

The Road to a PhD: Ten Tips for Surviving and Thriving During Doctoral Studies

Germán A. Fortunato[®]

Servicio de Cirugía Cardiovascular, Hospital Italiano. Buenos Aires, Argentina

ABSTRACT

Starting a PhD is a transformative experience both personally and professionally. This article provides a practical guide with ten key tips for those who wish to embark on this academic challenge. Through a realistic and accessible approach, it addresses essential aspects such as the importance of gaining prior research experience, the need for planning and organization, choosing the right time to start, building a strong research team, and seeking funding.

Keywords: doctorate, PhD, research, university.

Camino al PhD: Diez consejos para sobrevivir y triunfar en el doctorado

RESUMEN

Iniciar un doctorado representa una experiencia transformadora tanto personal como profesional. Este artículo ofrece una guía práctica con diez consejos clave para quienes desean embarcarse en este desafío académico. A través de una mirada realista y accesible se abordan aspectos fundamentales como la importancia de adquirir experiencia previa en investigación, la necesidad de planificación y organización, la elección del momento adecuado, la construcción de un equipo de trabajo sólido y la búsqueda de financiamiento.

Palabras clave: doctorado, PhD, investigación, universidad.

INTRODUCTION

Embarking on the journey of pursuing a doctorate (commonly referred to as a PhD), regardless of the chosen discipline –whether Health Sciences, Biology, Education, or others– represents a unique and exciting challenge. However, this experience requires careful planning, sustained effort, perseverance, financial investment, time commitment, and, above all, a deep passion for research.

Before getting started, candidates often ask themselves many questions: Will I be able to do it? When is the right

time to begin? Who will accompany me on this journey? Which supervisors or mentors could I work with?

This article provides key recommendations for those wishing to embark on this transformative stage, one that can profoundly shape their professional careers. It is worth noting that many Argentine Nobel Prize laureates achieved this distinction after completing and defending their doctoral dissertations.¹⁻³

Presented below are ten recommendations for starting a PhD, organized according to different stages of the process.⁴⁻⁶

Corresponding author: german.fortunato@hospitalitaliano.org.ar, Fortunato GA.

Received: 05/26/2025 | 01/5/2026 | Published: 06/18/2026

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.51987/Rev.Hosp.Ital.B.Aires.v46i2.1276>

How to cite: Fortunato GA. The Road to a PhD: Ten Tips for Surviving and Thriving During Doctoral Studies. *Rev. Hosp. Ital. B.Aires.* 2026;46(2):e0001276

Phase 1: Preparation

First recommendation: Assess your personal availability

Choosing the right time to begin a PhD is essential. Family and work circumstances play a critical role, as a lack of support can turn the process into a highly frustrating experience. Simultaneously undertaking a PhD while completing a clinical fellowship, a medical residency, raising children, or working multiple jobs may dilute one's energy and compromise the continuity and success of the project.

Second recommendation: Seek funding

Although it is not always openly discussed, research can be expensive. Whenever possible, obtaining financial support –without compromising the ethical integrity of the work– can greatly facilitate the process.

Third recommendation: Develop a clear dissertation proposal

Once the preliminary decisions regarding personal feasibility and funding have been made, it is essential to select a topic of interest and prepare a dissertation proposal. This document provides a concise and structured presentation of the research project to be undertaken. Its purpose is to define the research problem, justify its relevance, establish clear objectives, and propose an appropriate methodology. It serves as a roadmap for the subsequent stages of doctoral work.

Fourth recommendation: Propose a feasible project

It is essential to be realistic about one's capabilities and limitations. A PhD program involves specific deadlines, as well as coursework, seminars, and examinations that must be completed. Choosing a project that is feasible and can be completed within the established timeframe is one of the keys to success.⁷

Phase 2: Development

Fifth recommendation: Start with simple projects

Before embarking on a PhD, it is essential to become familiar with scientific research.⁸ An excellent way to get started is by writing a case report.⁹⁻¹¹ Attempting to undertake a PhD without prior research experience is like trying to run before learning to walk. Short research projects help develop essential skills, including organization, scientific writing, abstract preparation, publication, journal selection, literature searching, and responding to reviewers, among others.

Sixth recommendation: Build a research team

Research is not a solitary endeavor. It is essential to assemble a team of collaborators who can contribute to data collection, statistical support, and methodological

guidance. In addition, having committed dissertation supervisors and mentors provides valuable ongoing feedback.¹²

Seventh recommendation: Develop skills progressively

A PhD requires the integration of multiple skills that are acquired gradually over time. Beginning a doctoral program without this foundation may lead to frustration, unnecessarily prolong timelines, and ultimately jeopardize the success of the project.

Efficient time management is crucial, particularly given that, in most countries, research activities are typically carried out alongside professional responsibilities.

Phase 3: Sustaining Progress and Completing the PhD

Eighth recommendation: Perseverance and patience

Mistakes are an inevitable part of the learning process. Recognizing that a doctoral dissertation will require far more effort than initially anticipated helps maintain realistic expectations. Making steady progress through small but consistent steps is more effective than attempting dramatic leaps forward.

Ninth recommendation: Progress toward an original research article

Once the initial stage has been completed, the next challenge is to develop an original research article. Such projects require a deeper understanding of research methodology, database management, statistical analysis, and teamwork. Although this process is longer and more demanding, it is also essential. It is also important to normalize manuscript rejection, as it is a common occurrence in academic publishing. Reviewers' comments should be viewed positively, as they can help improve the manuscript so that, once revised, it may be accepted by the same journal or prove valuable for submission to another journal.¹³⁻¹⁵

Tenth recommendation: Enjoy the process

Finally, beyond earning an additional academic degree, pursuing a PhD is a profoundly transformative experience. It fosters leadership skills, creates opportunities to build new professional relationships and friendships, strengthens resilience, and provides the satisfaction of achieving a goal that once seemed unattainable.

CONCLUSIONS

Embarking on a PhD is undoubtedly one of the most enriching personal and academic experiences an individual can undertake. However, it requires prior experience, organization, planning, time commitment, and sustained perseverance to become a rewarding and transformative journey.

Conflict of interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest related to the content of this article.

Funding: The author declares that this study received no funding from any external source.

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