

So You're Interested in a Ph.D.?

Here is some information to help you begin your journey. This document is geared towards helping you understand how to prepare for a Ph.D., and is particularly relevant for people interested in Organizational Behavior and related programs. This document was created by a person that did a Ph.D. in Organizational Behavior (and is now a faculty member in Organizational Behavior), but also applied to programs in social psychology. Keep in mind that a lot of this advice is just one person's view/opinion, and does not necessarily characterize the views of other faculty at the same school or other schools. Rather, this is just intended to give you one person's advice and compiled wisdom, in case it is useful in your journey. Best wishes!

Ph.D. 101

- Ph.D. in management / organizational behavior (OB)
 - Where: In business schools
 - Why: Typically preparing you to become a business school professor.
 - How: Well-funded at top schools.
 - Length: 5-6 years
- OB vs. related areas
 - The information in this document is most relevant for people in Organizational Behavior, but may also be relevant for people pursuing related areas, such as management, social psychology, sociology, or I/O psychology.
 - Some business schools will call their program "Management" and others will call it "Organizational Behavior" (OB). There is a lot of overlap in these terms and they are often used synonymously, though Management is sometimes intended to be a bit broader than OB. For example, at Wharton, OB is a sub-area within the Management department. In this document, things that apply to programs in "OB" should oftentimes apply to programs in "Management."
 - A PhD in Management / Organizational Behavior (OB) is different from a PhD in Industrial-Organizational Psychology (I/O psychology). Unlike Management and OB, I/O is typically in psychology departments. The information in this document is for people who are interested in Management / OB, though it is possible that some of the information also applies to a PhD in I/O.
- Goals of getting a Ph.D.
 - A Ph.D. is intended to help you become a professor in a program that is similar to the one in which you are studying. For example, if you are a Ph.D. student in organizational behavior, you are preparing to become faculty in an organizational behavior department, management department, or similar department.
 - There are different ways to be a professor, and thus different types of schools and graduate school programs. At top-tier schools, professors are primarily focused on conducting research and teaching is secondary (research-oriented schools). At teaching-oriented schools (e.g., liberal arts schools), teaching is the primary focus. At balanced schools, faculty are expected to excel at both research and teaching. Similarly, graduate school programs differ in their focus. Some programs (usually at top-tier schools) primarily focus on training you to do research (research-oriented programs), while other programs are geared toward helping you become a teacher (teaching-oriented programs), and other schools are considered "balanced" between the two.

- If your end goal is a non-academic path then there may be faster ways to follow such paths without needing a Ph.D. (e.g., getting a professional or practice-oriented degree like an MBA or another type of Master's degree, or even forgoing additional schooling).
- A few secrets
 - If you are new to the Ph.D. path, here are a few important secrets that people often do not know
 - PhDs at top-tier research schools do not pay for their education. In fact, Ph.D. students ARE PAID a living stipend, typically for 5 years and sometimes for a 6th. In some programs, you have to teach to gain your stipend certain years, but teaching helps you gain important experience for becoming a professor anyhow.
 - Most Ph.D. programs do NOT require you to have a Master's degree. Also, you have to pay for a Master's Degree, but you may not need to pay for a Ph.D. If you know for sure that you want a Ph.D., skip the Masters and go straight to the Ph.D. For exceptions to this rule, see below under Options for Gaining Research Experience.

Should you pursue a Ph.D.?

- Here are some signs that a Ph.D. might be right for you
 - You are interested in not only learning knowledge (e.g., through reading books) but generating knowledge (which is done through the research you will conduct in graduate school and beyond).
 - You ask a lot of questions about the world, including why people or organizations behave the way they do
 - You can identify patterns in the questions you ask, enabling you to have a focused set of interests that you can pursue in graduate school
 - You have tried conducting research and know that you find it interesting more so than practicing therapy, consulting, and other applied work
- Trying something else first
 - Generally speaking, I would say that there is no harm in trying a different path before deciding to go to graduate school. I took 4 years off and worked in brand consulting before I went to graduate school. Many others take time off too. Graduate school is a heavy time investment so if you're on the fence, it may not hurt to try working a different job of interest for a couple of years or so first. Having work experience will not harm your application, and if you are applying to OB programs then it might actually help.
 - However - The main challenge I see for people who try something else is that, once you leave college, it is difficult to get research experience (which is very important for having a successful application). It is even harder to get research experience if you are trying to work a full time job (especially since most research positions are on a volunteer basis and don't pay). I personally ended up working a full-time job and then getting a volunteer research assistant position at NYU, where I worked in the evenings a few days/week. At one point, I even went part time for a few months at my main job. Not everyone has this flexibility though. If you are an undergraduate, take advantage of being in school by getting RA experience now. If you've graduated and need a job to pay the bills, your best bet may be to do something similar to what I did, or else find a paid

RA job (see below under “What does it take to get into a PhD program?” → “Research Experience”).

What does it take to get into a PhD program?

- Academic performance and preparation
 - Keep in mind that the information below is just intended to give you a sense of what people may care about, but these are not hard rules.
 - Major: Ideally, you want somewhat of a match between your major and what you’re applying for. A 4.0 in engineering may not be as good as a 4.0 in psych or management if applying to OB. However, keep in mind that if you have not majored in the area you are interested in for graduate school, getting other experience (e.g., research experience) in this area can still be very good.
 - What school you went to: Keep in mind that even great schools can have grade inflation so a 4.0 at a school like that might be underweighted
 - Higher level courses: It helps to take higher level courses (300 level, graduate level) instead of just ones you needed to get by. Show you took top courses available to you, as these are often the ones that involve work that is similar to a PhD (e.g., doing independent projects).
 - Tests: GMAT may be used instead for business schools, although programs like Organizational Behavior sometimes also allow GREs. GRE is required for most psychology programs. There are limited dates you can take these exams. At the latest, you should take it in October. In some cases, you can still complete it by November but that is cutting it close. And keep in mind that this information is a few years old at this point, so it’s possible you’ll need to take exams even sooner.
- Research Experience
 - Many PhD programs will require you to have past research experience in a field related to the program you are applying to. For your grad school applications, your research experiences is conveyed through your statement of purpose, resume, and letters of recommendation.
 - Types of experience:
 - Best is if you can do research under the supervision of a faculty member and/or graduate student, such as being a paid or volunteer research assistant (RA) or doing a seniors honors thesis in college. The best research experiences are those that allow you to develop higher-level skills that are needed for graduate school, such as formulating research questions, designing studies, etc. Oftentimes, you will have to start off doing more basic responsibilities (coding data, literature reviews, etc), but if you show the people who you are working with that you have the ability to think about research and propose ideas, they may be more willing to involve you in higher-level conversations about developing the study design, refining research questions, etc.
 - Difference between research exposure and research experience. Having the latter is much better, but at very least you need the former. The former can at very least help with understanding things like what it means to form a good research question, formulate hypotheses, etc

- Applied research like working in consulting is not really the same as academic research, but sometimes you can try to show how they are related (e.g., if you work at the Fed and do economic or market analysis then it could be applicable). Usually though, this will not be enough on its own to demonstrate that you have sufficient research experience.
- Options for gaining Research Experience
 - Research assistant (RA) positions in a business school, psychology department, or related department
 - One of the most common and effective approaches to gaining research experience is to become an RA
 - Your best bet for finding any RA position is to check on the website for labs or faculty that you are interested in, or see if a school or department has a general website for posting RA positions.
 - Paid RA - it is less common to find paid positions but sometimes you will find these options). For example, HBS has postings for paid RAs [here](#), and Wharton has paid RA positions for its students.
 - Volunteer RA - Many business schools and psych departments have volunteer RA positions that you can do on a part-time basis. When I was preparing for graduate school, I took a volunteer position that I could do after my “day job” for a couple of years and this worked well for me.
 - Lab manager
 - Find a psych lab that has paid lab manager positions, but just make sure that lab managers can actually get involved in research. For example, I’ve had friends who had paid lab manager positions at UCLA Anderson School and Columbia Business School. Harvard psych also has lab managers in certain labs.
 - Administrative research jobs within universities
 - Many universities have administrative jobs that involve doing research, or will at least allow you to gain greater exposure to research in the school. For example, Wharton’s has a People Analytics group.
 - Companies
 - You may be able to find a job at a company that does research similar to academic research, such as [Catalyst](#), people analytics and data science jobs (e.g., Disney Analytics, Google Data Science department), start-ups (e.g., [Paradigm](#)), etc. If you have to design studies or surveys, or you have to quantitatively analyze data, these are good signs that a job will have transferable skills to academia.
 - Student opportunities
 - A senior honors thesis is a very good option if you can get good supervision
 - If you’re a student, talk to someone in your school’s student advising office and your school’s careers office about whether there are research opportunities on and off campus. For example, Wharton has opportunities for students listed [here](#), and Harvard has a PRIMO program that some students participate in to get research experience at Harvard over the summer. Also, some schools have funding for students who want to work at another school over the summer and gain research experience.

- Additional education
 - Other post-college options involve paying for additional education (beyond college), like doing a Master's. Generally speaking, additional education like a Master's degree is only really helpful with improving your chances of PhD admission if it allows you to get more research experience. However, most of the time just volunteering part-time is sufficient or even better because you are concentrating solely on research and get a lot of training and guidance that is specifically focused on doing research. A lot of times, credits do not transfer from a Master's program to a PhD, and a PhD program will likely still expect you to complete all of their required courses. That being said, sometimes people will still prefer to go back to school. For instance, people who went to a small school and can't get research experience in other ways will get a Masters to help with their application. Another reason may be that if you have a very low undergraduate GPA and think you need a better academic record before applying to PhD programs, you may benefit from a Master's program (but even then, extensive research experience and very strong letters of recommendation may be able to offset a low GPA without you needing a Master's degree). Also, if you are an international student who (due to visa issues) cannot get research experience outside of a Master's Program, it may be worthwhile to go into a Master's program.
 - Post-baccalaureate programs are not really a common route, and should only be considered if they involve getting research experience. Harvard has a Post-bacc program that is traditionally for humaniites and sciences, and they might add econ to that.
- Statement of purpose
 - Check out this helpful [website](#). This website also discusses a Personal Statement, which is different from a Statement of Purpose, and other useful parts of the application
 - Here are some of the things that are good to show in a Statement of Purpose: research interests/ideas, preparation, fit with culture, fit with specific faculty (it is usually a good idea to list specific faculty and name more than one), enthusiasm
- Letters of recommendation
 - You typically need three people who can write you letters of recommendation.
 - Make sure you get good recommendations. Sometimes schools can get a solid application from a candidate, but then the recommendation doesn't match the quality of the rest of the application
 - Who should you ask?
 - People who are best-suited to write your letters are, in order of priority, 1) in academia, 2) know you well, and 3) senior in the field. If you don't have three people who fit all three of these criteria, that is perfectly fine, but just do the best you can to hit these criteria when possible.
 - Ideally your recommendations are written by academics. Or else people that have a terminal degree like a JD or whatever the final degree in their field is. If don't have academic contacts and need to get a professional recommendation, find people with terminal degrees if possible.
 - Getting people who know you really well is very important

- Doctoral student recommendations are fairly common and are fine if the applicant actually worked with them in their lab or on their research in some capacity
- Mistakes
 - If from the CEO of your company, it tends to be a professional reference and not about ability to be a scholar. If you ask someone who works in industry to write you a letter, be sure to give them a sense of what types of qualities they should highlight about you to show that you are a good fit for academia.
 - Getting recommendations from rockstar people in the field that barely says anything about you. If choosing between a rockstar who barely knows you and a less-known professor who advised your thesis, it is often better to choose the latter
- Content
 - Letter should talk about your ability to be a scholar. Academics are usually the best people to discuss this.
 - Great things for them to touch upon in an academic recommendation letter: Intellectually curious, self-motivated, self-managing, passionate about learning and research etc, collaborative and nice person
 - Should all add up to showing that you fit, are prepared for a PhD program, and are well-suited for academia (as opposed to better-suited for an industry job).
- Personal statement or diversity statement
 - Note that this is more personal than a “statement of purpose,” and not requested at all schools
 - check out this helpful [website](#)
- Resume
- Writing samples
- Undergraduate transcripts
 - Takes a while for schools to send this information so be sure to order in advance
- Application fee
 - Each application often requires a fee, though there are options to get these fees waived

Resources for applying to graduate school

- <http://grad.berkeley.edu/admissions/apply/>
- <https://ls.berkeley.edu/academic-programs/arts-humanities/graduate-diversity-office/prospective-students/statement-purpose>
- <http://blog.prepscholar.com/how-to-get-into-stanford-by-an-acceptee>