The Ph.D. and Me: A Discernment Exercise for Students

Designed by Shively T.J. Smith and Matthew Wesley Williams

*This writing exercise asks students to answer a series of questions in five categories; 1) scholars & books, 2) methodologies, 3) graduate programs, 4) personal experiences, and 5) vocational goals. Each category will contain a brainstorm question for which they will have one minute to list responses. Each category will also have a follow-up reflective question for which they will have five minutes to provide a written response.*

*At the close of this exercise, participants will have explored important questions related to their goals. This exercise can be used as a tool for discernment as students clarify the influences and aspirations driving their pursuit of an advanced degree. These questions are also designed to help participants generate content that may be used to craft a strong personal statement for an application to graduate programs.*

Category 1: Scholars & Books

Brainstorm: List the scholars and books that have most influenced the questions that are driving your interest in pursuing a Ph.D.

Reflection: What are your primary research questions? How have each of these thinkers and texts informed those questions?

Category 2: Methodologies

Brainstorm: List the fields and disciplines in which the abovementioned thinkers and texts are located.

Reflection: What theoretical methods do they employ and in what ways do you find them useful for your research interests?

Category 3: Graduate Programs (3a: Prospective Students/ 3b: Doctoral Students)

3a. Brainstorm: List the names of graduate programs to which you are considering applying. In each case list at least one scholar in that program with whom you intend to work.

3b. Brainstorm: List the names of potential members of your dissertation committee

3a. Reflection: Discuss the research interests of the scholar(s) with whom you would work in each program. In what way does their research align your own interests and questions?

3b. Reflection: Discuss the research of the potential members of your committee. In what ways might their research contribute your own research agenda and interests?

Category 4: Personal Experiences

Brainstorm: List the names of people, places, organizations, and institutions that have shaped you intellectually

Reflection: Pick one from the list and discuss its/ their influence on your personal and intellectual formation

Category 5: Vocational Goals

Brainstorm: Rank in order,1-5, the major professional activities and goals you feel called to undertake and achieve.

Reflection: What contribution would that activity or accomplishment make to your chosen field or discipline?

------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

The following questions are intended to help you consider what your experience of this exercise suggests in terms of your areas of strength and opportunities for research and learning as you prepare to apply to graduate programs. They may also be useful to begin dialogue with trusted advisers in the field about your preparation for graduate study.

* “How was this experience for you?”
* “What did you discover during this exercise?”
* “Were there any surprises?”
* “What did your responses suggest about who you are and what you bring to the academic enterprise?”
* “Where were you most confident in your responses?”
* “Where were you least confident?”