**So you want to get into a Ph.D. in political science Ph.D. program, Episode II: Attack of the Postgrads**

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OK, in Episode I, your humble blogger talked about what undergraduates should and should not do to get into a quality Ph.D. program in political science. In this exciting sequel, the natural question to ask is, "what if I'm not an undergraduate?"

To explain the advice I'm about to give, however, let me begin with a small parable. Consider two applicants, Johnny Undergrad and Jenny Postgrad. By a strange coincidence, Johnny and Jenny matriculated at the same undergraduate institution, received identical grades during their time as undergraduates, and both wrote fine theses. They both followed the guidance provided in my dos and don'ts post to the letter. The only difference is that Jenny is four years out of college, while Johnny is not. The latter, a senior, is now applying to grad programs. So is Jenny, but she's spent the past four years earning some coin and collecting some very relevant work experience for an important government/multinational corporation/NGO/think tank organization.

Now, you would think, ceteris paribus, that Jenny would have the stronger application for a Ph.D. admissions committee - she's more mature, more seasoned, and possesses an identical academic record. But you would likely be wrong.

See, Johnny has been in more recent contact with his undergrad professors. Since their memory of Johnny is likely stronger than Jenny, their letters of recommendation will be less bland and boilerplate. Johnny hasn't signaled that callings other than being a professor might tempt him, since he applied straight out of undergrad. Johnny's grades are an accurate reflection of his abilities, whereas Jenny's academic skills atrophy with every year out of the ivory tower (pro tip: if you don't know what ceteris paribus means, you're in trouble). Any thesis that Johnny has written is more up-to date.

This is the challenge you face if you are a post-baccalaureate applicant - and with each year further away from your graduation date, these problems get worse. So, if you want to be admitted, Jenny's goal should be to do everything possible to her file resemble something that blows Johnny out of the water. How does she do that? Here are five useful tips:

1. Reconnect with your professors. You need to have strong letters of recommendation, and almost all of those letters should come from people inside the academy. Fair or not, admissions committees will discount letters from people who themselves do not have a Ph.D.. If you're thinking of applying to a Ph.D. program, start by making sure the profs who you worked closely with as an undergraduate have a sharp memory of you. Remind them of what you were interested in as an undergrad and update them on what's your interests are now. If you've collaborated with academics during your post-bac jobs, make sure they write you a letter. You will need one recommendation from your supervisor/boss even if they don't have a Ph.D. - but make damn sure that, besides praising your overall competence and maturity, they talk about your burning desire to go back to the academy.

2. Ace your GREs. The GREs are a good first approximation of whether you have the intellectual chops to cut it in a doctoral program. If you've been out of school for a while, they might count a bit more, because there is that question of whether you're really ready to go back to school. An outstanding GRE score will not automatically get you admitted, but it can allay any fears about your abilities to earn a Ph.D.

3. Craft your personal statement with care. You have a more interesting tale to tell than undergraduate applicants, because you're like, older and stuff. That said, the statement also needs to signal an admissions committee that you know exactly what you are getting yourself into, and are eager for the challenge. Sure, you can talk about how your research interests are born out of your real-world experience, but make sure you also phrase your research interests in the context of the relevant literature. Again, this signals to an admissions committee that you know your interests from multiple perspectives. Furthermore, as a twentysomething, you have the luxury of reading up on the relevant academic literature and not being intimidated by big words like when you were 18 years old. Use that intellectual maturity to your advantage in your statement!!

4. Publish, publish, publish! You know that phrase "publish or perish?" It's not just for professors anymore. Demonstrating an ability to publish - even if the publication is not a peer-reviewed academic journal - is a signal to an admissions committee that you understand what you're getting yourself into. Publishing in a policy journal, or a think tank report, can count for something - particularly if it's a sustained piece of research. So, if your job requires you to write, try to get that writing into the public domain.

5. Get a master's degree. OK, let's say that your undergraduate performance was... less than stellar. Or, it's been a long time (more than five years) since you were in college. These are the situations when getting either a professional or terminal master's degree makes some sense -and a two-year program is a better option than a one-year program. If you know you want to get a Ph.D., then make sure you indicate that fact to the professors closest to your area of interest at the outset, take their courses, and have them supervise your thesis. Oh, and write a sharp M.A. thesis and think about getting it published. Strong letters from professors indicating that you did well in graduate school are the ultimate trump card, and are the one way that Jenny's application packet can blow Johnny's out of the water. With a good M.A. degree, Jenny can ensure that she is a better, stronger, faster version of Johnny.

Now, I'm still a bit reluctant to proffer this last recommendation, for a few reasons. First, a terminal master's ain't cheap. This means accruing a decent amount of debt and then going to graduate school for a few more years and then, if you're lucky, getting a job that won't help all that much in paying down your debt. Second, this approach takes at least two years to execute. You can't apply to a Ph.D. program in your first year of an M.A. program, because applications need to be in by January and your master's program profs won't know you well enough to draft good letters (that's why a two-year program is superior). Furthermore, as crazy as this sounds, for most Ph.D. programs, your M.A. coursework won't count - you'll often need to do a certain number of course requirements (it does help intellectually, however). And with all of this, there's still no guarantee you get accepted.

All that said, however, if you really want the Ph.D. and you're well out of college, this is the best gambit. A strong performance in an M.A. program - professional or not - is the best signal to a Ph.D. admissions committee that you can cut it in a doctoral program. Oh, and one last point: as a risk-averse strategy, choose an M.A. program at a Ph.D.-granting institution, so you can always try to complete your doctorate in your home institution.