

The Basics of Applying for a PhD

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(Slides prepared by Jenny Furlong, Office of
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Overview

- Is a PhD right for you? If so, what field?
- Nuts and bolts of applying:
 - Applications and deadlines
 - Personal statements and writing samples
 - Letters of recommendation
- Additional resources and food for thought...

Is a PhD Right for Me?

- **You have a (real) passion for your field:** you have a chosen field of study and have an abiding interest in it.
- **You've started to build a network:** You've connected with faculty members in your field and have their support to move forward.
- **You are very comfortable with uncertainty:** Higher education is changing and the number of tenure-track openings has been declining in nearly all fields for some time. You may have “being a professor “ as a first-choice career goal, but so many others.
 - “But, Ms. Mentor, don't the best and the brightest eventually get academic jobs?
 - No, because almost every one in your graduate cohort is also the best. Nearly every one of the 200 people who apply for every tenure-track job in English or history is the best.” (“They say I'll never get a job” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 15, 2014)

What Field Should I Choose

- Disciplines are very different. If you cannot decide between a wide range of fields, you are not likely ready to apply to a doctoral program.
- Having trouble seeing the differences between fields? Talk to the subject specialist librarians.
- Doing an interdisciplinary doctoral program is not likely to multiple your job prospects.
 - It may even make your search more challenging.

The logistics of applying

- Research the programs you are considering, draw up a long list and a short list
- Set up visits / calls with faculty with whom you might want to work
- Start crafting your personal statement
- Schedule your GRE and related standardized tests if applicable

Personal Statement

- 1-2 page document that should explain your research interests, questions, or methodologies
- Be concise
- Be specific about the program to which you are applying (also mention faculty & relevant centers)
- Ask a current faculty member to review it (with enough time to revise it)
- Check for grammar and typos (have a friend, parent, or colleague read it)

Writing Samples

- Check the requirements of each programs
- Take a strong piece(s) that you have written and revise if appropriate
- The piece should demonstrate your critical thinking skills, the originality of your ideas, or engagement with debates within your field
- Get input / insights from your faculty members as to what your strongest pieces of work have been

References – Part I

- Identify 3- 5 faculty members who can write for you
- faculty members who have taught you and whose work / discipline are related to the field that you want to study
- Politely ask them to write for you
- Once they have agreed, clearly lay out all deadlines and sending them all relevant materials (personal statements), links, etc.
- Politely remind them of deadlines

References – Part 2

- Thank the faculty members for writing for you
 - Writing a good letter is a significant amount of work
- Let them know the outcome, regardless of what happens.
 - If you are admitted, they might/should continue to be an important professional contact
 - If you are not admitted/chose not to pursue this path, they will still want to know what professional path you chose

Deadlines

- Try to get all of your materials together two or so weeks in advance of your deadline.
 - Applying to graduate school involves a lot of moving parts
 - You want to make sure you have what you need for each program/school
 - You want to give yourself time to make sure your letters arrive by the deadline as well
- Nearly everyone will have a pre-deadline scramble—work to minimize the stress level involved in yours.

Visiting a Campus

- If you are accepted, you will likely be invited to visit the campus. These visits are very important.
 - You will speak with individual faculty members
 - You may attend a talk
 - You will speak with other graduate students
 - You will tour the campus and the surrounding area
- Ask yourself: All things considered, are the doctoral students happy here? Are they supported?
 - This can make or break your own experience.

Making a Decision

- You may have more than one offer of admission. Things to consider:
 - Funding (almost above all)
 - Climate (will I be happy and productive here?)
 - Intellectual fit
- Know that if you chose a program because of one star person, you run the risk of having that person leave
 - Hedge your bets here. Chose a department that can provide robust support for your research interests

Why You Should Do a PhD

- Passion
- Patience
- You **love** to write
- Self-motivated
- Comfortable with ambiguity
- You have few current financial obligations
- You have no debt
- You are comfortable living “lean”
 - But know that these may change as you get older.

Why You Shouldn't Do a PhD

- Differed income, unclear possibilities for career advancement, and lack of a clear ROI (business speak: return on investment).
- Even if you are open to a wide range of career options, those around you may not embrace this choice (and you may not gain the skills)
 - “I'd also point out that any phd program operating "properly" will ensure that the finished Ph.D. will on the one hand be unable to imagine any life outside the academy, and on the other will be rendered so fearful and authority-bound, and also so enmeshed in the Myth of Meritocracy (and self-exceptionalizing delusion) that the idea of unionizing or any sort of political action or principled stand related to the labor market and their position in it, will be impossible.” Karen Kelsky (The Professor is In) in the comments to Ms. Mentor
- Your real career/life goal lies somewhere else (documentary filmmaker, advertising maven, living abroad).

Resources

- *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, <http://chronicle.com>
- *Inside Higher Ed*, <https://www.insidehighered.com/>
- 100 Reasons Not to Go to Grad School (and the further reading list), <http://100rsns.blogspot.com/>
- Grad Hacker blog (via Inside Higher Ed)
<https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/gradhacker>
- *Graduate Study for the Twenty-First Century: How to Build an Academic Career in the Humanities*, Gregory Semenza
- *The Chicago Guide to your Academic Career*, Gold, Komlos, and Goldsmith
- *How to Proofread Your Own Writing: Tips and Techniques to Help You Produce an Error-Free Manuscript*, Sandie Giles

About the Office of Career Planning and Professional Development

- We serve all students and alumni who are current students or have graduated from the CUNY Graduate Center
- Our services include:
 - **One-on-one counseling sessions** (typically 60 minutes) focused on job search, career concerns, and career self-assessment
 - **Workshops** (and now webinars!) highlighting career development and job search basics (e.g., writing a CV or resume, the nuts and bolts of the academic job search)
 - **Career events** featuring alumni and others from various industries, such as big data, government, and community colleges, to name a few

About the Office of Career Planning and Professional Development

- We also provide updated career resources on our website:
 - **Information** on the academic job search, non-academic job search, resumes, CVs, cover letters, interviewing, and many other topics
 - **Blog posts** focused on a variety of career-related topics, including specific career fields, teaching best practices, and job search advice
 - **Versatile PhD:** a popular online resource for students/graduates thinking about careers outside of academia
 - **Vault Career Guides:** an online resource featuring downloadable career guides on a variety of industries from investment banking to library careers
- Our website: <http://careerplan.commons.gc.cuny.edu/>

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Remaining Questions?