

Should I Do Research?

Universities value research above all (except maybe money). They tend to oversell the benefits of research and the life of the researcher, and particularly of academic research.

You can do research outside of a university! Researchers work for government agencies, for independent think-tanks, for commercial consulting firms, for corporations, for “soft money” research organizations, and for themselves. The advantage of academic research is more independence regarding what you study (but not how), the disadvantage is that while your salary gets paid, you usually have to raise money for everything else through external funding. Almost all other research organizations are better funded, but what you study tends to be constrained by organizational priorities.

Academic affiliation tends to give your research greater credibility with a wider range of people. Since the arrival of the new technologies, costs of doing research on your own have come down, and many younger researchers are joining new start-up companies, or starting-up their own. Many are putting together multiple sources of income, affiliating with universities on a part-time basis, but also working free-lance, as consultants, or with start-ups and their own companies.

Research is not going to save the world or make it a better place. Not by itself. Social change requires political action, and these days probably media attention or major social networking. Research can provide new alternatives. It can critique and subvert established ideas and ideologies. It can form the basis for new technologies and new ways of using technologies, and even those will not change the world unless there are also changes in power relationships that determine how the technologies are used and by whom.

Research does not mean just reading and writing. It can mean developing and testing new ways of doing things, new tools and media. It can mean making films and video. It often means talking with diverse people about their ideas and experiences, observing and documenting what they do, learning from them, helping them out, and trying to draw some useful conclusions from it all. It can mean analyzing media made by others, and producing media and counter-media of your own. It also often means working collaboratively with other researchers and other people involved in the activities you are studying.

Collaborative research and consortia are a key part of contemporary research. It takes a village to study a village. Or at least a small diverse community within the larger society.

Above all, do research only if you really, really want to!

See: Should I Get a Ph.D.?