

## Should I Get a Ph.D.?

Not unless you really WANT it, and NEED it!!

***Wanting it matters*** because it is a lot of work and you have to put up with a lot of antiquated and dysfunctional elements of university Ph.D. programs. The program will require you to study things you don't think are relevant. It will expect you to take tests and write papers that may not be useful to your goals. You will have to put up with egotistical and sometimes not very good faculty members. You may not get the advisor you want or need. Your dissertation research will be hemmed in by your advisor's and committee's interests and biases, and by the limitations of your university's research regulations.

***Needing it matters*** because you don't want to have to put up with all this if you don't have to. What a Ph.D. gives you is: credibility (if it's from a major university and/or under a well-known advisor), some options for an academic job, training in research methods (if you're lucky), and background knowledge in your field (usually more than you want). If you want to get paid for doing research, you probably need it to compete in the job market today. If you want to teach in a university, especially full-time, but maybe even part-time, you also need it.

In my opinion far too many people are getting Ph.D.'s these days. They are being trained to do boring research by people who do research that no one reads. Unless you want to do creative research, developing new ideas and pioneering new directions, please leave room in our over-subscribed Ph.D. programs for the people who do, and who can.

If you've decided you want it and need it, ***choose your program wisely***. This means (a) the university, (b) the program, (c) your advisor/mentor. The last matters most. Do research online in your areas of interest and try to find out which faculty members are most famous in your prospective field. Try to find programs or departments that have more than one such person in them. Usually they will be at prestigious universities, but not always. Make an appointment and go talk to the nearest one, ask for advice about choosing a program, what to read in the field, etc. You don't have to go there, but you need more information than you can get online. Talk to more than one, if you can.

The most important consideration in choosing a program? ***It's the faculty, not the curriculum***. Curricula change, and none of them are very good. What you need is a program where you will have a good chance of getting your dissertation supervised by your first- or second- choice of well-known researcher. And where you can turn to more than one person for mentoring and advice along the way. Small programs tend to be better than big ones, but check the faculty to student ratio (and count only full Professors to get the most reliable estimate). Small means they admit about 10 new doctoral students a year. Try to choose a program where many viewpoints are represented, but not one where the faculty are at odds over the basic standards of good research or their basic views of what is important in the field.

**Choose your Advisor carefully.** The most important choice you will make is your thesis advisor (mentor, supervisor, head of your dissertation committee). This matters more to your future than your thesis topic or even the name of the degree you get (university, department, or program). The most important practical quality in an advisor is that s/he be nationally or internationally known and respected in the field; the more famous the better. Such a person will probably have little time to give you, so you will also need other, even unofficial guides and advisors (who can also be members of your committee). This person's recommendation is often worth more than your dissertation or degree in getting a job, getting research funding, making key contacts at conferences, etc. He or she is your social entree into the field. Their stamp of approval counts for a lot with all the many people who know (but would never admit) that they really can't judge quality or originality in the field.

Beyond reputation and power, the other **qualities to look for** in an advisor are (1) a reputation for getting dissertations students "out" -- meaning graduated -- in a reasonable period of time (less than 5 years); (2) someone who is at the forefront of the field and knows what is going on nationally and internationally; (3) someone who fits with your own preference as between: telling you what to do vs. letting you work things out for yourself. Your advisor may or may not be the person you actually learn the most from. You should also be on the lookout for (1) really insightful people in the field, and (2) people who can teach you technical skills. The first sort will give you ideas about where what's worth doing and where the field ought to be headed. The second sort will enable you to actually get something done.

If you can combine a thoughtful and caring mentor, a brilliant scholar, and a person with power in the field in the same human being, that's the ideal. Realistically, however, there are just not enough such people to supervise all doctoral students. **Faculty choose their doctoral students, not the other way around.** You have to get to know the person you want, and you have to have something to offer them: energy, time, hard work, intelligence, ideas, a different viewpoint, special experience, access to data or sites, your own funding, an engaging personality ... but something.

See: Guide to Academic Success