

What is a Ph.D.?

A Ph.D. is the de facto "union card" for an academic position. Although it is possible to obtain an academic position without a Ph.D., the chances are low. Major universities (and most colleges) require each member of their faculty to hold a Ph.D. and to engage in research activities to insure that the faculty have sufficient expertise to teach advanced courses and to force faculty to remain current in their chosen field.

A Doctor of Philosophy degree, abbreviated Ph.D., is the highest academic degree anyone can earn. Because earning a Ph.D. requires extended study and intense intellectual effort, less than one percent of the population attains the degree. Society shows respect for a person who holds a Ph.D. by addressing them with the title "Doctor".

To earn a Ph.D., one must accomplish two things: master a specific subject completely, and extend the body of knowledge about that subject.

To master a subject, a student searches the published literature to find and read everything that has been written about the subject. Each university establishes general guidelines that a student must follow to earn a Ph.D. degree, and each college or department within a university sets specific standards by which it measures mastery of a subject. Because examinations given as part of a Ph.D. curriculum assess expert knowledge, they are created and evaluated by a committee of experts, each of whom holds a Ph.D. degree.

The essence of a Ph.D., the aspect that distinguishes Ph.D. study from other academic work, can be summarized in a single word: research. To extend knowledge, one must explore, investigate, and contemplate.

To complete a Ph.D., each student must present results from their research to the faculty in a lengthy, formal document called a dissertation (more popularly referred to as a thesis). The student must then submit their dissertation to the faculty and defend their work an oral examination.