

Considering grad school in political science or public policy?

Choosing a degree that's right for your goals

Masters degrees in Political Science, Public Affairs, Public Administration and Public Policy have overlapping coursework; in addition, curriculums vary across universities. While this makes it a bit more confusing, it also gives you more good options to choose among. In general, Public Administration degrees are oriented towards implementation and public & non-profit management, whereas the Public Policy and Public Affairs degrees are oriented towards policy analysis and advocacy. The Political Science M.A. and Ph.Ds are more oriented towards research and teaching. Be smart: these degrees aren't standardized, so look carefully at each program's coursework to see if the curriculum matches *your* goals and interests.

Master of Public Administration (MPA)

Usual length: 2 years

Typical courses: public finance, organizational management, public policy, urban affairs, public management, data analysis and statistics, GIS, cost-benefit analysis, leadership, policy implementation and evaluation. Mandatory thesis or capstone project; may include internship.

Common career paths: state and local government, hospitals, non-profit management, emergency management; also international opportunities, including with the US State Department. The MPA, sometimes described as the "MBA" for the public sector, is a widely-accepted credential for public service professionals.

Other considerations: many Public Administration programs are accredited by NASPAA ("Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs and Administration"), but non-accredited programs aren't necessarily bad. Just check if a program has good faculty and appropriate course offerings.

Master of Public Policy (MPP) or Master of Public Affairs (*also called MPA*)

Usual length: 2 years

Typical courses: policy design and analysis, microeconomics, data analysis and statistics, economic modelling. Mandatory thesis or capstone project; may include internship.

Common career paths: program officers in public agencies and non-profits, think tanks & advocacy groups, policy advisors, research analyst, corporate public affairs offices (lobbying)

Master of Political Science (M.A.)

Usual length: 2 years

Typical courses: American politics, public policy, public opinion, data analysis and statistics, political theory. Mandatory M.A. thesis or similar independent research project. May include internship if there is an "applied politics" track.

Common career paths: teaching (community college or high school); preparation for a PhD program; journalism; research analyst; market research & public opinion; state and local government; non-profits.

Doctorate in Political Science (Ph.D)

Usual length: 5 years (or less, if student starts with an M.A.)

Typical courses: American politics, international relations, comparative politics, public policy, political theory, statistics and data analysis. Mandatory dissertation thesis.

Common career paths: professor at university, liberal arts or community college; academic administration; public opinion & market research; research analyst; public affairs (private sector).

Some factors to consider when evaluating specific programs:

1. **Does it offer the specific courses that I want?** If there are courses that are really important for your goals, check how often these are taught.
2. **What kind of jobs do their recent alumni get, and in what locations?** Some programs provide access to strong alumni networks that can help students get internships and jobs. Many alumni networks are geographically specific. If you hope to work in Washington, D.C., target programs with many grads currently working there; likewise with your home state, or to work in an international agency.
3. **How easy is it to work a “day job” while earning this degree?** Many students can’t, or don’t want to, stop working and return to school full time. Some universities accommodate this by offering their degrees (or some courses) on-line; others schedule courses on evenings & weekends. On-line courses aren’t for everyone: they require much discipline, and offer fewer opportunities for networking and socializing. Consider your own learning style. Part-time degrees take longer.
4. **How much does it cost?** Grad school costs vary widely. Public institutions usually have lower tuition for master’s programs, particularly for in-state students. But the rules on who counts as “in state” can vary: ask about this if it affects your cost.
5. **What kinds of financial aid are available?** As for undergraduate degrees, universities generally ask you to submit financial aid applications to determine eligibility for scholarships and/or loans. **M.A., MPA, MPP, etc:** As a rule of thumb, the higher the cost of the program, the more likely it is that a *few* people will receive very generous funding packages (but most will not). You definitely should apply to try to get the funds, but don’t set your heart on a single program. **PhD:** many departments give some level of financial aid to *most or all of their* doctoral students. Often these packages include full tuition, PLUS a monthly stipend in return for assisting professors with their classes. No one gets rich from these stipends, but they allow students to complete these long degrees with little or no debt.