

Episode 62 – Graduate Education 2025-26 Year in Review

Welcome to Grad-post! This is the final episode of Season 3, and I thought I'd take the opportunity to look back at what has transpired in graduate education this past academic year. A lot has happened, and there are a few things to be updated, so let's get to it. I've got six items in this year-end review.

Number six. Let's start with some good news! [Chevelle Newsome started in her new role as the seventh President of the Council of Graduate Schools](#) last summer following the retirement of Suzanne Ortega. Chevelle comes from California State University, Sacramento where she was Dean of Graduate Studies. She has already been busy speaking on a variety of graduate education issues on various platforms, but I especially like her constant presence on LinkedIn. What does this mean for you? Well, the advocacy arm of CGS is perhaps one of the strongest voices in graduate education in congress and will take your interests to law makers as policies are shaped. All the remaining topics on this year-end review have some direct link to congressional and executive actions, so the role CGS plays in influencing federal policy is key. I have every confidence that Chavelle will do a great job in her new role. Now, on to the not so great news.

Number five. [Executive Order 14173](#) hit like a ton of bricks last year, and universities scrambled to respond to its anti-DEI edicts since they were categorized as federal contractors through student loan and research funding mechanisms. The Executive Order initially was paused by a court order but is now back in effect. More directly, the Department of Education tried to follow suit with their St. Valentine's Day Massacre "[Dear Colleague Letter](#)" of February, 2025 with more specific threats to pull back funding if DEI initiatives were not eliminated on college campuses. That effort has been [declared unenforceable by the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals](#), but the anti-DEI dominoes it put into motion have continued to fall. The *Chronicle of Higher Education* has been tracking both university changes and proposed anti-DEI legislation at the state level in their "[The Dismantling of DEI](#)" [website](#). But by my reading of these developments, I have to ask if DEI is being dismantled or simply renamed. At NYU, for example, their affinity-based graduation ceremonies were replaced this year by "identity-based celebrations" that reportedly function essentially the same way as they did in the past. [Depaul University merged its student affairs unit with their Office of Institutional Diversity and Equity](#) into a new administrative unit called "Belonging, Engagement, and Mission." Similarly, [Cal Poly San Luis Obispo](#) and Cal State Long Beach utilized the "belonging" terminology in renaming their diversity centers. The elimination of mandatory diversity statements in hiring is the most prominent anti-DEI initiative coming out of state legislatures these days, but we all know that this type of information will find its way into other parts of the interview process whether they are barred from solicitation or not. No doubt it will take a court to decide if asking an applicant to explain their "belonging" activities violates federal law. Regardless of that outcome, people are losing their jobs in these institutional reorganizations, and students from marginalized groups are being further ostracized through the loss of sanctioned communities and activities regardless of how strongly their institutions want them to "belong." But expect DEI to be resurrected in some form or fashion as institutions and state legislations recognized that their portfolios are not really being rebalanced, they are shrinking.

Number Four. Expect further declines in graduate student populations due to financial concerns including the availability of and access to student loans. [Federal student loan restructuring will go into effect July 1](#) and limit graduate lending to \$20,500 per year for so-called “standard” programs and \$50,000 per year for professional programs. One of the key problems with these revisions as I outlined in Episodes [54](#) and [57](#) is that professional degree programs have been limited to only 11 degree fields including such areas as theology but excluding other programs such as nursing. There was an excellent podcast on this issue on [1A and NPR this past week called “The Future Of The American Healthcare Workforce”](#) that summarizes the looming changes to federal graduate student lending policies and their potential impact on the healthcare workforce, especially graduate nursing. I invite you to listen to the entire episode rather than to summarize it here. But one segment stood out to me. [Dr. Beth Akers](#) of the conservative American Enterprise Institute brought up one of the problems with the entire conversation on graduate student loans that I have opined on several times before, especially in [Episode 7](#), and that is regarding the terminology we use to categorize graduate programs. Have a listen:

I continue to advocate for the terminology “practice-based” and “research-based” degree programs which would help alleviate the confusion here. But it would not alleviate the damage this policy is going to have on talented individuals from underrepresented and marginalized groups furthering their health care careers. Dr. Akers goes on to say in this interview that she doesn’t mind at all that her field of Economics is not considered a professional field and that her career would not have been affected by these student loan limits:

I wonder what other economists feel about their profession not being professional, and how those who were not privileged enough to get their PhDs at an elite private institution like Columbia University feel about having their loan limits capped to below a livable wage. There are still [pending legal challenges](#) to the proposed changes to graduate student loan limits and the definitions of eligible categories, so tune in to Season 4 which will launch in September for new updates.

Number Three. While changes to graduate student loan limits will have an immediate effect on those pursuing graduate degrees, the proposed changes to how universities and degree programs are accredited have yet to land and could have a profound impact on what degree programs are even available for students to pursue. As I outlined in [Episode 59](#), there are moves at both the state and federal level to set up alternative university accreditation pathways. So, on top of the consumer-side chaos of student loans limitations, there will be producer side chaos on who is accredited, by whom, and what that all means. I don’t have a lot of updates here, except to say that as of [May 21, the Department of Education has reached consensus](#) on a number of changes, including opening the market to new accreditors. New accreditors in and of themselves may not be a bad thing, but some of the language in the consensus opinions are downright scary. Terms that used to have clear meaning like “academic freedom” and “intellectual diversity” have been redefined to mean something much more nefarious. And concepts like “merit” that have been showed to be infused with implicit bias are now being resurrected as gold standards. How these terms are implemented and what they mean for accreditation will be

decided by the courts, of course, but for now they add to the chaos that is higher education reform and the attempt to create institutional monocultures in our colleges and universities. Speaking of which ...

Number Two. Beyond the anti-DEI initiatives, graduate student loan upheaval and looming changes to the university accreditation process, the largest and longest lasting impact on graduate education, workforce development, national security, and economic stability has been and will be the chaotic changes to U.S. immigration policy over the past year. As I first outlined in Episode 47, those changes include [increasing the number of countries ineligible for visas](#), overhauling the visa screening process to include a [review of an applicant's social media content](#), [increasing the fee for an H1-B visa](#), an [overhaul of the Optional Practical Training \(OPT\) program](#), and most recently the provision that [anyone applying for permanent residency must do so by leaving the United States](#) and applying from their country of origin. The latest blow is reportedly a hard deadline to student visas. [International students must complete their studies in four years](#), or the anticipated length of the degree, whichever is shorter. That might not be such a problem for master's students, but for doctoral students whose courses of study typically last beyond four years, that's an additional barrier to completion. The impact of last year's changes is already being felt. The [number of F-1 visas issued was down 36% in May-August of 2025](#) over the previous year according to the Karin Fischer at the Chronicle. She also reported a 17% drop in international student enrollment for Fall, 2025. What makes it difficult to analyze the impact of these policy shifts is not just the delay in enrollment reporting by universities, but the delay in reporting of visa issuances by the Department of State. As of the release of this podcast, the State Department still only has the most recent visa data for September, 2025. Who knows if we will ever see statistics for 2026. What makes these policy changes so damaging is that they are all along the pipeline: from prospective students learning that there are no longer visas being issued to their country of origin, to those who are completing their doctoral training with no viable options to remain in the United States through H-1B or OPT programs. This means a permanent loss of talent and a downsizing of programs, which leads us to ...

Number One. All of these factors are impacting university budgets and resulting in layoffs, budget cuts and program closures. The *Chronicle of Higher Education* is trying to keep track of the deluge, with Washington State University, George Washington University, Baldwin Wallace University, The University of Nebraska System and MIT the latest victims of budget cuts. Graduate programs are being hit especially hard as I highlighted in Episode [33](#) and [35](#). In addition to outright closures, some programs are being allowed to die on the vine through attrition. For example, the [University of Connecticut will be slashing the number of teaching assistantship positions](#) by as much as two thirds in 2026-27. Fewer international students, fewer domestic students, less tuition revenue, less overhead from federal research dollars, increased costs of re-organization, compliance with new accreditation standards, and litigation to fight unfunded mandates all point to one certainty: fewer graduate programs. It won't be felt this year, or probably next, but by the time we have corrected these ill-conceived and poorly implemented policy changes the damage will have been done. That, unfortunately, is the year in review.

I'm going to try and remain hopefully, however, and as I look ahead to Season 4, I have a few ideas on where I'm going to focus my efforts. As you recall, Season 2 was dominated by topics for those of you preparing to enter graduate school, while this past season highlighted topics related to being in graduate

school like qualifying exams, internships, unionization, and even socialization theory. It seems natural to focus on those of you finishing your degrees and entering the workforce, but there are already a fair number of those topics sprinkled through the previous seasons. I started the “[I Have a PhD](#)” vignettes this season to give those of you completing your degrees an idea of where your degree can take you and will continue to add to that. But I feel like I’ve neglected faculty and administrators in the first three seasons, so expect to see more episodes for them in the coming season. Don’t worry grad students – there will still be plenty for you! I’m taking my time with an AI-related episode to see how it is developing at the graduate level, and there will undoubtedly be policy changes this coming year that will impact you directly, so stay tuned!

Thank you for joining me today, and a special thanks to those of you that listen on a regular basis. Despite the challenges to graduate education that have presented themselves this past year, I still believe that every degree counts. Have a great summer!

Links

<https://cgsnet.org/press-releases/cgs-announces-chevelle-newsome-as-new-president>
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Executive_Order_14173
<https://www.ed.gov/media/document/dear-colleague-letter-sffa-v-harvard-109506.pdf>
<https://www.fisherphillips.com/en/insights/insights/department-of-education-drops-defense-of-anti-dei-guidance-for-colleges>
<https://www.chronicle.com/package/the-assault-on-dei>
<https://depauliaonline.com/83726/news/depaul-is-reorganizing-its-dei-focused-offices-heres-what-you-should-know/>
<https://mustangnews.net/student-development-belonging-rebrand/>
<https://www.ed.gov/about/news/press-release/fact-sheet-trump-administration-making-college-more-affordable>
<https://www.npr.org/2026/05/26/nx-s1-5835298/the-future-of-the-american-healthcare-workforce>
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beth_Akers
<https://www.npr.org/2026/05/19/nx-s1-5826688/lawsuit-student-loans-nursing-healthcare-graduate-degree>
<https://www.ed.gov/about/news/press-release/us-department-of-education-reaches-consensus-reform-and-strengthen-americas-higher-education-accreditation-system>
<https://www.highereddive.com/news/trump-expands-travel-bans-and-restrictions-to-39-countries/808185/>
<https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/News/visas-news/announcement-of-expanded-screening-and-vetting-for-visa-applicants.html>
<https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/blog/uscis-implements-h1b-100000-fee/>
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/stuartanderson/2025/11/11/new-immigration-rule-will-end-or-restrict-student-practical-training/>
<https://iss.wisc.edu/summary-of-the-proposed-duration-of-status-rule-change/>
<https://www-chronicle-com.eu1.proxy.openathens.net/article/the-drop-in-international-students-last-year-was-worse-than-we-thought>
<https://www.courant.com/2026/05/21/difficult-decisions-being-made-at-uconn-faculty-decry-planned-cuts/>