

University of Maryland

# Advice from UMD GVPT Grad Students to UM GVPT Grad Students

1/9/2010

## **Funding**

### **What do I do if I don't have funding?**

The best thing to do if you don't have funding (I think) is to look for a GAship somewhere else on campus. That way, you retain your tuition remission and your health benefits. They are also 20 hour a week assignments. When they are available, they are on the UMD Employment webpage in their own section. The emails that Jesse sends out about GAships are positions that are listed on that page. There usually aren't many on there until the summer when old students have left and they are looking for new workers, and they finally know what their budget is going to be so they know at that point if they can afford to take on a graduate student worker. I don't know of any source for external jobs that are geared towards graduate students. Irwin or Ann Marie (usually both) send out emails that the department receives from other schools about adjuncting at local colleges, but they are usually looking for students who are ABD.

There are a number of employment positions on campus that come with tuition remission, e.g., at the library or through OACS. Continuously check the employment postings. Make sure that you talk to your advisor about this, because s/her needs to advocate for you during the next round of funding.

The graduate student listserv often has grad assistant listings

Graduate assistantships and other jobs are often available at the UHR webpage (<http://www.uhr.umd.edu/employment/listings.cfm?listing=30%20Graduate%20Assistant>). Most jobs come online between January and July. Most are full-year assistantships, and many offer great opportunities for those who are proficient in second languages.

It probably also wouldn't hurt to contact various departments around campus to see if they have TAing needs. There are also other opportunities to make money on campus including through the writing center (<http://www.english.umd.edu/writingcenter>).

### **How important is it that your assistantship correspond to your research interests?**

I never really thought about the assistantships in this regard, probably because so few of them really have any connection to research interests anyway. Along the way, almost all of us will TA for gvpt170 or some other class that has nothing to do with what you are interested in studying. If you are able to get an RA position, then that should correspond to your interests, but part of that is out of your hands- it is the professors who make the final decision on who is going to be their RA, and they obviously will pick a student who has similar research interests.

It is ideal if you are interested in what you are doing, but probably not crucial. I had a good experience teaching an intro course that actually turned out to be very useful before taking the comps. There are a number of ways that the assistantship can serve as a development

opportunity even if it doesn't directly correspond to your research interests, and it is also important to work with someone who is a good mentor. Additionally, it is important to have a schedule that doesn't cause you to fall behind in your own work or classes. The assistantship is a means to an end; it is not the end of the world if you don't love yours.

I personally have never had an assistantship that corresponded with my research interests, with the dubious exception of teaching GVPT 100, and I've held nine separate assistantships. For me, this was not a necessity for my progress in the program. However, for those of you who plan to work closely with faculty members, an assistantship with one of these faculty serves as a means of fulfilling your funding requirements while contributing to—rather than competing with—your own research effort.

I think it's good to be versatile within your broad area of study. Teaching experience (no matter what class) will prove helpful in the future. I think having a research assistantship in your area of interest is more important.

Hard for me to answer, as I am a theorist and there is no such thing. I imagine it is better, but not a deal breaker either way.

It would be ideal for your assistantship to correspond to your research interests and if possible that should be something to try for. However, it is not always even possible for this to be the case. Ultimately, you should try to get the best assistantship you can, but not worry if it doesn't match your interests.

### **How do you get an assistantship that you want?**

You have a good idea of who is going to teach what for the next semester and who has RA positions available when Ann Marie sends out that form. You can put down what you want, but the best way is to express your interest in the position to the professor whom you will be working with. Once we as students fill out those forms, the professors get a list of who asked for their TA or RA and for the most part they get to pick who they want. A lot of times the professors will ask students who they want to work with in advance if they are interested in their TA or RA position.

Contact the professor you want to work with in advance.

You absolutely must talk to the faculty who have the access to these funding lines. There's no other way to get something you want specifically unless you want to go outside the department.

Talk to the professor in charge of making the preferences.

Schmooze with the professor with whom you want to work.

Talk to the professor. Be around. Don't be a stranger.

If you have guaranteed funding, don't be afraid to go and talk to the professor with whom you want to work before the assistantship decisions are made and make it clear you would like to work for them. That can go a long way to getting you the assistantship you want.

The key is to get to know the professors, decide which ones you would like to work with and let them know that you want to work for them before you fill out your assistantship preference form. If you take a seminar with a professor who teaches that class at the undergraduate level, it doesn't hurt to let the professor know how much you like the class and want to TA it for her while you are still her student (presuming that you are doing well in the course). Remember that the professors also fill out an assistant-preference form and if they don't know that you are interested in working for them then you stand a very slim chance of having them request you.

### **What are the tradeoffs between TA/RA positions and what is expected of each?**

TA's rarely work 20 hours a week, other than the weeks when papers are turned in and exams are taken. Those weeks are hell to get the grading done, but other than that, it's just attending the class, leading the discussion section (if there even is one) and then holding office hours that you rarely have any students stop by for. You get to see professors in action, so you can start to see some of the teaching strategies that work (and those that don't!); seeing a couple of different ways to approach teaching helps you to start visualizing how you want to run your own classroom.

RA's hours really depend on the professor you are working for. Some you work the 20 hours a week and then some, and others are much more laid back about the hours as long as the data/work is done when they asked for it. RA's mostly do the "grunt work" spending hours on SPSS or STATA collecting and analyzing data for the professor. Maybe not the most thrilling thing, but good experience in doing research, and you are likely to get your name on a publication when you are a RA.

Some people seem to favor the RA positions because there is no grading involved, but some professors are more understanding than others about what is a reasonable time commitment. I have enjoyed getting the teaching experience of being a TA and getting to know the students.

I never held an RA position, but I can tell you that there are some serious issues with TAing. TAing is an activity that, during most times, will only take up as much time out of your week as you decide to put into it. However, during exam periods, you will often work more than 20 hours in a given week grading exams and papers. Final exam periods also tend to coincide with your own end-of-semester class assignments. As a result, your schedule is often crowded and inflexible during these periods; effective time-management is a necessity.

Since I haven't been a TA, I can only comment on what I've heard from others and my own RA experience. The perks of being an RA are possible publications and learning research skills from tenured professors. However, your work schedule is very much at the mercy of the professor

you work for. I think you have more freedom as a TA, but grading can be intense. You will be very busy at certain points of the semester and not busy during others. You will probably have a steady flow of work as an RA.

I've only TA'd, but in my opinion, TAing is typically more demanding, only because you have 6 or 7 hours of you week when you must be in a certain place doing a certain thing. RAships can be really demanding, but you often have a little more flexibility. I guess you don't get to work with students, or much experience standing in front of a class. I find that my TAing made me a confident teaching my first time out alone.

I think it really depends on the position. Some TA positions are more or less work and some RA positions are more or less work. With TA positions you get the benefit of getting experience teaching classes you might be interested in. With RA positions you get the benefit of working on research with experience professors and sometimes you get the opportunity to co-author papers. So, there are pros and cons of both. Personally, I think RA positions are more beneficial for graduate students because of the co-authorship potential.

The workload and reward of both positions depends entirely on the professor. Most grad students will have to TA an intro-level class (GVPT100 – intro to government or GVPT170 – intro to American government) at some point in grad school regardless of your sub-field. These are large classes with several TAs and generally, quite a bit of grading. However, because they cover general information, the prep for TA sections can be less time consuming than upper-level courses.

Before requesting a position as a TA for an upper level class or a research assistantship, be sure that you know the professor and understand what she would expect from you. You will be collaborating quite a bit with this professor and it should be someone who you respect and know you can work with. Some research assistantships do not require office hours, have light work-loads, and the professor offers to co-author papers with you. Others require a 20-hour per week office job with many more responsibilities than just research. Some professors expect administrative work and supervisory skills (for interns or undergraduate RAs) and these jobs can be very time-consuming.

Prior to requesting the position, also consider the work-load that you will have with your own seminars and conference papers that year (most research assistantships are year-long positions). Some research assistantships will not leave much time for your own work. Be sure to get to know the professor and ask other grad students who have been RAs in the past. Before taking a position as an RA, ask the professor if the position will require working over the January term, if there are required office hours, and if you will be expected to put in time over the summer or other breaks. If you are asked to work over the summer then you are entitled to hourly pay, but talk to Ann Marie about the pay range because the university limits how much grad students can make and some of the professors are not aware of the rules. If you are asked to work over the January term or any other break then the professor does not have to give you any additional pay.

## **Why should I go for assistantships outside of the department?**

There is a reason for every single student to consider outside funding opportunities. If you have a funding guarantee, you can seek outside assistantships and defer your department funding until you need it, such as when you're working on your dissertation. If you are not one of the students lucky enough to have a funding guarantee from the department, you should seek outside funding at least as a backup to your department funding. If you do not receive funding at all, these are opportunities you must pursue if you want a stipend and benefits. For everyone, outside funding often provides year-round work and therefore more money for the cash-strapped student. Some are more demanding, but some are far less demanding. It's in every student's best interest to have as much information and as many alternatives as possible to decide what's best.

Working with faculty in the department, whether TAing or RAing is preferable if you can make it happen, because those people will be a resource for you as you continue in the program. If that is not possible, looking outside of the department is a good alternative, but make sure you stay engaged in GVPT as well.

## **Publications, research and conferences**

### **How important is it to publish and/or present at conferences? When should one start doing these things?**

It is unbelievably important to publish – it's the most important aspect of your 'total package' as a job applicant in academia. Sadly, I think there is way too much emphasis on publishing as compared to teaching, but I'll step off that soap box. I think your 2<sup>nd</sup>- 3<sup>rd</sup> year is a good time to start thinking about projects that you can work on with a professor that will hopefully end up as published work.

You should go to conferences when you can. They are a good way to see what other work is being put out there in fields that you are interested in, and they are a great place to network, which can be helpful when thinking about jobs. Having said that, I would advise against someone presenting just for the sake of presenting. In other words, don't go to every conference with a poor paper to present just so that you can add it to your CV. If you can afford it, it is nice to go to a conference your first or second year where you aren't presenting, so that you can get an idea of what conferences are like and how the presentations go.

It is very important to publish and present, but you want to make sure that you are ready before presenting at an external conference. Practice at a UMD workshop. When one should start presenting depends in part on your subfield. (IR students seem to get started later than Americanists, for example, probably due to challenges in collecting data).

Graduating from the lower-end of the top tier of political science schools will not guarantee you a job right out of the gate. Without publications you cannot compete with students from Chapel Hill, Michigan, or Berkeley, who will be going for the same jobs you will. This includes those who will obtain a position at a teaching-focused school as a main preference or as a fall-

back. Inasmuch, you should publish by the time you go on the market, and this requires that you present your work at conferences.

Do this as soon as you have a complete paper (meaning, something that is not just a research design). It's important to get out there and meet people in the field. And, as silly as it sounds, the conferences make you look and feel like a professional—something that's hard to come by day-to-day as a grad student.

Like everything else, the sooner the better. But there is almost no point in pushing yourself the first year, unless you come in with some work you want to develop. This varies from field to field, and is a place to really get your advisors to talk to you about.

Publishing is extremely important. Do so immediately. Conferences, not that much.

Publishing is the most important thing for graduate students to be doing with their time. One should start working towards conferences and publication immediately.

### **How do you coauthor a paper?**

Usually you can go to a professor with your idea for a paper and you can ask them for their advice on what you are trying to do and if they would like to work with you on it (of course, this means more or less, that you are going to write the paper and do the majority of the work, and then at the end they get to put their name on it as well). I shouldn't be so flippant about that though, there can be benefits to having a well established professor's name on your paper when it gets sent to journals.

Sometimes (and has been my experience), the professor whom you share research interests with, will be presented with an offer for a book chapter or to submit an article for a special edition of a journal, etc., and they ask you if you are interested in working on it with them. In this case, even if you have no interest whatsoever in doing this, you should have a really good reason to give them as to why you can't do it (the fact that you are dying under coursework, and another project or two that you are working on counts as a good reason—just not responding to the offer or turning down a really good opportunity 'just because' doesn't really fly with the faculty)

Note: I realize that this and a lot of what I am writing probably sounds like common sense. It is. But you would be amazed at the stories of some of the students over the years who have come through this department and the unbelievably dumb things that they did- so I suppose it all bears putting it out there.

If you want to coauthor with another student, you can do that on your own time, but you should get a professor to give the okay and keep them updated on your progress. This way, you will know from the start if what you are working on is feasible and a good idea. Some professors will let you coauthor a class paper if you are prepared to write a paper that is much better than your average seminar paper (one whose goal is to be eventually be published), but that's something to ask at the beginning of the course when you first start thinking about the paper.

Discuss working on a paper with a faculty member, ideally your advisor, or just take the initiative to get started on something with another graduate student.

Ask fellow grad students to work with you on a paper. Or, ask a professor. It's probably best to go to a professor with a well thought out idea in hand. Talk about how you might divide the sections. Make sure you are comfortable working with the coauthor before you go there.

I don't know. Theorists don't work well with others.

I think the dynamic here can vary greatly depending on if you are working with another student or a faculty member, or if you are considered a primary or secondary author.

### **How important is it to attend and present at subfield workshops?**

The American Politics WS is important to attend, especially when you are a first or second year student. It is a good way to see the faculty that you will be working with (and who will eventually be writing you recommendation letters). It is billed as the "fourth class" you have. It is a good way to see how a paper moves from ideas to an actual publishable paper.

I don't really find it all that important to present at the APW. If you have a paper and you want feedback on it, then yes, it's a good thing to do. But if you don't do it, I don't think you are missing out. I guess I would say, it doesn't hurt, but in the long run, it doesn't really help all that much either.

The APW is not what it used to be. At one time, it truly was a workshop for both professors and students to come with works in progress, and to get good feedback and some of the earlier stages of a paper. People still have an actual paper to present, but it was an early draft, so there was still time for the author to integrate really good ideas that they received. The past few years, it has become very professionalized, to the point where it seems like professors are more or less showing off their work that is for the most part ready for publication the way it is, or at least very close to that. I think it has intimidated students into not wanting to present their work, when they have to try and compare their seminar paper that needs a lot of work to a professor's nearly finalized paper, which is unfortunate.

It is very important to attend workshops, because it is an opportunity to get to know the other faculty in the field, who you may not take classes with. It is also a professional courtesy, since you will need the feedback of others at some point, too. If you don't get to know and work with other graduate students, you are putting yourself at a disadvantage when you are working on a paper or going on the market.

Relationships with faculty in your subfields are an indispensable source of professional capital. You will need these people, so it's important for them to know who you are. However, it's not just about showing up, but about contributing. Act as a discussant, attend and speak up, and present your work—but only if you have something meaningful to contribute.

Very important to attend and important to try and contribute eventually. It's a good way to see everyone in the field at one time on a regular basis. Different workshops work different ways, but 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> year grad students are those students who usually present at the AP workshop.

I think the workshop is tops. You get feedback in a safe environment, and you make sure that people in the department know who you are.

It is extremely important and useful to attend workshops. You get more feedback than a regular conference.

It is important to attend and present at subfield workshops. Attending allows students to observe and practice giving and receiving feedback on original research. In American Politics it is a de facto requirement that students attend the subfield workshop.

In the American Politics field it is absolutely necessary to attend the subfield workshop. Most graduate students, do not present their own papers until they are working on dissertation chapters (if ever) but attendance is very important. The professors take note of who is attending workshop and expect that if you are not coming then you are not taking the program very seriously. If you have an assistantship or other conflict that makes you miss the workshop then tell your advisor why you are not there. This is very important! In addition to making a good impression, the workshops are also an excellent way to learn professional skills and read papers on a variety of topics in the field. The discussion and critiques generated in the workshops is much better than any at professional conferences you will attend. It is a great learning experience.

### **What is a reference manager and how do I get one?**

A reference manager is software that collects and stores all of your bibliographic information so that when you are writing papers and you cite a source, the software automatically writes up the citation for you so you don't have to hassle with it. When people first started talking about it a year or so after I got here, Endnote was the one that everybody had. At this point, I think there are numerous choices. As far as I know, you have to buy a version of it (I've never seen it offered by OIT). Of course, you can easily 'find it' amongst other grad students. That is what usually happens. I have no problems with that (that's how I got the version that I had) but beware: some of the professors are a little touchy about copying software, so just make sure you know for sure if they are alright with it before you ask for copies of software from them. Personally, I was excited when I got endnote, because I thought it would be great, and a terrific help when I did my comps. I used it to store a lot of sources that I thought I would need for my comps. I didn't open it once for the four days of comps that I have taken (two days for 1 and 2 fields) and I have not used it for any other paper, and I'm not currently using it for my dissertation. It just didn't seem all that helpful after I had it for a while, so if you don't like using it, don't worry about it, you're not missing out on anything.

You can download Zotero on the Internet for free. It will save all of the reference information from a source, so you can develop a reference page easily. A great resource for comps.

Endnote or Zotero take a lot of the pain out of bibliographies and can be really useful for comps. Zotero is free online and Endnote can be had for free by finding the copy wandering around the dept.

I use Zotero (which is free shareware that you download: <http://www.zotero.org/>) and it has changed my life. It is amazingly useful for organizing sources for papers and projects and comps. It kind of has the same interface and intuition as iTunes and makes bibliographies a breeze among other things, and I don't even use half of its features.

Don't get one. Start learning latex and bibtex immediately. They are free and the output looks perfect.

<http://www.zotero.org/>

### **What data sources should students in your field know about?**

I guess the obvious ones: ICPSR, ANES, CCES (the 2008 edition MD has its own section of questions)

In American, I think a lot of data used comes from the government, so it's not that difficult to procure, you just have to spend a lot of time finding out where it is. All Americansists should be truly grateful for StatTransfer.

Pew Research Center for the Press & and the People – lots of surveys covering many topics and it's all free ...also National Annenberg Election Survey, National Election Surveys

Books (Political Theory).

For data on the US Congress start with [www.voteview.com](http://www.voteview.com)

This is a clearinghouse for roll-call votes, party polarization scores, individual party unity scores, and nominate scores.

ICPSR has a lot of data sources: <http://www.icpsr.umich.edu/>

*For Congressional Studies:*

VoteView: <http://voteview.com/> This has A LOT of data on congress include roll call voting data, DW-Nominate scores, party unity scores, and other information on bills and votes.

LexisNexis Congressional: <http://web.lexis-nexis.com.proxy-um.researchport.umd.edu/congcomp> This has a searchable congressional record, hearing transcripts, legislative histories, and other good stuff.

The Congressional Record: <http://www.gpoaccess.gov/crecord/index.html>

Almanac of American Politics: <http://www.nationaljournal.com.proxy-um.researchport.umd.edu/almanac> This has information on congressional districts and members of congress including election returned for each district.

CQ Electronic Library: <http://library.cqpress.com.proxy-um.researchport.umd.edu/?PHPSESSID=qkl8g11lg8va78ndloa8o2omg5> This has a lot of information on Congress, including staff directories, as well as information on other aspects of American Politics.

CQ Weekly: <http://library.cqpress.com.proxy-um.researchport.umd.edu/cqweekly/> Probably the best source on Congressional happenings.

Thomas: <http://thomas.loc.gov/> Information on all bills considered by Congress.

Policy Agendas Project: <http://www.policyagendas.org/> This is a great new project that has some interesting data coding the policy content of legislation.

Frisch & Kelly Data Page: [http://faculty.csuci.edu/sean.kelly/data\\_page.htm](http://faculty.csuci.edu/sean.kelly/data_page.htm) This is the most comprehensive committee request data available.

Charles Stewart's Data: [http://web.mit.edu/17.251/www/data\\_page.html](http://web.mit.edu/17.251/www/data_page.html) Charles Stewart has a lot of invaluable data on his website.

Joseph Cooper's Data: <https://jshare.johnshopkins.edu/jcooper6/web/research.htm>  
More roll call voting data

For IR/Comparative, especially conflict data, there are a lot of online sources, some of which are housed right here at UMD like International Conflict Behavior (<http://www.cidcm.umd.edu/icb/>), Minorities at Risk (<http://www.cidcm.umd.edu/projects/project.asp?id=17>), Global Terrorism Dataset (<http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/>). Others include: Correlates of War (<http://correlatesofwar.org/>), Uppsala Conflict Data (<http://www.pcr.uu.se/gpdatabase/search.php>). Also, Paul Hensel at UNT has a great clearinghouse page (<http://www.paulhensel.org/data.html>).

### **Coursework and Comps**

#### **What's the best timing for comps? Is the earlier the better?**

I think it's different for everybody. Some people feel ready to take them earlier than others. I took my first field the summer after my second year, and then my second field, the following summer. It helped that I took it at the same time that the three of the other four students in my cohort took theirs- that was helpful for study group purposes. Personally, I would have done badly had I tried to take mine earlier than I did. I think the summers after 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year are good. If you wait too long then some of the faculty start to raise their eyebrows a bit.

It depends on the individual and his/her background coming into the program, as well as one's financial situation and funding commitment. Keep in mind that you are preparing yourself to be competent in the field, not just going through hoops to get your degree.

This is different for everyone. Talk to your mentors and the faculty you interact with. Typically they will know if you're ready. You, personally, will not believe you are ready when you actually

are. Remember that nobody fails their comps unless they cheat or completely neglect preparation, and in the end nobody cares what your grade is so long as you pass.

Anywhere between your third and fifth semesters for your first comp. I don't know if earlier is better, but don't put it off if you've taken all relevant course work. And, I've heard it's best to take the second comp the semester after you take the first one. Best to be done with these by these somewhere in the third year.

I took mine really early (done by end of 2<sup>nd</sup> year). I don't know that this has really helped or hindered me. You will probably not fail your comps, unless you cheat, but you want to impress your committee. Waiting into your 4<sup>th</sup> year is a bad idea, though.

Take your time but take them before the third year.

Ceteris paribus, it is better to take them sooner rather than later. It's pretty hard to fail comps, but you do want to do a credible job, because many of the people reading them are likely to be on your dissertation committee and you don't want to embarrass yourself in front of them. It is good to get them out of the way, so you can focus on your prospectus. Also, it is possible to take them both at the "same" time. For example, if you are taking the August comp, you can take your first comp during the scheduled comp period and the second either the week before or after. If you are taking two subfields that overlap like IR and comparative, this isn't a bad plan.

### **Does it matter who you select to read your comp?**

Other than your advisor, I don't really think so. If your advisor is a good one, he/she will go to bat for you if need be, though that was more in the case of the oral defense, which they don't do anymore. Honestly, I think everybody passes their comp unless one of two things happens: 1) you get at least one answer totally incorrect- like you use terms and theories incorrectly- showing that you really did not pay attention at all in the course, or 2) you don't do a good job, and the professors are looking for a good reason to encourage you to leave the program- like for example, you have taken no interest in research projects that professors have offered you, you are on fellowship but are doing extremely poorly for no apparent reason, you make no effort to be an active part of the department.

Not really. Just select people who you think you might want on your dissertation committee.

Sure. But you only have so much control. There are plenty of department politics to consider, and plenty of people who don't get along, personally or methodologically. Maybe a good rule for when you should take your comp is when you've got things enough figured out that you can pick 3 people who won't fight and have your back.

No.

You only get to select two of the three readers on your comp. It is important to keep your readers in mind when writing your answers. It probably makes sense to have your dissertation chair be one of your readers as well.

### **What was the best advice you received for preparing for the comp?**

The best advice I got was to calm down about the comps! We all get (well most of us) get really worked up and nervous about it, and there are a lot of freak outs about not having done enough background work and getting questions that you have no idea how to answer. Once you open that email with the questions in it, and take a deep breath, you just start working and you get it done. Don't get me wrong- those two day really suck- but they are not the end of the world.

Of course, I'm sure anybody who hasn't take comps yet will take that advice the way I took it when I was told it...by saying, 'oh, okay,' and not believe a word of it for one second. So the other advice that I would give that you are more likely to use: 1) the professors know that you only have a limited amount of time to get a lot of writing done, so don't waste a lot of time worrying about making sure that the presentation is perfect like you would a seminar paper. As long as you can present a logical answer using the important literature, you're fine. 2) First field American students, listen up: Go to the EbscoHost database and look up the Annual Review of Political Science. Go through each volume, and print the articles that are relevant to your subfield, and areas that you think you need to know for your comp. These articles are reviews of the literature for that area or subject. It is a fantastic source to build a large number of sources to use for your comp answer.

Ask your readers and the field chair that semester what you should be studying for. They may not give you direct answers but it will not hurt to ask. This is especially important for exams in which you are one of a select few takers during that exam period. There is no excuse for being surprised by an exam on which you are the only test taker.

Use the old questions as study guides. If you ask Ann Marie for these, she will give them to you. Also, having a study group to hold you accountable helps...even if you are taking different exams.

Take time to exercise and sleep. Also, it's just a hoop. A burning, unpleasant, hoop.

Take good notes during your course and in readings you do.

Make sure to get the previous tests so you can get an idea of what the questions will look like and what topics are repeatedly asked. Ann Marie can give you the old copies of the exams.

Make sure to schedule time for sleep during the comp period. You get the comp at 8 AM on day 1 and it is due by 4:00 PM on the second day. Build in some time for sleep sometime during that period, otherwise, your answers are going to tend toward the nonsensical the more sleep deprived you become. Also, less is more. Stick to the page number guidelines; it is

unlikely your answer will be ground breaking or even something they haven't either taught you or heard before. For a lot of subfields, the questions likely to be asked are very predictable and you can write a substantial portion of them ahead of time and your readers know this. Do not write 40 pages per question and turn it in. Not only might a reader refuse to read it (this has happened), but it screws future comp takers, because they will ask more obscure, less predictable questions. Demonstrate command of the literature succinctly. Don't just regurgitate the literature; analyze it and give your position on it. I don't know whether or not this is true, but I have heard professors say they will fail a comp that is just regurgitation. Lastly, if you do a study group, don't use each other's outlines or write ups verbatim on the comp. A few years back there was a cheating scandal, because students independently wrote almost identical comps, because they shared all their notes and copied from each other in preparation.

### **How did you study for comps? Where can I get old copies of comps?**

Two other students in my cohort were doing comps at the same time, so we had a study group. Part of the time, we all looked up the same topic on our own, and then came together and discussed what we thought were the main points and the important literature. This worked really well, because we all usually came at the same subject from different angles so we had three different ways of looking at the subject now. The other times, we each took a smaller subject, or a book or two off the booklist and then we got together and summarized what we worked on for the other two. Group work really helps you feel like you can cover a lot more ground, but be careful: a couple of years ago, some students in a different field got in trouble, basically on claims of cheating, using work that they had done in a study group, so just be a little more aware of what are your words, and what are others. You can get old copies of the comps from Ann Marie.

I'm not sure that anyone's method is better than anyone else's. Everyone's study habits are different. I was successful cramming for a month before my exam. Writing full abstracts rather than outlines showed me what parts of the main argument I would miss without having to take multiple pages of notes for each subject. Using a reference manager and saving my abstracts in each reference made my work searchable on-demand. You will find out what you need to focus on by obtaining older comps from Ann Marie, and by asking the field chair what they will be including or changing this semester. You have a right to ask if not a right to an explicit answer.

I studied by prepping for questions that reappeared year after year on comp exams. See Ann Marie for old comps. I also had a study group.

I studied for one alone, after a semester of study group with other students. Ann Marie has old copies.

Everyone has different studying advice. For me it made the most sense to create outlines of general topics within the subfield. This helped me organize my thoughts on all the possible topics.

### **What are the best strategies for taking the actual exam?**

Get a full night's sleep. If you took enough notes before the exam, you should have enough time to get a full eight hours during the exam taking period as well. If you did take enough notes and you don't get a full eight hours, you are writing too much. Moreover, readers will tell you that anything over 30-40 pages, double spaced, is too much. This may be more than they want to read, but nobody is going to fail you for writing a long comp. In my experience, short and critical is a maximizing strategy that is more work-intensive but will allow you to receive a grade of Distinction. On the other hand, long and comprehensive will not win you Distinction, but it's a satisficing strategy that will almost certainly guarantee passage.

### **What do you wish you had done differently to study for the comp?**

Honestly, I think I would have put a little more effort into studying for them. By the middle of the summer I was tired and worn down from studying and the stress of thinking about comps, so I more or less did the minimum amount of work. Incidentally, I did just fine on both comps, but I could have been more prepared with outlines, etc.

I wish I had more time to study. Taking the comp in January doesn't give you much time. August gives you more time to prep without the pressures of a semester.

Relaxed a little more.

Nothing.

I wish I had studied less.

I passed both comps, but I wish I had studied a lot less for IR and more for comparative.

### **Prospectus**

#### **What was the best advice you received in developing your dissertation proposal?**

If you are worried about being too broad or too specific, lean more towards the broad side. Your committee will let you know if you are being too broad and give you suggestions on how to narrow your dissertation down.

Ask your committee what they want and they will tell you.

Treat it as the first chapter of your dissertation.

Don't try to make the prospectus perfect. It is more important just get your idea and plan down on paper and present it to your committee. Your thinking is most likely going to change during the subsequent two years you spend working on the dissertation anyway.

### **What advice do you have for picking your committee?**

I would say pick people who have some connection to your topic, if possible. Only my advisor studies what I am writing about, but I chose other faculty for my committee who I knew had life experience in the topic that I am writing about. It helps, if possible, to pick people that you already have a good working relationship with.

Topical focus is important, but not everyone will have specific expertise in your topic (if they do, your topic probably isn't interesting or specific enough). Pick a committee that A) has at least one member, preferably your chair, whose expertise is in the vicinity of your work, that B) includes as few professional conflicts amongst themselves as possible, and C) is sympathetic to your methodological and epistemological orientation.

I think you have to strike a balance among three things: (1) Pick faculty who do work similar to your topic; (2) Pick faculty who you work with well; (3) Pick faculty who might have a variety of opinions on your topic.

### **Dissertation**

#### **How do you make sure to stay on track, both substantively and timing-wise?**

This has been the hardest part of writing my dissertation. Once your classes are over and you have what seems to be an abundance of free time, it is really easy to take 'a few days to relax' and then before you know it, it has been two weeks since you've done any work. The best advice someone gave me about grad school in general was to treat it like a job, 9-5. But that can be hard to work on the same project eight hours a day for months at a time. If you tell yourself that you will work at least one hour a day on your dissertation, you will do alright. Most days you will do much more than that, but even on days that you only get an hour done, you will still be hitting the goal you set for yourself.

Setting deadlines for yourself is important.

#### **How do you get funding for research?**

You can apply for awards that are giving out by the department (which are usually geared towards specific fields), and the university gives away some awards. There are also some awards/fellowships available from foundations, think tanks, etc., that may specialize in what you are working on.

NSF has dissertation development grants.

## **General**

### **What are the department's strengths and weaknesses?**

I truly believe that a great strength of our department (at least in American Politics) is the commitment of the faculty to work with students and to help them out as much as possible. Also, the friendliness of the students with one another is a definite plus.

The department produces very well respected research, particularly in the fields of conflict studies and American politics. Other fields and research areas have problems that seem to go unaddressed. Political theory is suffering from faculty vacancies. There seems to be a tension between channeling resources into the areas that the department does well, and not causing the other fields to be totally inadequate.

In terms of looking for academic rather than professional or research guidance, some professors are good mentors and provide strong guidance, and some aren't and don't. You need to get to know them in person in order to decide. None of them will come to you—you must go to them and (politely) demand their time. The best mentors for navigating the department are the ones who have some experience but don't have so much that they are on their way to retirement. This means associate professors more than assistant or full professors. These are also the busiest mentors, however.

The graduate student atmosphere is very friendly and not at all cut throat competitive. Workshops are great. And professors accomplished and willing to work with students. The department website isn't great, and technology aspects could be better.

This question is incredibly loaded, and complicated. We have a collegial group of grad students and a mostly collegial group of faculty. We have a decent reputation and wide range of interesting work going on. In my opinion, we are moving in a methodologically rigid direction which fails to appreciate the range of approaches to the study of politics. We treat theorists, or those who do not pursue large-N studies, like they are from another planet. We do not support grad students enough, whether this is in terms of funding, mentoring, teaching opportunities or democratic input into the department. We alienate our best faculty, who move on to other institutions. We do not support language studies. Blah Blah Blah.

The biggest strength of this department is how much more collegial most of the graduate students are than they are in most other departments. There are also a lot of good faculty that actually do care about your development.

### **How valuable are ICPSR, Syracuse CQRM etc. to attend?**

ICPSR is valuable, and necessary if you want to have a second field in methods. I think it would help anybody in American politics, but it is not necessary. You can also take stats/math courses in other departments, and we have faculty/grad students who excel in statistics and are very helpful.

If you are interested in selling yourself as a certain type of job candidate with certain types of methods training, then these are important.

Probably a lot if you are not a theorist.

Attend ICPSR. Learn math. Take calculus classes at math department here.

ICPSR is indispensable for students interested in quantitative methods. I think it is a must if you plan on having a second field in quantitative methods. It is also worth attending if there is a specific method you need to learn about for your dissertation.

### **How important is your advisor? How do I change my advisor?**

Your dissertation advisor is extremely important. You have to find someone who has full confidence in your topic and who you have a good relationship with that you can work with. I don't know what the official way to change your advisor is; I've had the same advisor since I started the program.

Your advisor is very important for giving you honest and critical feedback (particularly whether you need to work more or advance on a paper or idea), and for introducing you to people who are doing work in your research area. But really finding someone who you want to work with is more critical during the application period so that you enroll in a program where you will get the support you need. If you arrive without an advisor you have more work to do to build the professional relationship, since some professors have already committed themselves to working with a primary set of students.

It is important that you have one, and that you have one who is still invested in this program but is also somewhat established in the field—this means professors who will be at least partially tenured but not retired by the time you plan to graduate. However, I have found my informal relationships with professors far more edifying than the formal one the department assigned to me. It is not important that you settle on *who* your advisor is right away. You can change this at any time. The only times you need to specify a mentor is on forms for comps and defenses, and you can (procedurally if not practically) change your chair any time up until you apply to defend your final dissertation. Unless your mentor has exceptionally invested their time in you, they will not mind you leaving them for another. They will typically be glad that you lightened their work load.

Early on, the first year, your advisor isn't that important. You can change your advisor by talking to the grad director first, and then taking his/her advice on where to go from there. I think the advisor will prove to be invaluable during the prospectus/dissertation phase.

Super duper important. Really, you change it informally by just asking someone else. You really only need to declare an advisor when you take comps or defend a prospectus, when they will

be recorded as your chair. I've never officially changed from my assigned advisor, but I don't think he remembers he was assigned. I just had my new advisor chair my comp and prospectus committees. Ann Marie takes care of everything.

Extremely important.

Your advisor is very important. You should keep in regular contact with your advisor and talk to them about your research and your progress. I do not think there are any formal steps in changing your advisor if you are in the pre-prospectus stage. I changed during this time and was told I didn't have to do anything. When you make your prospectus/dissertation committee just make sure you have the person you want as your chair. However, if you do decide you want a new faculty member to be your de facto advisor, make sure you have a conversation with both your former and new advisor to make sure it is ok with everyone.

### **How and where can I get psychological and emotional support?**

The counseling department at the Health center offers both individual counseling as well as a group for graduate students that meets once a week.

Both the Counseling Center (<http://www.counseling.umd.edu/>) and the Health Center (<http://www.health.umd.edu/services/mentalhealth.html>) provide psychological and emotional support. I have personally found the Health Center to be more competent in this regard, and they have psychiatric (pharmaceutical) support that the Counseling Center does not. The Counseling Center has free one-on-one talk therapy, while the Health Center costs \$15 a visit (which is still very cheap and deductible through insurance). Group therapy at both centers is free.

I think that the University health center has programs that serve grad students in these ways.

Friends? Colleagues? Pets? I hear the counseling center is great and many gvpt grads use it. Reach out. Isolation is not good for graduate students, but an easy trap to fall into.

The best source of emotional support comes from the friends you make here in graduate school. No one will understand what you are going through here more than they will.

### **What's free or cheap on or around campus that students should know about?**

I don't live in College Park, so I'm not sure about around campus, but most people go to DC for fun, but you should also consider Baltimore if you have an open weekend or time in the summer, etc. There are a lot of museums and galleries in Baltimore as well. You should also pay attention to the grad student announcements that they send out in email- there are usually opportunities for cheap activities offered to grad students in those announcements.

The co-op in the basement of the student center.

Hoff movies. Gym. Piney Branch or Rock Creek Park Trails. In DC, everything is free! Smithsonian, Zoo, monuments, etc.

The graduate student website has a whole list of services and discounts just for us:

[http://www.union.umd.edu/GH/resources/graduate\\_student\\_perks.html](http://www.union.umd.edu/GH/resources/graduate_student_perks.html)

There is also a list of discount on the wall in the grad lab that I do not have memorized.

You can get cheap food and coffee on campus at the student food coop in the bottom floor of the student union. You can get cheap beer at Town Hall: <http://www.yelp.com/biz/town-hall-liquors-college-park>. You can get *good* beer at Franklin's: <http://www.franklinsbrewery.com/>.

There are also a tax service set up to assist grad students with filing their taxes. Usually an email is sent around about it each year during tax season.

### **How do you go about building your own second field?**

You have to talk with Irwin Morris about the second field, and if you get the okay, you have to write up your own 2<sup>nd</sup> field proposal, which is mostly a literature review and some specifics about your interest in the subject. (I did public policy which is a very common 2<sup>nd</sup> field, so if you are choosing something that is not done very often, then it may involve more steps).

Talk to your advisor and/or another student who has done a similar type of field. You must also fill out a form that Ann Marie and can give you as well as write up a formal proposal that justifies the courses you will take and how they relate to your topic.

You should talk to someone in the department who does work in that field about what classes it would be important to take in such a field. You should also ask that person if they would support you in creating that second field. You should also talk to the graduate director about whether or not it will be feasible to create that second field. You will also have to write a field proposal before you take the comp. The proposal will detail why a second field in that topic is important to you and what classes you took and how they apply to the field.

### **Does every field have a second year paper requirement?**

We didn't have second year paper requirement when I was in my 2<sup>nd</sup> year, so I'm not sure.

??? My understanding was that this was pretty much something that wasn't really enforced. It's just understood that you should be at that point after your second year.

Apparently not, because I've never heard of this.

Not yet!

The American Politics field has a 2<sup>nd</sup> year paper requirement that is highly encouraged (and probably mandatory in the future). It is presented in a conference-style workshop at the end of the spring semester. Your second year is the most stressful year of grad school because of the heavy load of classes, comp preparation, and the expectation that you will be writing conference papers outside of class. For this reason, it is very helpful to take a seminar paper from your first year (or first semester of your second year) and turn it into the 2<sup>nd</sup> year paper that you'll present. This will save you time and you'll already have some feedback from the professor who graded it the first time that you can use to make it better for the presentation.

### **How do I get travel funding?**

To travel to conferences, you can get forms from Ann Marie to get reimbursed for part of your expenses. You have to fill out the paper work before you go on the trip. It used to be that you got reimbursement for one conference before you were ABD, and one after, but I'm not sure if that is still the rule or not.

I think you can apply for it and get it once every academic year if you are presenting at a conference.

The department will give you it once a year, and the grad school will throw down on top of that once in your career (use it some expensive time).

You need to get a faculty sponsor and fill out some paper work before you go to the conference to apply for the funding. Ann Marie has the paper work. After the conference you need a fill out an expense report and provide receipts for everything you claim on the report.

In addition to university and department funding, many of the conferences will offer funding for graduate students who are presenting a paper. Be sure to check the website for these opportunities as soon as you find out that your paper was accepted. Most grad students need the money so you want to get your application in as soon as possible. Most of these grants require a letter of recommendation from your advisor (university and department travel grants do also) so you may want to give your advisor a heads-up when you submit your paper so they have plenty of time to write the letter. All applications for university and department grants are available from Ann Marie and she will be the one who collects the paperwork and submits it for you.

### **Who is eligible for summer tuition remission?**

Those with 12 month assistantships.

### **How rigid are departmental requirements and deadlines?**

In my experience, the only rigid administrative requirements are those which you need to fulfill your course requirements (and even these are negotiable), and how quickly you must defend your prospectus and dissertation (both of which are negotiable with a letter from your mentor).

While you shouldn't use the fluid aspect of departmental structure as an excuse not to get work done on time—it's already too fluid for all but the strongest self-starters—don't let departmental structure impose additional stress on your professional and personal life. Everyone works at their own pace, and this has nothing to do with how good a grad student you are. It is a marathon, not a sprint, and finishing quickly is less important than finishing period.