

## My Old Guy PhD Program Begins – Entry No. 1

**Executive Summary.** Going back to graduate school for a master's degree at age 25 felt old. What's it like to start a graduate program at 53 years old? Read about the first steps taken, the admission process, and what's coming in my first semester this fall. Maybe you've been wanting to do it yourself!



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**Why do it?** I've always been somewhat of an outlier in the choices I've made. I left a great construction company to pursue my graduate degree at The University of Texas at Austin. Every construction engineer in Texas will tell you that only the tea sipping design engineers come from UT – the real constructors went to Texas A&M. I digress.

When I was strictly in contracting (now I'm in consulting), I was one of just a handful of professionals that had both a master's degree in civil engineering and a professional engineering license. But, this push for a doctorate turned serious earlier this year when I was approached by a professor to help him in the writing of a heavy civil construction textbook. Early on in our time together, he suggested that I pursue my doctorate in civil engineering because he knew I wanted to possibly teach at a university level. I also have felt that having a doctoral degree would help give me that extra little qualification for expert witness work.

So, I started looking into it.

**Where did you apply and why?** I applied and visited two schools: Purdue University and Arizona State University. Purdue has turned out three of the sharpest construction professionals I know, plus it is hands down one of the top civil engineering schools in the United States. When I kept digging, I came across a great program in construction at Arizona State University. I contacted the head of the department through LinkedIn and I went to campus for a visit. Wow, what a great facility, and what great support from the industry! In addition to choosing a great construction program, it was important for me to find a school that would mesh with a working professional, and that would minimize my travel time (don't forget I live 5.5 hours out in the middle of the Pacific Ocean in Hawaii).

**What is the application process like?** Every school I looked at was a bit different. They all pretty much require a master's degree, a certain GPA, a copy of

your transcript, and then some sort of essay. I learned through this process that the GRE is still out there, so if you haven't been to school in forever, perhaps you'll want to find a program which doesn't require the GRE test!

**As a working professional, how will you balance your studies and work?** Not having a wife and kids makes this easier than probably 80% of you reading this article. However, what I'm learning is that even with all of this "free time", the commitment is daunting. I see two major goals that must be accomplished to earn my doctorate:



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- Classwork – each school is different in their requirements for classwork (i.e. the number of credits). The program I chose requires 30 credits of true classes (beyond the master's). Some of these classes I can do online, but the classes I'm most interested will have to be taken on campus. And, to me, that sounds great. My first class is Statistics in the fall, by the way.
- Dissertation – again, each school is different, but there seems to be two schools of thought on a dissertation. The first approach is to do a great deal of research and then write a seven chapter, 200-page paper on this subject which has added to the body of knowledge. The second approach is to write three professional technical papers and then combine them – this then becomes my dissertation. My chosen program is the latter, the three papers route.

**How do you find your dissertation topic?** I've talked to many along the way and this appears to be one of the most difficult tasks in the process. I have an academic advisor who, along with the committee members, will have to approve my chosen topic. However, finding it is largely on the student. When I met with my advisor, I had about a dozen ideas. It's a little overwhelming when you've been in the business for 30+ years and have seen so much. And enjoy so much of the business. I left campus after talking with my advisor and was happy that he had helped me narrow it down a bit. But, it's still not easy. You see, the doctoral degree requires an original contribution to the body of knowledge within the field. This means that you need to add something new, and you should be the premier source on the planet for this topic.

**My story.** I have had, and continue to have, a wonderful career. I love civil engineering and I love heavy construction. To be able to share this passion, to share these decades of learning with younger people, is something I enjoy doing now and would like to do into the twilight of my career. In addition to teaching, I also hope to continue consulting. Work safe!