



## **The Road to a PhD Is a Marathon, not a Sprint**

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Completing a PhD is challenging and time-consuming. While specific program requirements and timelines vary greatly across disciplines, obtaining a PhD in your chosen field inevitably involves a multi-year investment of time and energy.

The road to a PhD will be paved with success, maybe disappointment, and new opportunities for professional development. While this process may at times seem daunting, it is important to remember that obtaining a PhD is a marathon, not a sprint.

Ultimately, the purpose of PhD training is to allow you to obtain expertise in your specific topic and chosen field. The objective then, is not necessarily to complete the program as quickly as possible, nor tackle massive change-the-world projects while still a student. Rather, the objective is to gain as much knowledge, experience, and exposure as possible during the process, while continuing to make steady progress toward your degree. So, what are some key considerations, whether you are considering a PhD, are in the midst of your program, or are preparing for your defense?

First, it is important to remember that the end goal is to develop expertise in your field, establish professional relationships and contacts, publish peer-reviewed articles, and obtain grant funding. However, there will be many additional demands on your time, including graduate assistant positions, writing and review groups, co-authoring manuscripts or book chapters, student and professional organization leadership positions, etc.

Given the wealth of activities available to you, it is important to weigh the potential impact on time versus value towards goals of each activity. Will it help you develop necessary skills (perhaps in a specific population, method of data collection, or strategy for data analysis)? Or perhaps the opportunity to work on a faculty member's research? Or lay the groundwork for a dissertation research project to assist you in obtaining grant funding? But remember that it is ok to decline opportunities!

Seeking the input of a colleague or trusted advisor can be particularly helpful in understanding how valuable a specific activity may be to your career development. Ultimately, there are more valuable opportunities than time in the day. Be selective of the activities and opportunities in which you engage so that you continue to move toward completing your program and goals.

It is also important to remember that getting a PhD is more a job than a student role. Only the minimum requirements are outlined to complete your degree. Accomplishing more requires goal setting and time management.

Consider including stretch goals (the most important task that you want to accomplish in the next week or month on your to-do list) in addition smaller daily tasks. By keeping your stretch goal in front



you, you may be able to make more meaningful progress, rather than simply tackling the easy, small tasks first. Another important component of progress is staying motivated.

In addition, making time to rest, exercise, and do activities you enjoy with family and friends will contribute to accomplishing professional goals by avoiding burnout. Staying engaged in life outside of your PhD pursuits will help you keep your goals in perspective and keep you motivated. Remember, incremental progress completes your program; the scale of a PhD doesn't allow for last minute sprints.

Finally, remember that getting a PhD is your first goal — changing the world comes after. Many of us decide to pursue a PhD because we have identified a significant problem in our field about which we are passionate. However, tackling this problem in its entirety is not feasible in a dissertation, it is part of a program of research that spans an entire career.

Thus, it is important to set realistic goals to accomplish during your program. Identify an aspect of your larger goal that can be addressed in a dissertation-sized project and talk to advisors, mentors, and colleagues to get feedback on how this contributes to your future program of research.

By identifying your program and professional goals and tackling them in small progressive pieces, you will be prepared to successfully complete the marathon that is a PhD and launch yourself into your career post-graduation.