

Meira Levinson's Advice to Prospective Harvard PhD in Education Applicants October 2017

Thank you for your interest in applying to Harvard's PhD in Education! We benefit enormously from the diverse array of prospective students who consider applying and coming to Harvard every year. I am really glad that you're considering applying, and want to encourage you to follow through.

For both practical and principled reasons, I don't meet (in person or on the phone) with prospective students prior to admission, nor do I read draft statements of purpose or other materials outside the normal admissions process. On the practical front, I tend to get 30-50 inquiries a year, and I just can't make time to respond substantively to prospective applicants while also giving my current students the time and attention they deserve. On the principled front, I believe strongly in trying to level the playing field. Only some applicants to Harvard have the social and cultural capital to know that it can be useful to contact prospective professors during the admissions process, and to do so effectively. I don't want to reinforce/exacerbate inequities in the admissions process by providing advice to a subset of applicants, and in particular those of you who know to contact me in the first place.

I have therefore instead recorded these thoughts/pieces of advice for those of you considering applying for a PhD in Education at Harvard. I hope you find them helpful.

Am I taking students this coming year?

Yes, I am always enthusiastic about taking on new doctoral students. This is true even if I am on sabbatical, as leaves are (relatively) short and relationships with doctoral students are (relatively) long.

It is important to understand, however, that individual faculty in the Harvard PhD in Education do not admit/accept students. Rather, we admit candidates as an entire faculty (represented by the admissions committee). This is important for two reasons. First, we have way more faculty than we have new PhD slots, and my colleagues also generally look forward to taking on new students. On balance, therefore, I am unlikely to get a new doctoral advisee in any particular year. Second, you should think of the audience for your application as being the whole faculty, not just me (and other prospective advisors). You do need to excite at least one prospective advisor. We accept students only if there is one (or more) faculty member who is enthusiastic about taking them on. But at the same time, you also need to excite the faculty as a whole. Advisors retire, get ill, move institutions, get pulled into new roles, etc. When we admit you, we commit ourselves to you as a school, and commit that even if (heaven forbid) your advisor gets hit by a bus tomorrow, you will still receive the support and training you need to do great work in education. So make sure you really want to be at Harvard, not just working with me, and make sure you can explain to the faculty as a whole, not just to me, what work you want to do, why it's important, and why you're well positioned to do it.

What I look for in applications

All of my advice is subjective, but this section is idiosyncratic as well. Having served on the doctoral admissions committee a couple of times in the past, I can say with absolute conviction

that professors read admissions folders in a variety of ways, with a range of implicit and explicit criteria in mind. I am telling you here what *I* look for when I read an application—in particular, when I read a personal statement/statement of purpose—but you should know in no uncertain terms that this is not what every reader—nor even every reader at Harvard—looks for in a personal statement. Furthermore, this section is idiosyncratic because Harvard Graduate School of Education is a very particular kind of place. It’s wonderful, but (and) it has a distinct culture. My advice applies solely to what *I* look for doing admissions *at HGSE*. Please do not unduly generalize for other institutions: neither other education schools nor other parts of Harvard.

I am a political theorist by training, which means that I look for clear, cogent, organized arguments. I am also a teacher by vocation, which means I look for practical wisdom about (some subset or combination of) teaching, learning, children, students, schools, families, and how these all intersect with broader social, cultural, and political phenomena. Putting these together, I look for the following:

- A clear account of a topic, question, phenomenon, or problem space that you want to research. What are you curious, bothered, excited, angry, or fascinated by, and why? In particular, why is this a question/topic/field/phenomenon that is ripe for *research* rather than working it out in the field?
- What makes this problem (or occasionally, set of problems) come alive for you—and why should it matter to the rest of us? Why does it matter enough to you that you’re willing to sacrifice a half-decade of your life to figuring out (likely only part of) the answer? Why does it matter enough to the world that Harvard should invest well over a quarter-million dollars in you so you can develop the skills and knowledge to tackle it?
- Good writing. Is your statement organized, clear, and engaging? Does it make efficient use of the short amount of space we give you? Does it demonstrate that you will be able to write good papers, articles, and possibly (as time goes on) books? Does your writing demonstrate that you can think, and that you have something interesting to say that you can convey cogently to others?

If you nail these things, you’ve nailed the personal statement, as far as I’m concerned. But again, please remember that this is just me: I most emphatically do not speak for my colleagues at HGSE, around the University, or at other institutions.

It may also be helpful note what is *not* included in the bullet points above. You do *not* need to include in your statement comments about how wonderful Harvard is, or about the eminence of a particular faculty member, or what a privilege it would be to study here. (In fact, please save yourself space and delete all such commentary.) You do *not* need to explain why your research agenda exactly parallels my research agenda, or that of any faculty member. You do not need to cite a lot of literature, although you are welcome to if it adds to your argument. You do not need to show that you’re already a first-rate researcher, although again if you are, that’s obviously great.

You really don’t have to “do what I do”

I love doing the work I do, and sharing in that work with my students. I therefore do (relatively unusually for a political theorist) co-author and co-conduct research with many of my students. One of my doctoral students and I have co-edited [a book](#) that includes case studies of and

commentaries about [ethical dilemmas](#) that arise in classrooms, schools, and school districts. Some additional doctoral students published commentaries in that book, and are lined up to publish cases and commentaries in a new book we're working on about civic ethical dilemmas that arise in fragile democracies like the United States.

I am also working on articles with current doctoral students on ethical dimensions of teacher partisanship, the school-to-deportation pipeline, and student surveillance. A few years ago, I published an [article](#) with another student about least-unjust approaches to teacher firings in LA Unified, and an article with a postdoc on [the ethics of grade inflation](#). I worked with a group of six students a couple of years ago to conduct a "blitz analysis" of equity, access, and opportunity in Boston Public Schools' proposed school assignment plans. Many years ago, two students and I co-planned a modification to my social studies methods course, then researched and published an [article](#) about the results. In general, it's fair to say that I co-author articles with students, plan conference panels together, co-plan every course I teach, and in many ways enjoy working collaboratively about topics, methods, and areas of inquiry that are of common interest.

At the same time, I am very happy advising and serving on the committees of students who don't "do what I do" in part or at all. Some of my current or recent advisees, for example, are writing or have written theses about the following topics:

- Theory of education for African Americans that enables them to *navigate* and *transform* racist society
- The challenges and opportunities for doing meaningful youth participatory action research in everyday urban classroom settings
- Why and how an *ecological theory of injustice* can help explain and provide guidance about educational policy dilemmas better than an ideal theory of justice can do
- How families' conceptions of educational aims in India shape their relationship with school and the broader polity
- How rural, migrant, and urban students in China make sense of education and learning both inside and outside the classroom
- How former and current prisoners sentenced to life without the possibility of parole find purpose in their lives and take on informal and formal educative roles with others

Depending on how well you know my own work, you may be able to see connections between what my students are doing and my own interests and domains of research. But at the same time, it should be equally clear that these students are pursuing their own intellectual agendas, which I fully support; I'm just along for the ride (and to give mostly-solicited advice).

Applying for a PhD in Education versus a PhD in a discipline

I am asked frequently by potential applicants about the pros and cons of applying for a PhD in Education versus a PhD in a discipline. A huge advantage of coming to Harvard, of course, is that you can take courses and find advisors and committee members across the University. So even if you come to HGSE, you can still take a huge number of courses in the Government or Philosophy departments (or whatever departments interest you), at the Kennedy School, the Law School, and so forth. Faculty from those departments and schools may also serve on your dissertation

committee. There is, though, still a difference between doing your PhD in education versus in a disciplinary department. Your required courses will be about the field of education, and draw on multiple disciplines, rather than being about (and rooted in) a particular discipline. Your closest colleagues will also be experts in education, rather than in one specific discipline.

One of the ways I advise you to think about it is to ask yourself whom you want to be talking with and learning from on a day-to-day basis, versus whom you would have to seek out. (And correlatively, what ideas/issues will be taken as given, versus sought out.) I love teaching at an education school precisely because I prefer being surrounded on a daily basis by people who are grappling with hard questions in education than by people who are grappling with hard questions in political theory. I still love political theory, but I'd prefer to have my students and colleagues take it as given that questions about charter schools, Common Core, educational inequity, and teaching and learning are interesting (and actually have informed ideas about these issues), than to have my students and colleagues take it as given that questions about ideal and nonideal theory, republicanism, distributive justice, and the nature of contracts are interesting (and actually have informed ideas about these issues). This means that when I present my work to colleagues and students in education, I may have to spend some time laying the groundwork for why I think about a problem in the way I do, or what the disciplinary foundations are for my argument. But that's okay with me. After all, when I present my work to colleagues and students in political theory or philosophy, I have to spend time laying the groundwork for why a particular problem of educational policy or practice is important, and what the substantive foundations are for my argument. So it's not as if I have to "dumb down" for one group more than for the other.

Furthermore, I'm more energized by having day-to-day colleagues who are deeply committed to improving educational experiences and outcomes for people around the world. I also appreciate the fact that my substantive contributions to that enterprise—for example, my writing curricula, consulting with policymakers, or conducting teacher trainings—are also facilitated and valued by HGSE, rather than being seen as nice things to do on my own time, as they would be in an arts and sciences department. As you think about your own intellectual home over the next half-decade or so (since it will likely take about 5-6 years to earn your PhD), these are the kinds of issues you may want to think about.

How and when I will read your application

The PhD in Education Doctoral Admissions Committee will forward to me applications that are relevant to my areas of expertise and advising interests. You therefore do not need to send me your application separately, or do anything special to draw my attention to your work. If you are a good candidate for the program and our interests overlap in some way, then you can be reassured that I will review your application with care and attention in the normal course of the admissions process. You should know that I am always enthusiastic about more candidates than we are able to admit. Please do not castigate yourself, therefore, if your application is unsuccessful. If you *are* admitted to the PhD, you can be assured that I will shower you with attention, and answer every possible question you may have. ☺ It is in our collective interest to ensure that the relationship is a good fit, and that you can achieve your goals if you come to Harvard.