

Three Year Strategic Plan Checklist: PhD

So, you are thinking about a PhD? Here are some steps you can take while at Wake Forest University School of Divinity to help prepare you for a PhD program:

YEAR 1

Fall/Spring

- **Begin taking foreign language classes that relate to your area of study** (i.e. Biblical languages: Greek, Hebrew, Arabic, Sanskrit; Modern Languages: French, German, Spanish; WFU sometimes offers summer courses) PhD programs will require reading competency in 2 relevant languages. To be a competitive applicant, you will need reading competency in 1 language before applying.
- **Take a Research and Advanced Writing Course.** Working towards a PhD will test your research and writing skills. No matter your skill set, it is important to continue to hone these skills to perfection.
- **Explore PhD Programs, study areas, and professors you would want to study with.** Start thinking about that one burning question you wish to research, write, teach, and devote 6+ years to. Consider: Who is doing similar research? Have you read the work of others with similar questions, in the same field? Does their institution have a Ph.D.? Consider that institutions with course work and examination requirements have the highest job placement rates in the U.S.
- **Discuss your aspirations with a Wake Divinity professor and your advisor.** Talking with professors in your academic area of interest is invaluable. Although we can provide a general checklist of things you need to do to prepare for entrance into a PhD program, your professors will have a better understanding of what will make your personal application the strongest!
- **Take the introductory course in your field of research interest.** This will likely be the prerequisite for advanced electives or a later Independent Study and can help you determine whether the discipline is actually the right fit for you.
- **Cultivate recommenders through your coursework.** If there is an opportunity to gear a research paper or class project toward some component of your research interest, do it! Use this as an opportunity to develop a relationship with your faculty by discussing your research interests and asking for methodological and bibliographic recommendations for your work in their course.

Summer I

- **Complete internship that gives you skills related to PhD work.** Your internship should give you experience related to your area of study. For instance, if you want to do a PhD in practical theology, then congregational ministry would be a great choice. Be strategic with your internships!
- **Read, write, and reflect.** Prior to the summer, talk with a professor and develop a reading list to further your academic growth. The summer is a great time to work on your research and writing skills.

YEAR 2

Fall/Spring

- **Take the GRE.** Taking the GRE in your second year will give you enough time to take a study course if your scores need improvement. Most programs will not consider students if their GRE scores are below the school's GRE threshold. Therefore, scoring well on the GRE is extremely important and should be considered a priority. *If you do not score well on your GRE, strongly consider taking a study course and invest in study materials to help improve your score.*
- **Take advanced topics course.** PhD programs will expect that you have delved deeply into a specific academic area. Strategically take electives that will allow you specific knowledge on persons, themes, time periods, etc.
- **Take a Methods or Theory based class.** The School of Divinity is a professional school, which means you will not always learn advanced methods and theory in the academic study of religion. Talk with

your academic advisor about classes that might be available for you throughout the University or in the Masters in Religion program.

- **Take a grant writing course.** (Check with your advisor when a class might be offered. They are not offered every semester). Getting a PhD and doing academic writing requires funding. Therefore, grant writing is a must! Learning this skill early on will help your tremendously down the road.
- **Take an Independent Study (IDS) with a professor in your area of interest.** Independent studies are available in your 4th – 6th semesters and are great opportunities to research specific questions or topics, which will allow you to begin to explore your question and see what energy you have around it, and independent studies give you an opportunity to develop a relationship with a professor, who may become a recommender when you apply.
- **Begin Researching PhD Programs.** By the end of your second year, you should have a good idea of the area you are interested in further studying. Start looking at different programs that align with your research goals, and specific scholars with whom you would like to do research. You should be asking yourself and your faculty mentor: who do I want to work with for the next 6+ years? It would be good to meet them, so think strategically with your mentor about how you might do this, perhaps through e-mail or at a conference.
- **Attend academic conferences.** You should try to submit substantial papers from classes to present at conferences. SECSOR is a regional conference that is very friendly to masters students. Even if you do not get your paper accepted, you should attend because at conferences you can network with various professors within your discipline. Even more, attending conferences, such as the Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion/Society for Biblical Literature is a great discernment tool. If you do not like the conferences, then PhD work is not for you! Limited funding is available for conference attendance through the Student Services Office.

Summer II

- **Begin working on your application materials.** Your application materials like your CV and personal statement are not documents you can create in a week. These documents can take months, many drafts, and various sets of eyes before they are ready for submission. You must craft a different personal statement for each program.
- **Strategically pick Internship setting and seek to gain Teaching Experience.** Can you do independent research for a professor? Be a teacher's assistant for a summer class? Take necessary language classes? Use the summer to round out your CV to make sure you have the strongest application possible.

YEAR 3

Fall/Spring

- **Finalize application materials and share multiple drafts of them with your faculty mentors.** Really.
- **Apply to programs.** Most programs begin accepting applications in the early fall and request all applications to be completed by January. It is important to see what the deadlines are for the specific program you are applying to. In this time, you will also want to work on your interview skills and your "elevator speech." Many programs will require you to interview before decisions are made.
- **Take the course CDS 712: Preparation for Advanced Study.** This workshop, led by a variety of WFUSD faculty each fall, offers a cohort and mentorship for students currently applying for doctoral and other advanced programs. Students will 1) narrow their choice of programs and potential advisers in their discipline; 2) refine a previous research project into a writing sample; 3) write and revise statements of purpose for each application; and 4) practice their interview skills. Prerequisites: a date to take the GRE if required by program, a completed research project in the student's discipline to workshop as a writing sample.

- **Weigh your options.** Hopefully by this time you are getting into a fully funded PhD program of your dreams. If not, consider back up options. If academic work is your burning desire, consider Th.M. and MTS programs. These are great opportunities to spend 1-2 more years improving your academic record.

Summer III

- **Move to your new city and take a summer language intensive to prepare for the language proficiency exam in your “second” language.** This is crucial to keep you on pace with your PhD program.

FACTORS TO CONSIDER WHEN SELECTING A GOOD PHD PROGRAM:

- Is it fully funded? Is there a stipend?
- Are the faculty well published?
- Does my research question connect with the faculty research?
- Does the institution have a good reputation?
- What training opportunities are there for teaching skills at this institution?
- Is the funding sufficient to ensure that you will not need to teach *too much*? Excessive adjunct teaching can add years to your program and detract from your exams and dissertation.
- What is the average time it takes PhD candidates from this institution to complete a PhD?
- What is the graduating job placement rating?

PHD JOB OUTLOOK:

Sadly, there are many well published and skilled professors without tenure track jobs. Do not get a PhD because you want to be a professor—statistics say you won’t have a job. According to Inside HigherED, “While many humanities disciplines are promoting nonacademic careers, the vast majority of those entering Ph.D. programs want academic careers, and that goal leads many of them -- if unable to obtain a tenure-track position -- to work off the tenure track, frequently in positions at relatively low pay and with minimal if any benefits. This also adds to job market competitiveness, as new PhDs are competing with not only their own cohort but also those from several years before who still haven't landed a good position.” Even more, 2014 figures suggest that only about 50% of humanities doctorate recipients have a job or Postdoc Commitments (% of doctorate recipients landing tenure track jobs is even lower), which is down 10% from 2009 (see link below for more detailed analysis of job market). **Get a PhD only if you feel that not getting a PhD would be untrue to yourself!**

<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2016/04/04/new-data-show-tightening-phd-job-market-across-disciplines>

WAKE FOREST UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF DIVINITY RESOURCES:

Although any professor—especially those in your area of interest—will be great to consult with about your interests in pursuing a PhD, consulting with Dr. Michelle Voss Roberts, Associate Dean for Academic Affairs, is highly recommended so that you can plan out an appropriate academic strategy based on WFUSD curriculum.

Current WFUSD Alumni Pursuing PhDs:

- Jessica Chapman, PhD Pastoral Care, Claremont School of Theology
- Andrew Gardner, PhD Church History, Florida State University
- Keith Menhinick, PhD Pastoral Care, Emory University
- Chelsea Yarborough, PhD Preaching and Homiletics, Vanderbilt University

For more resources, including alumni profiles, please check out the following webpage:

<https://divinity.wfu.edu/leadership-development/resources/doctoral-pathway/>