



STUDENT

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Navigating the Path to Your Ph.D.

by Bernard J. Milano and Lisa King

Do you secretly dream of becoming a business school professor? This guide to the ABCs of getting your Ph.D.—from choosing the right doctoral program to crafting your application package—can help you get started on making your dream a reality.

Congratulations! You've made your decision and you're ready to dive, head first, into a doctoral program in business. But are you really as ready as you think? Have you weighed the challenges and opportunities to make sure that a career as a business school professor is right for you? Have you figured out how to tell your boss, your family and your friends that you're giving up your corporate position to go back to school full time? Do you know what's involved in applying to Ph.D. programs? And once you're accepted, do you know what will be expected of you?

If all these questions seem overwhelming, there's a resource you can turn to for help. For over 10 years, The PhD Project, a multimillion-dollar diversity effort sponsored by some of the nation's leading corporations, has been helping African-American, Hispanic and Native American business professionals return to academia to earn a Ph.D. and become professors. The project supplies them with the information they need to make the decision to return to

school, then supports them throughout their doctoral studies with mentoring and peer support networks.

These newly minted minority business professors and current doctoral students had the same burning questions as you do when they first decided to get their Ph.D.s. And the question that's usually first on the list is: "Where do I begin?"

The following guide is designed to help you get started on your own path to the Ph.D. With some good advice, a little confidence and a lot of support, you'll be on your way.

Is an Academic Career Right for You?

First and foremost, you need to ask yourself, "Do I have what it takes to become a professor?" It is not always easy to answer this question, but here are some "ideal candidate" qualities. You need to be:

- Self-directed and self-motivated
- Highly disciplined
- Intrigued by ideas, knowledge, understanding how things work and why



- Curious to seek answers
- Able to work independently, examine a topic in detail, communicate your findings to others and persist in spite of negative feedback
- Someone with strong academic credentials, such as good quantitative skills and good writing skills.

If you don't have all of these qualities, don't worry. Some of them are inherent, but others can be learned. What is most important is your desire and perseverance.

Also, as part of this initial decision-making process, you need to weigh the pros and cons of leaving your current situation to embark upon doctoral study. Some of the cons may be a loss of salary and financial security, or possibly having to uproot and relocate your family. The stress of making this decision can, by itself, hinder the results.

But there are so many rewards to an academic career, which for many people far outweigh the negatives. You will have the opportunity to mentor and advise hundreds of future professionals, and to serve as a role model for new generations of minority business students. Through your teaching, you will create an innovative learning environment; you will continually be learning yourself as you research new ideas and topics; and you will be lending your skills to enrich the society and community you work in.

You will also enjoy a flexible schedule—one that you manage and organize, leaving time for important family and life events. There are also monetary rewards: Depending on the institution, years of experience and tenure, starting salaries for professors range from \$65,000 to \$150,000 for the nine-month academic year, with additional support—usually 22% of the nine-month salary—available during the summer break.

It is often best to make a list of your pros and cons, and then work through it with your loved ones and friends. This process can help reduce the stress of making your decision.



Participants in The PhD Project's 2003 Annual Conference in Chicago listen to a presentation on applying to doctoral programs.

MBA vs. Ph.D.

Next, you need to ascertain what academic path you are currently on in the Ph.D. process. There are many conduits to obtaining your doctorate. One of the biggest myths is that an MBA is a prerequisite to getting your Ph.D. This is not true. Although you need a good understanding of the material in many of the courses you would take in a master's program, it is not necessary to have the MBA credential.

It *is* necessary to have a good foundation in at least one area outside of business, like psychology or economics. So if you currently have only an undergraduate degree, you may want to take some courses in statistics or economics before starting your doctoral program. Some Ph.D. programs offer an MBA as part of their program—a “mini-MBA”—to enable you to take the essential courses you will need to succeed in your doctoral studies. This is a suggested course of action for students who have not gone beyond their B.A.

Even if you have your MBA and have been working for many years in the business world, you may still want to take some “brush-up” quantitative courses to prepare for doctoral studies. This is because there are definite differences between the MBA and Ph.D. degrees.



They Did It and So Can You: Inspirational Words of Wisdom from PhD Project Participants

"The opportunity cost for me [of going back to school to become a professor] was very high, considering the two job offers I held. I figured in the long run, I would be better off. Not only economically, but because of the fact that you can make a difference in people's lives both by teaching and doing research. More [rewarding] than anything else is the personal satisfaction I receive."

—Dr. Francisco Roman, Professor,
Rice University

"I gave up my house and my car and I entered a whole new world after age 40. I had always been so vocationally and practically oriented. There were so many things I didn't know [about academia]. Publishing, research methodology—I didn't understand anything about a research career. This whole idea of living a life of the mind—it's an incredible concept."

—Dr. Sammie Robinson, Professor,
Illinois Wesleyan University

"[Attending The PhD Project annual conference] literally changed my life. At the time, I had three young children. My wife was not yet employed. Until then, I thought no one like me entered a doctoral program. But there I saw people who had families, people making sacrifices. I started thinking, maybe this is something I can do."

—Dr. John Warren, Professor,
University of Texas, San Antonio

"On the first day in class [as a professor], I saw the young Latina women just sitting there and smiling at the sight of me. One student told me, 'All of my professors are wonderful, but there are just certain questions I feel more comfortable bringing to you.' I'm on the other side of the desk now, and there are moments of recognizing the responsibility that I am making decisions that affect people's lives. I want to be a catalyst in people's lives."

—Dr. Patricia Martinez, Professor,
University of Texas, San Antonio

The MBA:

- Is a professional degree.
- While in the program, you obtain information and build skills.
- You then use this information, skills and degree in the marketplace.

The Ph.D.:

- Is not a "Super MBA."
- Is an academic degree.
- Is an ongoing process of discovery.
- Helps you to develop knowledge.
- Allows you to establish a reputation as an expert in some area of the discipline.
- Allows you to disseminate information to the discipline and to students.
- Helps you enhance the reputation of your academic institution.

The Application Process

There are many factors to consider when choosing a doctoral program. You have to narrow it down to those institutions that will best serve your needs. For instance, if you don't want to relocate, is there a business school close by that has a good doctoral program with faculty conducting research in the area of your interest? If you need extra math courses, is their program going to satisfy your academic requirements? What is the success rate of other individuals who have obtained Ph.D.s from this university? How many doctoral students does the program admit each year? What are the financial aid requirements?

It's best to research as many schools as you can and apply to as many as you can. Most schools require the same basic information in a candidate's application package:

Objective Components:

- Transcripts of all past academic work
- GMAT transcript
- Work experience

Subjective Components:

- Statement of purpose or personal essay
- Letters of recommendation/references

The objective components are very straightforward. The admissions committee, made up of full professors, will want to know where you went to school, and they will focus on your studies to make sure you took the appropriate courses to fit their doctoral program. They also want to know that you have an acceptable GPA. Knowing your academic strengths and weaknesses is vital to beginning the process of applying to schools. You should make sure to study your transcripts and be



aware of any potential problems or questions they may present so you can acknowledge and explain them.

The GMAT (Graduate Management Admission Test) is something you must take, or must have taken within the previous five years. The admissions committee will look at your verbal, quantitative and total scores. You will be compared to other applicants as well as admitted doctoral students. The GMAT is administered by the Graduate Management Admission Council (GMAC). For information about taking the test in your locality, visit the GMAC Web site at www.mba.com.

Keep taking the GMAT until you receive a score that is acceptable to your desired doctoral program. Most programs will tell you their minimum score requirements. *You MUST prepare and study hard for this test.* There is no way to get around the GMAT requirement when applying to a doctoral program.

Your previous work experience will also come into play. The admissions committee will measure and qualify the relevance of your professional experiences to your potential doctoral studies. Did your position require you to do research? Have you ever taught employee training courses? Are you a leader at your job whom other employees look up to? This will all factor into the admissions decision.

The people who will write your recommendations and references should be chosen carefully. Make sure these are people who know you well, who know your work ethic and your strengths and weaknesses. Make sure the letters are long, strong and full of praise for you. They should address your suitability to be an academic—your intellectual abilities, self-motivation, interest in learning, creativity, research experience and perseverance.

These letters of recommendation may come from current or former professors and from professional acquaintances, like a manager or colleague. In the latter case, however, be sure the writer knows that his/her letter should address your academic potential rather than work-related accomplishments. Recommendation letters should NEVER come from a family member or friend, unless that friend knows you in a professional or academic light and can write objectively about you.

Your personal statement comes 100% from you—which means you have 100% control over it. It must be clear, focused and concise. It also needs to be compelling and forceful, illustrating your understanding of doctoral study, your chosen discipline, the institution to which you are applying, its faculty, and most importantly—yourself. Your statement should also demonstrate your intellectual curiosity, creativity, originality and passion for learning.

Use this statement to address any questions you may think the committee will have after reviewing all your material. Most importantly, write it, put it down for a day, then pick it up and rewrite it again. Do this a number of times until you feel you have the best statement possible. Then, show it to other people and incorporate any helpful feedback they may give. This statement is a very important part of the admissions process, so spend lots of time on it.

General Suggestions

Just as you would prepare yourself for a job interview or cram for a test, you need to learn all you can about the doctoral programs you are applying to. Take the application process as seriously as if you were applying for your dream job. Don't go to admissions interviews unprepared or looking unprofessional. Talk to faculty, visit the schools and use your network to extend your knowledge of the programs.

Make sure your application packages are consistent and have no grammatical, typographical or spelling errors. Read it, leave it, re-read it again and make sure to get feedback on it. Most importantly, pay attention to deadlines. Get your application in on time. Paying attention to all of these details may make the difference between whether the school admits you or chooses another candidate.

If you put your mind to it, you can succeed at anything. You have already been successful in your job searches, work assignments and previous academic pursuits. You can, and will, succeed in a doctoral program for the same reasons.

The PhD Project wishes you good luck—and remember, we're always here to help! To learn more about The PhD Project and the support we can offer you, please visit our Web site at www.phdproject.org.

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