

Episode 7: How To Bake the Perfect Advanced Degree

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.

Let's talk generally about advanced degrees today. There's a lot of ways to slice this postgraduate pie, but most of the ways lead to a sloppy mess where the filling runs all over and destroys the flaky, delicious crust. So, let's focus on how to make the perfect crust, that is, the ingredients to an advanced degree. The perfect pie crust has just four ingredients: flour, salt, water, and some ratio of butter, lard or shortening. The salt and water are small – but important – components. Kind of like the school and the city you choose for your advanced degree. Let's set those aside for the time being as being fixed ingredients. But the type of flour you use and the butter/lard/shortening ratio you select are critical to success. In fact, those two ingredients lead to a proliferation of online opinions about the “perfect pie crust,” disagreements within the baking community, and outright family feuds over who has the best pie crust. “Nana's pie crust is the best, but Auntie's is good, too, bless her heart.” Ya'll know what I'm talking about.

At any rate, any discussion about advanced degrees is kind of like making pie crust. The flour is the category of degree – professional or otherwise, and the butter/lard/shortening is the level of the degree – master's or doctorate. And just like pie crust recipes, there's lots of opinions and disagreements about how to classify post-baccalaureate degrees, and things can get complicated quickly. So, in the spirit of “all pie is good” let me focus the discussion on the various options for the category and level of advanced degrees without getting too judgy about which is best.

There are two common ways to classify post-baccalaureate degrees: professional and academic. Professional degrees are those that typically require some sort of certification afterwards, like education, health sciences, law, or social work. There are many others that fall in this category. Academic degrees, on the other hand, are those that typically prepare you for a career in academia and related sectors like government, tech companies, and non-profit think tanks. The PhD is the most prevalent academic degree, but also includes some master's degrees that are typically the highest degree attainable in the field – so-called terminal degrees - like the Master of Fine Arts, the Master of Architecture and even the Master of Business Administration. Yes, there are doctoral equivalents of all of those fields, but show me a music department with only DFAs, an architecture school with only PhDs, and a business school with only DBAs and I'll change my podcast. This ambiguity in terminal degrees highlights the shortcoming of both the academic and professional categories approach: **they are woefully inaccurate**. What's the alternative to a professional degree? A non-professional degree? What's the opposite of an academic degree? A non-academic degree? Those terms are problematic. And no, an academic degree is not the alternative to a professional degree. Some are both, and there are those who believe some are neither – but we won't get into that today. In fact, **all** advanced degrees are both professional **and** academic degrees. To say that the PhD is not a professional degree suggests that there are no professions built around it. If not, then I just spent thirty years working without a profession. Similarly, to suggest that the MD, JD, and MNP are non-academic degrees means you've never been through one. They're at colleges and universities, aren't they? You have to take courses for them, don't you? Then they're academic degrees. But academic or professional is what we have in the United States. I can't get good German flour here in the States, either. *So ist es*.

Speaking of Germany, they have a completely different system of advanced degrees. So does France. Yes, they recognize US degrees and there are equivalencies, but their advanced degree systems were developed mostly before or in parallel with the United States, whereas the more recently-developed countries have generally opted for the US master's/PhD system. Neither is right or wrong, but if your career plans have an international component, you should be aware of what your degree might and might not qualify you for.

Instead of professional or academic, I prefer to classify degrees as either research-based or practice-based. Research degrees are those that require some kind of culminating scholarly work like a dissertation or thesis. Practice-based degrees are those that require some kind of practicum. The PhD is a research degree. Full stop. There are some master's degrees that are research degrees if they require a thesis or are considered the highest academic degree attainable in the field as I mentioned earlier. The rest require some kind of practice in the field as part of the degree or final certification

requirement. Student teaching is an example of such practical experience. This research vs. practicum designation is important because it sets expectations for how the degree will be attained and how it will be used. Case in point. I was once working with a school of social work to develop a doctoral level program. They already a very fine master's of social work degree program - MSW - but had some demand from local practitioners for a higher level degree. The school's suggestion was to create a PhD program. "Will you require a dissertation?" I asked. "No," they replied, "we typically require some kind of practicum." It sounded more like a doctorate of social work – DSW - to me. It involved mostly coursework plus a practicum, would help advanced practitioners in their fields, and theoretically could be done on a part-time basis. But the full-time or part-time distinction is part of the butter/lard/shortening or degree level discussion. So, let's move on to that having established that research and practice are better ways to categorize advanced degrees. Cinch your apron a little tighter.

The degree level discussion comes down to either a master's or doctorate degree. Surprisingly, the distinction between master's and doctoral degrees in the United States is relatively simple if you dig down to the accreditation level. Without going into the weeds too much, each college or university is accredited by a regional higher education accrediting body¹. Some professions like nursing or teaching also require that the individual programs be accredited. This is how the "professional degree" designation got started. But the university-level accreditation for master's and doctoral degrees must first be met. For a master's degree, that's usually thirty credit hours or the equivalent. "Equivalent" here means that a required thesis for the master's degree is usually six credit hours of work. This could be transcribed – actual credit hours assigned to it – or recognized as the equivalent such that "24 credit hours plus thesis" is sufficient for the degree. Oddly, doctoral degrees also have a credit hour requirement: forty-eight credit hours for the PhD. I find it odd because the PhD is a research degree, based upon independent, scholarly work, not on the accumulation of credits. What ends up happening is that the research or scholarship component gets assigned credit hours in the same way that the thesis does for the master's degree. The result is that you may only take 15 credit hours of actual coursework in a doctoral program; the rest is scholarly research. Programs must track all of these credits for the regional accrediting agency which is done through your transcript, and be prepared to produce examples upon audit. There's a lot more to this in terms of when your coursework must be taken, the corresponding tuition level you pay, and additional degree requirement you must satisfy, but the master's vs. doctoral designation really comes down simply to the number of credit hours: 30 or 48.

You're saying to yourself: "Thanks for that expose, graddean, but you still haven't told me if I should use butter or lard or shortening in my pie crust." OK. Here's the upshot. Just like the ratio of butter to lard to shortening can affect bake time, the time to obtain a master's is very different from the time to obtain a doctorate. You already knew that, but it's really the credit hours that set the limits on time to degree. You can complete 30 credit hours in less than a year if you do it full time. If you can only handle **one** three-credit course per term due to work or family obligations, you're looking at more like ten terms or three and a half years to complete the master's degree on a part-time basis. You could do similar math for the doctorate and come to the conclusion that a PhD should take you about a year and a half on a full-time basis, but that's just wrong. Medical school takes four years, law school takes three years, and the time-to-degree for a PhD is about six years after entering the program according to the National Science Foundation². The math is even worse for a part-time doctoral degree, if it's even an option. Many Educational Doctorates – EdD - programs will let you attend on a part-time basis, but that's an exception rather than the rule. I'm loath to recommend entering any doctoral program on a part-time basis. It's just too hard and it takes too long. So, the choice of a master's or doctorate often comes down to how much time you can commit and for how long. The other considerations – career aspirations and return on investment, for example – are the topics of other podcasts.

Finally, there's the salt and water. The water is what holds all the ingredients together. That's your university. Campus climate, extracurricular activities, and your sense of belonging are all related to the university. It's what holds your academic experience together. As a wise provost I once worked for said, "Our institutions of higher education are called **uni**-versities, not **multi**-versities." What happens in the dance studio affects what happens in the law school affects what happens in the computer lab. Think holistically when you consider an advanced degree program, just like you expect the admissions committee to consider the whole you, not just your GPA. The salt, on the other hand, is the city or town in which you find yourself. Again, think holistically. The institution I worked for learned the hard way that it's not enough to be "**in**" the community, you have to be "**of**" the community. Take advantage of the institution's local culture. Learn their traditions. Revel in the sense of community, even if you don't plan on staying there.

As for the pie filling, that's your choice. Fillings from philosophy and physics to nursing and nanotechnology all taste good. Just don't try to mix ingredients. At the advanced degree level the "design your own major" often leaves you with a degree that others might find confusing or distasteful. I'll elaborate on that another day.

Of course, you have to bake your pie. Just to bring this ridiculous metaphor to a long overdue conclusion, how long you stay for your advanced degree – the time to degree – will determine how you feel about the experience in the end. Don't rush or overbake your welcome.

Thank you for joining me today. Look for the next episode in two weeks. A transcript of this podcast along with all the links referred to today are available on my website at grad-post.com.

Have you ever seen a pie that was 359° around? In life as in pies, every degree counts.

Links

1. US Department of Education Institutional Accrediting Agencies

https://www2.ed.gov/admins/finaid/accred/accreditation_pg3.html#RegionalInstitutional

2. Survey of Earned Doctorates, National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, 2022, <https://nces.nsf.gov/surveys/earned-doctorates/2022>