

## **Path to the Ph.D.: Things to Consider when Deciding upon a Ph.D. Program**

These are some of the questions you might ask (of your prospective program, and of yourself):

### **Support**

- How will the department support you (financially, intellectually, in your professional development, as a student of color, as a parent, as a person with a disability, etc.)?
- Will the courses offered by the department & its affiliates support your project?
- Will you be able to use research methods and theoretical approaches that you value?
- How does advising work in the department? What degree of autonomy will you and your advisor have in determining your program of study, the nature of your candidacy exams, and expectations for your dissertation?
- What other sources of support are in place (in the department and the larger university) to accommodate your intellectual, emotional, and health-related needs?
- Are there faculty in the department who are excited about your project, and about working with you?

### **Cohort**

- What students are currently in the department & what are their projects?
- Do you want to be a part of this cohort?
- Do other students seem happy (or at least content!), and excited about their research?
- How does this cohort shape the department's intellectual and political investments?

### **Teaching & Research Assistantships**

- What kinds of courses can you expect to teach?
- Will you be given the opportunity to teach a variety of different courses, at different levels?
- Are these courses interesting to you, and relevant to your research and professional development?
- You can ask similar questions about research opportunities in your department.

### **Future prospects**

- Will the department foster your professional development as an academic, and offer guidance in this area?
- And, most importantly, will faculty advisors support your interest in professional options beyond tenure-track positions in academia?

### **Quality of life**

- What will important people in your life (your spouse, partner, kids, friends, family) be doing while you're in the program? How will these relationships (need to) change once you're pursuing the Ph.D.? Are you okay with these changes?
- What will you gain by being in the program, and what might you have to sacrifice?

## Suggestions for Developing Support and Advocacy Networks

### In your program

- ❑ Join your department's graduate student organization. Membership will help you to develop collegial, social, and political networks with other students. Participating in your department's grad student organization can give you the opportunity to improve the experience of students in your program – and perhaps to transform the Ph.D. program itself.
- ❑ Form a writing or reading group. The group can motivate you to get writing or reading done, and will give you a chance to share thoughts and drafts with other students before you take them to your advisor or to a conference.
- ❑ Connect with faculty. Early in your program, try to meet and/or learn about the work of faculty in your department. If you can, set up brief meetings with faculty members and talk to them about their research, and your interests. Faculty members whose work doesn't seem immediately relevant to yours can still be good resources; they may not be on your dissertation committee, but they may be able to connect you with scholars in other departments and institutions. If you inform faculty members about your research, they may also let you know about opportunities in your research area (e.g., when they receive calls for papers or conferences).

### At your university

- ❑ Take advantage of workshops offered by your graduate school. Balancing your own research and coursework with the work you're required to do for an assistantship can be difficult, especially if you're teaching and don't have a clearly defined work schedule. Keep an eye out for time-management workshops, which may help you figure out ways to strike a good balance between work, research, writing, and the rest of your life.
- ❑ Go to dissertation writing workshops at different stages in the writing process. Writing workshops can be helpful before you start writing, when you're feeling stuck, and when you're trying to figure out how to turn a big project into something that you can handle on a day-to-day basis.
- ❑ Look into services offered by the university's counseling center. The counseling center may offer support groups specifically for grad students, or for students working on their dissertations. Some centers also sponsor groups for students of color, LGBTQ students, women, parents, nontraditional students, and students with disabilities. Support groups can be great spaces for talking about your experience and your program, since you don't need to worry about word 'getting back' to others in the department.

### Maintaining quality of life

- ❑ Develop friendships outside of your program. Having relationships with people who are not in your program, or (better yet) who are not in school, is worth the investment of your time and energy. These friends can help you gain perspective when you're feeling overwhelmed by school, they can give you a space to *not* talk about your work, and can provide you with opportunities to stay in touch with aspects of your life that may get left behind when you enter your program (e.g., activities, hobbies, creative pursuits, community ties).