A PhD in Public Affairs?

The Basics

A Doctor of Philosophy degree, abbreviated Ph.D. for the Latin *Philosophiae Doctor*, is an advanced academic degree earned in many fields, signifying major interests and accomplishments in research. Because earning a Ph.D. requires extended study and intense intellectual effort, less than one percent of the population attains the degree.

To earn a Ph.D., one must accomplish two things. First, one must master a specific subject thoroughly. Second, one must contribute to the state of knowledge about that subject. One may think of earning a Ph.D. as gaining the capabilities and the self-concept of a self-sufficient, independent "seeker for truth."

Mastering A Subject

Mastering a subject requires reading exhaustively in an area and consulting with gifted teachers, mentors, and experts. Academic books capture the accumulating scholarly knowledge and wisdom in a subject area. Journal articles contain the results of more current research. The most current work is exchanged more informally in scholarly person-to-person networks. Mastering a subject area requires extensive investigation and familiarity with all three of these repositories of knowledge.

Each university establishes general guidelines that a student must follow to earn a Ph.D. degree, and each college or department within a university sets specific standards by which it measures mastery of a subject. Usually, in preparing for Ph.D. work in a given field, a student must earn both a Bachelor's and Master's degree (or their equivalent) in that field or in a closely related field. To demonstrate mastery of the subject, a student may be required to complete additional graduate-level courses, maintain a high grade average, or take a battery of special examinations. In most Ph.D.-granting institutions, students must do all three.

Extending Knowledge

The essence of a Ph.D., the aspect that distinguishes Ph.D. study from other academic work, can be summarized in a single word: research. To advance what is known, one must explore, investigate, and reflect. Academics call that mix of activities *research*. Research necessarily involves interpretation and strives for deep understanding.

To complete a Ph.D., a student must present his or her research activities and results to the faculty in a lengthy, formal document called a dissertation or thesis. The dissertation is commonly guided and evaluated by a committee of three or more faculty members and is presented publicly in a dissertation defense attended as well by other interested faculty and students.

A dissertation in the field of public affairs develops an original and significant contribution to the understanding of public administration, public management, or public policy. It requires a demonstration that the student has mastered in detail the relevant literature and issues pertaining to the research topic and pushed beyond them to make a contribution. In the field of public affairs a dissertation normally includes a combination of applied and theoretical concerns.

Research Activities

Research activities are a critical component of the work done by PhDs, whether they are academics in a university setting or practitioners who hold research positions in public or non-governmental organizations, professional associations or research institutions. Research activities not only contribute to extant theories representing a body of knowledge; they may have practical applications for understanding complex social phenomena. That practical applicability is a hallmark of research done by Ph.D.s in public administration and policy.

Research is just one of three prongs that comprise the essential activities expected from PhD's who pursue academic positions. Teaching and service constitute the other two prongs. Even though the three activities are often described independent of each other, for most scholars it is their interdependency that yields the greatest rewards. When research results are engaged in the classroom, teaching comes alive. Students realize they are being asked to confront emerging answers to problems researchers have investigated for years. A spirit in inquiry comes to dominate the classroom experience. The researcher as teacher also gains because of the fresh perspectives students bring to the material, helping research results to lead to the next round of deep questions. Combining this activity with service to the professional community ensures the cross-fertilization of ideas between academia and the world of reflective practitioners. In turn, teaching and service activities suggest to researchers practical questions that require investigation through systematic research activities.

A Few Questions To Ask

If you are exploring the idea of pursuing a PhD. in public administration, public management, or public policy, here are a few questions you might ask yourself.

1. Do you want a research career?

Before enrolling in a Ph.D. program, you should carefully consider your long-term goals. Because earning a Ph.D. is training for research, you should ask yourself whether a research position is your long-term goal. If it is, a Ph.D. degree is the standard path to your chosen career (a few people have managed to obtain a research position without a

Ph.D., but they are the exception, not the rule). If, however, you want a non-research career, a Ph.D. is probably not for you.

2. Do you want an academic position?

A Ph.D. is the de facto “union card" for an academic position. Although it is possible to obtain an academic position without it, the chances are low. Major universities and most colleges require each member of their faculty to hold a Ph.D. and to engage in research activities. The degree signals that an individual is at the forefront of his or her field and is capable of continuing the scholarly activities that achieved that status, while working to bring students to high levels of academic achievement. Do you think you’d love teaching? Will you enjoy working with the full range of students, from reluctant learners to self-motivated scholars-to-be like yourself?

3. Do you have what it takes?

It is difficult for individuals to assess their own capabilities. The following guidelines and questions may be of help.

Intelligence:

> In your college and graduate courses, were you closer to the top of your class or the bottom? How well did you do on the GRE or other standardized tests? Do you love learning?

Persistence:

> Do you tend to persevere in the face of difficulties and setbacks? Can you sustain the four or more year commitment it will take to complete coursework and the dissertation? Do you love challenges?

Time:

> Are you prepared to tackle a project larger than any you have undertaken before? You must commit to multiple years of hard work. Are you willing to reduce or forego other activities?

Creativity:

> Research discoveries often arise when one looks at old facts in a new way. Do you shine when solving problems? Do you like ``brain teasers" and similar puzzles? Are you good at solving them? Do you like to invent solutions to tough social problems? Are you appropriately skeptical of proposed solutions? Do you enjoy thinking of ways one could become surer of proposed solutions?

Curiosity:

> Have you always been compelled to understand the world around you and to find out how things work? A natural curiosity makes research a joy. Did you fulfill minimum requirements or explore further on your own?

Adaptability:

> Many students are surprised by the self-reliance required to be successful in doctoral level work. Suddenly thrust into a world in which no one knows the answers, students sometimes flounder. Can you adapt to new ways of thinking? Can you tolerate searching for answers even when no one knows the precise

questions? Are you ready to make the transition from a student receiving answers from texts and professors to a professional trying to uncover those answers?

Self-motivation:

Undergraduates and early graduate students are accustomed to receiving grades for each course each semester. In the advanced stages of a Ph.D. program, work is not divided neatly into separate courses, professors do not partition tasks into little assignments, and the student does not receive a grade for each small step. Are you self-motivated enough to keep working toward a goal without day-to-day encouragement?

Competitiveness:

If you choose to enroll in a Ph.D. program, you will compete with others at the top. More important, once you graduate, your peers will include some of the brightest people in the world. You will be measured and judged in comparison to them. Are you willing to compete at the Ph.D. level?

Maturity:

Compared to coursework, which is carefully planned by a teacher, independent research has much less structure. You will have more freedom to set your own goals, determine your daily schedule, and follow interesting ideas. Are you prepared to accept the responsibility that accompanies the additional freedoms? Your success or failure in Ph.D. research depends on it.

A few warnings:

Students sometimes enroll in a Ph.D. program for the wrong reasons. After a while, such students find that the requirements overwhelm them. Before starting, one should realize that a Ph.D. is not …

Prestigious in itself

Almost everyone who has obtained a Ph.D. is proud of their efforts and the result. However, you should understand that once you graduate, you will work among others who also hold a Ph.D. degree. (One faculty member used to chide arrogant graduate students by saying, “I don't see why you think it's such a great accomplishment -- all my friends have a Ph.D!”).

A guarantee of respect for your opinions

Many students believe that once they earn a Ph.D. people will automatically respect all their opinions. You will learn, however, that few people assume a Ph.D. in one subject automatically makes you an authority on others. Even in your own field, respect must be earned.

A goal in itself

A Ph.D. degree prepares you for academic and professional careers involving research. If all you want is a diploma to hang on the wall, there are much easier ways to obtain one. After you graduate, you will have occasion to compare your record of accomplishment to those of other scientists. You will realize that what counts is the research work accumulated after a scientist finishes their formal education.

A practical way to impress your family or friends

Your mother may be proud and excited when you enroll in a Ph.D. program. After all, she imagines that she will soon be able to brag about her child, "the doctor." However, a desire to impress others is insufficient motivation for the effort required.

Something you can "try" to find out how smart you are

Sorry, but it just doesn't work that way. Unless you make a total commitment, you will fail. You will need to work long hours, face disappointments, stretch your mental capabilities, and learn to find order among apparently chaotic facts. Unless you have adopted the long-range goal of becoming a researcher, the day-to-day demands will wear you down. Standards will seem unnecessary high; rigor will seem unwarranted. If you only consider it a test, you will eventually walk away.

The only research topic you will ever pursue

Many students make the mistake of viewing their Ph.D. dissertation as a research area for life. They assume each researcher only works in one area, always pursues the same topic within that area, and always uses the same tools and approaches. Rather than pick a thesis topic that can lead to a written dissertation in at most two years, many assume they have to make their dissertation the contribution of their lives. Experienced researchers know that new questions arise constantly, and that old questions can become less interesting as time passes or new facts are discovered. The best people change topics and areas. It keeps them fresh and stimulates thinking. Plan to move on; prepare for change.

Easier than entering the work force

You will find that the path to successful completion of a Ph.D. becomes much steeper after you begin. Faculty impose constraints on your study, and do not permit unproductive students to remain in the program.

For every great student

The life of a researcher in academia or professional practice has its particular personal rewards, but many fine masters students find they are more fulfilled taking other paths to make their contributions. The best advice here is to know yourself well. Search for the life that fits. Be ruthlessly realistic to match your aspirations with you capabilities, deep interests, and personal style. If you really cannot determine where you stand, ask faculty members.

The good news:

Despite all our warnings, those who have earned Ph.D.s and exercise the skills and habits of mind doctoral study helps to develop are justly proud of their accomplishments and excited about what lies ahead in their work. If you have the capability and interest, a research career can bring rewards unequaled in any other profession. You will meet and work with some of the brightest people on the planet. You will reach for ideas beyond your grasp, and in so doing extend your intellectual capabilities. You will solve problems that have not been solved before. You will explore concepts that have not been explored. If you teach, you will have the great pleasure of helping to develop the next generation of gifted scholars, professionals, and thoughtful citizens. You will have the chance to spend the time and effort necessary to make insightful contributions to the well-being of society.

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