**Ph.D. vs. Ed.D.**

Which terminal degree is right for you?

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In today’s higher education climate, students who wish to pursue doctoral derees have a plethora of options.  Colleges and universities across the country have expanded their graduate offerings.  The Ph.D. (Doctor of Philosophy) degree is now accompanied by the Psy.D. (Doctor of Psychology), DBA (Doctor of Business Administration), and Ed.D. (Doctor of Education) degrees.  With so many options, prospective students often find themselves weighing opportunity costs of enrolling in certain programs, leading to questions, and sometimes debates, about which degree option is best for a particular student and his/her career path.

In no other discipline is this subject more frequently broached than in education.  With both the Ph.D. and Ed.D. degrees available, education students have two legitimate options for obtaining a terminal degree.  Dismissing the notion many “real scholars” hold about education not being a true, rigorous discipline like those in the humanities or natural sciences, I will use this space to give a comparison of the Ph.D. in education and Ed.D. degrees.

**Strengths of a Ph.D. in Education**

1. **Research Intensive.**  Both the Ph.D. and Ed.D. require rigorous research and scholarship production, but the Ph.D. tends to have a greater focus on these areas.  Students pursuing a Ph.D. in education typically are being trained to become scholars who spend much of their careers raising questions on best practices and outcomes for teaching and learning in K-12 and higher education settings.  Ph.D. recipients often develop theories through research that can be tested and utilized in the classroom or on campus.

2. **More Common for a Faculty Career.**  Although there are a number of Ed.D. recipients who become professors right out of graduate school, this tends to be a more common career path for Ph.D. recipients.  Ph.D. programs specialize in producing scholars who tend to pursue careers cultivating other scholars.  These programs train their graduates to focus predominantly on publishing in top-tier journals, presenting papers at national conferences, and obtaining tenure at all costs.  Ph.D. programs in education normally breed future education professors.

3. **More Program Options.**  There are far more Ph.D. programs in education than Ed.D. programs.  Students desiring a Ph.D. in an education field (higher education, curriculum and instruction, educational policy, etc.) will have an easier time finding a degree program than those seeking strictly an Ed.D.  More options means more opportunities in terms of institution, geographic location, quality faculty, etc.

4. **Funding.**  This is a *major* strength.  Ph.D. programs tend to—not always—fully fund students’ tuition while providing a stipend and living quarters.  It is rare to find an Ed.D. program that will provide full funding.  The major advantage here is that fully funded Ph.D. students can focus full-time on coursework and research.  Ph.D. students have time to teach undergraduate courses, travel to conferences, and serve as [teaching assistants](https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/gradhacker/six-excellent-books-new-and-seasoned-tas), all valuable experiences for developing a resume to become a professor.

**Strengths of an Ed.D.**

1.  **Administration Focus.**  Most Ed.D. programs—not all—focus specifically on preparing students to assume formal administrative leadership positions in educational institutions, school districts, nonprofit organizations, government agencies, and the private sector.  It is an applied, professional degree that aims to teach students how to solve problems and challenges that education administrators face on a daily basis.  The average Ed.D. student usually does not have aspirations to be an [academic](http://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/11/07/presidential-aspirations-marc-johnson).

2.  **Practical Over Philosophical.**  Related to the last point, pondering abstract concepts is not the primary focus of Ed.D. studies.  While critically examining theoretical constructs is useful, Ed.D. students are seeking solutions that are directly applicable at this moment to managing large, complex organizations.  Coursework and research is practitioner-based, and professors typically have spent time in the field doing what they are teaching rather than entering the academy directly from graduate school.

3. **Able to Hold Full-Time Jobs.**  Because most Ed.D. programs are not fully funded, students tend to hold outside full-time jobs to support themselves and their families.  While it might not seem that paying tuition is an asset, Ed.D. students who work do not have to endure the financially-strapped, poverty-stricken life most graduate students experience.  Many Ed.D. students are K-12 principals, assistant principals, assistant superintendents, or college deans, assistant deans, and other administrators.  These positions usually pay quite well and allow students to continue to support themselves while budgeting in the cost of their tuition to their life expenses.

4.  **Classmates as Professionals.**  Since most Ed.D. students tend to be working professionals, it can be normal to have a class or cohort of students who all hold significant administrative or professional positions.  This gives students an opportunity to learn from each other about what works in the field.  It also helps students build relationships and networks with people who may already be major players in their disciplines.  I personally have seen classmates in an Ed.D. program hire each other for significant, high-paying positions based on connections made in class.

It is important to note that I am not saying one particular degree is better than the other.  The one that is “better” is the one that fits your professional and personal needs and interests.  I am hoping this explanation brings some clarity to the nature of the Ed.D. and how it differs from a Ph.D. in education.  If you plan on pursuing a doctorate in education, think deeply about where you want to go in your career.  Your long-term career goals will help you make the right decision.