

Park

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Newsletter Piece

Honors Program

Why Graduate Programs Are a Good Idea, Part III: The Ph.D.

Finishing a Ph.D. will consume a good chunk of your life. In the humanities and social sciences, a Ph.D. takes about seven years or so, and if you live to seventy, that's ten percent of your life. It's a long time. A Ph.D. is still a good idea, but my former Department Chair explained that getting a Ph.D. is like wanting to become a marine—you must feel you really *need* to be a marine, as there's no “reason” for it. Like marines, a Ph.D. candidate will get hazed, abused, and forced through hoops that seem meaningless and cruel, and even when they successfully see the end of their training, they will likely be subjected to more stress and punishment even as they are underpaid. People who finish a business degree or a law degree will take two or three years, and the kicker is that they'll be much more likely to make much more money than the super nerdy people who finish a doctorate. It's all so vexing.

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The Ph.D. is an abbreviation for the “Doctor of Philosophy,” which in the classical Latin meant “teacher of a body of knowledge.” Obviously, one had to master a body of knowledge to teach it, and the early manifestations of the Ph.D. were from the medieval religious traditions, Islam and Roman Catholicism. Religious “doctrine” was itself a growing body of knowledge and interpretation, and because reasonable people had different interpretations of sacred religious texts, it became very important for leading religious institutions and their powerful political allies to figure out who could

and couldn't speak the truth about the word of God. In Arabic, a "mudarris" is a teacher of religious doctrine, and someone empowered by other senior mudarrissun to interpret the Koran. This often served secular purposes: a sultan or caliph derived his power in part from his claim to defend the Koran, and so the mudarris often served multiple roles as teacher, counselor, and righteous judge.

These practices migrated West, primarily into the Catholic tradition, where religious orders invested priests only after they had demonstrated learning of the Old and New Testaments. Bishops and cardinals were more powerful, and among most religious orders, these men were promoted based on their mastery of both Scripture and Catholic doctrine. They influenced princely politics for centuries. After the Protestant Reformation, each of the Protestant sects funded scholars who could explain why the Roman Catholic church had lost its way, and why their own new doctrines were superior. They trained doctors of their own, and princes who had quarrels with the Catholics for one reason or another eventually funded them, too.

The first group of English Protestant settlers nearly died off in Massachusetts Bay Colony, but by 1620, it seemed that they would actually survive. It was hard, though, to train new clergy without some institutional structure nearby, and so that's why the good minister, John Harvard, gave the colony some money and land in his will to start a College on the other side of the Charles River. Harvard College was the first of its kind in North America, but for the next two hundred years, private colleges sprouted in each colony, then each state, moving westward along with the movement of white settlers. Many began specifically to train clergymen.

The College of William and Mary in Virginia received state funds as early as 1695, but the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill was the first public university in the United States in 1795, built and sustained by public money and with a more secular mission. The Americans tried to separate church and state, and while the private colleges still trained men to save souls, the public colleges were about helping people make money and about creating a more educated citizenry. In 1862, Senator Morrill of Vermont successfully passed legislation to give each state land and money for the creation of large public universities. These universities had two interrelated missions: to support the economic activity of their state; and to provide a strong liberal arts education

to as many qualified citizens as possible. Their mascots also said a lot about them: Wisconsin has badgers, Michigan has wolverines, Texas has longhorns, Oregon has ducks, Washington has huskies, and California had bears, or at least it did in 1868.

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By the late 19th century, however, higher education was fundamentally changing, due in part to the intellectual revolutions that were understood to be a part of the Enlightenment and Reformation. Surprisingly, the Roman Catholic Church was an unwitting early participant in both: Easter is a “moveable feast,” a holy day that changes from year to year, to be pegged to the first Sunday after the full moon following the vernal equinox. But it’s tricky to find the vernal equinox, because it too is a moving target, changing from year to year, as the earth year was an annoying 365.24 days long. Wanting to be correct for this most important holiday, the Church encouraged early astronomers to look to the heavens to find the right day for the vernal equinox for any given year. Looking at the stars must have been endlessly fascinating, though, before city lights, and as Yogi Berra once said, “You can see a lot just by watching.” With cool new instruments like the telescope, you can see that some bodies move around others, that those bright big things in the sky are planets and not stars, that some of those planets have moons moving around them, that they all seemed to be moving around the Sun, and that the Earth might also be moving around the Sun, too. To a good Catholic doctor, though, all these facts were more than a little troubling, because Catholic doctrine had long insisted that the Earth was stable, everything moving around *it*. For hundreds of years, the Church had insisted that this was an “infallible” doctrine rooted in Holy Scripture, and so when astronomers said different, much more was at stake than astronomy. This was heresy. Heads would roll. Protestants pointed to the Church’s hostile reaction as a sign that the Church was more interested in preserving its power and legitimacy than in upholding the Truth.

The controversy pointed to a more fundamental problem: how do we know what we know? For centuries, “learned men” pored over holy texts to find meaning and insight about the world, as if all there was to know was already written by the hand of

God, and all that was needed was simply accurate interpretation of the Word followed by enforcement of God’s law. Things like the telescope and the microscope would challenge all of this, and yet some of the most radical new theories just involved lots and lots of watching. For example, when Charles Darwin published *The Origin of Species* in 1859, Protestants *and* Catholics freaked out, because here was a theory based on thousands of meticulous observations, one that suggested an evolutionary process through which all creation changed and took their current forms. *Every* living thing “moved” and changed on this Earth over time. In *Genesis*, on the fifth day of creation, “God said, ‘Let the waters bring forth abundantly the moving creature that hath life, and fowl that may fly above the earth in the open firmament of heaven.’ And God created great whales, and every living creature that moveth, which the waters brought forth abundantly, after their kind, and every winged fowl after his kind: and God saw that it was good.” It does *not* say that God created a nutrient soup from which badgers, wolverines, longhorns, ducks, huskies, bears, and Gauchos all evolved over bazillions of years—it just says “one day.” What gives, who is right, and what the heck is going on? What does this have to do with getting a Ph.D.?

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Nowadays, you cannot get a Ph.D. by claiming that the Earth is the center of the universe, by affirming that God created everything Himself, “after their kind,” Adam from dirt, his wife from his rib, and that all of this is so because Truth lies in Holy Scripture. You cannot get a Ph.D. by memorizing the Bible chapter and verse. Alas, you would have no luck even at a Catholic university.

Nowadays, if you want a Ph.D., you must learn everything scholars already know about a given field of knowledge, then *add* to it through your own *original* observations and analysis. The German-speaking states were an important birthplace for the Protestant Reformation, and by the late 19th century, the German universities developed the core of the modern, research-based doctoral degree. The basic assumptions are that human knowledge is not static, that what is taken as Truth now might not be Truth tomorrow, that all interpretations are fallible and in need of reassessment, and that everything moves

and nothing is simply what it seems. The most basic assumptions are that claims about what we know must be grounded on what we ourselves can observe, and that all of our observations must be as systemic as humanly possible. A research university is a place of constant revolution, the younger scholars trying to see beyond what the older scholars had worked so hard to see themselves. One of my favorite professors, quoting a 19th century German, said that the best students honor their teachers by going beyond them—it's as if the older generation of scholars *encourages* revolutionary ways of thinking, even when it challenges their own life's work. The American research university is a kinetic, dangerous, and exciting place, and the ideas generated here have the potential to save and ruin the world.

New Ph.D. candidates are initiated slowly, and the first two or three years of their doctoral programs consist of small seminars with professors where they learn the state of their academic field. What do we know and how do we know it? “Method” is a compound word that means, literally, “boundary” and “path”: in agricultural economies, farmers fenced off or built paths around their fields, to show visually what was theirs and also to get from here to there. Modern scholars use a mind-boggling array of different methods to define *their* fields: qualitative social scientists talk to people or inflict surveys on them, trying to analyze what they say, and glean meaning from their collective replies; quantitative social scientists look at large amounts of data about groups of people, to explain why some die earlier than others, or why some are richer than others, or why they behave this way or that way; historians sift through the objects and records that people leave behind, to say something new about how they lived; archaeologists and paleontologists dig, modern astronomers use Really Big Telescopes with Super Fast Computers, and marine biologists dissect and catalog funky sea sponges to see how these blobs make eyes. Their findings are presented to a new generation of scholars interested in people, relics, stars, and blobs, and a few of them really will make an original scholarly contribution, see and show more than what was already seen or shown, get their Ph.D.s, and repeat the cycle.

I say a few because it truly is a few: at most modern research universities, only a handful of applicants are admitted, then only a fraction of those admitted actually finish their doctorates, and then only a handful of those will get jobs at major research

universities. It's really, really hard to show "demonstrated ability by original research," which is what the University of California doctoral diploma says. After two or three years of seminars, each requiring about a book or two per week and a monster research paper at the end, there are typically "field exams," both written and oral, that test one's comprehensive mastery of an academic field and of its leading intellectual debates. An oral field exam is you standing in front of four professors who throw questions at you about things you really hadn't thought of, not because you're unprepared, because it's not always possible to think of *everything* in advance.

Even if you survive these exams, there is the doctoral dissertation, a huge thing in the humanities and social sciences and in every way complicated. It distills the state of the field, the specific research question you've decided to tackle, the methodology you used to collect your evidence, the evidence itself, then more of it and still more of it, until finally, you reach your well-argued conclusions. Four senior professors at your university must sign the "signature page," which verifies that your work was indeed an original scholarly contribution to the best of their knowledge and expertise. Unless they stake their *own* scholarly reputation on your work, in writing, *you ain't* Phinished. My dissertation was a five hundred page behemoth that took me four years to complete. I gained twenty pounds. I'm exhausted just reliving it now. Thank God I don't have to go through that again.

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Every research professor at UCSB has a Ph.D. This is a major research university, and to get a job here, a candidate for Assistant Professor often had to beat out fifty to a hundred or more other candidates, all with Ph.D.s. Once younger scholars get a job as an "Assistant Professor," they have five to seven years to publish scholarly works that are "blind reviewed," that is, reviewed by senior scholars in their respective fields who agreed that their work was sufficiently original to warrant publication. (It's "blind" because the reviewer doesn't know the identity of the author and vice versa, and scholarly journals and book publishers all keep a ready list of blind reviewers for all incoming submissions, most of which are rejected.) Blind review can be totally brutal,

but without a substantial amount of blind reviewed publications, there is virtually no chance in hell that an “Assistant Professor” will become an “Associate Professor.” By definition, an Associate Professor is someone who has demonstrated “superior intellectual attainment, as evidenced both in teaching and in research or other creative achievement.”

How do we know that such a thing was attained? Well, to get at part of that question, the University asks seven or eight senior scholars in your field (not from your University) what they think of all of your publications—and you don’t get to pick who they are. To become a tenured Associate Professor, a clear majority of your external reviewers, your Department, your Dean, an ad hoc committee of scholars at your University, a standing Academic Senate Committee, the Executive Vice Chancellor, and the Chancellor need to agree that you should be tenured. A good chunk of Assistant Professors will either leave or not make it through this process.

Scholars moving from Associate to Full Professor must subject themselves to “external review” once more: promotion to Full “requires an accomplished record that is judged to be excellent within the larger discipline or field.” The University asks yet another group of senior scholars, please, tell us if Professor Thomas’ research makes her an intellectual leader in her field. Once again, Professor Thomas’ Department, her Dean, an ad hoc committee of scholars at her University, a standing Academic Senate Committee, the Executive Vice Chancellor, and the Chancellor must agree to her promotion to Full. Unless they substantially agree, she’s not a Full Professor, despite her many prayers to God. It’s all so vexing.

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A very large majority of people who complete their Ph.D.s will not get jobs as professors at major research universities. Some of this is due to simple math: there are too many Ph.D.s and not enough jobs. Still, the Ph.D. is a good idea, because anyone who’s been through a doctoral program has skills that 99% of people in the world will not have. In some fields, Ph.D.s working outside the academic world make much more money than Ph.D.s in University settings. A super nerdy geeky person who can figure

out how to frame and to research a multi-faceted problem is unusually valuable to a wide range of complex organizations, including government agencies, private corporations, philanthropies, museums, financial institutions, and so on. All of these organizations have very good reasons to hire teams of super geeky people who can help them direct others to solve the most compelling issues that they face. Oh, there are stories of Ph.D.s who drive cabs or buses, but these stories are amusing because they tend to be rare. Super nerdy Ph.D.s in the sciences do quite well financially, as do many Ph.D.s in the social sciences and humanities.

One should be careful, though. The great French philosopher, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, once said that a man who spends his life inside a library, poring over books and musty learning, or tinkering in a dangerous laboratory when the day is beautiful and the flowers blooming—that man is a depraved man. There might be something very wrong with such a person. Sure, such people can come out of this learned and scholarly and great and useful, but creepy things can happen during this process, too. How many weird professors do I know: the guy who habitually picks his nose and farts without a care, the woman who passes you in the hall and says not a hello even when you do, the man who forgets every appointment and is never on time, the guy who says creepy or lecherous things to random people, the woman who screams habitually at her faculty colleagues, the department staff, small children, and pets. You probably know some weird professors, too, but hey, if *you* spent 10% of *your* life getting a Ph.D. and then another 20% worrying about becoming a Full Professor, you might turn really weird, too. And for what? To live with the very real possibility that some dopey graduate student might prove your life's work all wrong anyway. A professor at the University of California is by definition abnormal, if only because there's nothing normal about joining or remaining within the intellectual culture of a major research university.

But I *love* being a professor. It's the best job in the world. I get to spend hours reading and writing, and I thoroughly enjoy teaching, too. (Grading sucks.) I like travelling to academic conferences and hearing about other people's work, and I feel as though I'm constantly learning new and stimulating things. After spending hours, days, and months on my research projects, it's a wonderful thing to see my books and articles published, to see my ideas praised, criticized, torn apart, and built upon. I apply for

money to conduct my research, and most of the time, I get it. I get *invited* to apply for money, and I do research that is of deeply compelling interest to me. I teach whatever I want. I control my professional life to an extent unimaginable in other professional settings. I've been whacked anonymously during blind review numerous times, and yet I think blind review is essential, as it obviously improves me and the scholarly fields to which I contribute. I enjoy participating in the governance of the University, to contribute to those efforts that will enhance the academic environment for faculty and students. This University—all major research universities—are amazing places.

The students, staff, and faculty I've met here have greatly enriched my life, but my students are absolutely special, as these bright young people are like the sun rising. It's a blessed thing to see students change and grow while they're in college, and it's a humbling thing when they say thank you for being a part of that experience. It's a reward like no other. To be part of a community of scholars is truly special and thrilling. And so, quietly, I encourage my best students to get a Ph.D., even as I warn them of the pain and the risk, the sorrow and the weirdness. Quite simply, a life devoted to learning and contemplation is a great life, and it's no wonder that so many people pursue this path in spite of all the difficulties.