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

The research doctorate, or the Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) 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 must then pass written comprehensive examinations. Successful students who pass the examinations, and receive the recommendation of the doctoral faculty, are advanced to candidacy for the doctorate.

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 by the university and made available electronically for the academic community. Many dissertations are later revised, edited, and published commercially as academic monographs.

Note: 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.

EXAMPLES OF RESEARCH DOCTORATE DEGREE TITLES

The following list reflects the research doctorate degree titles included in the National Science Foundation's Survey of Earned Doctorates. It is provided for informational purposes only. The U.S. government does not regulate degree titles and does not publish an official list of recognized degree titles. The list below may not reflect all research doctorate degree titles previously or presently awarded in the United States.

Doctor of Arts (DA)
Doctor of Business Administration (DBA)

Doctor of Canon Law (JCD/DCL)
Doctor of Design (DDes)
Doctor of Education (EdD)
Doctor of Engineering/Engineering Science (DEng/DESc/DES)
Doctor of Fine Arts (DFA)
Doctor of Hebrew Letters (DHL)
Doctor of Juridical Science (JSD/SJD)
Doctor of Musical/Music Arts (DMA)
Doctor of Music Education (DME)
Doctor of Modern Languages (DML)
Doctor of Nursing Science (DNSc)
Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)
Doctor of Public Health (DPH)
Doctor of Sacred Theology (STD)
Doctor of Science (DSc/ScD)
Doctor of Theology (ThD)

SELECTED RESOURCES

Survey of Earned Doctorates (SED) is an annual census conducted since 1957 of all individuals receiving a research doctorate from an accredited U.S. institution in a given academic year. It is managed by the National Science Foundation (NSF). The website for the Survey of Earned Doctorates is <https://www.nsf.gov/statistics/srvydoctorates>.

Doctorate Recipients from U.S. Universities is a 2016 report from the National Science Foundation that calls attention to major trends in doctoral education, organized into themes highlighting important questions about doctorate recipients. The website for the report is <https://www.nsf.gov/statistics/2018/nsf18304/report/about-this-report.cfm>.