

Myths about the Ph.D.

by Donald Asher

We all have heard the myth of the cabdriver with a Ph.D. in astrophysics, or the poor fellow who worked for years to get a Ph.D. in English or history only to find himself asking, “Do you want fries with that?” It turns out that these stories are refuted by the employment data, which makes them, in fact, myths.

Here are commonly held beliefs about career outcomes for the Ph.D., only two of which are true:

Myths about the Ph.D.

- I. Ph.D.s are unemployed and can’t get jobs.
- II. Ph.D.s are chronically underpaid.
- III. There are far more Ph.D.s out there than faculty jobs for them.
- IV. The Ph.D. degree is so specialized that you can’t get any *other* kind of job.
- V. It costs a fortune to get a Ph.D.
- VI. It takes forever to get a Ph.D.

It might be fruitful to begin by discussing what the Ph.D. degree is, and where these myths came from. The Ph.D. degree is a research degree, designed to train a scholar to be able to do original research of publishable quality in his or her chosen field. The skillset of a Ph.D. includes the ability to design, conduct, and evaluate research, to write for scholarly and popular audiences, and to manage the most complex ideas at the highest levels. The people who train Ph.D.s are, primarily, graduate research faculty at large, research-focused universities, which is where the myth of the underpaid and underemployed Ph.D. came from.

These faculty traditionally view a successful Ph.D. graduate as someone who gets a tenure-track faculty position at *another* large, research-focused university, and view as a “failure” Ph.D.s who have any other career outcome. The cliché is that faculty want to clone themselves, and view non-clones as unsuccessful. So what is the penalty for Ph.D.s who “fail” to get a tenure-track position? Answer: They must accept an increase in pay. According to the National Science Foundation’s Survey of Doctorate Recipients, Ph.D.s who “fail” to obtain a tenure track position earn more than Ph.D.s who work in academe, and this is true in almost all fields, from engineering to art history.

The fact is that “Ph.D.s will earn \$1.3 million more than baccalaureate holders, over their working lifetimes,” reports Kenneth Redd, Director of Research and Policy Analysis for the Council of Graduate Schools in Washington, D.C. When challenged that maybe only wealthy people choose to pursue a Ph.D. in the first place, Mr. Redd responded: “That’s a misreading of the data. The fact is that the earnings return for someone who gets a degree from a lower-income family is actually much higher than someone from a higher income family, because they are starting from such a lower base in the first place.”

[INSERT earnings and unemployment by degree attainment, from postsecondary.org, with an asterisk on “professional degrees” and a note “*J.D., M.D., D.D.S., D.V.M.” This is the Census and BLS definition for this category. This is latest available data.]

What about chronic unemployment? You never hear the advice, “Don’t become a doctor or a dentist or a lawyer, because they are always unemployed!”, yet people do warn Ph.D. students about this. Ph.D.s have unemployment rates that are about the same as holders of these professional degrees, hovering between 1 and 2 % in recent years. So the data are clear: Ph.D.s are employed, and earnings are strong. But what are they doing?

It is true that there are too many Ph.D.s for the faculty openings at this time. In fact, in some areas of the humanities (notably, English and history), there are about twice as many new Ph.D. degrees conferred annually as there are advertisements in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* for faculty positions in these fields. So, where do these other Ph.D.s go? They go into corporate R&D, policy jobs, think tanks, consulting practices, high-level administrative positions, academic publishing, entrepreneurial endeavors, and a myriad other directions that their advanced educations perhaps did not directly prepare them for.

Daniel Denecke, Director of the Ph.D. Completion Project for the Council of Graduate Schools, says, “In general graduate schools and graduate deans are trying to be more supportive of the fact that up to 50% of the students in some fields go into nonacademic careers, but I think at the department level there is still a lot of resistance to recognizing that. A lot needs to be done to provide greater recognition that these degrees are so valued outside of academia.”

So one challenge Ph.D. candidates do face is doing career development for these alternate career outcomes when there is little or no support for these directions on most university campuses. Thus, many Ph.D.s do have to adapt to career appointments that they were not specifically trained for. However, the skillset of a Ph.D. may contribute to success in these transitions. If you are able to research any topic and teach yourself new skills as needed, that would be particularly useful in such transitions.

(As an aside, for forty years there have been predictions of a mass exodus of faculty, as older faculty retire, and for forty years these predictions have been premature or overstated. There is currently another wave of such pronouncements, but a smart prospective Ph.D. student would be mindful of the history of these forecasts.)

Another advantage to the doctorate is that full-time doctoral students often don’t pay any tuition at all, and are further supported by stipends and assistantships that in some cases equal or exceed what a baccalaureate holder can earn anyway. It is difficult to get a free ride through medical or law school, but Ph.D. students can be *paid* to earn their degrees. And in any case, potential earnings increases would warrant even a large investment in doctoral education.

Obviously younger students would gain the maximum return on investment from a doctorate, but it is never too late to pursue the terminal degree. The options to pursue a doctoral degree have exploded in the last decade, with rigorous, accredited doctoral programs available for any type of student. Fielding Graduate University, Nova Southeastern, and Capella University all offer doctoral programs designed for busy, full-time employed professionals, just for example.

Finally, let us acknowledge that it does take a long time to complete the Ph.D. A fast Ph.D. is three or four years, and it is common for these degrees to take five to seven years, and in some cases, even longer, to complete. However, Dear Abby is famous for advising older people who are considering pursuing a degree: “How old will you be in four years if you *don't* complete that degree?”

BIO:

Donald Asher is a public speaker and writer specializing in careers and higher education. He is the author of eleven books, including *Graduate Admissions Essays* (the best-selling guide to getting into graduate school), *Asher's Bible of Executive Resumes*, *How to Get Any Job with Any Major*, and *Who Gets Promoted, Who Doesn't, and Why*. His web page is www.donaldasher.com. © 2010 Asher Associates.