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Surviving the First Year

Students from the doctoral program’s inaugural cohort put the Ph.D. in perspective.

By Melisande J. McCrae, Ph.D.

With the first year of the doctoral program behind them, students in the first cohort to begin the Ph.D. in Financial and Retirement Planning may feel a bit weary at the moment; but they are none the worse for wear and all the more determined to finish what they started. “I was expecting that this would be difficult, but I did not know just how difficult. I found that it was extremely challenging in the beginning but just as when preparing to run long distances, you have to take one step at a time, build up your endurance and design a program that will get you to the objective,” said Jim Petersen, a student in the inaugural cohort who is also the principal and district advisor for First Command Financial Services.

A shared vision of New York Life and The American College, the doctoral program is as unique as it is relevant. As the only degree of its kind to emphasize issues related to retirement planning, students such as Roderick Barnes, a financial advisor with Ameriprise, recognize an extraordinary opportunity when they see one. “There are over ten thousand baby boomers retiring every day. I plan to play a role in leading some of the advisors who will be assisting the thousands of people who are planning for a successful retirement, and I plan to play a role in educating my local investment community,” Barnes said.

The Ph.D. in Financial and Retirement Planning requires master’s and doctoral-level coursework in financial and retirement planning as well as foundational and advanced courses in research and quantitative analysis. A comprehensive exam that follows the coursework phase qualifies those students with passing scores to complete the final research requirement known as the doctoral dissertation. To provide maximum flexibility for students who work full-time, courses are offered in the evening and primarily online via instructor-led webinars. Online instruction is enhanced with required residencies at The American College during crucial periods in the program. Time to program completion will depend on the academic requirements set for individual students.

Currently, 33 students across three cohorts are enrolled in the program. Although a respectable number, it reflects 39 percent student attrition since the start of the program. Why do some students stay in the program while others choose to leave? Guy Baker, a member of the first cohort offers his theory: “They dropped out, I am sure, because they saw the demands on their time being much more than they anticipated or were prepared to commit. It is definitely the most rigorous program I have ever attempted.” So how is Baker, co-managing director at Insight Wealth Solutions, different? “I am committed to this program for several reasons: First, it has always been one of my goals to earn a Ph.D. Second, I am really enjoying the work and the information. I find it stimulating and valuable. Why would I want to quit? It is one of the best things I have ever done in my career. Besides, the people are great and the professors are outstanding. It is a marvelous experience for me.”
The program’s faculty are equally impressed with the ease in which students move back and forth between practice and theory. “As practitioners, students are motivated to learn and often comment about the relevance of their coursework to their practices. At the same time, they provide new views and perspectives from the field, which can help guide future research by pointing out when academics have missed a critical aspect of how things work in practice. . . .” said Wade Pfau, Ph.D., CFA, faculty director of the doctoral program.

It turns out that every member of the inaugural cohort holds at least one professional designation from The American College of Financial Services as well as a graduate degree from its Master of Science in Financial Services. Given this common characteristic, one might think that the Ph.D. in Financial and Retirement Planning is the next logical step for a financial advisor. This isn’t necessarily the case according to Jim Petersen. “The Ph.D. program is not just an opportunity to put some new letters on the signature block of an e-mail but a dedication to higher learning like most people have not had to do, likely ever in their academic careers,” he said.

Sterling Raskie, a financial planner with Blankenship Financial Planning and fellow cohort member, echoes Petersen’s point: “Do it because you want to learn and add to the knowledge and literature in financial planning. Don’t do it for the money, letters or as a marketing tool for your business.”

So what’s the payoff for a terminal degree in financial and retirement planning? The career trajectory for those who possess the rare amalgam of professional and academic prowess in financial and retirement planning isn’t entirely clear. Consequently, members of the inaugural cohort and those who have since joined them are true pioneers—despite the fact that the Bureau of Labor Statistics projects faster-than-average employment growth for financial advisors through 2022.

With the first group of Ph.D. students expected to graduate in 2017 at the earliest, the reality that financial planning is a fledgling academic discipline cannot be overstated. Here are a few factors to consider: The American College’s Ph.D. program is one of only six financial planning doctoral programs in existence. Of the six, it is one of two part-time doctoral programs for working adults. Moreover, the Ph.D. in Financial and Retirement Planning is further distinguished as the only doctorate with an emphasis on retirement.

Undoubtedly, venturing into unmapped terrain presents its own challenges. Yet, having a little faith in the foresight of New York Life and The American College seems warranted when the overarching rationale for the Ph.D. program is taken into account. In essence, those who conceived of the doctoral program were acutely aware of two realities: An increasingly sophisticated body of knowledge is needed to keep pace with the growing complexities of retirement planning; and the future of the financial planning profession rests largely on its intellectual and social capacity to perpetuate itself through rigorous research and advanced education.

Looking ahead, it is quite likely that career options in research, teaching, consulting and thought leadership will be well within the grasp of graduates with the Ph.D. in Financial and Retirement Planning. In preparation for these important roles, students can supplement formal coursework by working on projects associated with the Centers of Excellence at The American College: a suite of corporate-sponsored initiatives designed to address an array of needs in the financial services industry. The New York Life Center for Retirement Income (NYLCRI) is one of those centers. According to Dave Littell, JD, ChFC®, CFP®, center director, “Ph.D. students can work with the NYLCRI in a number of ways. We can help students identify important issues to research and connect them with research partners. We can publish their work at our center and include their insights as part of our video library. They can also help further Center research. For example, a current student is helping with a joint project with the Ethics Center around ethical concerns in retirement planning.”

As an industry-focused institution, The American College is uniquely positioned to provide a robust learning environment for future scholars. At the beginning of this article, doctoral student Jim Petersen described the Ph.D. program as akin to running long distances. If one accepts his analogy, it’s imperative that these forerunners of advanced study in financial and retirement planning stay the course.

“Do it because you want to learn and add to the knowledge and literature in financial planning.”