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Structure of the U.S. Education System: First-Professional Degrees

First-professional degrees represent a category of qualifications in professional subject areas that require students to have previously completed specified undergraduate coursework and/or degrees before enrolling. They are considered graduate-level programs in the U.S. system because they follow prior undergraduate studies, but they are in fact first degrees in these professional subjects. Holders of first-professional degrees are considered to have an entry-level qualification and may undertake graduate study in these professional fields following the award of the first-professional degree. Several of these degrees use the term "doctor" in the title, but these degrees do not contain an independent research component or require a dissertation (thesis) and should not be confused with PhD degrees or other research doctorates.

A first-professional degree is an award that requires completion of a program that meets the following criteria: (1) completion of the academic requirements to begin practice in the profession; (2) at least 2 years of college work prior to entering the program; and (3) a total of at least 6 academic years of college work to complete the degree program, including prior required college work plus the length of the professional program itself.

First-professional degree programs are generally accredited by specialized, programmatic accrediting agencies. For individuals seeking professional licensure, each state-level licensing board determines its own policies concerning matters such as degree requirements, the accreditation of awarding institutions and alternative paths to licensure. Licensure policies can vary by state and by profession.

Note: The U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) discontinued use of the term "First Professional Degree" as of its 2010-11 data collection. For the Doctor degrees referenced below, NCES now uses the term "Doctor's degree-professional practice."

FIRST-PROFESSIONAL DEGREE TITLES

First-professional degrees may be awarded in various fields. These fields can change over time as professional licensure requirements evolve. The following list includes commonly awarded first professional degrees but may not be exhaustive.

Doctor of Audiology (Au.D.)
Doctor of Chiropractic (D.C. or D.C.M.)
Doctor of Dental Science (D.D.S.) or Doctor of Dental Medicine (D.M.D.)
Doctor of Jurisprudence or Juris Doctor (J.D.)
Doctor of Medicine (M.D.)
Doctor of Optometry (O.D.)
Doctor of Osteopathic Medicine/Osteopathy (D.O.)
Doctor of Pharmacy (Pharm.D.)
Doctor of Physical Therapy (D.P.T.)
Doctor of Podiatric Medicine/Podiatry (D.P.M., D.P., or Pod.D.)
Master of Divinity (M.Div.), Master of Hebrew Letters (M.H.L.), Rabbinical Ordination (Rav)
Doctor of Veterinary Medicine (D.V.M.)