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Doctoral degrees in psychology: How are they different, or not so different?

Clarifying key distinctions between the PhD and PsyD degrees.

By [Daniel S. Michalski, PhD](#), and [Garth Fowler, PhD](#)

Doctoral degrees in psychology offer individuals preparation to conduct scientific research, professional practice or both. Most individuals receive either the Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) or the Doctor of Psychology (PsyD) degree. Although each of these degrees is designed to engage students in deep knowledge and skills within a subfield of psychology, there are substantial differences in the type of training and career plans of individuals with these degrees. Finding the best-fitting program for an individual student begins with understanding these differences.

Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)

The PhD is the most common degree conferred in psychology and is generally offered at either private or public research universities.¹ PhD degrees are intended for students interested in generating new knowledge through scientific research (i.e., setting up experiments, collecting data, applying statistical and analytical techniques) and/or gaining teaching experience. PhD graduate students receive substantial training in research methods and statistics in order to independently produce new scientific knowledge and are often required to produce a dissertation to demonstrate research competency. Students enrolling in PhD programs may also be interested in pursuing professional careers in applied work — such as health services, counseling in school settings and consulting in businesses and organizations in addition to research and academic work.

Doctor of Psychology (PsyD)

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human behavior.

Both PsyD and PhD programs can prepare students to be licensed psychologists, and training in these types of programs prepares graduates to take state licensing exams (licenses are awarded by individual states, not graduate programs).³ Many states require graduates to have attended accredited graduate programs to ensure that all students have minimum training and competency necessary for treating patients and serving clients. APA accredits doctoral programs in clinical, counseling and school psychology, and you can find a list of these programs on the [APA Office of Program Consultation and Accreditation](#) website.

When you're gathering information about particular programs, it is important you understand what training and education the program provides so you are aware of what skills and abilities you will acquire and how those prepare you for a career after you get your doctorate. There is no "best" doctoral degree in psychology: There are, however, "best-fits" for your academic and professional goals. Please visit the [Office of Graduate and Postgraduate Education and Training](#) website for more resources on graduate study in psychology. The APA Office of Program Consultation also provides further details on the distinctions between PhD and PsyD degrees in its [Standards of Accreditation for Health Service Psychology](#) (PDF, 222KB).

¹ According to the most recent Graduate Study in Psychology data from 2013-2014, 94 percent of participating PhD programs were housed in university colleges of arts and sciences or education. Participating PhD programs housed within nonspecified or indeterminate institutional locations were excluded from analysis.

² According to the most recent Graduate Study in Psychology data from 2013-2014, 72 percent of participating PsyD programs were housed within professional schools of psychology (university-based or free-standing) or in medical/health science institutions. Participating PsyD programs housed within non-specified or indeterminate institutional locations were excluded from analysis.

³ The [Association of State and Provincial Psychology Boards](#) offers comprehensive resources pertaining to psychology licensure regulations and examination requirements.

About the Authors



Garth A. Fowler, PhD, is an associate executive director for education and the director of the Office for Graduate and Postgraduate Education and Training at APA. Garth joined APA in May 2012, after nearly seven years as the assistant chair of the Department of Neurobiology at Northwestern University.

Fowler leads the Education Directorate's efforts to develop resources, guidelines and policies that promote and enhance disciplinary education and training in psychology at the graduate and postdoctoral levels. Throughout his career, Fowler has been active in education, training and career development for young scientists. He served on the National Postdoctoral Association's board of directors from 2009-12 and is a member of its finance committee. He has been an invited speaker or keynote presenter at more than 100 career development events and has served as a panelist for two National Academies of Science Committees, the State of the Postdoctoral Experience and the Committee on Research Universities. From 2005-07, he was the director of the science careers outreach program at the American Association for the Advancement of Science, where he developed workshops, presentations and seminars and wrote articles to help early career scientists promote and pursue their chosen career paths. He has served as a consultant for universities and research institutions on developing training grants for graduate students and postdoctoral scholars and developing learning

outcomes and assessing career outcomes.



Daniel S. Michalski, PhD, currently serves as the associate director for graduate and postgraduate education and training at APA. In this capacity, he manages the PSYCAS, the centralized application service for graduate study in psychology. Throughout his tenure at APA, Michalski has disseminated information on psychology education, specialized accreditation and workforce issues through articles, reports, presentations at conferences, invited panel sessions and continuing education sessions.

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