

Advice for Incoming Political Science Students (From Second Years Students)

On behalf of the second-year Political Science students, welcome to the program. We as a cohort have banded together to offer up some pointers, gleaned over the course of our first year in the program.

We have all arrived at the Graduate Center at a very good time. The GC has recently improved its doctoral student funding options, as part of an effort to support students in getting through their degrees, and competing on the job market. At the same time, the Political Science department has been working hard to foster a closer sense of community and collaboration. New workshops, events, and other student-led projects are sprouting up, providing opportunities that more advanced students often remark were conspicuously absent from the department in the past.

Given the dispersed nature of the CUNY system, studying here presents some unique opportunities and challenges. Professors and students are scattered right across the city, so meeting and bringing people together involves a little more effort than at a more centralized faculties based on a single campus.

These pointers are intended as a very small step towards fostering a bond between the first and second year students in the program. There are a lot of aspects of graduate work that we haven't mastered yet (you'll notice that there's nothing here about teaching). The points below simply highlight a few things that we wish we had known as we were starting out. There is plenty more to be discussed, much of which does not fit neatly into bullet-pointed form. So please take this only as the very start of a conversation.

We look forward to working with you and getting to know you over the course of this year. Again, welcome to the program!

Department

- The program is very loosely structured, and offers students a lot of autonomy. As compared to other programs, there are no required sequences of courses, no formally-allocated advisors, and students and professors are dispersed across the CUNY system. This means that it is really up to students to make their own way: to form connections with professors and peers, to choose courses strategically, to develop research projects. It also means that the departmental events are particularly important, since they provide the few occasions on which professors and students converge at the GC.
- The program APO, Margaret Cook, has a better understanding of the twists and turns of CUNY bureaucracy than anyone else. She's an invaluable resource (and a wonderful individual).

Departmental service

- The department is very ably managed by core staff, but there are a lot of roles that are filled by students acting in voluntary capacities. Most of these are useful CV-builders, as well as being an important part of keeping the department functioning. Starting from your second year, consider volunteering to work on committees (for admissions, faculty hires, etc.) and in other such roles. By taking on such roles, newer students can free up more advanced students to get on with writing and getting out of here.
- Many of the organizing committees are fairly informal, though some, like the Colloquium Committee, are determined through the annual student elections.

Events, workshops, colloquia, wine

- These events are put on for students! Attending is perhaps the best way to make connections with professors and other students, and to keep up-to-date with what is happening in the department and the field. A lot of the events include snacks and drinks.
- A lot of these events are relatively new initiatives, and their success is dependent on student attendance and participation. Students that have been in the program longer report a dramatic improvement in the sense of community in recent years, and we want to maintain this progress. Attending events is an easy way to do so.
- A few of the regularly-occurring groups and events:
 - *Colloquia*: Monthly departmental events at which a professor is invited to present a current project. Presentations and Q&A are followed by wine and cheese.
 - *Comparative Politics Workshop*. Students and professors (from inside and outside of the program) present research in development for discussion. It is expected that those attending will read the paper under discussion ahead of time, so that more time can be spent discussing, and less time outlining the argument.
 - *Political Theory Workshop*. Monthly meeting at which invited professors present a project in development. It is expected that those attending will read the paper under discussion ahead of time.
 - *Public Policy Workshop*. Public policy students are planning to organize some events this year and would like to know who all is interested in the field. If you would like to be in the loop, send an email to Ursula Levelt at ulevelt@gradcenter.cuny.edu.
 - *Professional Development Workshops*. Some of these are geared towards people starting their careers, others towards those close to graduation and entering the job market.
 - *Mock Job Talks*. Students going onto the job market rehearse their job talks, and receive feedback from professors and peers.
 - *Students of the State*. A chartered group with the DSC. Students meet to read and discuss major theories.
 - Social and Political Theory Student Association. A chartered group with the DSC. Organizes workshops, conferences, and other events.

Fellowships (PhDs)

- The earnings that a Graduate Assistant can receive from CUNY in a year seem to be capped at \$35,000. There are many ways to increase your fellowship from the base level up towards this maximum - and some of these don't involve much extra work. While some are only open to students that have completed exams and/or coursework, many are open to first year students. Look out for awards, extra assistantships, teaching positions, and similar assignments that are frequently sent out through the listserv. You can also ask professors if there are opportunities for you to get involved with their projects.

Research assistantships

- During your first year, these are your most reliable point of contact with a professor. As such, it is about the closest thing that you have to an advisor relationship, but you have to make what you can of it - professors won't necessarily assume that you're looking for that sort of arrangement.

Advisors

- To reiterate: you aren't really assigned an advisor. You need to make your own connections with professors. Most are very welcoming, and can be the key to helping you along with extra funding, publications, and of course thesis or dissertation preparation.
- The easiest place to start is with the EO (Alyson Cole), DEO (Peter Liberman), and subfield chairs. All can offer advisement in some form, and guidance as you make connections with other professors.

Conferences

- Start thinking about presenting your research at conferences early. The departmental conferences and workshops are a great and welcoming environment in which to do so. Presenting course papers is fine, and in general the people in the department give great and thoughtful feedback.
- The departmental student conference takes place in the spring. It's fantastic, low-pressure arena in which to get started. Feedback from professors and students is excellent.

Travel awards (PhDs)

- Each semester, travel awards of \$300 (this takes the form of reimbursement for your expenses) are offered to students representing the GC at conferences. Get your applications for these in on the day that they open (usually within the first couple of days for each semester), because all available spaces are usually taken with about two days. You need to have forms signed before then, and you'll need to have proper documentation before you can be reimbursed.

Comprehensive Exams (PhDs)

- The best preparation that you can do is probably to choose your classes strategically, and to take comprehensive notes on your class readings throughout the semester.
- Students very often band together to tackle exam preparation as a group - this is encouraged by professors. Those that have already taken the exams will very often be willing to share notes and summaries, so ask around.

Coursework

- There is no structured path to completion of coursework requirements – it is very much up to students to chart their own path, and to make sure that they fulfill all coursework requirements.
- Check in with the EO, DEO or subfield chairs as you progress to make sure that you're fulfilling requirements. For PhD students, for example, there is a required methods course, but it is possible to fulfill this with theory courses, if that is most appropriate to your research plans.
- For those on fellowships, it is a good idea to take three or four courses in each of your first semesters. This takes care of a good portion of your total credits before you have to start balancing teaching with studying in your second year.
- Front-loading on courses might make sense for other reasons too, like having a good knowledge base ahead of comprehensive exams (for PhDs), and for getting to know as early as possible any professors with whom you might want to work later.

Consortium (PhDs)

- The GC is a member of the Interuniversity Doctoral Consortium, which enables doctoral students to take courses at Columbia, Fordham, the New School, NYU, Princeton and Rutgers from their second year onwards. Don't be shy in looking at courses at other institutions - methods courses at Columbia seem pretty popular within the department.
- The process for taking a course through the Consortium begins at the Registrar. It's fairly painless, but you should get started a couple of weeks before the semester begins.
- Some professors and universities may give preference to their own students before allowing Consortium students to register, so it's worth contacting professors ahead of time to let them know you're interested in a class.

Communication

- All official communication will come through your @gradcenter.cuny.edu account. Make sure to check it often or re-route your mail to a personal account.

Listservs

- There are two listservs for the department. One is an official departmental listserv, and is the principle way in which departmental news is circulated. The other is an informal, students-only listserv, which any subscriber can use to circulate information.

Foreign Languages

- As a doctoral student at the GC, you can take foreign language coursework at any CUNY branch, at no extra cost for students with tuition fellowships.
- The PhD degree requirements include a proficiency test in a second language of your choice. For students who are not native speakers of English, this can be your first language. The exam tests if you can adequately translate a written text in the language of your choice into English, and does not test other aspects of proficiency such as speaking or original writing. There is more information about the language exam in the Student Handbook.
- Foreign language coursework at the CUNY branches will not earn you any credit toward your degree. Some departments may let you audit the classes, while others (such as Arabic at Hunter College) will require you take the class graded, in which case the grade may appear on your GC transcript in a separate section for "undergraduate" coursework.
- If you want to enroll in a language class your first term, you need to hop on it as soon as you can in order to get a space. Here are some pointers:
 - You can do a simple internet search for available courses, e.g. "CUNY intermediate Spanish," which should bring up course listings at any CUNY branch which offers Spanish.
 - Once you find a branch that is in a desirable location and has a class which fits your schedule, we recommend that you email either the language department at that branch or the listed professor teaching the class to express your interest in attending.
 - In order to enroll, you need to fill out a "Permit Out" form from the GC Registrar's Office. It will need to be signed by Alyson Cole, our department Executive Officer. The language course instructor might want a copy of this too, but you need to turn it back in to the Registrar to officially enroll in the course.
- It is also possible to take language courses at other NYC universities in the Inter-University Consortium. Taking Consortium classes is usually only possible if the course is not offered within the CUNY system.