

Questions and Concerns  
about  
Pursuing the Doctoral Degree:  
Perspectives from Five Graduate Students and New  
Professionals

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**Important note to readers:**

Congratulations on considering a doctoral program! This is a very exciting time, so we hope that the following questions and answers will be helpful to you. The questions were submitted by audience members in a presentation we did during the 2007 ACPA/NASPA Joint Meeting in Orlando, titled, "*Pursuing the Ph.D.: Considerations for Applying to Doctoral Programs*". Together we reviewed the questions and tried to provide answers that may be useful to readers. Keep in mind, however, that this is just advice, and there is really no definitive answer to any of these questions. We strongly encourage you to ask many people these and other relevant questions as you begin this process and ultimately follow your own heart and mind. The following represents the opinions of the five of us and does not necessarily reflect the views and/or opinions of any component of ACPA.

*Thanks and Best of Luck!*

**Topical Areas:**

- BALANCE/LIFE/FAMILY
- REQUIREMENTS/PREPARATION
- DISSERTATION
- THE DOCTORAL EXPERIENCE
- FINDING THE RIGHT PROGRAM/ TYPE OF PROGRAM
- THE APPLICATION

**Questions and Concerns from the Presentation:**

**BALANCE/LIFE/FAMILY**

- **How do I balance a PhD program, family, and/or work?**
  - This is a tough issue that is going to be different for each person. You should definitely be honest with yourself, your family, and your employer about the time, energy, and commitment your doctoral work will take. HOWEVER, do not despair! It can be done and many people do it successfully. You will need to be diligent with your work, plan ahead whenever possible, and find creative ways to get things done. Ask others for support too.
- **I am afraid that I will not have any free time to enjoy life if I work and am a student again.**
  - You can definitely have time to enjoy life while being a student. Whether you work full time or part-time, there are ways to be an engaged student and have fun. But sometimes this means making tough decisions, such as needed to post-pone watching your favorite TV show, or working on a paper on Sunday afternoon. Think about taking Friday night off to refresh and then diving into your work on Sat. Or perhaps you like to have your weekends free so you work hard to get stuff done during the week. Be sure to take advantage of professional development opportunities that come your way, but also be careful not to over-commit because then you will not have much time to relax. And just keep in mind there will be busier and lighter times during the semester so plan accordingly.
- **I am married with children, is it feasible to attend school full-time? How much time will it take away from my family?**
  - Yes, in fact a number of people do this. Again explain to your partner/family that you will need their support and share with them why this experience is important to you personally and professionally. Talk about how life might change and how some things will still be the same. Perhaps you and your children can work on your homework together! Or take trips to the library as a family.
- **I am concerned about uprooting my life for a doctoral program.**
  - “Uprooting” yourself is a big decision. This involves financial costs of moving, but also starting over in a new area and meeting new people. While it can be daunting, it is also an exciting time to build your relationships and experiences something different. Doing so might even help you focus more on your studies. But if you are going to take this big step, be sure that you decide on a program that you feel good about. It is impossible to predict the future, so just use your best judgment and then make the most of the situation. If you’ve given the program a real chance and decided it is not for you, it is ok to leave. But do give it a chance....

**Questions and Concerns from the Presentation:**

**REQUIREMENTS/PREPARATION**

- **I did not write a thesis for my M.S., do I need to do one for acceptance in a Ph.D. program?**
  - For some programs, it may be helpful if you have completed a thesis, but for many programs a thesis is not required. Having completed a thesis may help you with your dissertation, but it is definitely not necessary.
- **How much work experience should I get prior to applying to a doctoral program? How much time should you take between the masters program and doctoral program?**
  - Many programs have a minimum requirement of completed work years. The average appears to be about 3 years. I would definitely suggest taking a break between the masters and doctoral program. The life experience you will gain with being in the work force will only help you comprehend what you are reading and learning in the classroom. However, some people do go straight through and succeed. Ultimately it's about where you are in your personal and professional life.
- **What experiences do I need to have now to prepare for the application process?**
  - Be prepared to either submit a paper you completed at the masters level or to write a new paper. Often, applications ask for a writing sample. Personally, I choose what I thought was my best paper from my masters program and updated it prior to submitting it. You should also start gathering a list of references. Some applications ask for up to 8 references. These references could be professional references or former professors.
- **Should I be published before I apply?**
  - This is definitely not necessary.
- **When is the best time to get a doctoral degree?**
  - The “best” time is going to be different for everyone. Some important indicators of readiness would be your interest in research (that doesn't mean a dissertation topic) and identified goals for your program. For some people, the doctorate means helping advance to a higher level position while for others it means moving towards a faculty position. Start keeping a journal of research questions; when you find that you're mind wanders to the “why” and “how” questions often, it might be time to start the application process.
- **If I got my masters in k-12 education, will I be able to get into a higher education Ph.D. program?**
  - There are varied entry methods to doctoral programs, not everyone who is in a higher ed program has a master's in student affairs or higher ed. A commitment to higher education research and interests in such things as access, retention, higher education, and college impact are more important than what type of master's degree you hold.
- **My research methods class in my masters program was not very strong—will I be ready for Ph.D. quality research. Should I take another course?**
  - You will take lots of research courses in your doctoral program; part of the doctoral process is learning how to be a researcher. Some people enter a program with lots of research experience, others have none. If you find yourself at an institution and it is feasible to take a course, it is good practice for getting back in the classroom (and will probably transfer), but is certainly not a necessity!
- **I am concerned about taking the GRE again.**
  - Fear about the GRE is normal! If you have already taken the instrument, you may not need to re-take it depending upon the program and graduate school to which you are applying. Check with the department chair to see if your test is still valid. The other

piece to consider: studying for the GRE is good preparation for studying in graduate school, and while GRE scores may not be an indicator of how well you will do when you get to grad school, they can be a tool for getting back in the mindset of academic preparation.

**Questions and Concerns from the Presentation:**

**DISSERTATION**

- **I feel very lost and overwhelmed with the idea of picking a topic. How do you determine a dissertation topic?**
  - I began my doctoral work with a clear vision in my mind on what I wanted to research, or so I thought. An upper level student gave me great advice which I will pass on. The student said to try out your dissertation topic in a class. By that, I mean, complete a writing assignment (preferably the 20 page type) in an early class to see if you like the topic. If you still like the topic at the end of the semester and are excited to learn more, that is your topic for your dissertation. However, if you are like me, and find that the topic just didn't interest you for the semester, you need to change your topic. My topic came from a budgeting course paper I wrote. I was intrigued by what I was learning for that class and my class paper turned into my dissertation. It is okay to change your dissertation topic while you are in your doctoral studies. Doctoral students often change their topic.
- **What do I do (with the literature review) if I am interested in a dissertation topic that is a new area/or uncharted territory?**
  - You just described many dissertation topics, including mine. For my literature review, I had to take pieces of my topic and write about four different subject areas or tracks and hope that my qualitative study brought those four tracks together. For example, my research looked at what college choice factors come into play when a crisis occurs on or near a college campus. I also wanted to find out what the college was doing for the prospective students when that crisis occurred. However, there was no research linking all of those ideas. Therefore, I did a research track on recent campus/community crises, crisis management teams, college choice, and admission and student recruitment.
- **Once coursework is over, I'm going to hate doing my dissertation and fall behind on deadlines/workload. (I'm very deadline driven.)**
  - Knowing this is the first step. In my program, our dissertation director created a dissertation support group. We met every 3-4 weeks on a Saturday, took turns bringing breakfast items, shared updates, and learned from each other. This also gave each of us a chance to talk to students who may have been a few steps ahead of us in the dissertation writing process and learn processes that would help. I also kept a calendar but learned quickly that the dissertation writing process doesn't always follow your timeline. There will be roadblocks along the way. Participants will withdraw from your study, the IRB will not always be your friend, and your dissertation committee will go on vacations during the year. When building a timeline, build in some flex time and be okay with the fact that you may not meet certain deadlines.
  - To keep to a writing schedule, keep a copy of your purpose (3-4 questions that you want your research to answer) posted by your computer or wherever you work on your dissertation. Keep referring to that. It is all too easy to read articles that are very interesting but doesn't really address what you are hoping that the research will answer.
- **How do I go about finding a research topic & matching well with an advisor who will guide you through your research topic?**
  - I chose a professor whose class I had never taken to ask to be my dissertation director because I knew of his interests. Set up an appointment with the person and go in with some definite ideas on what you would like to research but also be open for

suggestions and ideas from your director. Together, the two of you will develop the committee.

**Questions and Concerns from the Presentation:**

**THE DOCTORAL EXPERIENCE**

- **How feasible is working full-time and completing a doctoral program in a reasonable amount of time?**
  - This will vary by person and program. Some programs do not accept part-time students, while others cater to this type of student. Another caution is that some institutions have a residency requirement which means you must take a full-time course load for one or two semesters. This is rare, but something to watch out for! As someone who works full-time and goes to school part-time, I have found strategies for managing my time. I work hard to get my syllabi in advance and try to read before the beginning of the semester. It also means making lots of choices and being okay with not being perfect (at work, school, or at home). That has been the hardest part of my transition back to school, but the best part has been a supportive supervisor and an understanding cohort.
- **What is the average length of a doctoral program?**
  - This varies; however, most programs can be completed in 4 years. The average length of doctoral programs overall is 8-10 years, so higher ed and CSP programs tend to be below average.
- **Is there any way of completing a Ph.D. without having to do independent research?**
  - Well, you can't co-write a dissertation, but you can use existing data and participate in a research team to help with the data collection process. You will probably be able to work with others on collecting data, but a doctoral program will require independent writing and meaning-making.
- **What exactly are the steps and timeline for a person to earn a doctorate?**
  - The first step is to apply! Once you've applied and selected a program, there are typically core courses to take (usually about 2 and a half years worth). After completion of coursework, there is usually a comprehensive exam (otherwise known as comps or quals) (sometimes oral, sometimes written). After successful completion of comps, you must select a dissertation committee and propose your first three chapters of your dissertation (Chapter 1 states the problem, Chapter 2 is the lit review, and Chapter 3 is the methods section). The next step after defending your proposal is collecting and analyzing data and writing Chapter 4 (data) and Chapter 5 (interpretation and conclusion). Finally, you defend the entire dissertation. This process will vary by institution and program, but generally, this is the skeleton of the process.
- **How do I stay motivated?**
  - This varies by individual. Some people are motivated by the end goal: what does a terminal degree mean to you? Some are motivated by their desire to learn. Some reward themselves along the way for small wins. Some find support groups and cohorts to help them along.
- **I am concerned about actually surviving the doctoral process when the completion rate is so low.**
  - The completion rate of bachelor's degrees hovers around 50%- did that stop you from finishing college? You can do it! 😊
- **I do not feel smart enough to enter a Ph.D. program even though I have had encouragement and support.**
  - Many students experience the "impostor syndrome," but you are smart enough! If you are admitted to a program and have the encouragement of others, others clearly believe you are capable and intelligent, why don't you?

- **As a Ph.D. student, must all of the classes you teach be graduate courses? Can you teach undergraduate courses?**
  - This varies by institution and by desired outcome, but there are typically opportunities to teach both graduate and undergraduate courses. Sometimes this in on a volunteer basis, sometimes you can get course credit, and occasionally you can be paid for your teaching services.

**Questions and Concerns from the Presentation:**

**FINDING THE RIGHT PROGRAM/ TYPE OF PROGRAM**

- **Part-time/Full-time**
  - **I am concerned about transiting from a full-time job (administration) to attend a doctoral program full-time.**
    - There is always transition when you change jobs or go back to graduate school. It is hard to transition from being a full-time employee to being a graduate assistant, and often, no matter how much you prepare, there will be challenges in this process. As you apply to programs, talk with current students to get a sense of how they managed that transition and look for assistantships that allow you to be a full-time student.
  - **What are the benefits in attending a doctoral program full-time or part-time?**
    - This varies. As a full-time worker and part-time student, I find the benefit of a full-time salary. My colleagues who go to school full-time have a benefit of more time and the ability to take more classes and truly immerse themselves in the academic experience. Deciding if you will be able to balance full-time work and part-time school is partly dependent upon the office climate in which you work, how supportive your supervisor is of academic work, and how well you think you can manage your time doing both.
  - **Is it reasonable to only-take one class per semester? If so, how long on average would it take to complete a program?**
    - This might be reasonable, however, some programs require you take a full-load for one year (residency requirement). You would need to calculate how many courses your program requires and how long it would take with one at a time. There may be a requirement that you finish coursework within 6 years of enrolling or propose a dissertation within a certain timeframe. This varies by institution. Most people who go to school part-time take 1-2 classes per semester.
  - **Do you suggest rushing through as a full-time student or go through as a part-time student?**
    - This depends on financial considerations, goals for completion, and academic persistence. Each person's path to a terminal degree is different, for some, it's about getting the degree quickly, for others, it's about maximizing experiences along the way.
  
- **Ed.D/Ph.D.**
  - **What is the difference between a Ph.D. and Ed.D program?**
    - Typically Ed.D. programs have fewer required credits hours required than a Ph.D. does. The Ed.D. usually has a greater emphasis on practice, whereas the Ph.D. is more focused on research. However, both require a dissertation. This is an important question to ask each program you apply to, because it may very well differ.
  - **What is better a Ph.D. or an Ed.D?**
    - That is an ongoing debate. Nowadays, many people would say that both are fine, but you may choose one or the other depending on your intended career path and your own intellectual/academic interests. Some people believe that getting a Ph.D. is ideal if you are heading down the faculty career path. However, there are many great faculty members who have Ed.D.s. Moreover, practitioners have both Ph.D.s and Ed.D.s. The important thing is to try to tailor your degree (regardless

of which it is) around your own needs and interests. Take many research/methodology classes while you can during your doctoral program.

- **Picking the “right” program/Fit**

- **What factors should I consider when choosing a path (i.e., CSP, Public Administration, Education Administration, etc.)?**

- As with many other decisions, you should consider your own career/professional interests along with your own personal interests. It’s not just a matter of what you can “do” with your degree, but also what you are interested in learning about. This is why it is important to research each program and try to get a sense of their mission and purpose.

- **What does it mean to find the “right fit”? How do I find the “right fit”? /How will I know the program is right for me?**

- The following response is from <http://www.myacpa.org/c12/selecting.htm#Doctoral%20Programs>

“How do I find out if I "Fit" with a program? You should look at the faculty's level of involvement with students, research interests, professional involvement, philosophy about practitioners in the classroom, diversity in composition and professional interests and find out if their retirement is imminent. Examining the environment is important in determining fit. Answering the following questions will help.

- Is the program located in a place you could live for 3-7 years?
- Does the program support different lifestyles?
- If you are from a cultural/ethnic group that is not the "majority" at the institution, is there a way for you to have community?
- Is it (the program or institution) a political environment? How do you feel about that?
- Does the program have a good reputation? How old is that reputation? What does it mean?
- Is there a cohort group of doctoral students? Is having a cohort group important to you?
- Are the faculty/practitioners going to be able to help you make the connections you will need upon graduation?
- Are students given a "voice" in shaping the program and program's activities?”
- Once you are able to answer these questions, then hopefully you will understand what program “fits” best for you. To some extent it is a matter of using your head along with your heart to know what feels right along with what corresponds with your personal needs.
- **Is this the field I want to get in for the rest of my life?**
  - Some people who end up getting their doctoral degrees do not necessarily stay in that exact field for the rest of their careers. Sometimes they move into a slightly related field or change careers altogether. That’s up to you and your own path. However, earning a doctorate is a major commitment so it is not so much a time to explore this field (as a master’s might be), but a unique opportunity to focus your interests within the field and hone your research skills.
- **What factors go into deciding a program?**

- MANY!!! There are personal questions you should ask yourself like where do I want to live, do I want to move, what is/will be my financial situation etc, why type of community is there for myself and/or my family (These are discussed in other sections of this document). Yet there also more factors specific to the program, such as what types of support.
- **Searching for Programs**
  - **What is the best way to search for a variety of programs?**
    - I would recommend checking out the ACPA Commission for Graduate Preparation directory (<http://www.myacpa.org/c12/directory.htm>). This has a fairly comprehensive listing of programs by institution and geographical area including what degrees they offer.
  - **Are online programs considered to be equal in quality to the people who will be hiring me after I get my Ph.D.?**
    - Most people aren't very familiar with online PhD programs unless they completed their degree through one. With the rise of online programs in general, these programs are becoming more accepted. So, just as some professionals consider some "regular" programs better than others, some consider "regular" programs superior to online programs.
  - **How audible/valuable are online programs?**
    - As with most education and jobs, what you put into a program is what you will get out of it. Also to consider with an online program is what kind of a worker are you? Online programs require you to be very self-motivated with your work and very independent.
  - **What schools have the best programs?**
    - This will vary by the person you talk to and what you would like your specific (or general) focus to be.
  - **How do I select a well-rounded program?**
    - Each program will have its own unique idiosyncrasies but many will have a core of coursework, research, and practical experience. You need to determine what is important to you-do you want a balance of coursework, research and practical experience or are you planning on continuing to work full-time and don't need an assistantship? What kind of practical experience are you looking for-teaching, practitioner, or researcher? When you consider your needs of a program then you can narrow down your search of programs.
  - **Do you apply based on faculty, research topics of interest, location, etc.? It just seems like these are so many factors in the decision.**
    - You need to prioritize those factors for you. Depending on your family, career and life situations, you will have to decide what is most important and base your decision upon that. Keep in mind that the location and general scope of the program won't change but faculty members could.
  - **What Ph.D. programs would be appropriate for someone in various functional areas?**
    - It is generally safe to say that doctoral programs can prepare you for any functional area. Some are more geared toward those who want to be practioners, other are more based on those who want to go the faculty route (and some do both). If you are very interested in a particular functional area or research topic, it

is reasonable to try to find a program where there is an “expert” on that topic. However, you can also craft your own experience to focus on what you want, through your coursework, assignments, internships, and research.

- **What is the difference among all the programs we read about?**
  - The focus of the program and how it addresses its focus will be the main difference. While the core of many programs is similar, how it achieves that goal may be different in terms of the courses you take, the research opportunities you have and the practical applications you can make.
  
- **What are the pros and cons of going to the same school where you received your masters and going to a different institution?**
  - *Pros to staying at the same institutions*
    - You already know the professors
    - You know the feel of the program and the institution
    - You might have an easier time transferring in credits from your masters
    - You are already known and have a reputation
  - *Cons to staying at the same institution*
    - You already know the professors and they know you
    - You already know the program, so maybe tougher to transition into the mind frame of doctoral work
  - *Pros to going to another institutions*
    - It can be personally and professionally engaging to meet new professors and people
    - You can experience (professionally and personally) another campus and program culture
    - You can benefit because you are building additional professional connections at the new campus, perhaps in your assistantship
  - *Cons to going to another institution*
    - It is a lot of unknowns!
  
- **Does it look bad to earn an undergraduate degree, master degree, and doctoral degree at the same institution?**
  - Not necessarily. If that is the right institution/program for you and/or personal circumstances dictate that you must be in the area, then there is nothing bad about it. Just try to diversify your academic and professional experiences so that you are getting everything you can out of that experience.
  
- **Is the PhD or Ed.D. necessary for someone interested in middle management?**
  - I think that working toward a Ph.D. or Ed.D. is a personal choice. I have seen advertisements for senior level positions that require a master’s with years of experience. I am in middle management and find that having a Ph.D. works to my benefit because I constantly work with faculty and employers. I also teach as an adjunct.
  
- **Funding**
  - **I am concern about financing my education. What funding mechanisms are available to me? How will I survive financially?**
    - I resigned from my nice paying job with health benefits to return to college to pursue my doctorate full-time. I also moved from Kentucky to Chicago.

Wow! I pursued and received fellowships which paid for my tuition. I also pursued and became a graduate intern which brought in a little money (\$660 per month but rent was \$725). I also chose to take out student loans for cost of living so I didn't have to charge everything. The student loan interest is insanely low compared to credit card debt. I also looked into and received three research grants which paid for all of my travel and additional costs related to my dissertation research. It can be done but it is a shock that first couple of months. With moving to a new city, I also looked up things to do for free in the city and took full advantage of those opportunities. Look for fellowships through the college you are considering but also use the internet to your advantage and do your research on fellowships that are out there for students pursuing a doctorate.

**Questions and Concerns from the Presentation:**

**THE APPLICATION**

- **What do I include in my statement of purpose?**
  - You should really put a lot of time and energy in your statement of purpose. Many schools do not have interviews, so your paper application is your main opportunity to really demonstrate who you are. Some schools will provide you with prompts, or specific questions they want you to answer. If not, be sure to provide an overview of your essay (conceptual map), discuss why you want to pursue a doctoral, why you are interested in that institution, what you hope to gain from the experience, AND what you bring to the program. In addition, be sure to discuss your research interests.
- **What is the application selection process for a Ph.D. program like?**
  - This is something important to investigate as you look into different programs- b/c they do vary. However, there are a few elements that are pretty common. The key is to keep track of the timeline of when things are done and to whom you should send them to. Most programs require 1) GRE scores 2) a personal essay/purpose statement 3) ~3 letters of recommendation 4) transcripts. Some also ask for a writing sample and/or require you to interview. Many programs invite you to campus after you have been accepted, while others ask you to come to interview to determine if you will be accepted.
- **Do you need to have a concrete dissertation topic in mind to apply to a program?/How important is it to have a dissertation topic before you start?**
  - No, but you SHOULD have a few areas that you are interested in. Being a doctoral student requires an inquisitive mind, so if you are applying, there should be some things you are interested in and passionate about. Even people who come in with a dissertation idea often change it during the course of their doctoral experience. The important thing is to give it some thought, do some investigation, and think about what do you want to be an “expert” about?
- **I am concerned about being rejected at the school of my choice.**
  - That is probably a concern of everyone. If possible, try to apply to a reasonable number of programs (3-6), so that you have options. And keep in mind the “school of your choice” might not end up being your favorite after you do some exploring. If you are not accepted you can always apply later again, or you can decide if you would be comfortable and happy in another program.
- **When should I visit institutions to inquire about programs and should I directly contact faculty and current students?**
  - You should make contact with program you are interested in. It is good to get your name in the “pipeline” so they’ve already heard of you when they receive your application. However, you also don’t want to “hound” (for lack of a better word) a program. It is important to get questions answered and ensure your application materials are received. Just make sure you’ve done your homework, looked for things online, and ask informed, engaging questions that reflect your interest in doctoral work and that specific program. As for timeline, I think starting this contacting in the late summer or early fall is best. That gives you time to sort things out before deadlines approach (December 1- mid Jan usually). You can visit anytime, but probably best to the summer or fall before you apply.
- **I’ve noticed some of the apps ask for a recommendation from one of my faculty. I haven’t kept in very good contact with them since my masters. Any suggestions?**
  - If you haven’t kept in contact you have a few different options. One is to perhaps ask faculty that have taught you in a class since your master’s program. (Ask the doctoral

program if their recommendation would be acceptable). Or better yet, try to reconnect/re-establish that relationship with your old faculty members. Explain to them you are considering a doctoral program and you would like to talk to them about that process and get their advice. If you get a good feel from them, you can ask them if they would be willing to write you a letter of recommendation if you provide them with your resume/vita and your purpose statement. If it has been a while, it might also help to send them copies of papers/projects you did for them while you were a master's students.