

Episode 13: Online or In-Person? The Advanced Degree Decision Box

Welcome to Grad-Post! I'm your host, Brian S. Mitchell, and we're here to talk about life before, during, and after graduate school, and whether an advanced degree is right for you. I'll draw upon my experiences as a graduate dean and research mentor, as well as my network of students, colleagues, and experts to bring you the most complete information on graduate education that I can.

In Episode 12, I talked about whether an advanced degree is right for you and some of the factors you should consider in making your decision. Given that that's an ongoing discussion both here and in your life, I thought I'd move on to some ways in which advanced degrees are delivered. You not only have to decide whether you want an advanced degree, and which kind, but also the format for obtaining that degree. By that I mean basically online or in-person. For some of you, that is a *fait accompli*, but for others of you it might be the sole determinant of whether you go for an advanced degree or not. It may even determine whether you are successful at it!

Now, I should say upfront that I obtained my degrees and worked at institutions that were predominantly in-person. As with all of us in educational settings during the global pandemic, I did teach entire courses and advised my students in a virtual format, so I at least have some appreciation of the benefits and challenges of teaching and mentoring in this manner. I also oversaw a small cadre of online professional programs as a grad dean, but, I've never taught in a fully online degree program. So, yes, I have an implicit bias on this topic that I fully recognize. I also have an implicit bias as a research scientist to treat information with some objectivity. It's with that spirit that I approach this episode that is meant to help you start your decision-making process on the modes for obtaining your advanced degree.

Let's start with a very coarse-grained tool. You'll need a pencil and paper, tablet and pen, or just your brain. First, draw a square big enough to put some labels on both the outside and inside. Now draw a vertical line dividing the box into two equal parts, then a horizontal line dividing it further into four equal parts. If you did this [Ta Da!] you are ready for grad school! Just kidding. On the top of the box put two labels outside the two columns, left to right: master's and doctorate. On the left side of the box, label the rows as "practice-based" for the top row and "research-based" for the bottom. Recall from Episode 7 – the one with the pie – that I prefer to classify advanced degrees as either practice- or research-based as opposed to professional or academic. I argued in that episode that all advanced degrees prepare one for a profession in that field and that all advanced degrees are academic because they are obtained in academic settings. The real distinction – regardless of whether it is at the master's or doctoral level – is really about the culminating experience. Is it a practicum, certification, or practical training? Then it's a practice-based degree. Is it a scholarly product like a series of publications, critical analysis of artistic works or genres, or a thesis? Then it's a research-based degree. You may not agree with these classifications, but let's roll with it for now. I think you'll see that it's particularly useful in this decision box we're developing.

OK. Now you have your box with four categories and the labels that describe them: practice master's; research master's; practice doctorate; and research doctorate. Here's where we get to the online vs. in-person part. I told you this was coarse-grained, so I'm going to suggest that you write "in-person" in all the categories except one: the practice-based master's category in the upper left. There you write "online."

	Master's	Doctorate
Practice-based	Online	In-person
Research-based	In-person	In-person

And that's it! Is it perfect? Not by a long shot. But, it's a starting point.

The devil, as they say, is in the details. Which degree is a research master's and which degree is a practice-based doctorate? My cop-out answer is, as always, "it depends." There are some relatively easy ones, though. Doctorates are pretty straight-forward, for the most part. The PhD is a research-based doctorate, plain and simple. I've said it in previous

podcasts and I'll say it again: I don't recommend pursuing an online PhD. The "professional" part of the PhD is the network you build along the way from performances and presentations to lab rotations and library carrels. There is no adequate online substitute for these activities. COVID-19 drove that home for all of us. Practice-based doctoral equivalents like the JD, MD, DVM, DPharm, and DDS are also best accomplished in-person for some of the same reasons, but also for the hands-on training that is critical to the degree. There are some grey areas to be sure. The educational doctorate, EdD, is one of them. It is a practice-based degree for the most part, although a dissertation of some sort is often required. That requirement is changing, however, and the EdD is increasingly considered a practice-based degree as evidenced by the National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics (NCSES) [dropping it from the Survey of Earned Doctorates in 2020](#). Prior to that, though, it was included as a research degree, along with other online-dominated doctorates like the PsyD or Doctorate of Psychology. Why do these classifications matter? Because, if I asked you to name the [top ten producing institutions of research doctorates in the United States](#), you might come up with quite a few of the leaders like the University of Michigan, Stanford, or the University of Florida. But if I asked you to name the top producer of research doctorates by females, would you have guessed Walden University? And it's not even close. According to NCSES, Walden awarded 580 research doctorates to women in 2022, with the next closest being Harvard with 364. Walden University – and other distance education institutions like them – offer postbaccalaureate degree programs primarily to adult learners through online learning environments. As a result, the abundance of their advanced degrees are in the fields of psychology, education, and related social sciences – areas that historically have been populated by women. Some of the doctoral degrees that they offer like the PsyD and the EdD were classified by NCSES as "research degrees," hence their leadership in production rates. As I said, that changed in 2020, but it will take some time for all the students in these programs to be re-classified as they graduate. The point is that some of these large, online programs skew the doctorate production statistics in certain categories.

Despite the online EdD's popularity, there are plenty of opinions about whether an EdD or a PhD is the better way to go for those of you in the education field, and perhaps I'll weigh in on that in a future podcast, but for today, let's just say that you need to do your homework. For more on the current state of the EdD specifically, I refer you to an [interview by Isabel Peña Alfaro in Fortune magazine with Jill Perry](#), executive director of the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate. There she discusses topics relevant to today's EdD like the evolution of the dissertation, the move away from concentrations, and the future of the degree. And there are certainly comparisons of the two degrees online at each institution that offers them, as well as in the literature, like a recent one by [Foster, et al.](#) But we're not talking about the relative merits of each degree today, just the delivery modalities that are available.

Given that online doctorates are out there as an option, the fact remains that the vast majority of doctorates are awarded by in-person programs. According to the NCSES IPEDS Data Tables only 3.5% of doctoral degrees of all types – including the PhD, EdD, MD and DDS – were awarded by primarily online institutions in 2020-21. There are good reasons for obtaining a doctorate in person as I discussed earlier, and my advice is to strongly consider taking the time and cost to obtain your doctorate in person – it will be worth it, even for those of you in the fields of education.

When we get to master's degrees, recommending the best delivery modality gets even more complicated, mostly because the practice-research based designations start to get convoluted. The master's of art (MA) and the master's of science (MS) are still broadly considered research degrees, primarily because there is some culminating scholarly or artistic product. I recommend these research master's degrees be obtained in person for the same reasons as the PhD. And like the PhD, some of these master's-level degrees are considered what are called "terminal degrees" – the highest degree attainable in the field. The MA in creative writing falls into this category, as do some MS degrees in fields like geosciences and environmental sciences. There are certainly doctorates and even PhDs in these fields, too, and the degree requirements for certain jobs can vary, but it's worth noting that some master's degrees are considered the primary educational requirement in certain fields. These include nursing (MSN), social work (MSW), and public health (MPH). There are also practice-based versions of traditionally research-based degrees, like the Professional Master's of Arts (PMA) or the Professional Science Master's (PSM). There are a surprising number of these programs in highly specialized areas. Check out [professionalsciencemasters.org](#) for a current list of PSM programs. The PMA is less well-known and is even [struggling as a viable degree according to some](#), but these programs do still exist. Their purpose is to provide more specialized training for private sector jobs as opposed to a stepping-stone to a terminal degree in the field.

The most common of these terminal master's degrees is the Master's of Business Administration, or MBA. There's plenty of opinions out there on the [value of the MBA](#) and the [future of the MBA](#), and more to the point of this discussion, whether it is best obtained [online, in-person](#), or whether that even matters at all. Same goes for full-time or part-time attendance. The MBA is certainly worth its own podcast and I'll get there someday soon, but for this discussion it's worth noting that according to the NCSES IPEDS provisional data from January, 2024, there were a total of 124,608 master's degrees awarded between July 1, 2021 and June 30, 2022 in the broad category of Business Administration, Management and Operations. Note that IPEDS does not go by the name of the degree, like MBA, it goes by the level – in this case, master's – and the category of the degree using something called a “Classification of Instructional Programs” or CIP code. So, the actual number of MBAs awarded is slightly less than this 124,000 number. The business school accreditation body, [AACSB, put the number of MBAs granted at 120,000 in 2020](#) using the same data source, so let's use that as a ballpark figure. This same source puts the number of programs offering an MBA online at more than half, with that number continuing to grow in the post-pandemic era. A similar story could be told for the MSN, with debates on the [pros and cons of online nursing degrees](#), and the rise of online programs in the post-pandemic era, despite [declining enrollments](#).

Despite the popularity of the MBA and MSN, the percentage of online master's degrees continues to be small, but growing. Again, according to the NCSES IPEDS Data Tables, 11.5% of master's degrees awarded in 2020-21 were awarded by primarily online institutions. These statistics do not reflect online degrees awarded by primarily non-online institutions, so those percentages are likely higher if you consider all degrees awarded online. It's worth noting that there is a significant proportion of students who take “some” online courses. That is, their degree programs are neither fully online nor fully in-person – what is called a “blended” program. Nonetheless, the percentage of students obtaining advanced degrees fully online is still in the minority. There are large numbers of students who are enrolled, however. The percentage of students enrolled in postbaccalaureate courses that are exclusively distance education [hovers at around 40%](#), so you can see there's a large discrepancy between students taking courses online and completing their advanced degrees online. There are legitimate reasons for this, of course, including those enrolled in certificate and microcredential programs who may not be seeking a degree, but there is still a high level of attrition in online graduate programs. We won't go into these reasons today, but think about your life situation and whether the benefits of obtaining a degree online outweigh the difficulties with doing so.

There are significant and growing numbers of online programs for these practice-based master's degrees. This is the only broad category of advanced degrees that I recommend be taken in an online modality. That's primarily because of their acceptance in the workforce and the viability for working adults. One caveat to this recommendation is if you are considering going even further for an advanced degree or combining one of these degrees with a doctoral degree. For example, there are in-person joint degree programs like the MD-MPH. While you could obtain your MPH online then go back to medical school for the MD, why not just get them both at the same time? These joint degree programs are exceptions to the over-simplified table we're discussing today.

To summarize, our table looks like this: all advanced degrees are best attained in-person except for practice-based master's degrees:

	Master's	Doctorate
Online	<i>MSW, MBA, LLM, MPH</i> and other practice-based degrees	Maybe: <i>EdD, PsyD</i> , other specialized doctorates
In-Person	<i>MA, MS, MFA, MArch</i>	Everything else: <i>PhD, MD, JD, DVM, DDS, DPharm</i>

I'm not trying to be elitist or self-serving here in promoting in-person advanced degrees. I just think there are networking and professional development opportunities for which online environments are not satisfactory. Again, reference your online experiences during COVID-19. But I recognize that sometimes an online option is just a better fit for you, your lifestyle, and your career plans.

None of this says anything about part-time versus full-time attendance, of course. That's a separate podcast, too, but an oversimplification is to just to replace "online" with "part-time" and "in-person" with "full-time" in today's table. That is, if you are going to attend in-person, do it full-time, and if you are going to attend part-time, do it online. That's a gross oversimplification, so we'll dig into that topic down the road a bit. Stay tuned!

Let's conclude by circling back to what I suggested that you do in Episode 12 when considering an advanced degree: **talk to people**. If you are seriously considering getting an online doctoral degree as a career advancement tool, then ask your would-be supervisors explicitly if that degree will qualify you for the job or position you want. If you want to be a financial analyst for a Wall Street firm and the job requires an MBA, ask a potential employer if an MBA from online institution X will be given the same weight as an in-person MBA from a Big Ten or Ivy League-adjacent school. If the answer is "no," then you either don't want to work for that company or you don't want to get an online MBA. You decide. That analysis may be different than if you want to work up to the next pay grade where a master's degree and additional years of service are the only requirements. And it's different than if you really want to be a tenure-track faculty member at a land grant university. Do your homework, both online and in-person.

Thank you for joining me today. All of the links referred to in this podcast are available on my website at grad-post.com. There you'll find additional podcasts and resources to help you plan your adventure for an advanced degree.

Regardless of online or in-person, practice-based or research-based, every degree counts.

Links

NCSES Survey of Earned Doctorates 2020 <https://nces.nsf.gov/pubs/nsf22300/technical-notes>

<https://nces.nsf.gov/pubs/nsf24300/data-tables>

The future of the Ed.D. degree – and how it will change over time, <https://fortune.com/education/articles/the-future-of-the-ed-d-degree-and-how-it-will-change-over-time/>

Foster, H.A., S. Chesnut, J. Thomas, and C. Robinson, "Differentiating the EdD and the PhD in Higher Education: A Survey of Characteristics and Trends," https://aquila.usm.edu/fac_pubs/21551/

Professional Science Masters <https://professionalsciencemasters.org/>

Cassuto, L., "The Sad Story of the P.M.A.," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, August 4, 2015, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-sad-story-of-the-p-m-a/>

<https://www.statista.com/topics/2175/business-schools-in-the-united-states/#topicOverview>

<https://www.aacsb.edu/insights/videos/2017/10/the-future-of-the-mba>

<https://fortune.com/education/articles/online-mba-versus-traditional-mba/>

<https://www.aacsb.edu/insights/articles/2022/06/big-mba-programs-are-getting-bigger>

<https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/chb/postbaccalaureate-enrollment>

<https://nursejournal.org/resources/in-person-vs-online-nursing-programs/>

<https://fortune.com/education/articles/why-masters-degree-programs-in-nursing-are-experiencing-fluctuating-enrollment/>