

Battle of Prestige: Ph.D. versus Ed.D.

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Fall 2010

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### **Historical Introduction**

In the field of education, more specifically higher education, there are two pathways to the doctorate, which are the Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) and the Doctor of Education (Ed.D.). What also exists is a contention between which degree is the pinnacle “degree of choice” for those in pursuit of the doctorate.

Historically, and with bias, scholars in academia feel the Ph.D. should be the one and only degree that exists out of the two degrees because it is seen as the degree that prepares individuals for research and the professoriate. There are others who understand the need for Ed.D., but believe it needs reformation to serve its intended purpose for practitioners and the application of theory to practice. Yet, there are still those persons who are neutral in this argument. They believe there the differences between the Ph.D. and Ed.D. are so minuscule that the debate of distinction is moot. Prospective graduate students interested in a terminal degree in education have many things to consider before a decision can be made.

This research paper is not intended to dictate which doctorate option is best, as both have a purpose in academia. What this research paper will seek to do is to provide a historical overview of doctoral education, a general perspective of both terminal degrees in education, and discuss the validity and future of these two doctoral tracks in education.

### **The Historical Perspective of the Doctorates**

The idea of the doctoral degree is thought to have origins dating back to the medieval universities. Students at these institutions were trained for professions of law, medicine, and theology. The research component of doctoral degrees was developed in the early German universities, which later became the model for early American colleges and universities (Baez, 2002).

The existence of the doctorate in the United States dates back to the 1860s. Yale University's Department of Philosophy and the Arts granted the first Doctor of Philosophy in 1861. This imitated a new trend in American higher education. In 1876, Johns Hopkins University, along with twenty-five other institutions, awarded a total of forty-four Ph.D. degrees to students (Rudolph, 1990). In 1893, Teacher's College awarded the first Ph.D. in the field of education, which began yet another movement in education. Educators at the university level wanted to obtain this distinctive degree designation (Toma, 2002).

**Doctorate of Philosophy in Education.** The Ph.D. in Education came to represent the pinnacle of academic achievement. Those persons who accomplished this feat, they enjoyed prestige and respect amongst their peers. Those college professors without the Ph.D. definitely wanted to reach the same level of status and reverence. The Ph.D. within the profession of higher education became as the label of academic respectability and professional competence. This evolution of degree obtainment drove colleges and universities across the country to make great haste to not only offer Ph.D. programs, but also bring Ph.D. graduates to their staffs. The Ph.D. prominence became the silent expectation at American higher education institutions. Administrators expected their professors, as well as the staff, to have Ph.D. In 1904, the City College in New York implemented new policies that required Ph.D. degrees for professors and instructors. The University of Illinois followed suit in 1905 with the same resolution for their campus and declared all future appointments of professors would be given to men that had attained a Ph.D. The demand for the Ph.D. degree was high. As a result, the rise in "honorary" Ph.D. degrees increased between the 1870s and 1880s. The sentiment was everyone needed to be called "doctor," no matter what avenue one took to get the title (Rudolph, 1990). This

designation became necessary for one to be considered competent to teach at the collegiate level, regardless if their aim was to conduct research or not.

**Doctorate of Education.** With so much focus on the Ph.D., it could be assumed the Doctorate of Education would be just as well-received and sought after by prospective scholars. However, this is not the. Since its inception at Harvard University in 1920, the Ed.D. degree has been scrutinized educational scholars, administrators, and even students. Throughout the years, the Ed.D. has been called the “watered-down” version of the Ph.D. Amongst some crowds, it has never been regarded with the same level of prestige as the Ph.D. According to Coorough & Nelson (1991) it [Ed.D.] has always been the least sought-after degree by the students who enter doctoral programs. Osguthorpe & Wong (1991) argued the degree choice from the student perspective typically leans towards the Ph.D., due to the historical aspect of the Ph.D. being the more established doctoral title out of the two.

The Doctor of Education degree was established by the Harvard Graduate School of Education with the intent of it becoming the professional doctorate of the field of education (Toma, 2002). It was conceived by Harvard with the belief, as a field, education should have its own distinctive separation from the arts & sciences, and the Doctor of Education was to be that distinction (Osguthorpe & Wong, 1991). Since its beginnings, the Ed.D. has differed minimally in emphasis, structure, and strategies from the Ph.D. Therefore, the belief in many sects is the two degrees are the same in many ways, and should be considered as equals. However, there are professionals in the field that would wholeheartedly disagree with an even comparison of the two.

### **Explanation of Ph.D. in Education**

As stated before, the first American Ph.D. was awarded in 1861 by Yale University. In 1909, John Hopkins University established the Master's of Arts (M.A.) and Ph.D. as separate degrees (Baez, 2002). The M.A. was designated "for college teachers" (Baez, 2002, p. 49). The Ph.D. was then reserved "for the small group of individuals who it [the University] judged able to make first-rate contributions to original research" (Baez, 2002, p. 49). Early on, the letters Ph.D. identified the experts in a particular discipline. It was intended for those who had an interest in the production of research in the various fields. Though the M.A. was still available, by the mid-1900s the Ph.D. was required for educators at the university level (Baez, 2002). In Baez's research, he found early on "fewer than 20 percent of Ph.D. holders actually produced research". His hypothesis suggested this is the reason for "the creation of different doctoral degrees" and why "Harvard University granted its first Ed.D. in 1920 for practicing educators" (Baez, 2002, p. 50). In efforts to remain aligned with the German model for higher education, the early American Ph.D. remained specifically for researchers.

**Examples of Ph.D in Education programs.** From 1920 until today, education remains one of the few fields of study with two distinctive terminal degrees-Ph.D. and Ed.D. The Ph.D. in Education helped establish education as an academic discipline "with its own set of problems, questions, knowledge bases, and approaches to inquiry..." (Golde & Walker, 2006, p.254). Like other disciplines, the Ph.D. "is understood to be for the training and credentialing of researchers and scholars" (Baez, 2002). In general, it is primarily research-oriented and research-focused. "A Ph.D. in education is a traditional academic degree that aims to prepare researchers, college teachers, and scholars in education" (Golde & Walker, 2006, p.247). For example, the University of Georgia's online graduate catalog stated "this degree [Doctorate of Philosophy] for

the purpose of providing properly qualified students with the opportunity to pursue research and other scholarly activities beyond the point that is possible in programs for the master's degree” (UGA-Grad). At the University of Georgia (UGA) the Ph.D. is “granted in recognition of proficiency in research, breadth and soundness of scholarship, and thorough acquaintance with a specific field of knowledge, not upon completion of any definite amount of work prescribed in advance” (UGA-Grad). The elitist view of the Ph.D. is still quite evident among American higher education institutions. But the UGA is not alone, the University of Florida online graduate catalog described their Ph.D. without ambiguity as “a research degree and is granted on evidence of general proficiency, distinctive attainment in a special field, and particularly on ability for independent investigation as demonstrated in a dissertation presenting original research...” (UFL-Catalog). Our own institution, the University of North Texas, specified the Ph.D. for “individuals primarily interested in the scholarly inquiry and/or teaching of higher education as a field of study” (UNT-Grad). Is it possible the stature of the Ph.D. is kept alive only by the rhetoric of higher education? Even still, the “Ph.D.’s in education generate new knowledge, understand the intellectual history of the field...and represent that knowledge to others within and outside the field” (Golde & Walker, 2006, p.254).

### **Ed.D. in Education**

With the first Ed.D. awarded in 1920, it seems the M.A., which was originally for college teachers, was eliminated. For decades, the Ed.D. has been surrounded by great debate over its relevancy, legitimacy, and longevity. The Ed.D. degree serves a different purpose than the Ph.D. in education in that it defines education as a profession. For the general sense, it is largely accepted as ‘practitioner-oriented’ and is “to prepare managerial and administrative leadership in education” (Golde & Walker, 2006, p. 247). Much of the content and structure of the Ed.D. curriculum is based on the combination of theory and practice. According to research published

by Toma in 2002, the “Ed.D. is focused on application...on the acquisition of skills...most students attend part-time...and classes are less cohort based” (p. 3).

**Examples of Doctorate of Education programs.** For comparison, the University of Georgia’s Ed.D. degree is minimally identified as a degree that “provides advanced professional training for careers in teaching, administration, and other educational services” and “specialization in research training...in subject fields appropriate to elementary, secondary, and college teaching” (COE-UGA). This is a stark contrast to the description of the Ph.D. However, with further examination of the degree requirements, we found the Ed.D. required the same core courses, dissertation-candidacy semester hours, and similar have cognate/elective obligations as the Ph.D. program (COE-UGA). On the other hand, the University of Florida’s College of Education has distinctive differences within the Ed.D. and Ph.D. higher education programs. Unlike the Ph.D. curriculum, the Ed.D. curriculum is pre-defined for students with little room for flexibility outside of the concentration options. Though the 90 hour requirement is the same for both degrees, including dissertation hours, the Ed.D. plan consists of more electives hours and almost fifty percent less research hours (COE-UFL). Lastly, the University of North Texas’s Higher Education Ed.D. program is “designed for individuals interested primarily in the application of theory to practice” (COE-UNT). Like the UGA programs, it shares several core course components with its Ph.D. counterpart and the major difference lies in the research course requirements. In line with current literature, it can be assumed the Ed.D. degree is mainly for those persons who view education as a profession rather than an academic discipline. It is for those who want to put learned theory and research to practice in the field. Given the provided information, why is there still an argument of the Ed.D.’s value in the higher education?

### **Comparison of Degree Strategies**

When looking at the two, the Doctor of Philosophy and the Doctor of Education have very few differences, generally speaking. Both, commonly, require rigorous coursework, research tools/experience, an end-of-coursework qualifying examination, and the culmination of all Doctoral work, the dissertation. In relation to the dissertation, the Ph.D. dissertation typically utilizes more multivariate statistics. The typical Ed.D. dissertation does more survey research. Differences also exist between in research designs, statistical analyses, and target populations, but otherwise these programs are relatively similar degrees (Coorough & Nelson, 1991). However, many scholars have questioned the credibility of the Ed.D. in comparison to the Ph.D.. Some actual believe the Ed.D. should have been eradicated long ago in favor of only keeping the Ph.D. as the doctorate of choice (Osguthorpe & Wong, 1991).

The Ph.D. and Ed.D. were created to serve independent objectives for the education field of study. The Ph.D. was originally formed to encourage the pursuit of new knowledge, theory development, and advanced research among early college professors. The Ed.D. was crafted to support the practice of education as a profession for those persons interested in going beyond theory. Simply stated, “the Ph.D. concentrates on training faculty and researchers” and “the Ed.D. prepares administrators for professional practice though practical curriculum” (Toma, 2002). From the three collegiate examples provided above and current research, we found only minimum concrete differences in the two degrees. Toma (2002) summed it up as “the Ed.D. develops the researching professionals while the other [Ph.D.] trains the professional researchers” (p.4)

In the continued discussion of these two degrees, it is typically stated that the easiest way to discern between them is to give the distinction that the Ph.D. is more research-oriented, meant



to prime researchers, college professors, and educational scholars. While on the other side, the Ed.D. is an educational practitioners degree, meant to train individuals who want to be college administrators and managerial leaders in education (Golde & Walker, 2006). The assumed mentality behind *degree privilege* is more important to the mission of higher education is all a matter of opinion. If privilege is given to practice and practitioners, then it is assumed the doctoral programs should be utilized to prepare individuals to be productive and adequate members of the working world. However, if privilege is given to academia and theory, then it is assumed that the role of the graduate programs is to be the producer of knowledge for the world, which is done through research (Baez, 2002).

**Specific Ph.D. programmatic similarities and differences.** To demonstrate, at the University of Georgia the Ph.D. in Education Administration & Policy program consists of six segments and three of which are different from the Ed.D. in Educational Leadership. (Note both programs are listed under UGA's College of Education Department of Lifelong Education, Administration, and Policy.) The hours required for the cognate outside of the field, specialization within the field and apprenticeship in academe are all reserved for Ph.D. students. The Ph.D. dissertation process is explicitly explained for prospective students with detail, including statements such as "each major professor and committee determines the scope of the prospectus [dissertation proposal]" and "again, what constitutes a prospectus is articulated by the major professor" (COE-UGA). This in turn reinforces the research orientation, college-level teaching and publishing aspect of the Ph.D.

The University of Florida's College of Education Department of Educational Administration and Policy has taken a slightly different approach with their Ph.D. in Higher Education Administration. The curriculum is not as defined or precise as we have seen in other

programs, with the exception of the twelve research hours required by the UFL College of Education. Remember this program has a minimum of ninety hours. Of that ninety hours, twenty-four are dissertation hours. Of the remaining fifty-four hours, thirty-six hours must be “approved by the supervisory committee”. The student only gets to choose approximately five or six classes at their discretion (COE-UFL). Again, we found a very high faculty influence within the course curriculum. We can assume this allows the faculty to serve as professional mentors and research role models, rather than merely a professor in a classroom.

The University of North Texas College of Education Department of Higher Education Ph.D. in Higher Education resembles a hybrid of the two previous examples. The department is clear on the parallel between the Ph.D. and Ed.D. However, there is a constant reappearance of one statement to validate the difference of the degrees on several web pages and it goes on to say “the Ed.D. and Ph.D. programs differ significantly in their length and emphasis and in course work, research tool, minor field and dissertation requirements” (COE-UNT). It seems it is important for the department to give notice to prospective students. Currently, this program only reviews and accepts new Ph.D. applications annually, unlike the Ed.D. program that admits students twice yearly. The most substantial piece to this Ph.D. is the required Research Tool hours, which go beyond the nine hours designated by the College of Education (COE-UNT). The completion of these extra nine helps strengthen the student’s inquiry competency and research expertise.

**Specific Ed.D. programmatic similarities and differences.** The Ed.D. focuses on the “enhancement of professional practices” (Toma, 2002, p.6). We see examples of this with the three programs we have provided in our research. The Ed.D in Educational Leadership at the University of Georgia is “a performance-based program of study designed to prepare school and

system leaders who can advance the knowledge and practice of PreK-12 educational administration and support school and system improvement” with *Plan A* and *Plan B* program options. Both options have fifty-five hours of coursework, but with completion of *Plan A* the student will receive a Leadership Certification from the Georgia Professional Standards Commission. However to be admit to *Plan A*, the candidate must acquire both a partnership agreement with their respective school system and a letter of recommendation & support from a system-level administrator (COE-UGA). So, it is assumed prospective students are already working in the education and will continue to work throughout the process.

As stated before, the Ed.D. in Higher Education Administration within the University of Florida College of Education’ Department of Educational Administration & Policy has a strict format. The curriculum is divided into six sections including the higher education administration core, area of concentration, and research classes. The same twelve research course hours is required for both the Ph.D. and Ed.D. degrees. We also can predict within the Higher Education Administration program the Ph.D. students will take the same classes, but maybe not the prescribed order as the Ed.D. because the Ph.D. degree is be tailored to appease particular research interests. The area of concentration course options solidifies this Ed.D. program as a typically professional, or practitioners, degree (COE-UFL).

Our last example of an Ed.D in Higher Education is housed within UNT College of Education Department of Higher Education. The Ed.D. and Ph.D. in Higher Education Administration extract from the same pool of core course curriculum. Like the Ph.D, Ed.D. students have an option of choosing minor, or cognate, and completing an field internship if there is no prior work experience. The key differences lie in the minimum research requirement from the College of Education and of course, the dissertation purpose. According the

department's guidelines, the Ed.D. dissertation should relate to "immediate operational programs of any aspect of higher education, either in an analysis and solution format or in an application of theory or research context" (COE-UNT).

**Summary of comparisons.** Many researchers and scholars do approve of the current designations of the two degrees, stating it allows for some differentiation between two programs that are seemingly similar no matter where one looks. This would especially hold true for institutions of higher education that offer both degree programs in their education programs. The echoing sentiments are the Ph.D. should solely be concerned with research and the pursuit of new knowledge and the Ed.D. should be solely concerned with the training of efficient practitioners in society. Even with these differentiations, the prevailing reality still remains there is very little difference between the two degrees, which actually may be the problem in students having to choose (Baez, 2002). What makes the decision for students even more skewed is the perception of the Ed.D. degree versus the Ph.D. degree, especially when one considers the relation of the degrees to specific types of institutions. Research universities typically tend to show reluctance in offering the Ed.D. as their only degree designation, with their preference being to offer both degrees. While comprehensive colleges and universities are more likely to offer the Ed.D. degree as their only doctorate. In examining the perspective of the student, it is again evidenced that students whom attend institutions that offer both programs typically choose the Ph.D. over the Ed.D., which further leaves the Ed.D. with more scrutiny to face than its predecessor (Osguthorpe & Wong, 1991).

### **The Future**

It is an assumption the Ph.D. in Education will not disappear from higher education any time soon. With the Ph.D. being the oldest and most prestigious doctoral degree in the existence of American higher education, it seems it is one of the most "untouchable" degrees. The Ph.D. is

seen as the top tier degree to obtain. It is well-known in all circles of education. Professional degrees tend not to hold up as well against the Ph.D., outside of the M.D. Recommendations have been made to alter the Ph.D., in terms of tightening up the coursework requirements and dissertation requirements. Therefore, within the field of education, the Ph.D. will stand out more when compared to the Ed.D. degree. If predictions were to be made, the fact will remain that the Ph.D. is the primary doctorate in academia, which just further contributes to the pervasive attitude of “degree snobbery,” and the deepening wedge that is driven between the Ed.D. and Ph.D. degrees.

Though the debate surrounding the validity and purpose of the Ed.D. endures, in 2008 approximately three thousand new Ed.D. dissertations were added to the ProQuest *Dissertations and Theses* database (Malette, 2009). Over two hundred colleges and universities grant Ed.D. degrees, in addition to the Ph.D. in Education (GradSchools.com, 2010). From the given examples and previous research, we know institutions through reform are making efforts to establish greater distinguish between the Ph.D. and Ed.D. programs. Therefore, the future of the Ed.D. lies in the hands of the decision-makers within the institutions. Yet, we have learned the Ed.D.’s value cannot be defined by the rhetoric of higher education or the perceptions of scholarly critics. But rather, the Ed.D. validity is accomplished through the contributions to educational research by those who hold Ed.Ds, the application of theory in the workplace and production of well-prepared professionals to serve at the numerous colleges & universities as administrators, faculty, and staff. As the field of education expands as a profession, as well as an academic discipline, the scope of the Ed.D. will grow parallel to meet those expected needs.

**Conclusion**

We have discussed at the length the historical perspective of the Ph.D. in Education and the Doctorate of Education. So, we now better understand the foundational concepts for both degrees. We have delved in to debate over the common and exclusive elements of the Ph.D. and Ed.D. Though the differences are small, in context we recognize why this debate over scholarship versus professional training has continued throughout the years. With the provided examples of graduate education programs, we illustrated specific programmatic components that exist within these programs. Overall, we agree the future of the Ph.D. and Ed.D are intertwined and the battle for validity will continue. As long as education is an academic discipline and profession, there will be a demand for either degree. For it is assumed, the need to further educational research & theory and the need to properly train future higher education administrators, deans, and professional staff is ever-present.

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