Are You Considering a Doctoral Degree?

By Dr. Mary C. Clement and Dr. Laurie DeRosa

Many PreK−12 educators with a master's degree ask themselves if they should continue their education and pursue a doctoral degree. It sounds attractive—having PhD or EdD after your name, or Dr. in front of it—along with the hope of obtaining an engaging new job upon graduation. Key questions always arise when one is making this type of decision: Why should one invest so much time in pursuing an advanced degree? How does one begin to pursue the doctorate? Where should one earn this degree, and when is the best time to start a program? What is the commitment needed, and what are the possibilities upon completion? There are many considerations to answer the questions of why, how, where, when, and what if you are considering a doctoral degree.

Why pursue a doctoral degree?

A PhD is a doctor of philosophy degree (which can be in education), while an EdD is a doctor of education degree, and both are referred to as doctorates. The difference varies by institution, with some PhD's doing more research than coursework. Either doctoral degree can be the credential for becoming a professor in a college or university or obtaining a higher-level position. In today's school districts, the doctoral degree may be the required preparation to become a superintendent or central office administrator. Governmental positions in state boards of education may require doctorate degrees.

The emphasis on being a life-long learner may also prompt some PreK−12 educators to pursue their advanced degrees. KDP Member Marta Vargas (personal communication, Feb. 12, 2015) understands how important education is for career development: "I went [to college] because I knew without it my life would be at a standstill. My first two years in a community college changed how I viewed education. Instead of it becoming something I needed to do; it became something I wanted to do." Unsure of where the degree may lead them, many educators decide to earn their doctoral degree and see what happens next in their careers. One author of this article taught high school foreign languages for eight years before earning a master's degree while teaching part-time at a university. After the first week of college teaching, she made her decision to earn a doctorate and pursue teaching full-time at the college level. The other author taught ten years as an elementary art specialist before earning her master's degree and then decided to continue graduate studies, earning a doctorate in order to teach at the college level.

How do I begin the process?

Just as high school students search widely for their college choice, so too should a potential doctoral candidate. The first step is to research college catalogs of both private and

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public institutions to find out what programs are offered, the entrance requirements, the amount of coursework and research, and the tuition costs. Another step includes talking with your former professors, your administrators, and others who have successfully completed their advanced degrees. In addition, it is critical to visit the campuses that are of interest to you and talk with a potential advisor. It is important to plan ahead for deadlines regarding admission and financial aid.

Before making your decision, read widely about college teaching if that is your long-term goal. There is a big jump between teaching second-graders and teaching undergraduate students how to teach second grade. Consider reading several books about college faculty work. (See, for example, Clement, 2010; Gapppa, Austin, & Trice, 2007; and Lang, 2008.) Read the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (chronicle.com) to become familiar with issues and policies that guide higher education curriculum and professional responsibilities.

It is important to understand that this process may take from 3−7 years to complete. Will you be quitting your full-time teaching job to return to college, or will you continue teaching and take graduate classes part-time? How will you pay for earning this degree? The cost may be tens of thousands of dollars for a doctoral degree. Will you apply for scholarships or grants, or will you be a full-time student who works for the university? Professional organizations, such as Kappa Delta Pi, have multiple scholarships to support research of graduate degrees. It is important to research the costs, the availability of assistantships and funding, and consider your own money and time.

Does it matter *where* I earn the degree?

Yes, the reputation of the program you complete can affect your career after earning the doctorate. There is much debate about the difference between a program that is online versus one that is completed on a "brick and mortar" campus. Blended degree programs exist, where some coursework is online and the remaining work (usually specific courses) is done on a campus. The decision about online or on-campus may depend upon where you want to work after degree completion and where you presently live along with whether you need to keep working while completing your degree. It is important to always ensure that the institution has state and/or national accreditation by reputable organizations.

Those seeking full-time, tenure-track professorships at more prestigious colleges and universities may need a doctorate that was earned on a campus, and that included significant experience teaching for the university while completing coursework. Newly-hired professors need to have a research agenda established during their doctoral studies, so an online or campus program must prepare the graduate for rigorous research and writing for publication. Talk to professors and school administrators about the programs they completed, with regard to the preparation for research and publishing. It's all about the institution's reputation.

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Does it matter *when* I get the degree?

Yes, it does matter, based on what you want to do with the degree. Many people complete doctoral coursework, take a new job, and then have difficulty completing their research and dissertation. It may be better to complete the degree, and then change jobs. If a teacher or school administrator earns a degree and stays in their classroom or position for several years before seeking a professorship, they may have difficulty making the move to higher education. Search committees that review applicants for professorships look for ongoing research agendas and records of continual publications from the time one completes the degree until applying for a new position. If you don't move immediately into higher education teaching, keep your research and publishing ongoing until you do. Another consideration is the salary to be earned. Some educators experience a decrease in pay from teaching PreK−12 to teaching at the college level. KDP Member, Dr. John Krenik (personal communication, February 9, 2015) earned his PhD, but decided to continue teaching at the middle school level because of the salary differential. He is interested in working at the college level after he retires.

Some PreK−12 teachers and administrators retire in their late 50s or early 60s and then decide to work in higher education as a part-time job. Many part-time positions exist for those wishing to teach one or two classes a year, supervise student teachers, or advise students. Part-time positions, with the title of adjunct, have limited pay and benefits, but may be a good match for semi-retired educators.

What is the commitment needed to successfully pursue a doctorate?

It is not easy to teach full time and be a part-time student, nor is it easy to quit one's job to be a full-time student and part-time university employee. Successful completion of a degree takes time, money, and the completion of challenging academic work. During doctoral studies, a strong student establishes a network of colleagues for support, as well as maintaining personal and family support.

A high level of commitment is needed for each step of the doctoral process. After applying to graduate school and choosing a field of study, graduate courses begin. Choosing your doctoral committee members and completing a comprehensive exam occur around the mid-point of the process.

Developing focused research questions helps to guide your research. The goal is to become an expert in your field and to contribute to the field of education with your original work. The research process includes gathering data and analyzing results to answer your focused research questions.

The next step includes writing the dissertation, followed by defending your thesis in front of the doctoral committee and other invited guests. The final step is walking across the graduation stage to be hooded, and picking up your diploma.

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What is the best advice for earning a doctorate?

To paraphrase how educators plan for classes, "start with the end in mind." Before pursuing the doctoral degree, have a clear goal for why you are in the program. Know that research and writing are a much larger component of earning this degree than the requirements for a bachelor's or master's degree. In addition to establishing a network of support (family, peers, colleagues, graduate students, or others found on the internet through blogs, chats, and other social media), there are both personal and professional skills needed to be successful. Do you have methods to cope with stress (for example, meditation and affirmations)? Do you have professional skills such as reading, summarizing, writing with clarity, editing for publication, as well as technology skills to locate meaningful research? It is easy to become overwhelmed with all of the decisions in this process. However, it is important to understand that you only need to take one step at a time as the process unfolds. Ultimately, perseverance is the key.

Great job opportunities exist—in school districts, in higher education, in state departments of education, in private businesses, and as executive directors or CEOs of education centers. Your options include full- and part-time work, research, and publishing. The networks that you build in your doctoral program will be of great use in job searching. Your professional organization membership will also be invaluable as you earn the degree and after graduation. All education opens doors, and a doctorate opens doors of opportunity and self-fulfillment.

Before making a decision about getting a doctorate, you will want to view or listen to "Are You Considering a Doctoral Degree?" by Dr. Mary Clement and Dr. Laurie DeRosa.

References

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