When to Consider Going on for a Doctorate

As any graduate student understands, completing an advanced degree takes a strong commitment of time, energy, and financial resources. Many students on the verge of completing their master's degrees ask the question, “Should I continue on with a Ph.D. or other doctoral-level program?” For many, pursuing a doctorate immediately following master's degree conferral serves as a natural next step based upon the professional goals of those students. However, those with other professional aspirations may prefer to postpone the doctoral degree until after they have gained a substantial amount of work experience in their chosen field—or they may choose not to pursue the doctoral-level degree at all. Entering an advanced degree program is an important decision that should be both carefully weighed and well-informed.

Understanding Master’s vs. Doctoral Degrees

Gaining a clear understanding of the distinctions between the master's and doctoral-level degrees can be an important first step in deciding where to go on the next leg of your professional journey.

The Master’s Degree: A Closer Look

The intended purpose of the master’s degree is to provide you with an increased level of understanding, depth of knowledge, and applicable skills to be used within your chosen field. Master’s study introduces you to research and provides the opportunity to learn research techniques, collect and analyze data, and write a thesis based on this research. Typically, programs require approximately two years of full-time graduate study. During the first year, schedules are comprised of a heavier course load which (unlike undergraduate general education) consists of material that is field-specific rather than broad-based in nature. Students will begin working with an advisor during the first year in order to narrow their desired concentration within the field. Research on a master's thesis or master's paper topic may begin in the latter portion of the first year.

The second year experience consists of additional coursework that will serve to complete the degree requirements set for the program. The level of emphasis on research also increases as you progress toward the completion of the thesis or paper required for degree conferral. The thesis requirement is intended to serve as a demonstration of the level of field-specific knowledge and research skill you have gained within the academic focus. You may participate in internship or practical learning experiences to a more significant degree during the second year, enhancing direct exposure to your selected area of concentration.

A critical point of career decision making often occurs as the end of the master's program nears. This is the period of time when you may be most strongly encouraged to consider applying for doctoral programs based upon your demonstrated research, skill, and professionalism in completing the master's degree.

The Doctoral Degree: What to Expect

Choosing to enter a doctoral program is a major decision that requires the utmost commitment and a keen awareness of what to expect. A doctorate may take at least 4-6 years to complete, and the demands of this level of education are more rigorous than what is required at the master's level. The two primary doctoral degrees are the Doctor of Philosophy, which is an academic degree, and the Doctor of Education, a professional degree. For the purpose of simplified explanation, the doctoral program may best be divided in half.

During the first half of the doctoral program, much of a candidate’s work is based in coursework that fulfills the degree requirements of the particular program. Areas of research interest are also narrowed by working with an advisor and possibly one or more additional professors in the field. The first half of the doctoral program typically culminates with the completion of comprehensive exams.

The final half of the doctoral program is usually defined by a shift in focus from coursework to intensive research and development of the dissertation, depending upon the degree sought. The purpose of the dissertation is to showcase new and innovative research in one’s area of concentration or demonstrate the application of scientific principles to practical problems. Candidates experience a much greater sense of professional autonomy within this final stage of the program as compared with the more structured nature of the first half. Candidates may also be likely to teach a heavier course load and interact more closely with professors and other colleagues in the field. Finally, the candidate will defend his or her dissertation in front of a panel of faculty members.
Determine Your Readiness

Current Commitments

What commitments are currently impacting your decision to seek a doctorate? It is important to consider the commitments you have to your current job or workplace, to your family, and to other close associates. First, with regard to the workplace, what are the provisions made by your employer that serve to promote professional development? Would you be afforded the ability to stay at your current position while seeking credits toward a doctorate on a part-time basis? Is there another feasible compromise that can be agreed upon between you and your employer that will allow for you to actively move toward your career goals? These are just a few questions that you may want to ask yourself or address with your current supervisor prior to applying to any programs.

Commitments to family and other close associates can also be highly influencing factors to consider when deciding to pursue advanced degrees. Your decision to enter the challenging and time-consuming process of attaining a doctorate does not typically involve you alone. What are your personal goals for life and family? Are you currently in a committed relationship? Do you have children? How will your home life and leisure time be affected by the financial challenges, time, and energy required to focus on your education? Discussing how this decision may impact you and those closest to you will be necessary for the well-being and understanding of all involved parties.

Emphasis of the Program

What is the emphasis of the doctoral program you are considering? How well does the specific focus of the program align with your future aspirations within the realms of academia or industry? Is earning a doctoral degree in your field a feasible—and necessary—next step that is consistent with your long-term career goals? These are very important questions to ask. If you can articulate only vague career goals related to the field you wish to study, or if you view the doctoral degree solely as an extension of previous education that will enable you to buy time prior to entering the workforce, you are probably not ready to seek a doctorate. Specific interest in an area of your field along with a strong commitment to clearly defined career goals, which make the doctorate desirable and/or necessary, are imperative to determining your readiness to become a successful doctoral candidate.

Funding Resources

Funding is an extremely important factor to take into account when deciding whether or not to pursue further education. The availability of loans and other financial aid can serve as a green light—or as a barrier—to realistically seeking an additional graduate degree. In addition, it would be wise to determine, in advance, if funding is available for your doctoral research. Such funding may be available via internal resources (through your academic department or institution) or externally provided through various grants, fellowships, etc.

Community and Support

As a graduate student, the demands of your program can be both exciting and overwhelming at the same time. For most advanced degree-seekers, having—or forming—a community of fellow graduate students and professionals who can relate to the challenges of academic life can create a more collegial graduate experience. Researching the out-of-class experience at institutions you are considering can be helpful in establishing a starting point for finding community with similar interests to yours. Also, you may wish to visit the campus(es) you are researching on days that are not designated as official visitation days. This will enable you to obtain a more accurate sense of the campus culture and/or graduate student life as it exists on any given day.
In addition to establishing a peer community, it will be of great importance to find a mentor within your field or program who can help you to navigate the challenges that may arise as you enter into or progress through your chosen degree program. Finding an individual whose research interests and personality are compatible with yours may take time, but it is certainly possible. You may begin by reviewing faculty biographies on the department’s website, or you may choose to meet with a few individuals on a campus visit to help determine who may be willing to work with you in this capacity.

Career Counselors will work with you to devise an action plan for exploring—or applying to—doctoral programs, discussing the pros and cons of seeking doctoral-level education as it relates to your own individualized career goals. Drop-In Counselors, are available between 8:30 a.m. and 4:30 p.m. weekdays or until 6:30 p.m. on Tuesdays during the fall and spring semesters.

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