

Inside the Academy: Getting a Humanities PhD in the US

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Humboldt-Universität
zu Berlin

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 Academic Chatter Retweeted

Some personal news: I've mastered out of my PhD program.

I have very mixed & complicated feelings about my decision to leave, but at the end of the day, I know it's the right decision for me. 1/

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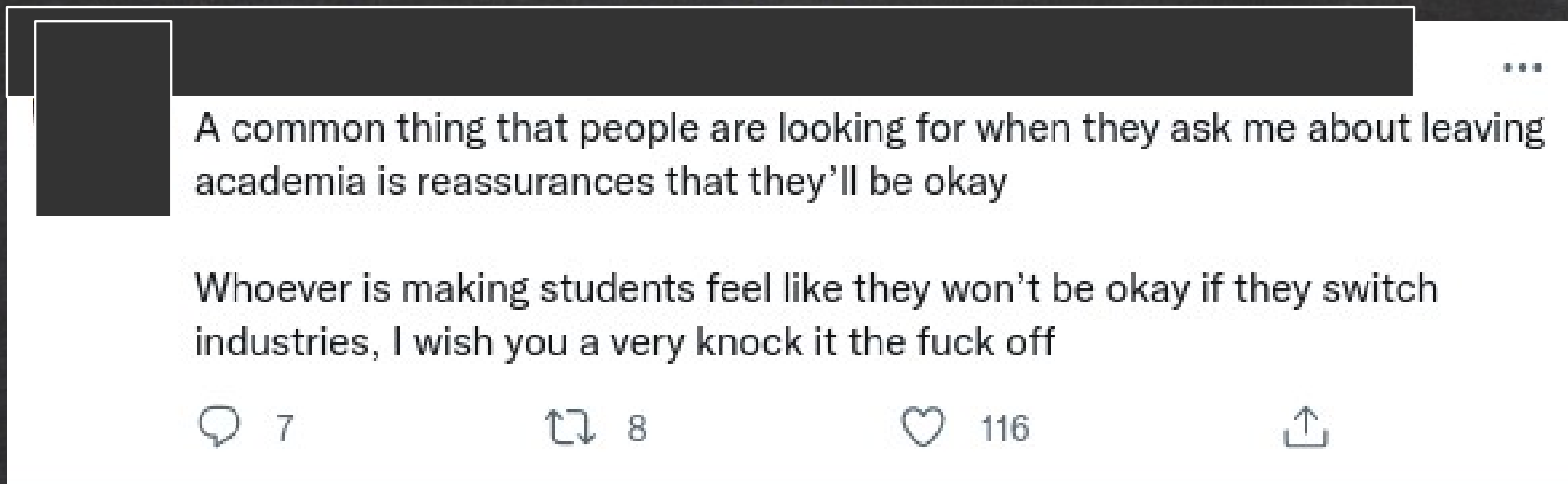
..when I finish this paper
..when I submit that paper
..when I get this degree
..when I complete this task
..when I climb that ladder
..when I win this award

The future is always busy. Don't forget to live now.

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Rockstar grad student to unemployment pipeline

 14
  92
  1,436
 


Why should you know?

- Understand what future colleagues have gone through

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- Understand what future colleagues have gone through
- Understand reasons for changes in humanities academia

1. Before the PhD Program

Requirements

- **Standardized tests** (usually the GRE), although this may change

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- Tests language, readings, and mathematics skills
- Used not only for admission but (at least in the past) for scholarships

Requirements

- Increasingly need a **Master's Degree**

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- Some programs admit directly into a PhD program and include a Master's Degree (after 2 years)

Requirements

- Problems with MA requirement

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 - “Terminal” MAs are expensive and some programs are problematic

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 - “Terminal” MAs are expensive and some programs are problematic
 - For specialized fields (Northwest Semitics, Egyptology, Assyriology), difficult to find

Requirements

- **Problems with MA requirement**
 - No guarantee that you will be accepted into a PhD program

Applying

- Be prepared to apply over several rounds/years (and all that means)

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- Applying is an expense (\$50-100 per program)
- Often have to apply to PhD program in your same department while you finish MA!

How to choose a program

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- If you know what you want to focus on, even better, since it helps you narrow
- Speaking with potential advisors

2. The PhD Program in a Nutshell

“Just Another Degree Program”

Same structure as Bachelor's (“college”) and Master's:

- Taking standardized tests to get in
- Many applications
- Coursework (2-4 years)
- Thesis

“Just Another Degree Program”

Depending on where you “get in,” you may change your focus, perhaps out of different options you had in mind

What to expect

- Likely not enough guaranteed funding from the beginning to carry you through your dissertation defense

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- Dissonance of older versus newer PhD students, who are on different timetables

What to expect

- 4-12 years

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- Many reasons! Traditional goal: college professor
 - Very few strictly research jobs in the US in hum.
- As long as you remember that the job market is much different than it was in the past, even the recent past

3. Why get a PhD?

- It is very wise to have one or two backup plans

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- It is very wise to have one or two backup plans
- You can take advantage of your funded time at a university to diversify yourself, but it is usually at a cost to your academic progress

4. Funding

How does funding work?

- Acceptance almost always involves multiyear, increasingly generous stipends which are supposed to put you through the entire program

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- Difficult to finish dissertation in this timeframe, however

How does funding work?

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- Teaching requirements part of the arrangement for receiving a stipend
- Stipends can be **decreased** accordingly per year, with the understanding that students will “make it up” teaching

What is being funded?

- Tuition
- Stipend for living expenses
- Basic healthcare

What is **usually not** being funded?

- “Student life fee”
- Housing
- Childcare
- Healthcare beyond the basics

How does funding work?

- An older model:
 - Conditional acceptance with one or two years unfunded (except for tuition)
 - For students without enough background in the field

What happens when funding ends?

- Fellowships through competition

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- Fellowships through incentives to reach benchmarks sooner (coursework, exams, dissertation proposal)
 - **Often impossible!**

What happens when funding ends?

- Tuition for people writing dissertations is usually taken care of or eliminated

What happens when funding ends?

- Many fellowships are for **finishing**

What happens when funding ends?

- Many look for work inside and outside the university

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- Many look for work inside and outside the university
- Difficulties
 - Limits on hours per week students are allowed to work
 - Universities attempting to avoid having to admit that PhD students are **workers**

5. Training

PhD coursework

- 2-4 years
- In fields with fewer undergraduate majors, much PhD coursework is dedicated to language acquisition

PhD coursework

- 3-5 courses per semester or quarter

PhD coursework

- PhD students often take classes and teach at the same time

Modern languages

- Reading knowledge of French, German
- Others depending upon discipline (e.g. Italian in Classics)

Paper writing

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- Many professors build courses around producing quality papers which are often used as the seeds of dissertations
- Writing multiple papers is challenging

Trends in course requirements

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- Encouragement to specialize earlier (which means accepting different kinds of students)

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- Less flexibility with turning in late papers

Pedagogical training

- Ranging from easy, *pro forma* seminars taken in department, to entire classes

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- Helpful training, including observations, to help learn techniques for teaching, running, organizing classes

Career training

- A big development over the past ten years or so: “outside the academy” training

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- “What else can you do with a humanities PhD?”

Comprehensive exams

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- Most after coursework
- Usually require 1 year or more for preparation

Comprehensive exams

- Exam types are defined by your program, but you also often have flexibility

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- Topics and reading lists are often decided between students and faculty members who will give the exam

Comprehensive exams

- Full exams: 8 hours
- Half exams: 4 hours

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- Full exams: 8 hours
- Half exams: 4 hours
- A full set of comprehensive exams is usually one over 1-2 weeks

Comprehensive exams

- Students are usually able to retake exams that they do not pass
- Some exams, however, do not allow multiple attempts, depending on the program

Learning about the university

- For better and for worse, jobs you work on campus to support yourself (and your family) give you a glimpse at the two sides of a university
 - Academic
 - Administration

6. Relationships

Advisor

- Extremely important

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Advisor

- Extremely important
- Range of possibilities:
 - Entering the program having chosen your program because of your advisor and what you want to research
 - Having no clue

Advisor

- PhD programs in the US are still very much built around the relationship with the advisor

Advisor

- PhD programs in the US are still very much built around the relationship with the advisor
- But it is possible to be successful without having a close, or even good relationship

Advisor

- It is possible to have one or more other faculty members who end up playing a role very similar to that of an advisor

Other figures

- Director of graduate studies
- Departmental chair

Friends

- Opportunity to make many close friends, especially given the difficult circumstances

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- The department or school provides ample social events
 - A negative: culture based around alcohol

Family

- Financial precarity can be a burden on one's spouse or significant other

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- To finish the PhD and find a job means your partner must sacrifice something, often a great deal

Being a non-child-bearing parent

- (Depending on the timing) not working a typical “9-5” is great when you have babies

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- But: a weak social welfare system and shaky university support makes life hard
 - ...unless you have other sources of income
- → **it takes longer**

Being a child-bearing parent

- The same applies, but with **much harsher consequences** for your PhD program
- → delay of having children

7. The dissertation

The proposal

- After finishing comprehensive exams (1-2 years after finishing courses)
- Have 6 months to 1 year to propose

The proposal

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The proposal

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- Slightly more know the general area, but perhaps 50%?
- Your dissertation does not always match your coursework

The proposal

- Proposals from 3pp to 80pp

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- Some faculty members are **extremely** stringent on what the proposal should consist of, be structured, etc.

The proposal defense

- 20-30 minute presentation, sometimes public, sometimes private

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The proposal defense

- 20-30 minute presentation, sometimes public, sometimes private
 - Some programs do not require one, only a proposal paper
- Questions from your committee
- Success means you are a **candidate**

The dissertation committee

- 3-5 people, usually 4
- Advisor is typically the chair
- Can find an outside committee member, especially if their expertise is lacking in the university

Writing a dissertation

- A quick dissertation is usually written in 2 years
- 2-5 years is normal

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- 2-5 years is normal
- Programs increasingly cracking down on taking longer than 5 years

Defending a dissertation

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- 20-30 min presentation followed by questions

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- 20-30 min presentation followed by questions
- If you are allowed to defend, you will pass 99% of the time

Final thoughts

- Navigating different personalities on your committee is extremely challenging

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- Faculty in US universities are drawn from all over the US, but also Europe and elsewhere, and have very different ideas of what a dissertation should be

Final thoughts

- Faculty members have different opinions about what a finished dissertation should look like, and to what extent compromises in face of job offers are possible

Conclusion: final thoughts

Bad parts

- Finishing a PhD program takes extreme effort and perseverance in an often hostile environment

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- Finishing a PhD program takes extreme effort and perseverance in an often hostile environment
- With no guarantee of a job that relates to your training

Bad parts

- Many students in the US finish their PhD with significant student loan debt and credit card debt

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- Being out of the workforce for 4-10 years has negative effects

Good parts

- Diverse kinds of training, ability to do interdisciplinary work

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- Living on or near a university campus, and all that involves

Questions/other topics

- More about dissertation
- Jobs
- Publishing