

Why am I a PhD student?

When considering or entering the PhD program, you can be in a state of deep confusion. Indeed, for many of you, doctoral studies are often the longest-lasting commitment you may have made by exercising free will, and long-term commitments have consequences which you may fear and, from time to time, lead you to wonder “why am I doing this?”.

There are several reasons to be a PhD student.

First, there is the desire to become a researcher or a scholar. Originally, doing a PhD was considered to be the best, but not always the only step to embrace a research or academic career. The idea was that you would devote yourself for a few years to a subject that may lead you to making important discoveries and, possibly, form the foundation of your entire research career. The PhD then forms the initial “treasure” that you will keep growing by intelligently mixing acquired knowledge with new opportunities. This mission of the PhD endures and produces the bulk of higher-education academics. It also produces the numerous scientists and technical experts who populate industrial and government laboratories.

With time however, the PhD has acquired new roles, discussed below.

Second, the PhD might be the opportunity to prepare yourself for starting up your business. Indeed, science has slowly evolved to become closely intertwined with technology, and technology itself has acquired the enviable status as the main engine of human progress, both personal and corporate. As a result, there is a considerable amount of capital ready to fund excellent ideas, and doing a PhD is a great way to generate ideas: You enjoy moments of concentration, interaction with others, and technical development with a level of freedom that will be hard to match by any corporate environment. One key aspect to understand is that your PhD topic does NOT have to be fully aligned with your entrepreneurial energy to come in support of it. Finding an excellent entrepreneurial idea is a combination of luck, networking, creativity, and knowledge. A good PhD program will stimulate your creativity and will “train you” to recognize the ideas of yours that are fun and promising.

Third, the PhD is a valuable diploma that opens many careers of responsibility. Then the PhD is a certificate of aptitude to come up with new things and turn them around quickly into valuable knowledge. For example, the best banks and the best consulting companies do not hire physics PhDs because they know relativity theory, aerospace PhDs because they know structures and materials, or biology PhDs because they understand the way enzymes work. They hire those PhDs because of their ability to use systematic, scientific methods to deal with diverse new problems efficiently without falling into the trap of confirmation bias and other economically disastrous business flaws.

Conclusion

Looking back at the material above, one common characteristic of what makes your PhD valuable is that you have learned to learn the known and, more importantly, the unknown. As such, it endows you with a certificate of your ability to put your freedom to good use by tackling the most challenging problems of your choice in a systematic yet creative way. While this is an honor, it is also a challenge and a responsibility. More than one PhD candidate will have found not to enjoy this condition after all. That is no big deal, the degree will still be there, reminding you that you gave your best shot at meeting the ideals of freedom the PhD stands for, and ready to support you if you change your mind.