

Standard 5 overview: doctoral degrees in theological education

BY LESTER EDWIN J. RUIZ

Doctoral degrees approved by the Commission on Accrediting of The Association of Theological Schools (“the Commission”) serve as both capstones of advanced ministerial and academic preparation and as gateways to deeper service within the church, academy, and broader society. Such degrees must align with each school’s mission, constituencies, and institutional capacity, while upholding rigorous standards of student learning and formation. These programs—whether professional or academic—need to be evaluated regularly, with outcomes used to refine curricula and strengthen the overall quality of formation.

The Doctor of Ministry (DMin)

The Doctor of Ministry is the quintessential, advanced professional doctorate within North American theological education. It is intended to equip individuals for more profound and effective religious leadership in congregational life, ecclesial bodies, and various ministry contexts, including teaching roles. As a program that builds upon prior graduate theological education and substantial ministry experience, the DMin requires a minimum of 30 semester credits.

The only nomenclature recognized by the Commission for this degree is Doctor of Ministry (DMin), regardless of any specialized tracks or emphases a school may choose to include in its promotional materials.



This program is shaped around four key learning outcomes:

1. Advanced theological integration, enabling students to theologically interpret and engage their cultural contexts with both depth and clarity.
2. Contextual competency, equipping leaders to identify, frame, and address significant ministry issues.
3. Leadership development, aimed at enhancing the student’s capacity to lead effectively in diverse ministry settings.
4. Personal and spiritual maturity, nurturing a renewed and deepened sense of vocational calling.

The DMin program typically includes a blend of peer learning, self-directed projects, research-based engagement, and field-based practice. It culminates in a major written project that addresses a vital area of ministry related to the student’s calling. This project must employ sound research methods and contribute new knowledge to the practice of ministry. A formal oral presentation and evaluation follows the written submission, demonstrating mastery and integration of the program’s outcomes.

Applicants to the DMin program must ordinarily hold an accredited Master of Divinity (MDiv) degree. However, schools may admit students without an MDiv if they meet publicly stated alternative criteria in six areas: theological interpretation, cultural adaptability, vocational clarity, personal and spiritual readiness, a relevant accredited master's degree or equivalent, and significant ministry experience sufficient for engagement at a doctoral level.

Like all commission-approved degrees, the DMin program must undergo regular institutional evaluation, with faculty assessing both the overall program and specific learning outcomes to ensure continuous improvement.

Other professional doctoral degrees

In addition to the DMin, the Commission approves other professional doctorates designed to support leadership in fields such as education, missions, intercultural studies, or church music. These degrees require a minimum of 36 semester credits and are tailored to the specific disciplinary focus of each program.

Degree titles vary depending on the field and include designations such as Doctor of Education (EdD), Doctor of Educational Ministry (DEdMin), Doctor of Intercultural Studies (DICS), Doctor of Missiology (DMiss), Doctor of Musical Arts (DMA), or Doctor of [Specialization].

These degrees should have clearly articulated student learning outcomes that reflect their particular disciplinary aims. They typically focus on advanced integration of theological disciplines with insights from behavioral and social sciences, research methodologies, and field-based practices. Each program culminates in a doctoral dissertation, extended project, or summative research report, integrating the student's learning in a form appropriate to the field.

Courses shared with other programs must demonstrate doctoral-level rigor for students in these degrees, and, like the DMin, these degrees are subject to regular evaluation of both the whole program and its outcomes.

Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) and Doctor of Theology (ThD)

The Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) and Doctor of Theology (ThD) degrees represent the highest level of academic achievement in US and Canadian theological education. These research-intensive degrees are designed to prepare individuals for vocations of teaching and scholarship in theological schools, universities, and other contexts where deep academic formation is essential.

The program requires at least 36 semester credits and is usually referred to as the PhD, although some institutions, depending on tradition and context, use the ThD title. The Commission will only record the general title (PhD or ThD), unless a school requests approval for a specifically named specialization.

PhD programs are built upon well-defined learning outcomes that focus on three major areas:

1. Mastery of a theological discipline, providing comprehensive knowledge and interpretive skills.
2. Original research and writing, advancing theological understanding within and beyond the academy.
3. Vocational formation for scholarship, including teaching, mentoring, and academic leadership.

The academic rigor of these programs is supported by structured training in research methods, appropriate language study, and opportunities for developing pedagogical and formational competencies. Students must complete coursework, pass comprehensive examinations, write a doctoral dissertation that demonstrates original scholarship, and defend their dissertation through an oral examination.

Importantly, the Commission requires that at least half of the PhD coursework be completed in residence on the institution's main campus. While limited exceptions for synchronous or multi-site delivery are possible by petitioning the Board of Commissioners, programs that rely primarily on asynchronous learning are not approved. This standard

reinforces the PhD's emphasis on oral engagement, critical interaction, and scholarly formation in community.

As with other degrees, PhD and ThD programs must be evaluated regularly, with assessment findings used to improve student learning and program quality.

In summary, doctoral degrees approved by the Commission on Accrediting—whether ministerial, professional, or academic—are designed to foster excellence in theological reflection, spiritual maturity, and vocational effectiveness. They reflect a commitment not only to advanced scholarship or leadership development, but to the holistic formation of individuals called to serve the church and the world with wisdom, skill, and integrity.



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