



Academic Degrees Demystified

Academic Degrees

The decision to work toward one type of degree or another is an important one. For some fields, post-secondary education is highly recommended; in other fields it is more of a choice based on career goals. For example, if you would like to become a physical therapy assistant, the associate degree is the appropriate degree for you. If you want to be a physical therapist, you'll need a master's degree from an accredited physical therapy program. The different types of degrees can sometimes be confusing. This site is designed to help you understand the degree options available to you. Graduate education is the term used in the United States.



► Traditional Academic Degrees

Associate's Degree

An associate degree is a college degree awarded after the completion of about 20 courses. It either prepares students for a career following graduation or allows them to transfer into a bachelor's degree program. Associate degrees are available from public community colleges, private 2-year colleges, for-profit technical institutes, and many 4-year colleges and universities. An associate degree program can prepare you for many exciting careers in science, technology, engineering, and healthcare. Compared with those whose highest level of educational attainment was a high school diploma, those with an associate degree earn much more -- especially over the course of a career. According to U.S. Department of Education data, a total of 728,114 associate degrees were awarded in the U.S. during the 2006-2007 academic year by degree-granting postsecondary institutions in the 50 states, the District of Columbia, and outlying areas that year. Of these, men earned 34.3% and women earned 62.5% of degrees awarded. A December 2009 report, "Changes in Postsecondary Awards Below the Bachelor's Degree: 1997 to 2007," describes changes in the number and types of postsecondary awards below the bachelor's degree (certificates and associate's degrees) conferred over the decade between 1997 and 2007. According to the report, about 47 percent of all undergraduates were enrolled in subbaccalaureate programs in 2007-08, and in the previous year, subbaccalaureate awards accounted for almost 40 percent of all undergraduate credentials awarded. Between 1997 and 2007, the total number of subbaccalaureate awards conferred increased by 28 percent to a total of 1.5 million. While community colleges still



confer the largest number of subbaccalaureate awards, the rate of increase in awards conferred by private for-profit institutions was greater, especially in 4-year for-profit institutions, which more than tripled the number of awards conferred between 1997 and 2007.

Bachelor's Degree

The bachelor's degree is the most commonly awarded undergraduate degree and is required of students who seek to enter graduate-level research programs and study for higher degrees.

Most bachelor's degree programs are designed to require 4 academic years of full-time study. However, there are exceptions to this rule. For example, bachelor's degrees in architecture (B.Arch.) and some engineering specialties require at least 5 years of full-time study. As with the associate degree, some students at the bachelor's degree level are also enrolled part-time. The time taken to complete a bachelor's degree program is thus often longer than 4 years, with 5.5 years being the current average. The range may be due to additional credits mandated by some engineering programs, or also due in part to the large number of part-time adult learners.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau there is a true economic value to education. Over the course of their working lives, adults are likely to have higher earnings the more educated they are. U.S. Census Bureau tables showed that more education continues to pay off in a big way: Adults with advanced degrees earn four times more than those with less than a high school diploma. Workers 18 and older with a master's, professional or doctoral degree earned an average of \$82,320 in 2006, while those with less than a high school diploma earned \$20,873. Financial gains are predicted at each successive level of schooling completed in between. Workers 18 and older with a bachelor's degree earned an average of \$56,788 in 2006, while those with a high school diploma earned \$31,071.



Master's Degree

A Master of Science (M.S.) is a postgraduate academic master's degree awarded by universities, and is the most typical Master's Degree for the sciences and engineering. Admission to a master's program is normally contingent upon holding a bachelor's degree, and progressing to a doctoral program often requires a master's degree. An M.S. degree generally can be earned within two years after the B.S. degree. A Master's degree in the United States are typically designed to be completed in two years of full-time study, and some universities and colleges allow ambitious students to complete them in less time. The term "master's degree" includes a variety of awards of varying content, length, and purpose.

These include:

- Master's degrees awarded as advanced research degrees in academic or professional fields of study;
- Master's degrees awarded as basic professional qualifications; and
- Master's degrees awarded as terminal degrees.



In many professional fields it is possible for the student to enroll in either a research master's degree program, a course work master's degree program, or a professional master's degree program, depending upon his or her educational goals.

Research Master's Degrees

Master's degrees are awarded in the academic disciplines and applied research fields for study and research from 1 to 3 years beyond the bachelor's degree or the first-professional degree. The length of the program depends upon the requirements of the discipline and the institutional faculty, which may include work in several fields related to the subject being studied. Studies for research master's degrees involve the completion and defense of an independent thesis, the passing of comprehensive examinations set by the graduate faculty, and occasionally the completion of special projects in addition to participation in advanced seminars and courses. The research master's degree is frequently on the road to the Ph.D.



Course Work Master's Degree

Some institutions offer a course work master's degree in addition to or instead of the research master's degree. The total credits are generally the same but are all course work. This degree is often taken by persons wanting deepen their knowledge in their field, but do not intend to pursue research or the Ph.D. degree. It generally takes less time.

Professional or Practice Oriented Master's Degrees

Master's degrees awarded for professional studies also generally do not have an academic research component but are largely taught degrees. However, they most usually include the addition of a supervised project or report as part of the degree requirements. This degree is often a terminal degree for the recipient.

Master's Degree Titles

U.S. degree titles are not governed by national laws, so an institution may exercise wide discretion in the nomenclature it uses for degrees. Accrediting associations may exert some influence on degree titles, as do the labor market and the professional academic community, but there are still a wide variety of master's degree titles in use. The best way to tell whether a master's degree represents research work or professional studies is to either be familiar with the program of the awarding institution or to examine the student's academic record to determine what type of degree requirements were met. Some of the more common master's degree titles are:



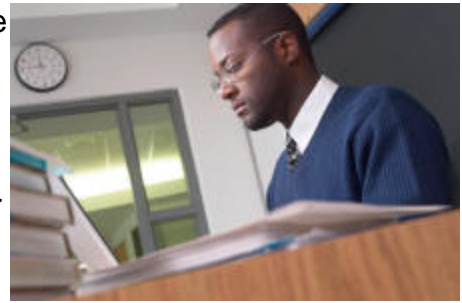
- Master of Business Administration (M.B.A.) (nearly always a 2 year professional degree in management);
- Master of Education (M.Ed.) (awarded for both professional and research studies in education subjects);
- Master of Public Health (M.P.H.) (usually a 2-year professional degree);
- Master of Science (M.S.) (awarded for both research and professional studies in a wide variety of subjects);
- Master of Science in Nursing (M.S.N.) (usually a professional degree but also awarded for research); and
- Master of Social Work (M.S.W.) (usually a 2-year professional degree).

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Prepared as part of the Career Cornerstone Center (www.careercornerstone.org)

Research Doctorate Degrees

The research doctorate is the highest earned academic degree in U.S. postsecondary education. It is always awarded for independent research at a professional level in either academic disciplines or professional fields. Research doctorates earned at accredited institutions are not awarded merely for completing coursework, professional preparation, or for passing examinations. Doctoral studies may begin after completion of a bachelor's, master's, or first professional degree. In some subjects it is the custom to begin a program



leading eventually to the doctorate immediately upon receiving a bachelor's or first professional degree, while in others it is still customary to earn a master's degree before enrolling for a doctorate. Regardless of the entry point, doctoral studies involve three stages of academic work. The first stage involves the completion of preliminary course, seminar, and laboratory studies and the passing of a battery of written examinations, usually called "writtens" or "comprehensives." If successful at this stage the student is permitted to proceed with doctoral studies, called advancement to candidacy. If not, he or she is withdrawn from the program, in some cases with the possibility of earning a master's degree. The first stage is often longer for students that do not already possess a higher degree.

The second stage consists of a set of advanced seminars and consortia during which the student selects a subject for the dissertation, forms a dissertation committee, and designs his or her research. American educators call the doctoral thesis a dissertation to distinguish it from lesser theses. The dissertation committee consists of usually 3-5 senior faculty in the student's research field, including his or her academic adviser. They do not necessarily have to be from the student's own university.

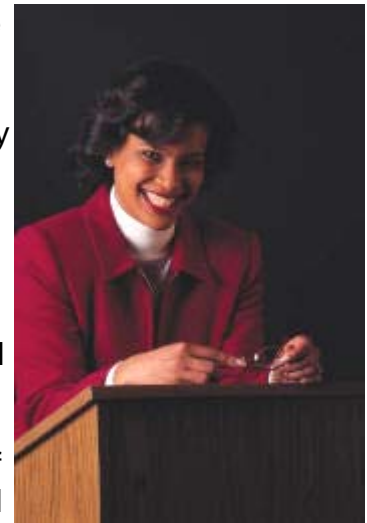
Once the student has developed and presented a research design acceptable to his or her adviser and committee, the independent research phases begins. Independent research and writing the dissertation can take anywhere from one to several years depending upon the topic selected and the research work necessary to prepare the dissertation. When the academic adviser is convinced that the dissertation is of an acceptable standard to put before the dissertation committee, the student delivers it to all committee members and is scheduled for the dissertation defense. The defense consists of an oral examination in depth before the committee and invited guests during which the student must establish mastery of the subject matter, explain and justify his or her research findings, and answer all questions put by the committee.

A successful defense results in the award of the degree. Some doctoral programs may include additional requirements such as fieldwork or practica or evidence of teaching experience and skills. All doctoral programs require that certain technical skills be mastered in the first stage, including mathematical and computer skills, or other specialized professional competencies relevant to the field being studied.

► Professional Degrees

First Professional Studies

Some professional fields of study require the student to first complete a undergraduate degree program before he or she can be admitted. These fields include Chiropractic, Dentistry, Law, Medicine (including surgery), Optometry, Osteopathy, Pharmacy, Podiatry, and Veterinary Medicine. There are many more professional fields of study in the United States, but those listed here are unique in that they are not offered at the undergraduate degree level.



It is also important to recognize that first-professional degrees in these fields are first degrees, not graduate research degrees. Several of the degree titles in this group of subjects incorporate the term "Doctor," but they are not research doctorates and not equivalent to the Ph.D. Master's degrees and research doctorates in these fields of study are awarded, but they have different names and students enroll in those programs after having earned a first-professional degree.

As with many other education systems, student competition to enter many first-professional programs is fierce and admissions are frequently restricted to only the most qualified candidates. While the United States does not operate a numerus clausus system, the relevant professional associations, and state authorities are actively concerned to maintain the quality of professional studies and balance the number of students admitted and graduated, and the number of accredited programs, with the economic and social need for professional services.

► Special Non-Academic Degree Programs

Postdoctoral Programs

While U.S. institutions do not award higher doctorates, many persons who have earned Ph.D.s or similar degrees apply to and enroll in postdoctorate research programs or internships. Such programs are especially frequent in the health and medical sciences, the counseling professions, and the natural sciences. Postdoctorate programs take place at universities, hospitals and clinics, research facilities in government and industry, and museums. They may last one or more years. Academic credit toward further degrees is not usually earned, but the programs are often significant additions to an individual's professional resume and credentials.



Certificate Programs (Undergraduate)

Certificate Programs usually consist of at least 18 units or credits, and are intended to certify that students who have successfully completed the program are prepared to enter the careers associated with the chosen certificate. They usually take at least one to two years to complete. These are typically available at community colleges or junior colleges and are also occasionally available online.

In addition, several organizations offer certificate training programs specifically developed for their products. For example, Microsoft offers certifications for nearly every Microsoft application for IT professionals, developers, office workers, home users, and technology trainers. In addition, Cisco certificate programs focus on customer service, support, and technology.

Intermediate Graduate Awards (Graduate)

Students at the graduate level may occasionally undertake specialized, short courses of study. Most of these study programs result in the award of a certificate, frequently called a Certificate of Advanced Study (C.A.S.). The C.A.S. is not considered a degree but it does constitute completion of a structured program of study at the graduate level. Graduate level certificates are awarded in both academic and professional specialties, especially in the fields of education, visual and performing arts, languages and linguistics, religious vocations, the social sciences, and the health professions. In the field of education there is one recognized degree that is intermediate between the master's and the research doctorate. The degree of Education Specialist (Ed.Sp.) is awarded for professionally oriented studies, usually culminating in an independent applied research project, that prepare the student to assume leadership and management roles in the primary and secondary education career streams.

