



Is a part-time engineering Ph.D. even possible?

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Ph.D. in Industrial Engineering, '2022.

“Yes! Definitely!” This was my 30yrs old self being excited about the unprecedeted journey. Five years and a half had passed, when I finally got the degree, I would argue with my younger self that “There is no such thing as Part-time Ph.D.!”

I imagined anyone cared reading my writings would be around 30 years old. If I was in my early 20s, I would quit my job and go all-in.



Fun fact: on average, it takes someone about 5 years to finish a full-time engineering Ph.D. program. If they aspired to be tenure track professors, it would be another 6 years before securing the positions. This is a good day scenario. For most perspective professors, there could be at least 1- or 2-year gap where they found themselves working as post-docs. So, it is about 13 years turning any full-time Ph.D. student into an associate professor.

There are certainly many other possible paths than just going for a tenure track position in academia. To most Ph.D. students, it is just a 5-year thing, or even shorter. A lot argued that part-time should expect a very much prolonged student career, 7, 8, or even longer. I would argue that it is not necessarily true.



There is no guarantee for any Ph.D. students to graduate within 5 years. But, being a part-time doesn't always imply a super long duration.

I completed my journey as a part-time Ph.D. student a little over 1.5 years ago, successfully finishing the marathon. Being a part-time student, working full-time and raising a family at the same time, was a quite unique experience.

I wished for examples, both positive and negative, to serve as references. The concept of being a part-time Ph.D. student seemed appealing, but having someone to look up to would have been even more valuable. Unfortunately, there were few precedents in my year, or I couldn't reach any with my capability. Nevertheless, I consider myself fortunate to have navigated the path independently, weathering numerous ups and downs, a few moments of collapse, and ultimately finished it. I feel genuinely content with the 5.5 years of thrills and fulfillment.

Salute to those who have started or finished their journey already!

Seven years have elapsed since 2016, and I've observed a growing number of part-time Ph.D. students across the United States. We're no longer alien to each other, yet the experience remains somewhat mysterious to many.

I can't help but wonder if our full-time peers are still trying to figure out: 'Why on earth are these individuals doing this?'

While there's occasional discourse on part-time Ph.D. experiences through blogs, newsletters, and posts, it's disheartening to note that a considerable portion appears more like advertisements. However, authentic user discussions on platforms like Reddit and Quora often leave me puzzled.

I must admit to a general sense of disappointment. If I were seeking advice online, I'd likely be confused or even freaked out, given that the majority of content seems to emphasize the challenges and label the endeavor as outright crazy.

I do agree that pursuing a part-time Ph.D. is indeed a daunting undertaking for most people.

Occasionally, I stumble upon positive stories, but many simply urge others to 'go for it!' and 'don't give up,' which, frankly, wouldn't be advice I'd want to hear either.

Nevertheless, they are well-intentioned individuals trying to offer encouragement.

So, I decided to share my personal experience, reflecting on why I wanted it, how I got into it, the things I did, pivotal moments filled with laughter and tears, excitement and hardship, and the entirety of my journey's highs and lows. I'll get into my decision-making process at each step, sharing my thoughts on significant and subtle aspects. I'll discuss how I set expectations, coped with stress, faced setbacks, rebuilt confidence, and many more.

I'm not attempting to lesson anyone. Instead, I'll just share my life stories, a snapshot spanning only 5.5 years though. I'll present it openly to any interested readers without reservations.

Writing a substantial amount of text at once is a bit hard for me, so I plan to release my reflections in parts. Each segment will focus on telling my stories and highlighting corresponding facts and ideas.

For those in early 30s seriously contemplating spending the next 4 to 5 years on a part-time Ph.D., if you'd like someone to chat with, my email is shi.zheng.tfls@gmail.com.

P.S.: I enabled comments. Any feedback would be greatly appreciated!

 [Part I - How I started the journey?](#)

 [Part II \(Coming Soon!\)](#)

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