

# 5 Ways to a Faster Ph.D.

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By *Dave Wilton*

I was one of 17 students who started the University of Toronto's Ph.D. program in English in the fall of 2010. The nominal schedule for earning the degree is five years, and all 17 of us received guaranteed financial support for that period. Six years later, with our funding exhausted, only three of us had finished our degrees — a completion rate of 18 percent — and none of us had finished within five years. Another three had left the program entirely — an 18 percent attrition rate — while the remaining 11 were still at it.

How do those results compare with completion rates at other Ph.D. programs in the humanities? About average. The Council of Graduate Schools' [Ph.D. Completion Project](#) reports that only 20 percent of North American doctoral students in the humanities complete their degrees within six years, and only 29 percent are done after seven. (These [statistics were collected](#) by the council from students entering doctoral programs between the years 1992-95).

Some of the delay is attributable to external factors — that is to say, to life. Some in my cohort at Toronto took time off to get married, have babies, or deal with an illness. Any endeavor that takes five-plus years is going to be subject to such delays.

But such external factors do not explain a 20-percent completion rate. Something else is going on, too, and the problem starts to come into focus when we compare the humanities with other disciplines.

It turns out, the humanities is not the only sector of academe with a Ph.D. completion problem, but the degree of its problem is demonstrably worse. Of all the disciplines, engineering does the best, with 49 percent of its Ph.D.s finishing after six years of graduate school. Then — in order of decreasing completion rates — come the life sciences, mathematics and the physical sciences, the social sciences, and humanities, bringing up the rear.

The data show three distinct problems:

- Absolute completion rates (the proportion who finish regardless of how long it takes) are low for all disciplines, with even the best-performing field (engineering) failing to reach 65 percent.
- No matter the discipline, at many institutions, the funding package does not cover the time it takes most students to earn their degree.
- Finally, completion times for the humanities and social sciences do not coalesce around a point that would indicate how long a degree “should” take: There is no knee in the curve. By contrast, almost all those who are going to complete a doctorate in STEM fields have done so within eight years. The mystery — and perhaps the key to solving the completion problem in the humanities — lies in why this third problem exists.

My own experience may provide an example of what a degree trajectory should look like. I am one of the three from my cohort at Toronto who earned my Ph.D. within six years. I defended my thesis in November of my sixth year, and I could have completed within the nominal five-year period had I pushed it. (But with no job waiting for me, it made strategic sense to delay my defense and retain my eligibility to teach at Toronto for another year.)

I finished relatively quickly, not because I was smarter or more dedicated than my peers, but rather because I was an older, nontraditional doctoral student. (One of the other three who completed in six years also had considerable work experience outside academe.) With several decades of experience managing R&D programs for the U.S. government and Silicon Valley companies, I was already adept at jumping through bureaucratic hoops, so the academic version wasn't overwhelming for me. In addition, I also knew how to guard against what in Silicon Valley we call “feature creep” — that is, to keep the scope of a project (in this case, my dissertation) under control.

By the time I started graduate school, I had already written several book-length projects, so I knew how much I could complete in a given period and how to plan and execute a multi-year project. And I already had a dissertation topic in mind. So when I completed my coursework and started on my dissertation, I was able to hit the ground running.

Everyone's experiences and challenges in graduate school will be different. But I do see some reforms that — if institutionalized — could reduce time-to-degree across the board. Some departments are already doing some of these things, but for those that aren't, I believe they are critical:

**Require a dissertation proposal as part of the application.** Students should be free to change their thesis topic as they progress through their Ph.D. program, but making a proposal part of the application process would give students a ready-made topic in their hip pocket when they complete their coursework. Such a proposal would also help match applicants with potential advisers in the department and help ensure that the research interests of a prospective student are a good fit for the department, reducing the dropout rate. When I was applying to graduate schools, of all the programs I looked at, only one required applicants to submit a proposed dissertation topic.

**Award every student full funding for at least seven years .** While some students can finish in less time, the data show that unless we radically restructure what a humanities Ph.D. requires, it takes most students that long to complete their degree. Given that the total funding available is not likely to be increased, taking this step would mean cutting admissions. But accepting fewer students would eventually reduce the number of Ph.D.s on the faculty job market, and would give professors more time to work with the students they do have. As an incentive to finish, universities could require graduate students to start paying tuition payments after their eighth year. With seven full years of financial support, and a grace period in their eighth year, students wouldn't have to take outside jobs to pay the bills (delaying their graduation) and would be incentivized to finish in eight years to avoid tuition payments.

**Require a chapter-by-chapter outline and a project timeline with due dates.** Students should be required to submit such detailed documents by the time they finish their coursework. Any change to the plan, including postponing due dates, should require the approval of the adviser and the student's dissertation committee. Students

and their advisers should be held accountable for meeting the project schedule. All plans are subject to change, but there needs to be a plan in the first place, and any changes to it should be considered and deliberate. The object here is not to penalize students for failing to progress, but to enable advisers and committees to identify problems early, and get the student back on the track to completion.

**Hold departments accountable.** Departments should examine where their own internal bureaucracies create delays and then redesign their programs to make progress more expeditious. I can identify problems with Toronto's English PhD program that create a year's worth of needless delay, but such problems are peculiar to the institution. Each university and department will have different bureaucratic inefficiencies.

**Publicize the numbers.** Universities should publish their Ph.D. completion rates by department/program and by year. The time-to-degree problem cannot be solved unless we have the full data to identify and define the problem and its scope.

None of these steps require changing program requirements and standards. Doctoral programs would remain as rigorous as they were before. Rather, the focus is on ensuring that students have the institutional structure and tools to expeditiously navigate a multi-year graduate program.

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