Spotlight on Doctoral Education #3

Center for Innovation and Research in Graduate Education

Findings from Social Science PhDs—Five+ Years Out National Survey
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Does Time-to-Degree Matter?

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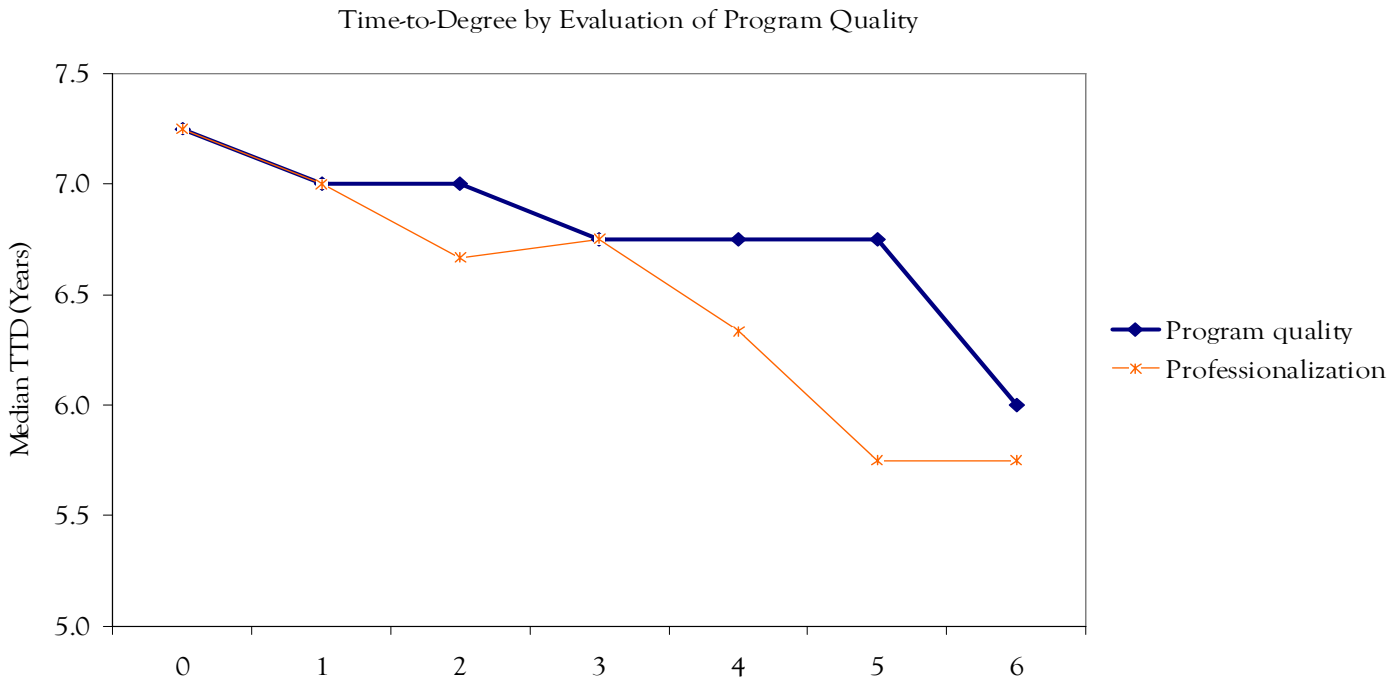

Source: CIRGE, *Social Science PhDs-Five+ Years Out*

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Time-to-degree continues to be a common concern related to PhD program quality (Lovitts, 2001; Nerad, 2004). Although time-to-degree is frequently tracked and documented, much less attention has been given to the factors affecting time-to-degree and to the influence of time-to-degree on career outcomes. Basic socio-demographic information is collected by the U.S. Survey of Earned Doctorates (SED), but the SED does not include important PhD program evaluation measures that may affect time-to-degree, nor does it include detailed career path information that may be affected by time-to-degree.[1] In this paper, we use data from the study *Social Science PhDs–Five+ Years Out* to evaluate the association between time-to-degree and participant characteristics, program attributes, career outcomes, and family situation among PhDs in six social science fields: anthropology, communication, geography, history, political science, and sociology. In particular, we (1) describe variations in time-to-degree by field of study, master's degree status, and participant characteristics; (2) evaluate the association between time-to-degree and respondents' evaluations of their PhD program; (3) evaluate the association between time-to-degree and first job and job at current employment/time of the survey; and (4) evaluate the influence of family and relationships on time-to-degree. Additionally, because studies suggest that there are important differences in men's and women's experiences of graduate school and career paths in general, gender will be treated as a moderating factor in each of the analyses described below (Fox, 2001; Long, 2001; Reskin, 1976; Shauman & Xie, 2003; Smith-Doerr, 2004).

Concerns about the length of time it takes to complete one's PhD are not new, but have become more urgent because of evidence suggesting increases in time-to-degree in the 1970s and 1980s. A report by the U.S. National Research Council in 1988 found that time-to-degree had increased by about 30% over the prior 20 years; Bowen and Rudenstine (1992) countered that actual increases are probably closer to 10% (p. 115). It is well established that time-to-degree varies substantially across disciplines with social sciences and humanities having the longest time-to-degree (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Nerad & Cerny, 1991). Nevertheless, comparable increases occurred across the spectrum of academic disciplines (Thurgood, Gollady, & Hill, 2006). Hoffer and Welch (2006) present SED data covering a 25 year period (1978 to 2003) that demonstrate increases in *registered* time-to-degree (i.e., the actual time registered in one's graduate program), and also document the differences between the social sciences (median time 7.8 years) relative to the physical sciences, engineering, and life sciences (median times 6.8 to 6.9 years).

A comprehensive investigation within the University of California system (then 9 campuses) by Nerad (1991) also documented increases in time-to-degree, from a median of 5.4 years in 1968, to 6.4 years in 1978, to 6.7 years in 1988. That study identified differences in *graduate* time-to-degree (i.e., the time between registering in any graduate program and PhD award) by master's degree status, finding that students who did not obtain a master's degree completed their program about one year faster than students who obtained a master's degree from their PhD awarding institution (in the course of the doctoral studies). These differences are important to note given that 91% of social science PhDs typically obtain a master's degree, compared to only about two-thirds of life and physical science PhDs (Hoffer, Hess, Welch, & Willams, 2007, p. 25).

METHODS

Data collected for the national survey *Social Science PhDs–Five+ Years Out* provide a unique opportunity to examine the associations between time-to-degree and variables that might affect time-to-degree such as quality of mentoring

[1]Upon receiving their degree, recipients of a U.S. PhD fill out the Survey of Earned Doctorates, which is sponsored by several agencies of the United States federal government, including the National Science Foundation, the National Institutes of Health, the U.S. Department of Education, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration.

during graduate school, supportiveness of the doctoral program, and the family situation of the doctoral student. It also includes variables that allow examination of the association of time-to-degree with career outcomes such as type of first job and career satisfaction. Survey respondents were doctorate holders who earned their degrees between July 1, 1995 and June 30, 1999 from 65 U.S. academic institutions in one of six social science fields: anthropology, communication, geography, history, political science, or sociology. Data collection, primarily via a web-based questionnaire, began in April, 2005 and closed in February, 2006. Contact information was obtained for 6,670 doctoral recipients and 3,025 responded, yielding a study-wide response rate of 45%. The majority of respondents completed the web-based survey (n=2,695), while an additional 330 respondents mailed in a shorter, pencil and paper self-administered questionnaire.

Time-to-degree measure. Month and year of entry into the PhD program and month and year of PhD award were supplied by the respondent, and the difference was calculated as the time-to-degree.[2]

Program evaluation measures. Evaluation of the quality of the program was measured with three scales: (1) a 12 item inventory captured the quality of the program; (2) ten items captured the quality of training in specific skills; (3) six items captured satisfaction with one's committee chair.

Program quality inventory. Items were scored excellent, adequate, or poor. A principal components analysis reduced the 12 items to two factors consisting of 6 items each, a *program quality factor* (clear program requirements, feedback on student progress, preparation for qualifying exam, support/guidance during dissertation writing, academic rigor, and overall program quality) and a *professionalization factor* (financial support, socializing students into an academic environment, having a diverse student population, encouraging students to take initiative in shaping academic activities, academic career preparation, and non-academic career preparation).[3] The number of items cited as "excellent" were summed to produce a score for each factor.

Quality of skills training. Ten items evaluated quality of training received in specific skills (excellent, adequate, poor). A principal components analysis reduced these items to three distinct themes: *managing projects* (3-items: writing proposals for funding, writing/publishing reports and articles, and managing people/budgets), *communication and teamwork* (4-items: working collaboratively, working in an interdisciplinary context, working with people of diverse social backgrounds, and presentation skills) and *core PhD skills* (3-items: analyzing/synthesizing data, thinking critically, and research design). Again, the number of items cited as "excellent" was summed for each of the three factors.

Satisfaction with dissertation committee chair. Six items measured satisfaction with one's committee chair (very satisfied, somewhat satisfied, somewhat unsatisfied, very unsatisfied) in terms of mentoring in developing the dissertation topic, completing the PhD, publishing, support for the job search, support of career decisions, and the overall quality of mentoring. In addition to the individual items, a summary satisfaction measure was created as the sum of the number of items in which the respondent was "very satisfied."

Career outcomes measures. Job satisfaction was measured with 12 items using a 4-point scale (very satisfied, somewhat satisfied, somewhat dissatisfied, very dissatisfied). Factor analysis revealed four job satisfaction themes: *satisfaction with the work itself* (9-items: intellectual challenge, career growth opportunities, autonomy, responsibility, contribution to society, use of doctoral training, prestige of organization/job, recognition for work, good fit with abilities and interests), *material resources* (3-items: job

[2]The exact wording for the survey item was: "When did you start your PhD program? For this survey, "your PhD program" includes master's degree work that you completed in the same program in the course of completing your PhD." There is some ambiguity here because some PhD programs require students to first enroll as master's students; students are then admitted into the PhD program in a separate process.

[3]Inclusion of financial support in the professionalization factor might reflect the important role of teaching and research assistant positions in the professional socialization of doctoral students.

security/stability, salary, availability of resources), *work-life integration* (3-items: balance between work/life, support/tolerance for all types of people, flexibility of work), and *work-family balance* (3-items: opportunities for spouse/partner, proximity to extended family, geographic location).

Family situation. Marital status at time of PhD completion (single, separated-divorced-widowed, in a committed relationship) and whether or not the participant had any children living with them (at least 50% of the time) were used to measure family situation.

Respondent characteristics. Analyses also include demographic indicators (gender, age at PhD program entry, and race), and reasons to pursue a PhD.

Data analysis. Time-to-degree ("TTD") was operationalized as the time from entry into one's PhD program to the time of degree award. Consequently, TTD was affected by one's master's degree status; individuals who entered their program with a master's degree from another institution typically had shorter TTD than someone who earned their master's degree during their PhD studies. Respondents were classified as having: no master's degree, a master's degree in the same field as the PhD but from a different institution, a master's degree in the same field and from the same institution as the PhD, a master's degree in a different field but from the same institution, a master's degree in a different field from a different institution, or having no information regarding a master's degree.

We also recognize variations in TTD inherent to the different fields of study. Therefore, the regression analyses using time-to-degree as the dependent variable are adjusted for master's degree status and field of study (i.e., these variables are included in regression models).

In the results below, the impact of program quality, quality of training in specific skills, and family variables on time-to-degree are based on regression analyses, where time-to-degree is the dependent variable. The primary outcome of interest, time-to-degree, was log transformed in order to facilitate the use of ordinary least squares regression techniques. The transformation resulted in a normal distribution of the dependent variable (log transformed time-to-degree). However, all descriptive TTD values presented are actual values (i.e., not log transformed) even though the transformed values were used in regression analyses.

RESULTS

Results are based on 3,000 survey respondents for whom time-to-degree could be ascertained. The sample was 51% female, 87% white, and 49% were 25 years of age or younger, 27% ages 26-29, and 24% 30 years of age or older at the start of their program. With 27% of respondents, history PhDs represented the largest proportion, followed by political scientists (23%), while geography had the smallest proportion, accounting for only 5% of the sample (Table 1).

Table 1. Sample Characteristics (n=3000)

Female	51%
Age at PhD entry	
< 25 years	49%
25 – 29 years	27%
≥ 30 years	24%
Race	
Amer/Alaskan Native	1.2%
Asian	3.5%
Black	2.7%
Hispanic	2.6%
Native Hawaiian/PI	0.8%
White	73.5%
Not specified	15.6%
Field of Study	
Anthropology	14.2%
Communication	11.4%
Geography	5.4%
History	27.8%
Political Science	23.1%
Sociology	18.1%
Source: CIRGE, *Social Science PhDs–Five+ Years Out*	

Table 2 presents the distribution of respondents by master's degree status and field of study. More than half (53.2%) of respondents received their master's degree in the same field and from the same institution that granted their doctoral degree; the median time-to-degree for

this subgroup was 6.9 years. In contrast, 21.9% of respondents entered their doctoral program with a master's degree in the same field but from a different institution, and completed their doctoral studies in a median 6.0 years. Individuals who reported not having a master's degree reported the longest median time-to-degree (7.0 years), but represent only 8.3% of respondents. Time-to-degree also varied considerably by discipline. Communication studies and geography PhDs reported shorter median time-to-degree (5.2 and 5.8 years, respectively) while anthropology PhDs reported the longest (median 7.8). Because of these differences, all subsequent analyses adjusted for both field of study and master's degree status.

Although there were no significant differences by age or race, regression analyses indicate that women took slightly longer to complete their doctoral programs than men (p=.01). Men and women reported similar median time-to-degree (6.8 years), but a closer look at the distribution of time-to-degree by quartiles reveals that slightly more women are represented in the longest

Table 2. Master's Degree Status by Time to Degree and Percent of Respondents by Field of Study

Master's degree status at time of survey	Median TTD (Years)	All		Anthro	Comm	Geog	History	Poli Sci	Soc
Does not have master's degree	7.0	8.3%		10.1%	3.2%	5.5%	7.8%	14.0%	4.8%
Same field / same institution	6.9	53.2%		56.7%	28.3%	34.2%	56.8%	57.6%	61.5%
Same field / different institution	6.0	21.9%		16.6%	43.3%	30.1%	22.2%	17.1%	15.2%
Different field / same institution	6.3	4.0%		3.8%	4.1%	8.9%	2.5%	3.1%	6.0%
Different field / different institution	6.8	8.6%		9.5%	16.2%	19.2%	5.5%	4.7%	9.6%
Not specified / missing	6.8	3.9%		3.3%	4.8%	2.1%	5.2%	3.5%	2.9%
Total n*	6.8	2675		367	314	146	748	620	480

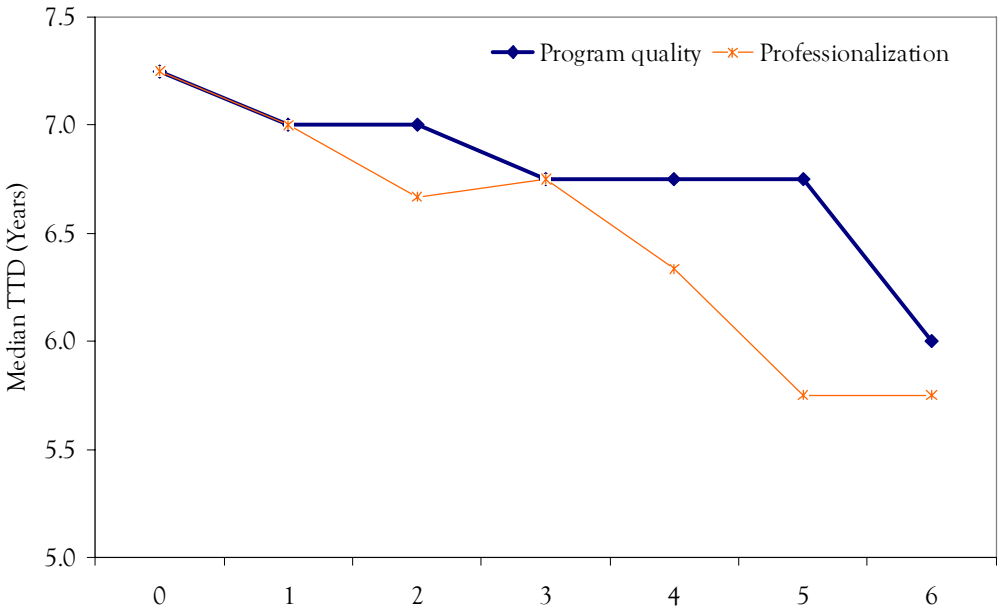
*An additional 325 respondents (11% of 3000) completed a brief survey and were not asked about their master's degree, for this group median time to degree was 6.9 years. Source: CIRGE, *Social Science PhDs–Five+ Years Out*

quartile (28% vs. 23% for males), while only 22% of women fall into the fastest quartile compared to 26% of men. Nevertheless, this modest statistical difference by gender in time-to-degree is attenuated when controlling for family situation, as discussed below. (See the Appendix for detailed table of median TTD by gender, field, and master's status.)

There were differences in time-to-degree with regard to respondents' reasons for pursuing a PhD; individuals motivated by an "intense interest in their field" reported somewhat longer TTD (median 6.8 vs. 6.6 years, p = .008), while those who said the PhD was "a necessary credential for their desired job" took slightly less time to earn their degree (p=.001). Nevertheless, the median for those endorsing and not endorsing this reason for pursuing the PhD was the same (6.8 years). Again, a closer look at the distribution of time-to-degree reveals a higher proportion of those motivated to get a necessary credential in the fastest quartile and a higher proportion of those who did not endorse this reason in the slowest quartile.

Program evaluation. Time-to-degree was significantly associated with the number of program quality and professionalization attributes rated "excellent" (maximum of 6 items; $p < 0.001$, both measures). For example, respondents identifying only one "excellent" program quality or professionalization attribute reported median TTD of 7.0 years, compared to median TTD of 6.8 and 5.8 years, respectively, for those who cited 5 items as "excellent" on program quality and professionalization (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Time-to-Degree by Evaluation of Program Quality: Number of attributes rated as "excellent" among program quality and professionalization factors



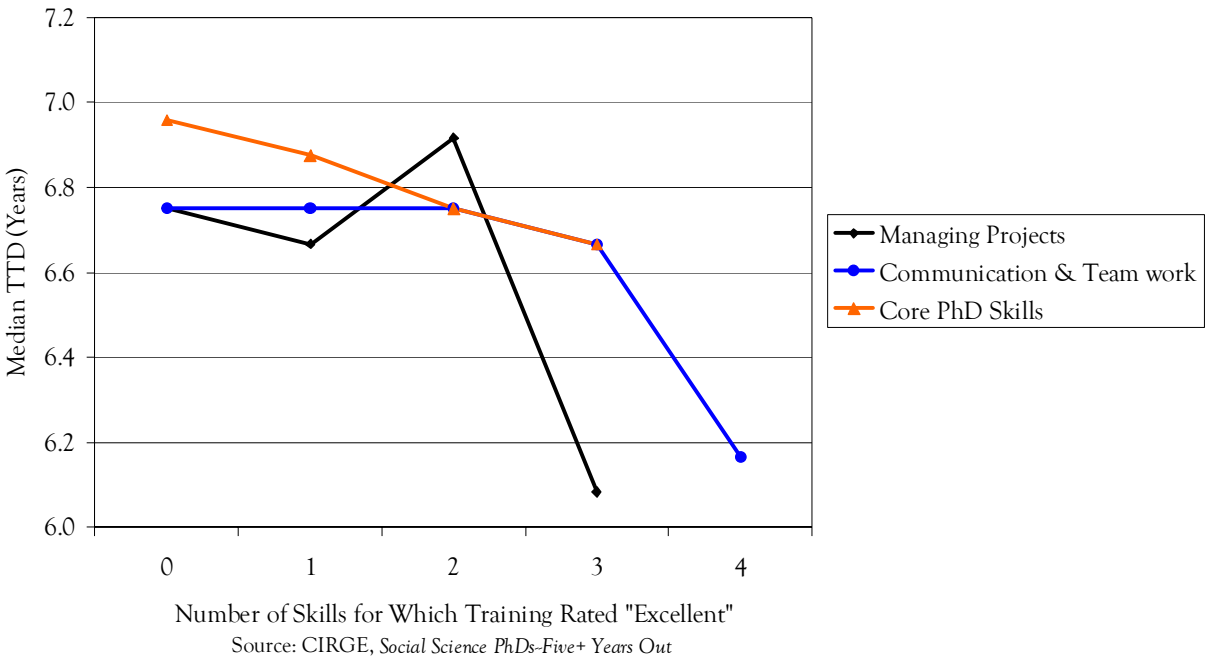
Source: CIRGE, *Social Science PhDs-Five+ Years Out*

Quality of training was also significantly associated with TTD. Again, the greater number of "excellent" ratings with regard to training for managing projects, communication and team work, and core PhD skills was correlated with shorter TTD ($p = .012$, $p = .011$, and $p = .002$, respectively). Figure 2 presents the trends in TTD relative to ratings for each of the quality of training measures.

Figure 3 displays TTD relative to satisfaction with one's dissertation chair. Specifically, respondents who were "very satisfied" with the support received from their chairperson had significantly shorter TTD, compared to respondents who were "somewhat satisfied, somewhat unsatisfied, or very unsatisfied." For example, respondents who were "very satisfied" with support developing their topic reported median TTD of 6.8 years, compared to less satisfied individuals (median TTD = 7.2 years, $p < .001$). For each item assessed, as well as overall satisfaction, significant differences were detected at the $p < .001$ level.

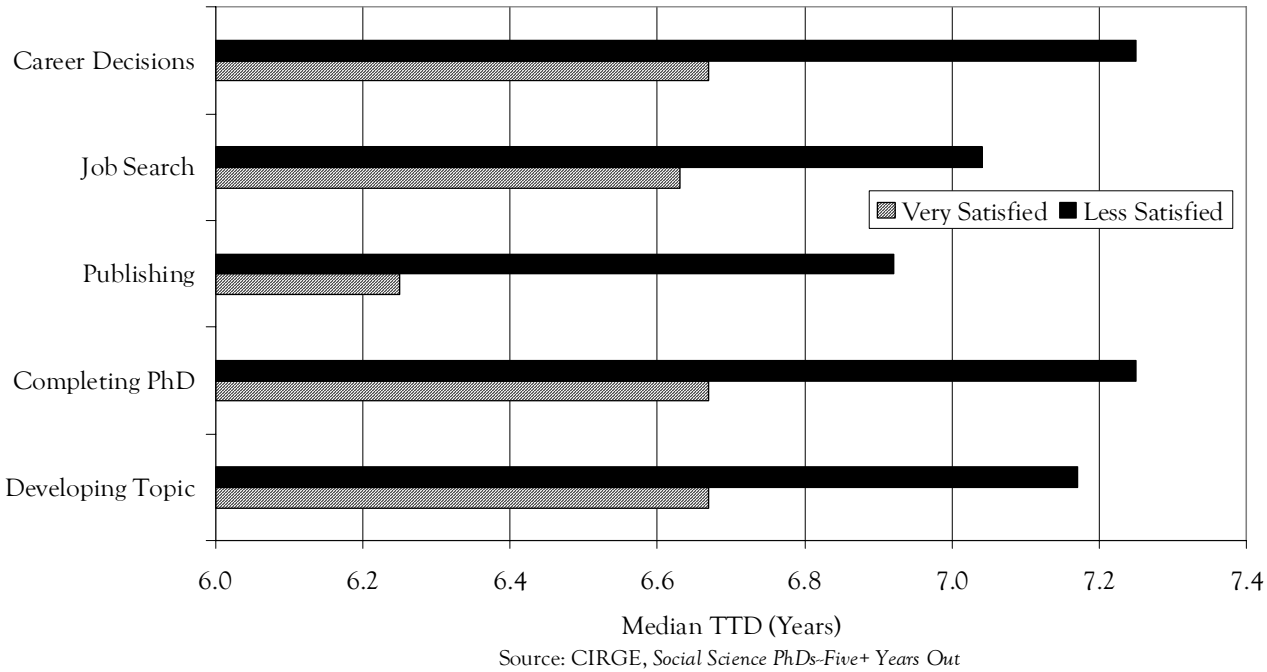
Career goals and career path. Respondents who had a career goal (at the end of PhD studies) to obtain a ladder faculty position reported significantly shorter TTD (median 6.75 years) relative to individuals with goals of other academic positions (median 7.13 years, $p < 0.001$), jobs in the business, government, or non-profit (BGN) sector (median 6.75 years, $p < .022$), or those without stated goals (median 7.4 years, $p = .023$). Those who held a ladder faculty position at *first* job completed their programs significantly faster (median 6.5 years) than individuals who took academic other (median 7.5 years, $p < .001$) or BGN positions (median 6.8 years $p = .018$), but not significantly shorter than those in non-tenure track positions (median 6.8, $p = .207$). However, those in ladder faculty positions at *most recent* job reported shorter TTD (median 6.67 years) relative to those in non-tenure-track jobs (median 7.7 years, $p < .001$), academic other jobs (median 7.5 years, $p < .001$), and BGN jobs (median 6.8 years, $p = .001$).

Figure 2. Time-to-Degree by Evaluation of Program Quality: Number of attributes rated "excellent" among quality of training factors



Source: CIRGE, *Social Science PhDs-Five+ Years Out*

Figure 3. Median TTD by Satisfaction with Aspects of Dissertation Chair's Mentoring



Source: CIRGE, *Social Science PhDs-Five+ Years Out*

Family situation. Respondents who were single at time of PhD award reported significantly shorter TTD (median 6.75 years) compared to those who were separated-divorced-widowed (median 7.25 years, $p < .001$) or married-in a committed relationship (median 7.25 years, $p = .05$). Being single at PhD award was associated with shorter time-to-degree for both men and women, while having children at the time of PhD award was significantly associated with longer TTD compared to those without children (median 7.25 vs. 6.75, respectively, $p < .001$). Notably, the association between having children at PhD award with longer time-to-degree was true for both men and women. When controlling for family situation at PhD award, the association between gender and time-to-degree (noted earlier in this paper) is no longer statistically significant.

DISCUSSION

Time-to-degree is associated with several factors, including measures of PhD program quality, quality of mentoring by the dissertation chair, quality of skills training, and career outcomes. These findings consistently support the correlation between shorter TTD and higher quality of training and mentoring. Respondents who rated academic and non-academic aspects of their programs as "excellent" had shorter TTD. Particularly noteworthy is the association of shorter time-to-degree with higher ratings of quality of training in the so-called "professional" skills needed for project management, communication and teamwork. This suggests that incorporating effective professional skills training into PhD programs need not lengthen TTD. In addition, all measures of satisfaction with mentoring by the dissertation chair indicate that greater satisfaction is associated with shorter TTD.

Respondents who completed their degrees more quickly were more likely to obtain ladder faculty positions. These findings were consistent with respondent goals at time of PhD completion; shorter TTD was reported by individuals who intended (at the time of the PhD award) to attain a ladder faculty position.

Notably, the association of marital and family status with TTD was similar for men and women. Single men and women both reported shorter TTD; both men and women reported longer TTD if they had children living with them at the time of earning the PhD. There was a slight tendency for women to report longer TTD, but these differences were not significant after further adjustment for measures of family situation, specifically marital status and having any children at PhD award. Family and marital status are clearly modifying variables, but they seem to influence TTD for men and women similarly.

There were no significant differences in TTD with regard to race/ethnicity.

The primary limitation of this study is that program evaluations rely on retrospective information that may be subject to bias due to one's career experience. Despite the consistent and robust associations between shorter time-to-degree and positive evaluations of program elements, skills training, and mentoring, the direction of causality remains unclear. Similarly, shorter time-to-degree is clearly associated with becoming a professor, but the meaning of this is open to debate. Further, a comprehensive, overall program evaluation needs to include input from students who left the program before earning the PhD degree. Completion rates (at 10 years after beginning PhD studies) in social science PhD programs are estimated to be around 50% to 60% (Council of Graduate Schools, n.d.; Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992), which means that the experiences of half or nearly half of those who begin social science PhD programs are not represented in a sample of completers.

CONCLUDING REMARKS:
THE MEANING OF TIME-TO-DEGREE AS A MEASURE OF PROGRAM QUALITY

This paper has examined the relationship between individual TTD and ratings of program quality. Analysis of *SS5* data show that the quality of support for students and professionalization activities, the quality of skills training, and the quality of mentorship offered by dissertation advisors are clearly associated with TTD. In each of these aspects, shorter TTD is associated with higher graduate-perceived quality. This has practical implications for PhD programs: the route to shorter TTD runs through

improving the quality of support and attention offered to students not only in learning to do research and through mentoring by the dissertation chair, but also in program transparency, guidance to complete the PhD, career preparation, and training in professional skills such as teamwork, communication, and management.

Insofar as a program's average or median TTD reflects the care and attention to guidance, career preparation, and skills training offered to students by PhD programs, we believe it can be interpreted as one measure of program quality, which, however, should never be considered in isolation. In addition, interpreting TTD on its own as a program quality measure is limited. Contributions to knowledge occur in various ways and in various, not always predictable, lengths of time. Students with more ambitious projects and programs that support riskier endeavors might have longer average TTD, but should not be discouraged simply because of this. In the end we need a system which has room for supporting bold and risky research endeavors to ensure a future of lively, engaged, creative and innovative science. In times of accountability and the increasing importance of efficiency measures, we need to be careful to distinguish between what TTD can tell us about program quality and the use of TTD as a measure of efficiency. Pressure to shorten TTD in order to achieve "efficiency" could, in the absence of other indicators of PhD program success, tend to inhibit creativity, innovation, and risk-taking in science.

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Appendix. Median Time-to-Degree (n) by Gender and Master's Degree Status*

Master's degree status at time of survey		All	Anthro	Comm	Geog	History	Poli Sci	Soc
Does not have master's degree	M	6.5 (120)	7.7 (15)	5.2 (4)	5.5 (6)	6.9 (28)	7.4 (57)	6.7 (10)
	W	7.3 (100)	9.1 (22)	5.7 (6)	5.5 (2)	6.9 (29)	7.4 (28)	6.7 (13)
Same field / same institution	M	6.8 (701)	7.8 (82)	5.7 (31)	5.7 (32)	7.2 (233)	6.7 (218)	6.9 (105)
	W	7.0 (689)	7.7 (123)	5.7 (55)	5.9 (16)	7.5 (182)	6.5 (130)	6.7 (183)
Same field / different institution	M	6.0 (310)	7.3 (26)	4.6 (71)	5.7 (24)	6.7 (93)	6.7 (72)	6.5 (24)
	W	6.0 (259)	8.2 (32)	4.8 (59)	5.7 (18)	6.7 (71)	6.5 (32)	6.1 (47)
Different field / same institution	M	6.2 (53)	7.0 (8)	4.3 (6)	5.9 (9)	6.7 (11)	6.0 (11)	6.9 (8)
	W	6.3 (51)	7.2 (6)	6.3 (7)	5.0 (4)	7.9 (7)	5.9 (7)	6.5 (20)
Different field / different institution	M	6.3 (115)	7.3 (14)	5.2 (19)	5.9 (19)	7.0 (27)	6.7 (19)	6.2 (17)
	W	6.8 (112)	8.2 (21)	5.5 (30)	6.7 (8)	7.3 (14)	7.1 (11)	6.7 (28)
Not specified / missing	M	6.7 (44)	7.9 (3)	7.7 (3)	7.7 (1)	6.7 (20)	6.2 (11)	5.7 (6)
	W	6.6 (61)	7.7 (9)	6.0 (12)	4.8 (2)	7.5 (20)	6.3 (11)	6.7 (7)
Total n**	M	1343	148	134	91	412	388	170
	W	1272	213	169	50	323	219	298

*In many categories, n's are too small to draw conclusions. **An additional 325 respondents (11% of 3000) completed a brief survey and were not asked about their master's degree, for this group median time-to-degree was 6.9 years. Source: CIRGE, *Social Science PhDs–Five+ Years Out*