

What's a PhD for?

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In 1987, I decided to do a PhD because I wanted to become a professor. Academia was also the destination of most of my PhD classmates, though a small minority wanted to advance their careers in policy analysis. I chose Berkeley to do my doctorate because I thought that DCRP and other Cal departments would give me, a graduate in architecture and city planning, the training in the social sciences that I needed to address complex urban issues in a rigorous manner.

I got more than I bargained for. My doctoral studies were a real privilege and a life-altering experience. In content, they were an opening of the mind on the myriad ways in which power is exercised in society; in outcome, they were an admission ticket to a select club whose members enjoy great freedom of thought and action. As an intellectual odyssey and a lived experience, they gave me the most beautiful years of my life.

Lucky was I to be taught by Mel Webber, Judith Innes, Fred Collignon and Mike Teitz, by Manuel Castells and Peter Hall, by Paul Rabinow and Dick Walker. Happy was I to do varied and stimulating coursework with these social scientists or social scientists-cum-planners and to spend thousands of hours reading, talking and writing on urban and social theory, history and policy. Blessed was I to do all that among smart and friendly people, in beautiful Northern California, in partnership with the woman who is still by my side as I write these lines. Fortunate was I, with PhD in hand, to land a tenure-track position in a good university, located in the attractive city where we live.

Like all scarce resources, PhDs are very unevenly and unfairly distributed. Parental income, place of birth, race and ethnicity all affect the likelihood of earning a university degree. The spiraling cost of university education puts that goal beyond the means of many, and the debt incurred in the process can be a lifelong burden. Consequently, public trust in the promise of upward mobility through education is waning. Although confidence is still high that top-notch researchers are needed to drive technological innovation, from an individual perspective, the eight to twelve years of study, over three degrees, that lead to the title of Doctor do not offer a good return on investment in many fields. There, the value of the PhD lies primarily in the unquantifiable advantages it provides, in the fact that it enables people to pursue their passion, satisfy their thirst for knowledge, work on challenging questions, and become a member of a vibrant community.

But what's a PhD really for? An increasing number of PhD holders do not become academics, either by choice or by lack of opportunity. In many fields, including in planning, many graduates find employment as researchers and professionals in the private, public and non-for-profit sectors. If the goal is to train professors, what should a good PhD program do? Should it include teacher training? Some programs now have requirements in university pedagogy, and most involve their students in teaching. Even if the goal is "merely" to train researchers, what does it take to train the best of them? What role should theory play in their education? What place should coursework have in their training?

I had the opportunity to explore these questions at two different Canadian universities. Canadian doctoral programs in planning—as the cliché about Canada would lead one to expect—are somewhere between American and British ones in structure. Whereas British PhD programs generally have very few or no course requirements and are strongly focused on research activities, American programs typically require two years of coursework (between 10 and 20 courses) and call on students to demonstrate their knowledge of theory, methods and substantive fields before they are allowed to write their dissertation. Canadian programs tend to call for one year of coursework.

The British model makes increasing sense from a social and economic perspective: faster and cheaper, the doctorate without coursework is potentially accessible to more people. And yet, as a proud DCRP graduate, I am a fervent proponent of the American model. True, the more a doctoral program demands of its students, both in quantity and in quality of effort, the more it can be accused of feeding an elitist view of doctoral education. But aiming for excellence is still the best way, the right way, to train future professors in a highly competitive environment. More important, proficiency in theory, in methodology and in more than one narrow field of specialization is a legitimate condition to obtaining the title of "doctor of philosophy," i.e., to being recognized as a person who masters the "theory underlying or regarding a sphere of activity or thought" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). A PhD program is, or at least ought to be, a program of training in which the "technical precepts and practical arts" (ibid.) of research receive due attention but only as means to answer questions—manageable questions that can be addressed in less than three years and three hundred pages—about the worthy, wicked problems of the day.

This doesn't mean that having a PhD is a necessary condition for being a good professor. In professional fields such as planning, many of the best educators and of the greatest innovators are practitioners. One can even say, as I already remarked in these pages in 2012, that much scholarship is of little direct value to students and practitioners. Still, a professorate with high-quality PhDs remains essential to enhancing our understanding of how the world works, to assessing practices and their impacts, to diffusing innovations that make the world a better place, and to educating reflective practitioners. For that purpose, doctoral programs must continue to set high stan-

dards and impose onerous requirements in theory, methodology, specialized knowledge and communication.

Thus the question “What’s a PhD for?” is fairly easy to answer. In a professional domain such as planning, a PhD serves to train people who will be paid to think critically about current and potential practices in their field, people who, by virtue of that critical thinking, will have a measure of credibility in the eyes of decision-makers. To my mind, the question of how a PhD program ought to be designed is also fairly straightforward. A doctoral program must set the bar high in substantive knowledge of the field, in methodological skills and in theoretical understanding, and it must impose clear requirements to that effect. The question that is more difficult to answer—much, much more difficult—is how to equalize opportunities in an unjust society so that effort and talent, rather than background, determine who has access to demanding PhD programs and the privileges they afford.

