

## Episode 4: 12 Reasons Not to Not Get a PhD

Welcome to Grad-Post! I'm your host, Brian S. Mitchell, and we're here to talk about life before, during, and after graduate school, and whether an advanced degree is right for you. I'll draw upon my experiences as a graduate dean and research mentor, as well as my network of students, colleagues, and experts to bring you the most complete information on graduate education that I can.

Epi Alert! This is an editorial podcast. I promised I would warn you when it happens!

I ran across an old article in *MoneyWatch* the other day entitled "12 Reasons Not to Get a PhD" by Lynn O'Shaughnessy<sup>1</sup>. It's now over a decade old having been published in 2012, but I found myself reading what are still some of the myths used today to justify why advanced degrees – the PhD in particular – just aren't worth it. So, in the spirit of objectivity I thought I'd list these reasons, give them some updated numbers, and myth bust where possible. If you've listened to any of my previous podcasts you'll know that I'm an advocate for advanced degrees. So, it should come as no surprise that I'll mostly refute what appears in this article. But hey – it's my show and if you're listening you're probably at least somewhat interested in advanced degrees.

I have lightly edited some of Ms. O'Shaughnessy points for brevity and grammar, but she starts her list of 12 by stating:

*1. A PhD takes twice as long as a bachelor's degree to complete. The average student takes 8.2 years to slog through a PhD program and is 33 years old before earning that top diploma. By that age, most Americans with mere bachelor's degrees are well into establishing themselves professionally.*

Yah, and beef wellington takes longer to make than a bologna sandwich. So, by that logic we should always eat bologna sandwiches since they don't take as long to make. And not only will those with a "mere bachelor's degree" - which is both condescending and antithetical - have established themselves professionally by age 33, extrapolating backwards would show that those with a high school diploma will be even further along in their careers and those who dropped out of middle school must all be multi-gazillionaires! A high school education is apparently overrated.

We also see how in this statement how statistics can be misleading. The average time-to-degree for a research doctorate – the PhD as opposed to the MD or JD - actually comes in three flavors. According to the National Science Foundation National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics (NCSES)<sup>2</sup> the first flavor is time to degree since earning a bachelor's degree which was 8.6 years in 2022 – the last year for which we have statistics. The time to degree since starting graduate school, however, was 7.2 years. And NCSES recently started tracking the time to degree since starting the doctoral program, which was only 5.7 years for all disciplines in 2022. The difference between the time-to-degree from starting graduate school and entering the doctoral program is because some programs – but certainly not all – first require completion of a master's degree. It's a little misleading to include that time in the time to the PhD since you're actually getting **two** degrees. The shortest time to degree since starting the doctoral program was 5.0 years in several disciplines and the longest was 7.5 in anthropology. There are no statistics on how many students considered it a "slog."

In terms of age at graduation, the average age of a graduate has nothing to do with anything, unless you are an agist. People start and stop their pursuit of an advanced degree just like anyone else in any other profession.

But really, this "wasted time" argument misses the point. Getting an advanced degree **is** establishing yourself professionally. Perhaps those who don't go to college are establishing themselves professionally right out of high school, but so are those who go to college and those who go to graduate school. They just aren't establishing themselves professionally **through employment**. They're establishing themselves professionally through skills development and networking. The statistics bear this out. According to the Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce's *Learning and Earning by Degrees* 2024 report<sup>3</sup>, the median cost-adjusted lifetime earnings are higher for those with a graduate degree than those with bachelor's and associate's degrees across all racial and ethnic categories. The net gain across the U.S. workforce is staggering: **\$2.8 TRILLION** dollars in net lifetime earnings gains for those with graduate degrees over those with a bachelor's degree. Individually, the median expected lifetime earnings for those with a doctoral degree are \$4M, master's degree \$3.2M, bachelor's degree \$2.8M, and high school \$1.6M. Yes, you need to factor in lost wages,

debt level, and time-adjusted value of money, but from a purely income standpoint – which we know is not the full story – the advantages of a graduate degree are clear.

**2. Professors will exploit you.** *It takes forever to earn a doctorate degree because graduate students are routinely treated like slaves. Grad students perform the grunt work that professors find distasteful, such as teaching undergraduates, grading papers, holding office hours, and playing mother hen to undergrads.*

Wow. Where did you go to school? This sounds more like a rant about spoiled undergraduates than it does about oppressed graduate students, but there's apparently nothing good about college. The undergraduates don't want to be there. The professors don't want to be there. And the graduate students are caught in between.

Are there parts of these jobs that suck? Sure, just like any other job. But the data just don't support the miserableness contentions.

National statistics on graduate student job satisfaction are hard to come by, but some universities track and publish this information voluntarily. For example, Vanderbilt University found in a recent survey that 80% of respondents were satisfied with being a doctoral student<sup>4</sup>. Cornell University's Doctoral Experience Survey dashboard shows that 82% of respondents listed their overall experience as good, very good, or excellent<sup>5</sup>. I could go on, but the image of the disgruntled graduate student suffering through a doctoral program is just not accurate.

**3. You could drop out.** *Only about 57 percent of doctoral students will get their PhD within 10 years of starting graduate school.*

I don't know where to start with this one. The fact that 57% of doctoral students completed their PhD within 10 years of starting graduate school has nothing to do with dropping out. I could infer from that statistic that the other 43% completed in more than 10 years and that the dropout rate was zero. Neither of those views are correct, of course. Although 10 years is the generally-accepted time frame for looking at doctoral completion, it doesn't tell the whole story. For comparison, again according to NSF's National Center for Education Statistics<sup>2</sup> (NCSES), the equivalent six-year completion rate for an undergraduate degree in the U.S. is only 64% - only slightly higher than the doctoral completion rate. And we know that not all undergrads drop out. They switch schools. They take gap years. The same things can happen in doctoral programs.

What you really want to look at are attrition rates. These data are a little harder to come by, but a 2015 report using student-level data from the Council of Graduate Schools<sup>6</sup> puts the seven-year attrition rate at about 31% in the Life/Health Sciences and as much as 47% in the Social & Behavioral Sciences. The more troubling part of these statistics is that the seven-year attrition rate is even higher for students from underrepresented minorities. Students cite lack of financial support as one of their key reasons for non-completion. Rather than jeopardizing our workforce and telling our brightest talent not to attain higher level skills, we need to find ways of making it more affordable and equitable for them to do so.

Speaking of financial support ...

**4. You might end up on food stamps.** *In the three years since the 2008-09 recession, the number of PhD's who filed for food stamps tripled to more than 33,655 in 2010, according to The Chronicle of Higher Education's Urban Institute. In part that's because part-time professors, who are paid by the class, can earn less than university secretaries.*

I won't even comment on the term "secretaries," but by all means pick the years of the Great Recession to make your case about lack of employment for PhDs. Didn't more journalists end up on food stamps during that time period, too? I wonder if there were more stock brokers in bread lines during the Great Depression and if software engineers and programmers had trouble finding jobs after the dot.com bust of 2000.

The "food stamps" program – then and now called the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or "SNAP" but who would expect someone in the business world to know that – saw a doubling of participation from 26.3 million people in FY 2007 to 44.7 million in FY 2011<sup>7</sup>. If the Chronicle's data are correct - and I have no reasons to doubt them - then PhDs accounted for less than one-tenth of a percent of SNAP recipients. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics<sup>8</sup>, the percentage of the U.S. labor force that has a doctoral degree is around 2%. That puts *MoneyWatch's* so-called "PhD food

stamp rate” at about 5% of the workforce. With an unemployment rate of 10% at that time, I would conclude that a PhD is more recession-proof than other educational levels.

OK, so that didn’t work. Let’s go after those snooty academics and their secretaries ...

**5. Academic jobs are tough to find.** *According to the authors of the book "Higher Education?," America produced more than 100,000 doctoral degrees between 2005 and 2009. During that period, however, only 16,000 new professorships were created. Here's another grim stat from the National Science Foundation: Only 14 percent of Americans with a doctorate in biology and the life sciences are landing an academic position within five years of graduating.*

I totally agree that academic jobs are hard to find. Fortunately, graduate programs have started shifting away from cloning faculty to providing training for a wide variety of compatible careers.

Again, according to NCSSES Survey of Earned Doctorates Data Tables<sup>2</sup>, there were more like 235,00 research doctorates awarded between 2005 and 2009 (inclusive). That number rose to nearly 275,000 a decade later from 2015-2019. And as recently as 2022, only 33% of doctoral recipients opted for a job in academia whereas it was 52% in 2002. According to the same survey, a full two-thirds of doctorate earners in the biological and biomedical sciences found non-postdoctoral employment in the private sector. More on non-academic jobs in a moment, but first ...

**6. It could cost you.** *About 40 percent of PhD candidates borrow money to obtain their degrees, with the average debt nearly \$37,000, according to FinAid.org. This debt would be on top of any loans a student assumed as an undergraduate.*

Another good point, but the numbers have changed. I have a separate podcast on financial implications of going to graduate school and there are tools on my website to help prospective students make their decision. We all know that student debt level is a massive problem and that our nation’s student loan programs are a mess.

But like any investment, the debt level is only part of the story. If avoiding all debt were the ideal scenario, then we wouldn’t have a mortgage or take out a car loan. We wouldn’t feed or clothe our kids, either. What a financial burden they are! We continuously make decisions about what to spend money on and how to invest in ourselves. It’s not about the debt level we have, it’s about return on investment - ROI. If you have to take on \$37,000 in additional debt to earn \$1.2M more over your bachelor’s degree, isn’t that a good investment? There are also downsides to the ROI approach, especially for some master’s level programs<sup>9</sup>, but the purely financial approach doesn’t account for intangibles like “happiness” – the subject of another of my podcasts.

**7. You probably won't get tenure.** *The old model of academics paying their dues and ultimately securing tenure for life at a tree-lined campus is archaic. Non-tenure-track jobs now account for 68 percent of all faculty appointments in the U.S., according to the American Association of University Professors.*

There’s a lot wrong with this statement. First, it’s patently false to say you probably won’t get tenure. If you enter a tenure-track position, the odds of getting tenure are a little over 50% at one large, research-intensive, public university according to a 2006 study<sup>10</sup>. While this institution is probably representative of most of its peers, it turns out that measuring tenure rates is difficult. It’s partly a reporting problem and partly a definitional problem. You first have to determine the time period you’re looking at, just like you do with time to degree. Tenure within six years? Seven years? Ten years? There’s no accepted definition. Faculty stop the tenure clock for a variety of reasons, including family leave and global pandemics. Second, there’s little information on faculty who leave a tenure-track position voluntarily – like to accept a position at another institution, the private sector, or to change careers – compared with those who are outright denied tenure by the institution. My anecdotal experience is that - with the exception of the handful of elite privates where faculty candidates are told outright that multiple individuals are being hired for a single tenure position and that their tenure review will consist of a national search for the best person to replace them - the tenure process is mostly spelled out in faculty handbooks and institutions are supportive of their junior faculty. They have invested a great deal of money in their faculty hires and ultimately want to see them succeed. So, I would put the tenure success rate – as ill-defined as it is – well north of 50% across all institutions.

At any rate, the odds are that you probably **will** get tenure. Yes, it’s an archaic model, and yes, it’s under scrutiny. Tenure is even getting revoked and revised on some campuses, so it’s worth paying attention to. AAUP reports that in 2019, only

36.5% were either tenure or tenure-track, with 63% contingent faculty<sup>11</sup>. That's what we call non-tenure track faculty – contingent faculty. And the number of institutions converting tenure-track positions to contingent positions is growing. In 2022, over 50% of institutions reported replacing tenure lines with contingent appointments in the last five years.

But the fact that non-tenure track jobs account for an ever-larger percentage of faculty appointments in the U.S. has nothing to do with whether or not you will get tenure. If you enter a non-tenured position, you will never get tenure **by definition**, just like you won't get any money if you take a non-paying job. Go figure. I think the point she is trying to make is that we have a contingent faculty problem in the United States. She's right. There's a terrible problem. But she's conflating the contingent faculty problem with tenure. The two have nothing to do with one another.

**8. College presidents would eliminate tenure if they could.** *In a Pew Research Center survey, less than a quarter of college presidents said they favor having most of their faculty as full-time tenured professors.*

Why is this a reason not to get a PhD? Social media influencers don't have tenure, either, but there are plenty of them around.

**9. More than 50 percent of faculty are part-timers.** *Part-time faculty usually don't have access to health insurance, retirement plans, and other benefits.*

OK. Now you're just being repetitive. This was the same reason you used for not getting tenure and college presidents not wanting tenure-track faculty. So, there's really only ten different points on your list. I'll repeat myself, too, then: yes, we have a contingent faculty problem. I wouldn't encourage anyone to take these kinds of jobs as a long-term career choice. Short-term needs can vary by individual so there is a place for contingent faculty, but they are woefully underpaid for the services they perform. They don't necessarily have access to employer contribution retirement plans, but they can still set up their own retirement plans. The health care situation has changed since 2012 so that part-time faculty can get access to health insurance just like any other American and they are actually subject to the same academic calendar as full-time faculty, so I'm not sure what "other benefits" she's referring to.

**10. Jobs can also be scarce outside academia.** *PhD holders in the humanities have long struggled to find jobs related to their expertise, but it's also become challenging in the sciences. For instance, the pharmaceutical industry was once a job haven for PhD grads in chemistry and biology, but that pipeline has largely dried up as the industry has consolidated and moved jobs outside the U.S.*

Isn't this the same reason as #5? I guess we're down to nine reasons. And, of course. Pick on the humanities; the old English-PhD-as-taxi-driver anecdote. I guess it would be Uber driver today. If you want to bash the PhD writ large, just take shots at the humanities. But they really aren't that different than any other PhD holder.

According to the National Science Foundation, in 2017 – the latest year for which data are available - two-thirds of humanities early career doctorate holders – those who obtained their doctoral degree within the past 10 years - had the same career aspirations as when their doctorate was awarded – the same percentage as **all** early career doctorate holders; and 79% of them would take the same position again if starting over, again – the same as all early career doctorates<sup>12</sup>. Humanities Indicators from the American Academy of Arts & Sciences puts the job satisfaction for humanities PhD recipients even higher – 90%<sup>13</sup>. Ironically, that's higher than Uber drivers' job satisfaction rating at 81%<sup>14</sup>.

And pharmaceutical industry jobs drying up? You wouldn't have known this in 2012, but there will be a global pandemic in 2020 so I hope not too many PhD chemists and biologists took your advice.

**11. Graduate schools play with the numbers.** *It's hard to find graduate schools that provide meaningful job placement information about their alums. If schools don't track where their PhD's end up, they won't have to share their dreadful track records.*

LOL. Steaming poop emoji. Schools **are** sharing their track records, and they're not dreadful. Here's just three, and I didn't even have to try that hard:

University of Texas at Austin <https://careerengagement.utexas.edu/graduate-students/explore/phd-career-outcomes/>



University of California, Riverside [https://ir.ucr.edu/stats/outcomes/placement\\_phd](https://ir.ucr.edu/stats/outcomes/placement_phd)

Brown University <https://oir.brown.edu/institutional-data/alumni-outcomes/graduate>

There's even an employment dashboard for non-Uber-driving English PhDs at The Ohio State University:  
<https://english.osu.edu/graduate/programs/ma-phd/careers>

Wanna see a really cool study on where a university's PhDs end up? Look the University of Toronto's *10,000 PhD Project*: [https://www.sgs.utoronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/SGS\\_Overview\\_10KPhDsProject.pdf](https://www.sgs.utoronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/SGS_Overview_10KPhDsProject.pdf)

To be fair, job placement and career tracking at the graduate degree level have really changed in the past decade. I suppose this person could take credit for creating change through a single *MoneyWatch* article, but I attribute it to reports like *The Path Forward* from the Council of Graduate Schools and ETS<sup>15</sup>, the work of people like Jim Grossman at the American Historical Association on alternative careers for humanists<sup>16</sup>, and the 2012 National Institutes of Health report on the biomedical sciences workforce<sup>17</sup>, just to name a few.

And, finally...

**12. Unfortunately, you can't eat prestige. But you can write obscure papers that only a handful of people will read.**

Or you can write just one that only one person will read.

Thank you for joining me today. All of the copious links referred to in this podcast are available on my website at [gradpost.com](http://gradpost.com). There you'll find additional podcasts and resources to help you plan your adventure for an advanced degree.

Do more than a 359° analysis when you run across articles like this, because every degree counts.

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