

## How to get a PhD \*and\* save the world

'Tis the season for graduate school applications and associated angst. Several aspiring political scientists and economists have asked me for my thoughts and advice, and I've generally started by pointing them to Greg Mankiw's excellent [Advice for Aspiring Economists](#) and [Advice for Grad Students](#).

Mankiw's advice does not quite cater, however, to those of us that are young, idealistic, and want to pursue PhD research that makes life better for those less fortunate. For those so inclined, I offer the following addenda.

1. **Use graduate school to tech up.** You'll have time to learn how save the world later, when you're actually in it. Learn all of the theoretical, statistical and other difficult-to-acquire skills you can while in grad school, because you won't have the time later on. You, your cause, and your job prospects will be well-served by the technical skills you build.
2. **Hang in there.** In the first year of any grad program you will encounter a lot of required material that will feel too theoretical, too divorced from social change, and (occasionally) like too much nonsense. Much of it is good for you (see point 1), even if it doesn't feel like it at the time. After a year of metrics and micro theory, I was ready to run to the real world to do what I thought I really wanted to do. The best advice I ever got (from one of my pre-PhD advisers) was, "Shut up and hang in there; by your second to third year you will discover all the people doing interesting applied work soon enough and be free to work on whatever you want by your third year." He was right.
3. **Take chances.** The second best piece of advice I ever received came from my dissertation chair, shortly after my oral examinations committee told me that my prospectus was poorly thought out, uneconomic, and overly risky. They were 100% right, and I benefitted from hearing it (although at the time I was miserable). Where I think they were wrong is that they told me to abandon my plans for risky and expensive field work. They favored the less risky route that could get me to a completed dissertation faster. My chair's response: "Hey, if you really want to do this, why not? Give it a shot. If it doesn't pan out after three months, then come back and work on something else. Worst case scenario: you lose a few thousand dollars and a summer, but you have a great experience." I plan to give the same advice to my students.

4. **But minimize your risks by being prepared.** Don't embark on a big project, especially field work, without a solid hypothesis, research design, and plan. Think through the theory beforehand. Write down your assumptions, your logic, and your econometric regressions before you collect data. Especially write out your regressions. I am still guilty of rushing to the field too quickly, and am continually reminded of the costs.
5. **Look before you leap.** If you're not sure whether you want to be an academic researcher, use your first two summers to work for outside organizations—whether the World Bank, an investment fund, the Fed, or a think tank. Try each on for size. At the end of your fourth or fifth year of grad school do not make one of the biggest decisions of your life (what kind of job do I want?) with oodles of information about one kind (academia) and zero about the alternatives. You don't have to be an economist to know that such decision-making is sub-optimal.
6. **Your professors are not your only role models.** If you are at a strong research university, remember that what your professors do is not necessarily representative of all your post-grad options. They represent maybe 1% of graduates, and they are self-selected to have a particular set of interests, life goals, and measures of success. These are not necessarily bad measures—I share many of them. But incredibly smart and interesting people graduate from economics and political science PhDs every year and go on to amazing and fulfilling careers. You will inevitably begin to take on the interests and priorities of your professors, even if they are the interests and priorities of a selective 1%. If these values don't suit you in the end, or make you miserable, that's okay.
7. **Do what you love.** You can try to game the system and do something that's hot, conventional, or orthodox. But if you don't love your topic and your research, it is probably not going to be interesting to anyone, let alone you. Plus you'll be miserable. Did you really work this hard and come this far to be mediocre and unhappy?
8. **Don't hang your job market hopes on academic positions outside your core discipline.** There aren't nearly as many of them out there as you might think, and they can be hard to get. There are few policy schools, and they seem to have relatively few junior openings. Public health and other professional schools have limited needs for social scientists, and their job market system is a bit opaque. If these positions suit your interests, shoot for them by all means. But your main market will be your core discipline, so keep this in mind when you write up your dissertation, letters, and applications. For the same reason, you should be cautious about entering interdisciplinary PhD programs.

9. **Be wary of big field projects.** A number of leading academics (and more than a few grad students) are working on large field projects with governments, international institutions, and NGOs. Be aware that these projects—nationwide surveys, program evaluations, and the like—have limitations: they seldom implement on schedule; the research designs are not always as clean as what you drew on paper on Day One; and the implementing organization's interests and priorities are often different (and probably more important for more people) than your own.
10. **Don't ask, don't tell?** Here I hesitate. If you are undecided about a career in academic research, my gut (unfortunately) tells me that you shouldn't advertise this fact to your department until you are certain. My main rationale: some (but not all) academics will be quick to write you off as 'not serious', and should you change your mind later in your PhD you may find that 'credibility' difficult to reclaim. Certainly you should be candid with your committee about any interest in or openness to non-academic careers. They will have much advice and experience to offer. But don't declare your intent to follow other paths if you are interested in keeping the academic route open.

All of the above represent one (new and unwise) academic's point of view, so I urge caution in taking the above advice. I urge more strongly, however, feedback and commentary. I would like nothing more than to develop a resource of ideas and opinions for idealistic young grad students to build rather than temper their abilities and enthusiasm. So comments invited.