

“Who Wants to be a Ph.D.?”
by Sandra C. Ceraulo, from The Princeton Review

You're considering getting a Ph.D. and becoming a professor or researcher? You may have a burning desire to know more about Mayan art or to determine protein structures. Maybe you've even done some research already. You might think you'd love a job like the one your professors have. Many people find the prestige associated with the Ph.D. attractive, too.

But a Ph.D. program takes a long time. How long? According to 1999 statistics, the median number of years new Ph.D.s were registered as graduate students was 8.9 for arts and humanities Ph.D.s, 7.5 for social science Ph.D.s, 7.0 for Ph.D.s in the life sciences, and 6.8 for Ph.D.s in the physical sciences. Holy Toledo! That's a long time. Will you take a financial loss by going to graduate school or is a Ph.D. program right for you?

For the right type of person, getting a Ph.D. is a great idea. Whatever the field of study, there are some characteristics common to successful Ph.D. students. They tend to:

- Enjoy learning for learning's sake
- Be willing to work very hard for many years with only a possible payoff later
- Be persistent (never give up)
- Like intellectual challenges
- Enjoy an academic environment
- Enjoy scholarly discussions
- Have excellent command of undergraduate coursework
- Be willing to give up some parties and other pastimes to do research
- Be willing to live on a tight budget for many years or have outside income

If being a Ph.D. student sounds like a monk-like existence, that's because in some ways, it is.

Straight Talk About Atmosphere

With the noble goal of creating new knowledge, most students are idealistic when they start their Ph.D. programs. However, graduate school may not be the intellectual haven they had imagined. An early observation is that fame and friendliness of professors tend to be inversely related. Well-known faculty members can be irritable and too busy to talk with graduate students. Upon leaving a well-known chemistry professor for another advisor, one Ph.D. student stated, "He didn't know I was alive." Some graduate students even feel abused.

The first year of graduate school is intense, actually, extremely intense. While the Ph.D. is a research degree, first year grad students usually concentrate on courses, not research. How many courses? Usually three graduate courses. Graduate courses are much more work than undergraduate courses, and three graduate courses is an extremely heavy workload. Since many Ph.D. students teach during their first year, too, the first year of graduate school can consist of almost nonstop work.

Is There a Conspiracy?

While most first year Ph.D. students work extremely hard, statistics reveal that many will not meet the first year requirements of their graduate programs anyway. Only one out of every six students who starts a Ph.D. program in the humanities and social sciences finishes it.

Some people believe graduate departments with large undergraduate programs accept more first year students than they can fund in successive years because they need the teaching assistants (T.A.s). These people maintain that professors purposefully give out low grades so they can "flunk out" graduate students the department can't afford to keep after the first year. This belief is so widespread that, in departments that guarantee to fund graduate students through teaching or research assistantships, there's probably at least some truth to that theory. Some students who don't complete the Ph.D. will leave with master's degrees; others will leave with no degree at all. All Ph.D. students should have a backup plan.

Can You Live Like a Monk?

Most Ph.D. students must live entirely or almost entirely on their earnings from teaching assistantships, research assistantships, or other low-paying employment. Thus, obtaining a Ph.D. means being a starving student for another five years or more. Students often find that getting a Ph.D. takes longer than they thought it would (remember those averages you read at the beginning??).

Getting a Ph.D. is intellectually rewarding but not necessarily financially rewarding. And unless their specialty is a hot field such as computer science or nanotechnology, Ph.D.s usually find that the academic job market is even more competitive than they had imagined, too.

Giving up financial security for the pursuit of new knowledge is noble to some but foolish to others. One person who might be critical of the low priority you are putting on financial security might be your significant other. Unless you have an outside income, you will have a combination of a tight budget, stressful work conditions, and Spartan living quarters that can make life difficult for your special someone.

Keep in mind that your significant other is indeed significant. If you think "Me, Me, Me", your relationship may end up consisting of just You, You, You.

Where the Grass is Greener

Many Ph.D. students start to think that the mail carrier, the departmental secretary and just about everyone else in the world has it made compared to them. These people work fewer hours, get better pay and benefits, have more job security, take less flak from supervisors, and have no exams to take. Other professions may seem especially attractive after a low grade or biting criticism from a professor. Some first-year students leave their programs voluntarily because they think grad school just isn't worth the time, effort, and lost pay and benefits.

Despite the long hours and low pay, people stay in doctorate programs because they enjoy learning for learning's sake. They love intellectual stimulation, and they find academic work fun. Most Ph.D. students think only researchers and academics have it made because they get paid to tackle intellectual problems. Graduate school faculty members and most other professors reinforce this belief, too.

Academic Life: Where Work is Play

Many Ph.D. departments are competitive and students work round the clock to pass first year requirements and to impress professors. In the first year courses, there is a tremendous amount of reading and some students find Friday and Saturday nights are great times to catch up on it and other coursework. Keep in mind that Ph.D. students tend to be extremely intelligent and to love their field of study. To them, academic work is play, and many enjoy studying night and day.

Prepare for the Stress-test

Prepare for the stresses of a Ph.D. program by carefully choosing living space and writing out an estimated budget. Relieve stress by:

- Breaking all large projects into smaller ones. Make a list of tasks to do each day and check them off as you complete them;
- Seeking supportive friends and colleagues;
- Doing the non-academic activities you enjoy such as hiking, camping, or attending sporting or cultural events;
- Taking periodic breaks from the university and academic work. These will increase your overall productivity;
- Keeping the lines of communication open between you and your family or significant other. Talk about your frustrations with peers or senior graduate students, and don't let academic frustrations take control of your whole life.

When frustration mounts, keep in mind that there is life outside your department, and most people have never even heard of what you are studying.

The Cycle of Academia

Many Ph.D.s seek academic jobs. In recent years, a higher percentage of faculty positions in U.S. colleges and universities are temporary or non-tenure track. Many colleges hire visiting professors or lecturers for one-year appointments, and recent Ph.D.s often take such positions to gain valuable teaching experience and earn a much-needed paycheck. Others become faculty members at research universities or colleges. These professors, and, in particular, the ones at prestigious colleges, will be the pride of their former Ph.D. programs, and their names will be mentioned to prospective graduate students for many years to come. And so the tradition continues.

Building Intellectual Empires

For the most part, only people who like a subject can take being immersed in it for six years or more. So Ph.D.s tend to be "into" what they are doing. If a big house, expensive cars and luxurious vacations are important to you, then the Ph.D. is probably not the degree for you. With few exceptions, people do not grow wealthy by using their Ph.D. training. The overwhelming majority of Ph.D.s just make a living. If your American dream is one of working hard for intellectual fulfillment rather than financial success, you probably have what it takes to get a Ph.D.