

October 3, 2007

ON EDUCATION

Exploring Ways to Shorten the Ascent to a Ph.D.

By [JOSEPH BERGER](#)

Correction Appended

PRINCETON, N.J.

Many of us have known this scholar: The hair is well-streaked with gray, the chin has begun to sag, but still our tortured friend slaves away at a masterwork intended to change the course of civilization that everyone else just hopes will finally get a career under way.

We even have a name for this sometimes pitied species — the A.B.D. — All But Dissertation. But in academia these days, that person is less a subject of ridicule than of soul-searching about what can be done to shorten the time, sometimes much of a lifetime, it takes for so many graduate students to, well, graduate. The Council of Graduate Schools, representing 480 universities in the United States and Canada, is halfway through a seven-year project to explore ways of speeding up the ordeal.

For those who attempt it, the doctoral dissertation can loom on the horizon like Everest, gleaming invitingly as a challenge but often turning into a masochistic exercise once the ascent is begun. The average student takes 8.2 years to get a Ph.D.; in education, that figure surpasses 13 years. Fifty percent of students drop out along the way, with dissertations the major stumbling block. At commencement, the typical doctoral holder is 33, an age when peers are well along in their professions, and 12 percent of graduates are saddled with more than \$50,000 in debt.

These statistics, compiled by the [National Science Foundation](#) and other government agencies by studying the 43,354 doctoral recipients of 2005, were even worse a few years ago. Now, universities are setting stricter timelines and demanding that faculty advisers meet regularly with protégés. Most science programs allow students to submit three research papers rather than a single grand work. More universities find ways to ease financial burdens, providing better paid teaching assistantships as well as tuition waivers. And more universities are setting up writing groups so that students feel less alone cobbling together a thesis.

Fighting these trends, and stretching out the process, is the increased competition for jobs and research grants; in fields like English where faculty vacancies are scarce, students realize they must come up with original, significant topics. Nevertheless, education researchers like Barbara E. Lovitts, who has written a new book urging professors to clarify what they expect in dissertations; for example, to point out that professors “view the dissertation as a training exercise” and that students should stop trying for “a degree of perfection that’s unnecessary and unobtainable.”

There are probably few universities that nudge students out the door as rapidly as Princeton, where a humanities student now averages 6.4 years compared with 7.5 in 2003. That is largely because Princeton

guarantees financial support for its more than 2,000 scholars for five years, including free tuition and stipends that range up to \$30,000 a year. That means students need teach no more than two courses during their schooling and can focus on research.

“Princeton since the 1930s has felt that a Ph.D. should be an education, not a career, and has valued a tight program,” said William B. Russel, dean of the graduate school.

And students are grateful. “Every morning I wake up and remind myself the university is paying me to do nothing but write the dissertation,” said Kellam Conover, 26, a classicist who expects to complete his course of study in five years next May when he finishes his dissertation on bribery in Athens. “It’s a tremendous advantage compared to having to work during the day and complete the dissertation part time.”

But fewer than a dozen universities have endowments or sources of financing large enough to afford five-year packages. The rest require students to teach regularly. Compare Princetonians with Brian Gatten, 28, an English scholar at the [University of Texas](#) in Austin. He has either been teaching or assisting in two courses every semester for five years.

“Universities need us as cheap labor to teach their undergraduates, and frankly we need to be needed because there isn’t another way for us to fund our education,” he said.

That raises a question that state legislatures and trustees might ponder: Would it be more cost effective to provide financing to speed graduate students into careers rather than having them drag out their apprenticeships?

But money is not the only reason Princeton does well. It has developed a culture where professors keep after students. Students talk of frequent meetings with advisers, not a semiannual review. For example, Ning Wu, 30, a father of two, works in Dr. Russel’s chemical engineering lab and said Dr. Russel comes by every Friday to discuss Mr. Wu’s work on polymer films used in computer chips. He aims to get his Ph.D. next year, his fifth.

While Dr. Russel values “the critical thinking and independent digging students have to do, either in their mind for an original concept or in the archives,” others question the necessity of book-length works. Some universities have established what they call professional doctorates for students who plan careers more as practitioners than scholars. Since the 1970s, [Yeshiva University](#) has not only offered a Ph.D. in psychology but also a separate doctor of psychology degree, or Psy.D., for those more interested in clinical work than research; that program requires a more modest research paper.

OTHER institutions are reviving master’s degree programs for, say, aspiring scientists who plan careers in development of products rather than research.

Those who insist on dissertations are aware that they must reduce the loneliness that defeats so many scholars. Gregory Nicholson, completing his sixth and final year at [Michigan State](#), was able to finish a 270-page dissertation on spatial environments in novels like Kerouac’s “On the Road” with relative efficiency because of a writing group where he thrashed out his work with other thesis writers.

“It’s easy, especially in our field, to feel isolated, and that tends to slow people down,” he said. “There’s no

sense of belonging to an academic community.”

Some common sense would also hasten the process. The dissertation is a hurdle that must be cleared, not a magnum opus, the capstone of a career. Princeton’s Mr. Wu has made that calculation.

“You do not want to stay forever,” Mr. Wu said. “It’s a training process.”

E-mail: joeberg@nytimes.com

Correction: October 4, 2007

The On Education column yesterday, about efforts to shorten the time it takes to earn a Ph.D., misstated the number of graduate students at Princeton University. There are more than 2,000 — not 330, the number of Ph.D degrees the university awarded last year.

[Copyright 2007 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)
