

So you think you want to go to the Kennedy School...

What you need to know, and what it takes to get in, from an Obie who has been there.

Getting in—A quick snapshot

Oberlin GPA near 3.5, Honors project -or- significant campus leadership

Strong background in major (Politics, economics, sociology, etc.)

Evidence of quantitative skills

GRE scores—600+ verbal, 650+ math, 700+ analytical

2-3 years of relevant work experience

Recommendations: 1 academic, 2 professional

5 essays!

What to expect

Most recent OC graduates (there are three of us at KSG at current writing, April 2003) enter the Masters in Public Policy program. It is 2 years full time. The first year is comprised of 4 core classes and 1 elective each semester. The core is rigorous and totally different than the academic environment to which you are accustomed. OC students are at a strange advantage/disadvantage. Most KSG MPPs are from very large universities and are used to these huge informal classes, but not the level of work these classes require. They will be experiencing work overload, while you will probably be experiencing academic culture shock. This is especially true 1st semester.

Classes get more intimate and you have more choices 2nd semester. 3rd and 4th semester, you write your Policy Analysis Exercise, which is more like an enormous strategy memo than a traditional thesis, while taking a total of 8 classes of your own choosing. The scope and topic is of your PAE entirely of your own design.

KSG is more liberal than other schools, but dramatically more conservative than Oberlin. Expect your conclusions to be challenged more than they are at OC, because there is a greater spectrum of beliefs. Like OC, there are a lot of international students who add greatly to the atmosphere.

Why attend KSG?

There are pros and cons to attending the Kennedy School. It is easy to be attracted to what is considered the best public policy program in the country, but as you have likely learned at Oberlin, rankings don't mean everything. The reputation of KSG, and your ability to secure a job after graduation, is a reasonable factor in the decision to apply. The quality of students that the school attracts is unparalleled. You will meet people that you're likely to encounter and depend upon for the rest of your career. The speakers and opportunities that the school is able to provide are profound and enriching.

There are many students, though, at the school who are less committed to public service and will most likely enter the private sector. In general, the student body is somewhat conservative and you may not encounter others who are looking to create the same kind of public value that you are. The community of progressive-minded students is there to be sought out.

Courses at OC that will help you get in

These classes will give you the skill set that you need to show the admissions committee:

Econ 101, Microeconomics, and any other economics courses
Statistics (Math 113)
Any class in the Politics department
Classes with policy or theory applications in other departments

Courses at OC that will help you survive and thrive

Beyond getting in, these classes cover a lot of the material in the MPP Core Classes. Get them out of the way at OC and you can have an easier time at KSG, or perhaps even pass exemption tests and have more time for electives:

Politics: POLT 103 or 105, Political Theory, Public Policy, POLT 204, Constitutional Law
Philosophy: 101 or 105, Logic, Ethics
Religion: Moral Issues, Medical Ethics
If you are interested in quantitative policy research, math at least to calculus is necessary

You may not have time to take most of these classes, especially if you are not a Politics major with a focus in American politics or Public Policy. These are just guidelines, and obviously if environmental policy or international development is your main area of interest, your courses need to reflect that more strongly.

Books to use on your papers now or to read for a private reading

Having read these books at OC, I had an advantage over my classmates:

Kingdon, John W., *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995.
Moore, Mark, *Creating Public Value*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997.
Fisher, Roger and William Ury, *Getting to Yes: Negotiating agreement without giving in*. New York: Viking Penguin, 1981.

What about other schools?

This may apply to other schools as well, but I only applied to KSG, so I am not positive. And as a disclaimer, getting in is hard (about 15% of applicants are accepted each year to the MPP program). This is just some practical advice and is no guarantee of admission whatsoever.

I am always available for talking with current students. Just email me:
Meagan_Holman@ksg04.harvard.edu.

Good luck!