



Structure of the U.S. Education System: Research Doctorate Degrees

The research doctorate, or the Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) and its equivalent titles, represents the highest academic qualification in the U.S. education system. While the structure of U.S. doctoral programs is more formal and complex than in some other systems, it is important to note that the research doctorate is not awarded for the preliminary advanced study that leads to doctoral candidacy, but rather for successfully completing and defending the independent research presented in the form of the doctoral dissertation (thesis).

RESEARCH DOCTORATE DESCRIPTION

U.S. doctorates are structured programs of advanced study and supervised research. Students admitted to doctoral programs must complete all qualifying graduate-level coursework and participate in doctoral seminars and colloquia. No coursework is credited toward the doctoral program unless it is doctoral-level and part of the research seminar and colloquia preparation for advancement to candidacy. Students who complete these preliminary requirements at a satisfactory level (usually an A average grade is required) must then pass written comprehensive examinations that cover their chosen research specialization plus two or more adjunct specialties, one of which is often in a related subject area. Successful students who pass the examinations and receive the recommendation of the doctoral faculty are advanced to candidacy for the doctorate.

Some U.S. graduate students' transcripts may show that undergraduate courses were completed in subjects such as languages, quantitative methods or a second subject, particularly if the student entered pre-doctoral studies from the bachelor's degree level, is undertaking interdisciplinary studies, or is changing subjects. It is important to know, however, that U.S. accreditation rules do not allow such undergraduate credit to be counted toward graduate studies. Only if undergraduate courses are taken for graduate credit – requiring additional work – and are certified as such by the graduate faculty will an award of credit be considered.

The doctoral candidate selects a doctoral dissertation advisor and doctoral committee (usually 2-5 senior faculty, frequently with at least one member from another subject area or university). The advisor and committee approve the dissertation research proposal and are available to advise on the progress of the independent research program. When the candidate and the advisor judge that the research is completed and the dissertation is finished, the candidate is scheduled for a public oral examination defending the dissertation. At the conclusion of the oral defense, the dissertation committee votes on whether to award the doctorate and sign the dissertation, which is then published via university printing services and made available electronically for the academic community. Many dissertations are later revised, edited, and published commercially as academic monographs.

[Survey of Earned Doctorates \(SED\)](#) is a comprehensive longitudinal study of all recipients of U.S. research doctorates, from 1954 to the present, managed by the National Science Foundation (NSF).

[Survey of Doctorate Recipients \(SDR\)](#) is a follow-up survey of holders of U.S. research doctorates that gathers data on their career progress until age 76.

[Time to Degree of U.S. Research Doctorate Recipients](#) is an NSF study of how long it takes U.S. and international students to finish U.S. doctoral studies.

[PhD Completion Project](#) is the Council of Graduate School's longitudinal study of doctoral student attrition and degree completion.

[Research Doctorate Programs](#) is the National Research Council's current study assessing the quality of U.S. research doctorate programs.

RESEARCH DOCTORATE DEGREE TITLES

NOTE: This is the list of frequently awarded research doctorate degree titles accepted by the National Science Foundation (NSF) as representing degrees equivalent in content and level to the Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degree.

Doctor of Arts (D.A.)
Doctor of Business Administration (D.B.A.)
Doctor of Church Music (D.C.M.)
Doctor of Canon Law (J.C.D./D.C.L.)
Doctor of Design (D.Des.)
Doctor of Education (Ed.D.)
Doctor of Engineering (D.Eng./D.E.Sc./D.E.S.)
Doctor of Fine Arts (D.F.A.)
Doctor of Hebrew Letters (D.H.L.)
Doctor of Industrial Technology (D.I.T.)
Doctor of Juridical Science (J.S.D./S.J.D.)
Doctor of Music (D.M.)
Doctor of Musical/Music Arts (D.M.A.)
Doctor of Music Education (D.M.E.)
Doctor of Modern Languages (D.M.L.)
Doctor of Nursing Science (D.N.Sc.)
Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.)
Doctor of Public Administration (D.P.A.)
Doctor of Physical Education (D.P.E.)
Doctor of Public Health (D.P.H.)
Doctor of Sacred Theology (S.T.D.)
Doctor of Science (D.Sc./Sc.D.)
Doctor of Social Work (D.S.W.)
Doctor of Theology (Th.D.)

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