



# A PROFILE OF THE COMMUNICATION DOCTORATE IX:

THE 2020 NATIONAL SCIENCE FOUNDATION'S  
SURVEY OF EARNED DOCTORATES



NATIONAL  
COMMUNICATION  
ASSOCIATION

Each year, the National Communication Association (NCA) generates “A Profile of the Communication Doctorate,” based on data contained in the National Science Foundation’s Survey of Earned Doctorates (SED). The 2020 SED was released in October 2021 and this report serves as an update to the previously released profiles of the Communication doctorate.

## A Note on Disciplinary Classification

Since 2009, the complete set of responses to the SED has included specific information about doctorates received in Communication.<sup>1</sup> Communication is classified in the SED as “Other non-science and engineering.” In addition to Communication, this “broad field” category includes “Business management and administration” and “Non-S&E fields not elsewhere classified.” Additional non-S&E broad fields include “Education” and “Humanities and Arts.”

Respondents to the SED are asked to identify the primary field of their dissertation research and to select a code from a list of fields to classify their dissertation research. The major field classification of Communication includes the fine field designations of Communication Research, Communication Theory, Film/Radio/TV & Digital Communication, Mass Communication/Media Studies, Communication/General, and Communication/Other. The major field classification for Letters includes the fine fields of Speech & Rhetorical Studies and Rhetoric & Composition. It is possible that some Communication doctorates selected Speech & Rhetorical Studies or Rhetoric & Composition as their field, and thus would not be classified in the field of Communication by the SED.

Data about Communication doctorates should be read broadly, with the understanding that some doctorates may not be included (i.e., doctorates self-classified as Letters), while others from related disciplines (i.e., Journalism) may be counted toward the total number of Communication doctorates.

## Doctoral Recipients and Institutions

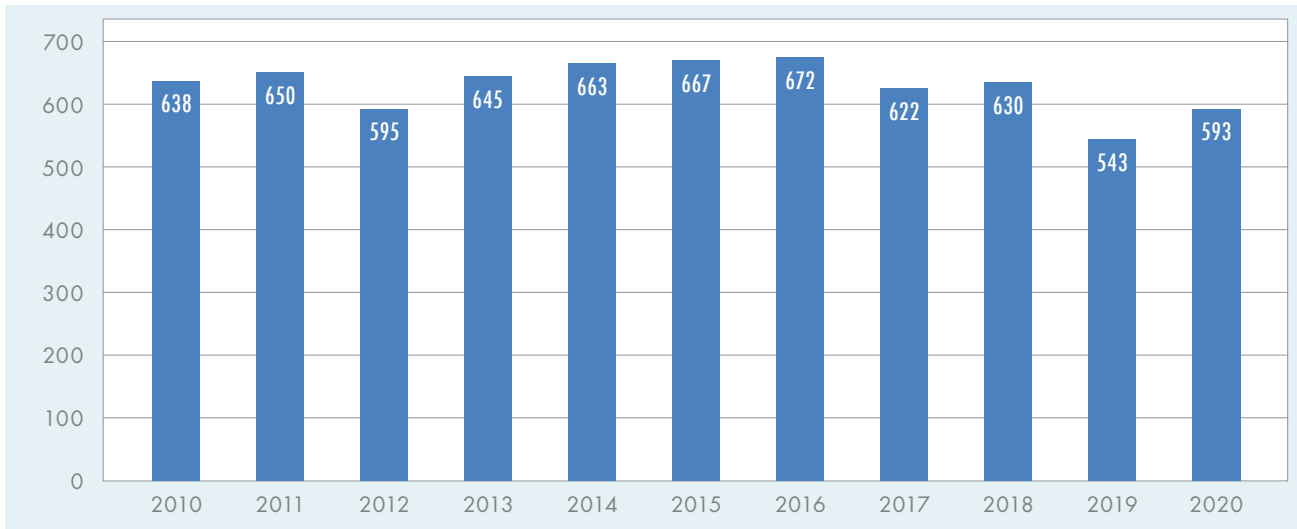
The population eligible for the 2020 SED included all individuals who received a research doctorate from a U.S. academic institution between July 1, 2019, and June 30, 2020. This population consisted of 55,283 persons at 449 institutions. The survey response rate was 92.1 percent.<sup>2</sup>

Of the 55,283 doctorates reported in the 2020 SED, 593 (1.1 percent) were classified as in the Communication discipline. This represents an increase of 50 doctorates since the 2019 SED, which reported 543 doctorates in Communication. In comparison, Political Science and Government produced 637 doctorates (down from 707 in 2019), Sociology produced 607 doctorates (down from 632 in 2019), and Anthropology produced 448 doctorates (up from 445 in 2019). In the humanities, History produced 887 doctorates (down from 912 in 2019), and Foreign Languages and Literature produced 564 doctorates (down from 610 in 2019).

<sup>1</sup> Though the SED reports some data on Communication doctorates from 1981 on, full responses organized by field that include Communication are only available from the 2009 SED to the present.

<sup>2</sup> See: <https://nces.nsf.gov/pubs/nsf22300/report/data-source>.

### Communication Doctorates Conferred, 2010–2020



Source: : 2020 SED, Table 13. Available at <https://nces.nsf.gov/pubs/nsf22300/data-tables/#group3>.

Of the 593 Communication doctorates conferred in 2020, 141 (23.8 percent) were in Communication Research, 24 (4 percent) were in Communication Theory, 188 (31.7 percent) were in Mass Communication/Media Studies, 10 (1.7 percent) were in Film/Radio/TV & Digital Communication, 174 (29.3 percent) were in Communication/General, and 56 (9.4 percent) were in Communication/Other. In the major field of Letters, doctorates identified as Speech & Rhetorical Studies numbered 33 in 2020, or 2.4 percent of all doctorates in Letters, and the number of doctorates in Rhetoric & Composition totaled 206 in 2020, or 14.8 percent of all doctorates in Letters.

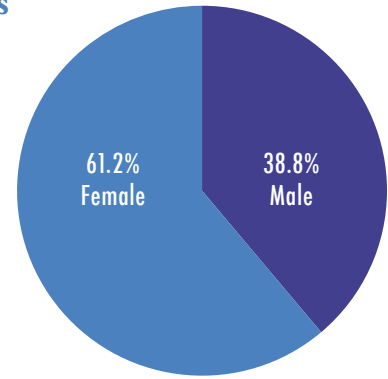
The University of Texas at Austin granted the highest number of Communication doctorates in 2020, awarding 32. A total of five institutions awarded more than 15 doctorates each, while another 12 institutions conferred at least 10 doctoral degrees. The table at right displays universities conferring 10 or more Communication doctorates in 2020.

INSTITUTIONS CONFERRING 10+ COMMUNICATION DOCTORATES, 2020	
University of Texas at Austin	32
Texas Tech University	21
Ohio University	20
Michigan State University	18
Regent University	17
University of Southern California	15
University of Florida	14
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign	14
Purdue University	14
University of Wisconsin-Madison	14
Indiana University Bloomington	12
University of Pennsylvania	12
Arizona State University	11
University of Colorado Boulder	11
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, New Brunswick	10
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill	10
Ohio State University	10

Source: 2020 SED, Table 8. Available at <https://nces.nsf.gov/pubs/nsf22300/data-tables/#group2>.

## Demographic Data—Communication Doctorates

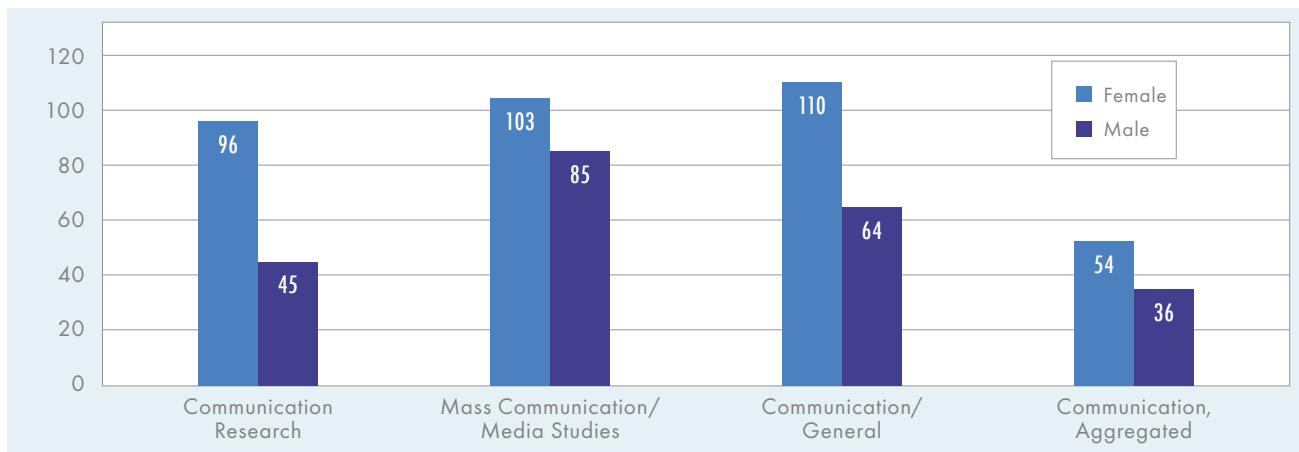
Just over 61 percent of 2020 doctoral recipients in Communication were female. By way of comparison, among the social sciences, 39.1 percent of doctorates in Political Science and Government were awarded to females, while 60 percent of doctorates in Sociology went to females, and 67.6 percent of 2020 doctorates in Anthropology were awarded to females. In the humanities, 42.3 percent of History doctorates were awarded to females, and 57.7 percent of doctorates in Letters went to females.



Source: 2020 SED, Table 16. Available at <https://nces.nsf.gov/pubs/nsf22300/data-tables/#group3>.

The chart below indicates that females received more Communication doctorates in the discipline’s sub-fields as well. This difference is most noticeable in the Communication Research sub-field.

Doctoral Recipients by Sub-field and Sex, 2020

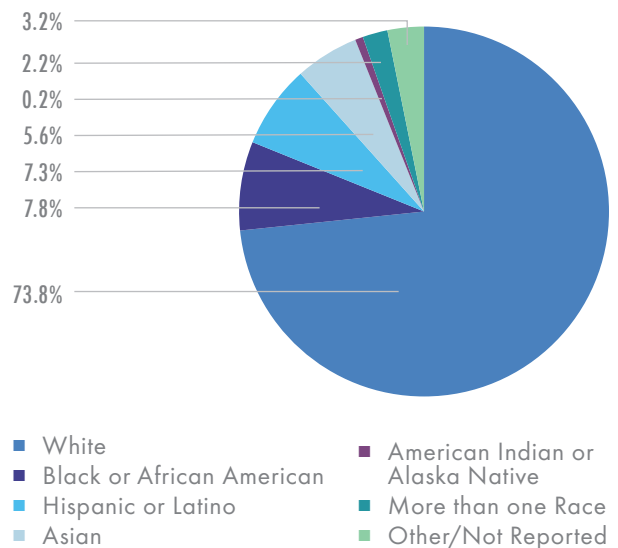


Source: 2020 SED, Table 16. Available at <https://nces.nsf.gov/pubs/nsf22300/data-tables/#group3>.

Note: Communication, Aggregated includes the fine fields of Communication Theory, Film/Radio/TV & Digital Communication, and Communication/Other.

Of the 593 Communication doctorates awarded in 2020, 26 percent (154) were received by “Temporary Visa Holders,” suggesting that more than one in four Communication doctoral recipients are international students. Of the 412 doctoral recipients who were not temporary visa holders and who responded to queries about race/ethnicity, 73.8 percent (304) were classified as “White,” 7.8 percent (32) were classified as “Black or African American,” 7.3 percent (30) were classified as “Hispanic or Latino,” 5.6 percent (23) were classified as “Asian,” .2 percent (1) were classified as “American Indian or Alaska Native,” 2.2 percent (9) identified as being “more than one race,” and 13 (3.2 percent) were classified as “other race or race not reported” (6) or “ethnicity not reported” (7).

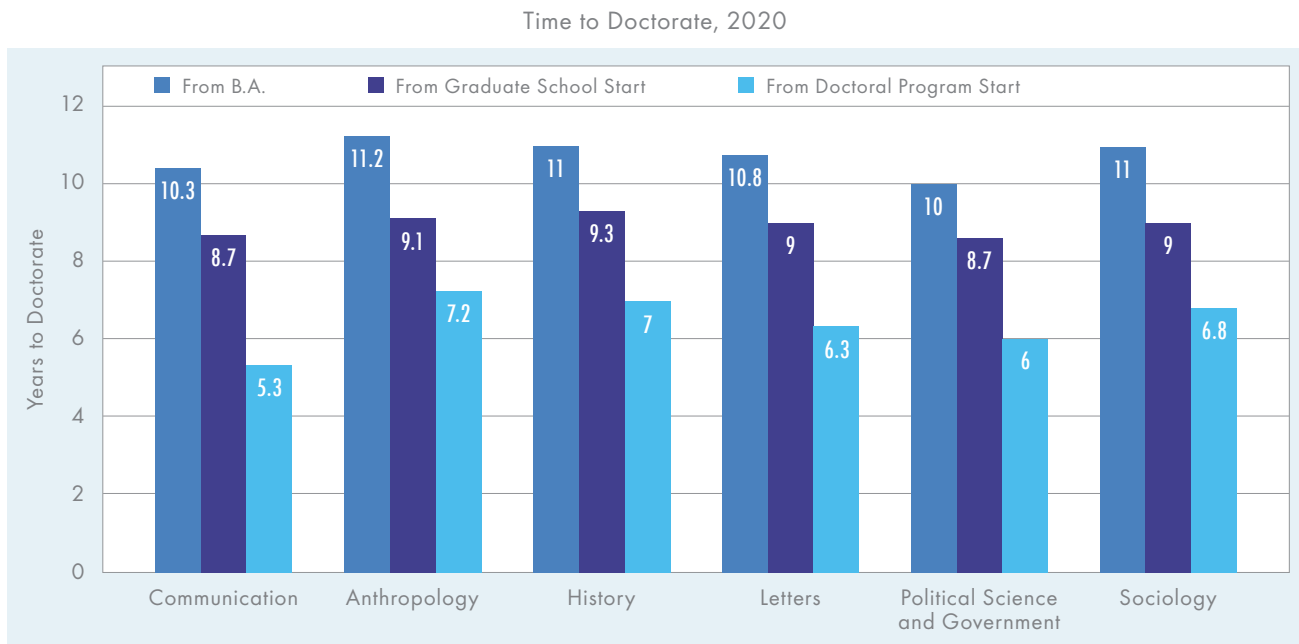
Communication Doctorate Recipients by Race/Ethnicity, 2020



Source: 2020 SED, Table 22. Available at <https://nces.nsf.gov/pubs/nsf22300/data-tables/#group3>.

## Other Information—Communication Doctorates

For the 593 Communication doctorates included in the 2020 SED, the time to degree was less than in most comparable disciplines. In the broad field (“Other Non-S&E Fields”) that includes Communication, the time to degree was 11.3 years from the B.A., 9.3 years from entering graduate school, and 5.3 years from the start of the doctoral program. These time-to-degree figures for this broad field have declined from a 2001 high of 14.0 years since the B.A., and 10.7 years since entering graduate school. In Communication, the 2020 time-to-degree figures were 10.3 years from the B.A., 8.7 years from entering graduate school, and 5.3 years from the start of the doctoral program. The chart below compares Communication doctorate time-to-degree with comparable social science and humanities disciplines. As is noted here, the time-to-degree from the start of the doctoral program is lowest in Communication. Communication and Political Science and Government share the lowest time-to-degree from graduate school start, and Communication trails behind only Political Science and Government in lowest time-to-degree from the B.A. degree.



Source: 2020 SED, Tables 62, 68, & 70. Available at <https://nces.nsf.gov/pubs/nsf22300/data-tables/#group7>.

Note: Time to doctorate from doctoral program start is based on master’s degree entry if the master’s degree was at the doctoral institution in the same fine field of study or was a prerequisite to the doctorate; otherwise, it is based on doctoral program entry.

Additional characteristics surveyed by the SED include marital status, degree status, and age at doctorate.

SELECTED CHARACTERISTICS OF COMMUNICATION DOCTORATE RECIPIENTS, 2020	
Never Married	29.7%
Married	41.7%
B.A. in Same Field	44.4%
M.A. Earned	87.2%
Median Age at Doctorate	33.5 years

Source: 2020 SED, Table 70. Available at <https://nces.nsf.gov/pubs/nsf22300/data-tables/#group7>.

## Postgraduation Plans—Communication Doctorates

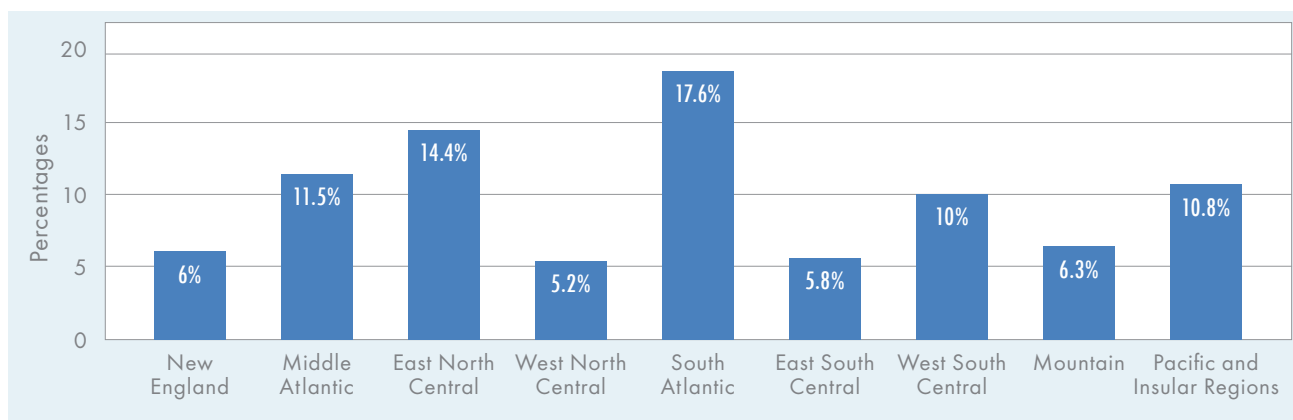
The SED asked respondents for an indication of their postgraduation plans. Of 593 Communication doctorates, 9.6 percent (57) reported “definite postgraduation study”; of that number, 96.5 percent reported receiving either a postdoctoral fellowship or a research associateship.

Another 54.6 percent (324) of the Communication doctorates reported “definite employment” as their postgraduate plans (a slight decrease from 55.8 percent in 2019). Of those reporting definite employment, 80.9 percent reported employment in academe (a 3.6 percent decrease since 2019), 11.4 percent reported employment in business or industry (a 3.5 percent increase since 2019), 2.8 percent reported employment in government (a slight increase since 2019), and 3.1 percent reported employment in a nonprofit organization (a slight decrease since 2019). Just over 22 percent (132) of respondents reported that they were “seeking employment or study” at the time they answered the SED, and 2 percent (12) reported “other” as their postgraduate plans. “Other” includes those who indicated having no plans to work or study, those who indicated some other type of postgraduation plans, and those who indicated definite plans for other full-time degree programs.

Female doctoral recipients reported higher numbers of both definite postgraduate study and postgraduate employment. Of the 57 respondents with definite postgraduate study plans, 68.4 percent of females reported definite postgraduate study, compared with 31.6 percent of males. Of the 324 respondents with definite employment plans, 62.7 percent of females reported definite employment versus 37.3 percent of male respondents. More females (84.2 percent) also reported definitive employment in academia than their male counterparts (75.2 percent).

Of those Communication doctorates reporting definite postgraduation plans, most (89.8 percent) plan to stay in the United States, with many graduates planning to locate within the South Atlantic and East North Central regions. This is consistent with findings from the 2019 SED, which also highlighted the popularity of the South Atlantic and East North Central regions. The planned postgraduation locations of Communication doctorates are found in the chart below.

Planned Postgraduation Locations, Communication Doctorates, 2020



Source: 2020 SED, Table 71. Available at <https://nces.nsf.gov/pubs/nsf22300/data-tables/#group7>.

### ABOUT THE NATIONAL COMMUNICATION ASSOCIATION

The National Communication Association advances Communication as the discipline that studies all forms, modes, media, and consequences of communication through humanistic, social scientific, and aesthetic inquiry.

NCA serves the scholars, teachers, and practitioners who are its members by enabling and supporting their professional interests in research and teaching. Dedicated to fostering and promoting free and ethical communication, NCA promotes the widespread appreciation of the importance of communication in public and private life, the application of competent communication to improve the quality of human life and relationships, and the use of knowledge about communication to solve human problems. NCA supports inclusiveness and diversity among our faculties, within our membership, in the workplace, and in the classroom; NCA supports and promotes policies that fairly encourage this diversity and inclusion.

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