

Episode 19 – An Overview of United States Postgraduate Schools for International Students

Welcome to Grad-post! I'm your host, Brian S. Mitchell and we're here to talk about life before, during, and after graduate school, and whether an advanced degree is right for you. I'll draw upon my experiences as a graduate dean and research mentor, as well as my network of students, colleagues, and experts to bring you the most complete information on graduate education that I can.

We continue today with our series on preparing your grad school application. We talked in [Episode 16](#) about how undergraduate research can be your superpower that sets your application apart from the others, and in the [previous episode](#) how to tweak your GPA to get every tenth of a point out of it. In Season 1, I talked about deciding on whether an advanced degree is right for you in [Episode 12](#), and the pros and cons of online degrees in [Episode 13](#). We even discussed broadly in [Episode 7](#) some considerations in selecting a graduate school. Today, we'll expand upon those topics and talk about some aspects of graduate schools that might be perplexing, even to domestic students, but especially to those of you unfamiliar with the United States higher education system – the international student.

Graduate study in the United States is often referred to postgraduate education elsewhere in the world. This confusion in terminology is just one of the things you will have to get used to if you are considering getting your advanced degree in the US. Another point of confusion is where you get your postgraduate degree – often called “graduate school” here in the States - when it is not a separate entity (in most cases) but part of a college and university, just like where you are obtaining your bachelor's degree. We also don't “attend university” but “go to college” here, but now I'm parsing out British English phraseology from American English. That's a relevant topic too, since you probably learned British English as your second or third language, but we'll go down that rabbit hole some other day. Be sure to Google “going down a rabbit hole” if you are unfamiliar with that trope. I'll try to avoid them from here on.

Let's start with the most general of overviews. How many 4-year colleges and universities do you think there are in the United States? And no fair Googling. Even those of you already enrolled in at a US college will probably get this one wrong. One thousand? Two thousand? Try 2,628 to be exact as of 2022-23 statistics from the [National Center for Education Statistics](#). And that's down from over 3,000 just ten years earlier. Now, how many of those 4-year colleges do you think are public? Over 50%? Not even close. Only 782, or less than 30% of them. That means that over 70% of the four-year degree granting institutions of higher education in the United States are private. Many of you may come from countries that have both public and private educational institutions, but the views on their legitimacy and quality of education vary widely around the world. I won't try to cover all those views here, but in the United States, the public-private distinction is mostly related to where their operating expenses come from. Public universities get some money (but not nearly enough) from the state governments in which they reside for their operations: paying faculty salaries, keeping the lights on, providing reliable internet service to tens of thousands of people, and so on. Private institutions get their money from other sources, primarily from tuition. There's also endowments that they have accumulated over time, but the percentage of operating expenses that come from endowments is surprisingly low - less than 10% most of the time. But the differences in educational quality are not really related to being public or private. There are great public institutions just like there are world-renowned private institutions. There are also some of lower quality in both categories.

You might think the source of operating funds has an impact on your graduate school financing, but not necessarily. While the cost of attendance at the undergraduate level is certainly important and is a major driver in student debt, at the graduate level it is much different. Tuition is still a key consideration in some practice-oriented programs, especially at the master's level, but in most research degree programs it's a

non-issue. That's because tuition is often waived, or is paid by someone else like your research advisor off of grants. I've often said that if you were able to teleport into a graduate school lab, lounge, or library anywhere in the country, you'd be hard pressed to tell whether it is a public or private institution just by looking around and asking people about their everyday experiences. There are certainly differences between wealthy institutions and less-well-off institutions, but the quality of the graduate experience is usually driven by factors other than public or private. In either case, most institutions are non-profit organizations, that is, every penny that they generate must be balanced by an expenditure. No monies go to stakeholders, owners, or board members.

There are indeed for-profit institutions, and you may be wondering where they fit in this landscape. There are only about 300 for-profit colleges left as of 2022-23, down dramatically from 782 a decade earlier. Most have closed. Those that continue to exist are part of that private, 4-year category I described earlier, but make up only about 12% of the 4-year colleges and universities in the United States. This is no comment on the quality of their degrees, just statistics. There's a place for them, particularly those of you interested in distance or part-time education.

That still leaves over 2300 institutions to pick from for your advanced degree. How do you narrow that down? We talked in [Episode 7](#) and [Episode 12](#) about finding an institution and locality that fits your lifestyle and values. But, we can further categorize these 2,300 institutions in ways that may be of benefit to you in your search. The most relevant categorization scheme to this discussion is the [Carnegie Classification System](#). The Carnegie Foundation is a non-governmental, non-profit organization that has been classifying institutions of higher education for many decades. Its classification system – now done in collaboration with the [American Council on Education](#) (ACE) - is not officially used by government agencies, but it is widely used in academic circles in the United States, so it's worth being aware of. There are several categories of institutions, but for our purposes the two categories of interest are Master's Colleges and Universities (one category), and Doctoral Universities (the second category). Most of these institutions are part of the 2,300 4-year institutions mentioned earlier, but there are a few that offer only master's or only doctoral degrees, like independent schools of business or medicine. There are important sub-categories within each of these categories.

Within Master's Colleges and Universities, there are small, medium, and large institutions, based primarily on the number of degrees they award each year. There are 159 institutions in the "small" category, 185 institutions in the "medium" category, and 325 institutions in the "large" category. As with all other categories we've discussed so far, they are a mixture of public and private institutions.

The Doctoral Universities use a different categorization system, based not just on numbers of degrees awarded, but also on the size of their research portfolios. There's a lot of history, controversy, and ambiguity in how these categories are used, but for our purposes we'll use the current system which has three sub-categories of simply "Doctoral/Professional Universities" of which there are 187, "High Research Activity" institutions of which there are 133, and "Very High Research Activity" institutions of which there are 146.

What does this all mean to you? Well, if you have never heard of all 1,135 institutions in these two broad Carnegie categories – I include myself – then it means you have to be careful when selecting an institution to apply to. Let me give you an example. Let's say you want to do your graduate studies in San Diego, California. Maybe you have an aunt who will let you live there for free, or you just really like surfing in your off time.

There are 14 colleges with the word "San Diego" in their title. There are well over twenty higher education institutions in the San Diego area, but let's just focus on those with San Diego in their title. Of

the 14, a whopping six of them are for-profit institutions. This fact runs counter to what I described earlier with only 12% of 4-year colleges being private for-profit, but apparently San Diego is a hot spot for online institutions. Again, there is a place for these institutions in the graduate education universe, but if you are coming halfway around the world to go to graduate school you are probably not looking for an institution that is primarily online. There are also a couple of schools on our list that don't offer graduate degrees, so by the time you get down to the institutions that are most likely to offer an advanced degree in your area of interest whose programs are primarily full-time and in-person, you are looking at three similar sounding institutions: San Diego State University; the University of San Diego; and the University of California-San Diego. All good institutions, but all very different.

[San Diego State University](#) is a High Research Activity doctoral university in the Carnegie Classification system. It has professional programs and Division I athletics. It is primarily a non-residential campus at the undergraduate level, meaning that a large percentage of its undergraduates are from the San Diego area and live off-campus. It is a large, public institution with more than 37,000 students enrolled, of which about 4,500 are graduate students as of Fall, 2023. It offers a wide variety of master's degree programs and 19 doctoral programs, primarily in professional areas like education. What makes it somewhat unique is that it is a Hispanic-Serving Institution or HSI. I'll do a separate podcast on minority-serving institutions, but this is an important designation for several reasons we'll go into at some other time. The similar-sounding named [University of San Diego](#) is also a High Research Activity institution, also has professional programs, but it has Division I-AA athletics. Why do I mention the athletics program classifications for these institutions? First of all, because college athletics is an important part of American culture. Second, because some students – even graduate students – can find funding through athletic scholarships. And third, because athletics and research classifications are more related than you might think. Listen to [Episode 14](#) for more details and background on athletics program classifications. Back to the [University of San Diego](#), unlike the other two institutions we'll discuss, it is a private institution, and has much smaller enrollments with 8,800 students overall of which about 2,300 are graduate students. In addition to some of the same professional programs as San Diego State University, it has a law school. Moving on to the [University of California San Diego](#) – or UCSD for short – it is part of the enormous University of California system that includes such schools as Berkeley and UCLA. So, it is a public institution, and is in the Very High Research Carnegie Classification. How high? It had \$1.8 Billion – that's with a "B" – of sponsored research funding in 2023. It has a wide range of professional programs including medicine, public health, pharmacy, as well as unique graduate programs like oceanography. It has about 34,000 undergraduate students – the same size as San Diego State – but many more graduate students at 7,720 and has Division I athletics programs.

OK, thanks for those statistics and school fight songs, Graddean, but "What about rankings?" you're asking. Look them up yourself if you want. They're pretty meaningless in my book. There are university rankings then there's program rankings, the latter of which can be difficult to find except for the most highly rated programs. They can also be behind paywalls which is ridiculous. I've discussed finding the right institution for you before so I won't reiterate that here. Suffice it to say that you may pick one of these institutions if you want a master's of education degree, another if you want a PhD in nursing, and yet another if you want either level of advanced degree in materials science.

Look, I'm not here to promote one university, program, or city over any other. I'm just trying to help you avoid confusion and worse, regret. The last thing you want to say to yourself halfway through graduate school is "This is not the experience I expected or wanted." Do your homework. But know that there are more institutions offering graduate degrees in the United States than you thought, and some of them

sound pretty similar. It's even fair to say that there are still predatory institutions out there that purposefully pick names like other well-known institutions just to pique your interest.

If you receive promotional materials from any institution in the United States, I recommend you first go to the Carnegie Classification website to get basic information on this institution:

<https://carnegieclassifications.acenet.edu/institutions/>

You won't get any ranking, tuition, or job placement information, but you will be able to determine what **TYPE** of institution this is. That's information you won't even get on the institution's website. Then, go to its website and learn more about the great programs, culture, and job prospects it has to offer.

There's much more to know about US graduate schools, including what's called "land grant" status, endowment levels, accreditation status, as well as other Carnegie Classifications like Community Engagement. Look for upcoming bonus episodes on these topics and more!

Thank you for joining me today. Join me again in two weeks for an interview with Dr. Vicki Johnson of Profellow.com. She'll be talking about funding for your graduate school experience and the great resources on fellowship and assistantships on Profellow. Here's a teaser from her interview:

Follow me so you get that reminder! Remember that all of the links provided in my podcasts are available at grad-post.com. There, you'll find additional resources and information to help you plan your adventure for an advanced degree.

It's as true in the country you live in as here in the United States: every degree counts.

Links

https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d23/tables/dt23_317.10.asp?current=yes

San Diego State University - <https://www.sdsu.edu/>

University of San Diego - <https://www.sandiego.edu/>

University of California San Diego - <https://ucsd.edu/>