

2013 PLS Alumni/ae Survey: Postgraduate Degrees

Summary

The 2013 alumni/ae survey asked a number of questions about postgraduate education, including years attended, degrees earned, and fields of study. A summary of key results appears below, followed by a discussion of methodological questions and a more detailed exploration of the data.

- Of the 608 respondents to the survey question about postgraduate education, 504 (83%) answered that they had attended graduate or professional school after leaving Notre Dame.
- 58% of respondents earned professional degrees (either doctoral or masters), while 28% earned graduate degrees, either masters (15%) or doctoral (13%). (The sum of these figures is greater than the total percentage of respondents who attended a postgraduate program because some respondents earned both graduate and professional degrees.)
- Law was by far the largest field of study (31% of respondents), followed by graduate study in the humanities (with 18% of respondents earning a master's and/or doctoral degree). An MBA formed the next highest group (11% of respondents), followed by a master's in education (9%)
- Among respondents who earned master's degrees in the humanities, Theology & Religion was easily the top choice (31 respondents), followed by Literature (24 respondents), History (14) and Philosophy (11). Within the social sciences, Psychology took top place (12 respondents), followed by Political Science (5), and smaller numbers in Anthropology, Sociology, Economics, and Linguistics.
- At the level of graduate master's degrees, the humanities heavily outpaced the social sciences (comprising 66% of all graduate master's degrees vs. 20% for the social sciences), but that gap fell when considering doctoral degrees. Only 48% of doctoral degrees came in the humanities, with 27% going to the social sciences and an additional 12% coming in Education.
- In the case of graduate doctoral degrees, Philosophy took the top spot (14 respondents), followed by Psychology (12), Education (9), and then Literature (8), Theology & Religion (7), and History (7).

- About 43% of respondents who attended graduate or professional school started their (first) degree just after leaving Notre Dame. An additional 27% began their studies in the next two years; 19% in 3 – 5 years after graduating; and 11% started 6 or more years after graduation.

Methodology: Graduate vs. Professional Degrees

Generally, professional schools train students to become practitioners (but not necessarily researchers) in a particular field whereas graduate schools emphasize research. Master's programs in business (which usually do not require a thesis and do not expect students to become research scholars) exemplify the professional degree, whereas most doctoral programs in the humanities fall toward the opposite extreme. Yet categorizing programs into this binary classification can be difficult and sometimes misleading.

First, there is not a sharp boundary between the two types, and many postgraduate programs fall somewhere in between. For example, master's programs in science and engineering emphasize research but frequently provide credentials for a career in private industry (where indeed one's job may be a form of research, but not in an academic setting.) On the other hand, students who earn doctoral degrees in law or medicine may pursue a research career as a scholar within the university.

Nor is it clear where to fit the Arts in such a scheme. Most Master of Fine Arts (MFA) programs, for example, are dedicated to practice rather than research. At the same time, an artist at work can be said to be advancing his or her field in a manner analogous to that of a research scholar, and an MFA seems closer in spirit to a doctoral degree in the humanities than it does to an MBA.

Beyond such conceptual problems, the survey itself did not provide sufficient detail to distinguish some cases. For example, many of the master's degrees in Theology were probably Masters of Divinity, which can be more akin to professional degrees. Similarly, many of the master's degrees in Psychology probably represented degrees in counseling or clinical psychology rather than preparation for further research in the field. On the other hand, some degrees categorized as "professional" in this study (such as Journalism or Library Sciences) may have been more like graduate programs.

Bearing these caveats in mind, Table 1 presents the categorization adopted for this analysis:

TABLE 1: Classification of Degree Programs

Masters Degrees		Doctoral Degrees	
Professional	Graduate	Professional	Graduate
Business	Humanities	Law	Humanities
Public Administration	Social Sciences (includes Area Studies)	Medicine	Social Sciences
Health Sciences	Engineering		Engineering
Social Work	Natural Sciences		Natural Sciences
Military Science	Mathematics		Mathematics
Architecture	Arts (Performing, Visual, and Art History)		Arts (Performing, Visual, and Art History)
Education			Education
Journalism & Communication			Journalism & Communication
Library & Information Sciences			Library & Information Sciences

Note that Education, Journalism & Communication, and Library & Information Sciences switch from professional degrees as masters programs to graduate degrees as doctoral programs, a change which seems to correspond with the character of those degrees.

Charts

Chart 1: Postgraduate Degrees Earned by Respondents

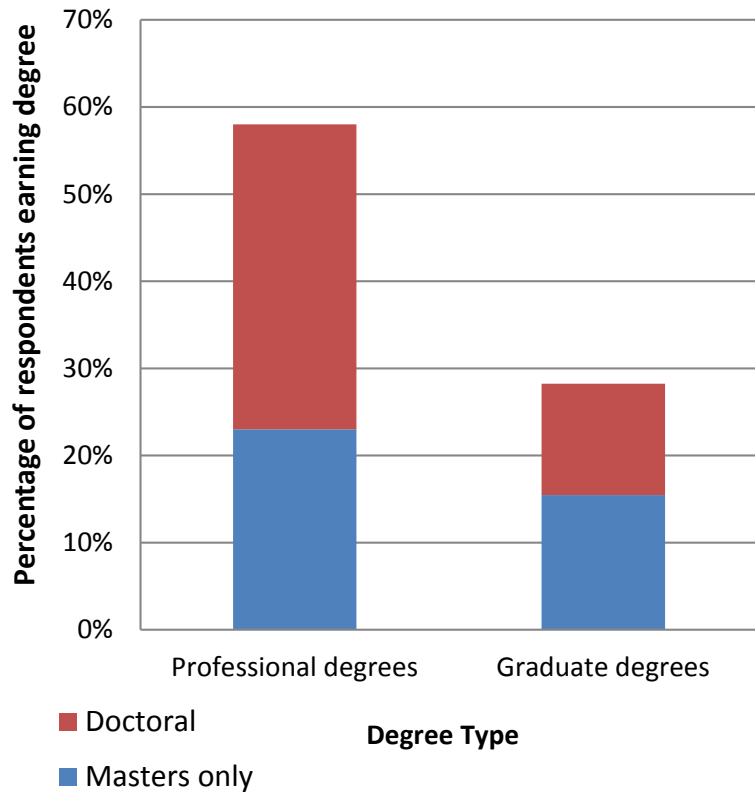


Chart 2: Postgraduate Degree Fields

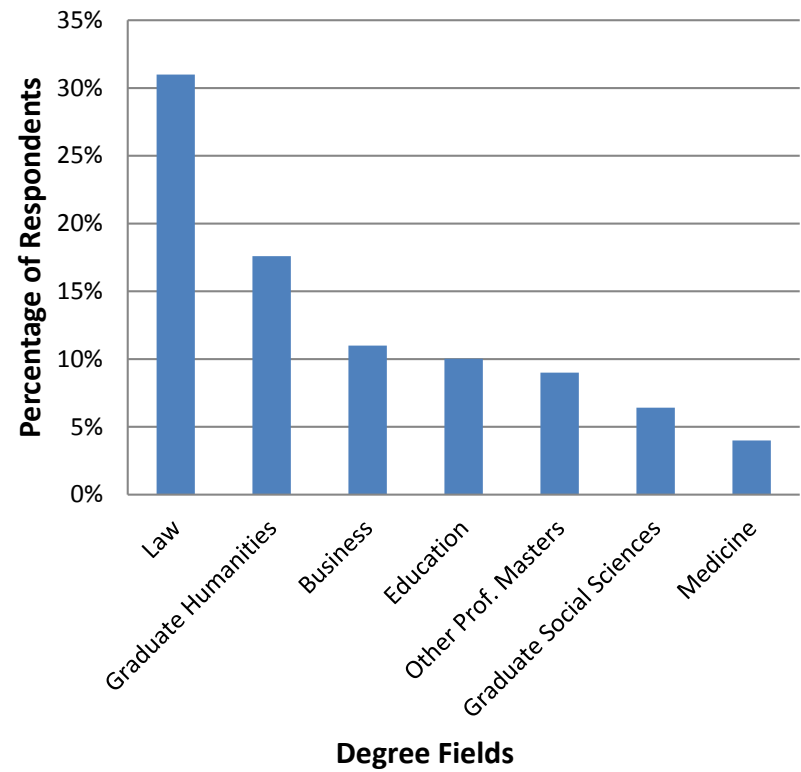


Chart 3: Professional Degrees Earned by Respondents

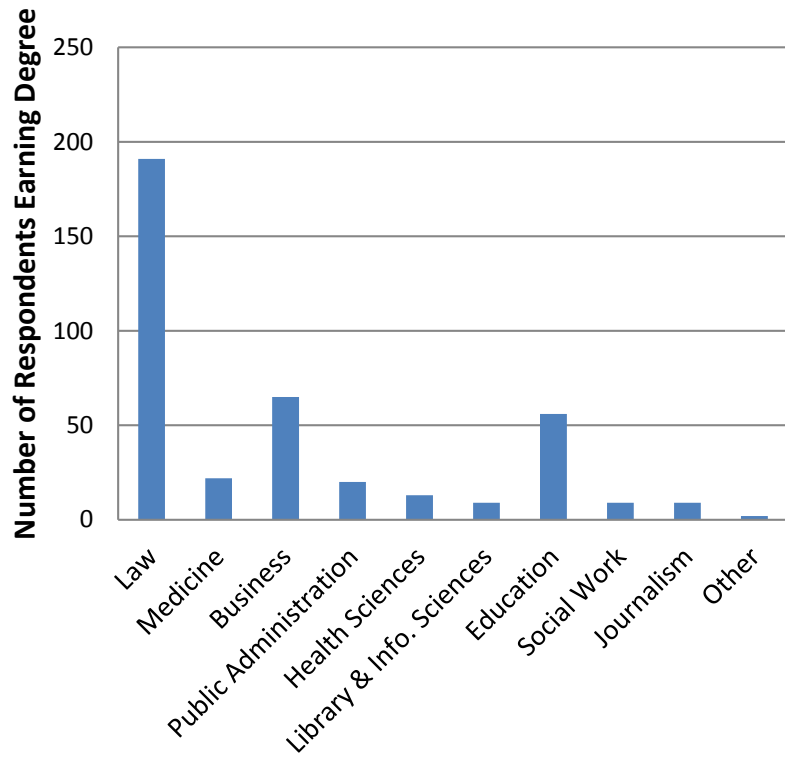


Chart 4: Percentage of Respondents Earning Various Professional Degrees

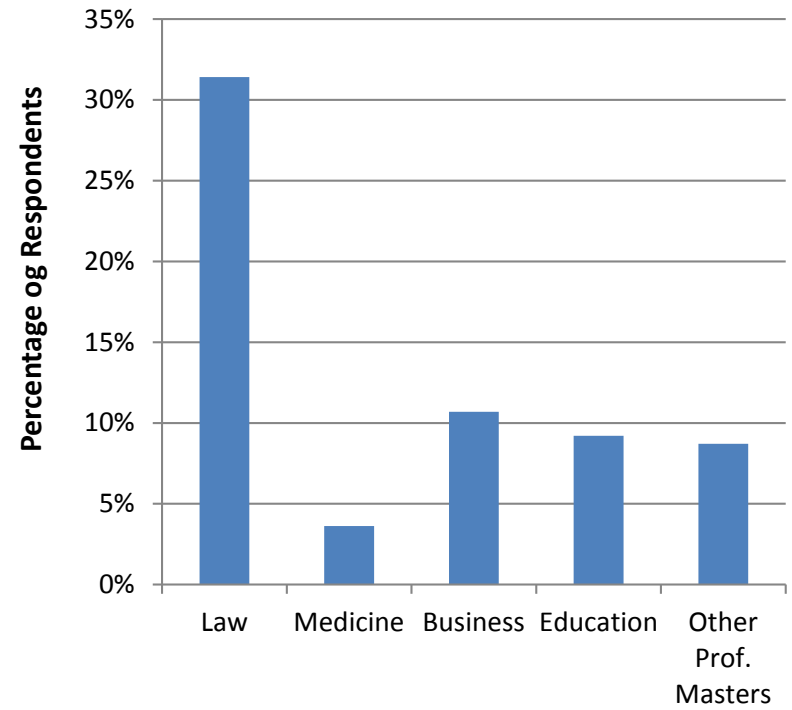


Chart 5: Graduate Masters Degrees Earned by Respondents

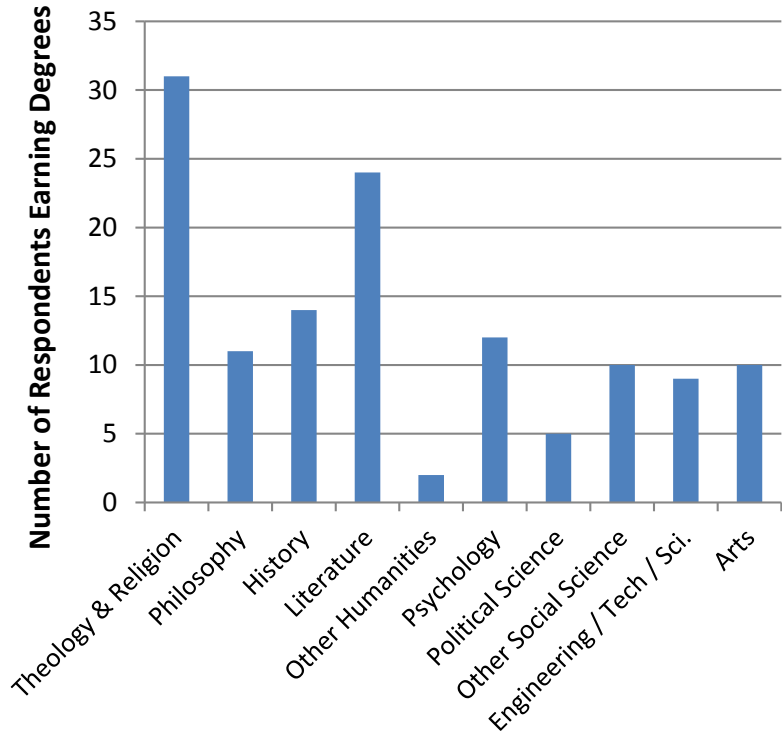


Chart 6: Doctoral Degrees Earned by Respondents

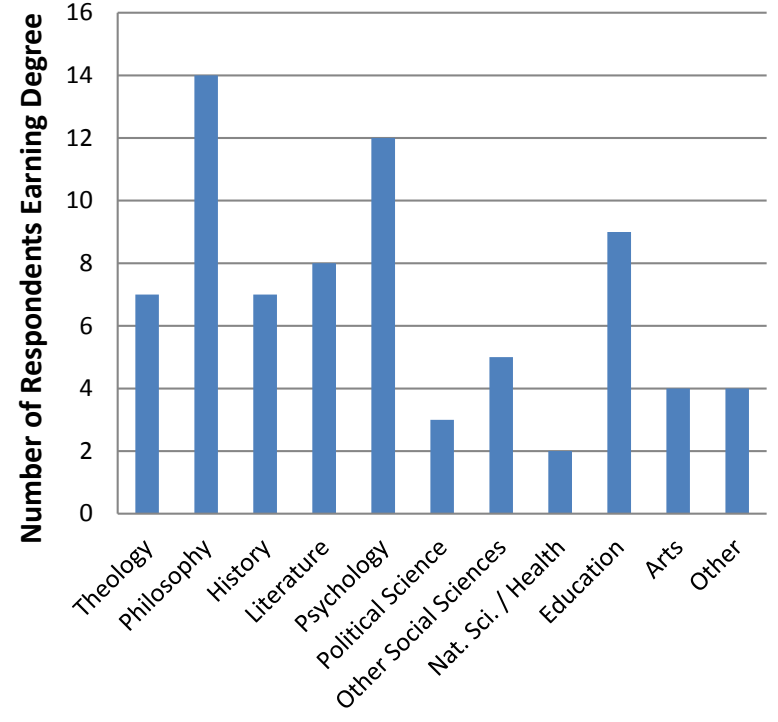


Chart 7: Years elapsed after graduation before starting graduate or professional school

