

Episode 33 – Bonus Episode! Suspended Graduate School Admissions – February 2025

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.

There is a lot of uncertainty regarding offers of admission to graduate school programs in light of the proposed cuts to federal agencies that fund academic research. Many of those grants support graduate student researchers, and universities are scrambling to develop policies and procedures in response to not only these potential funding cuts, but unclear pseudo-mandates from the teetering Department of Education on elimination of all things DEI at colleges and universities. What does this mean for current and future graduate students? Let's look at the state of affairs as of the end of February 2025 and provide some resources to help you keep up to date on the topic.

First off, if you have been admitted to a tuition-paying program, chances are that those programs will continue and your offer of admission will stand. Whether or not you will be able to get student loans is another important matter that I am tracking, but let's focus today on those programs that make offers of admission with financial aid. Those are the most currently at risk and leading to the air of uncertainty.

I'm not going to try and update you on the status of all admissions cycles at every university today. The situation is very fluid and while some institutions are pausing admissions to research-based degree programs, others are not, and those that are seem to be lifting the pause relatively quickly. There are stories in the [Chronicle of Higher Education](#), [Nature](#), and [Statnews](#) this week that highlight what is happening. See the links in today's transcript at grad-post.com with apologies if the stories are subscription only. You may be able to gain digital access through your institutional library. To summarize those articles, admissions freezes are indeed occurring, mostly to Ph.D. programs in the biological sciences, but not across the board. If you are in the biological sciences and want to keep up to date on admissions pauses, there is a Google docs resource called "[Graduate Reductions Across Biomedical Sciences \(2025\)](#)" maintained by Carolyn Ibberson (@cbibberson.bsky.social) that is attempting to track all of these admissions changes as well as hiring freezes. The updates in this document are categorized by "verified" and "unverified", but given the fluidity of the situation I recommend going directly to your program for answers. I applaud the effort, however, and wish that more institutions would be just as aggressive in communicating their admissions pauses to applicants. I have not run across similar documentation attempts in other fields, but I'll post them to my website as I find them.

In general, I think that some universities are freaking out and being overly cautious. I recognize that there are huge amounts of money at stake here, but most of the institutions on lists like this also have huge resources at their disposal. If the pause in admissions to Ph.D. programs in the biomedical sciences is a response to the cut in NIH indirect cost funding, I honestly don't see the connection. Continuing grants have student stipends hard-wired into their budgets. Those funds don't come out of indirect costs. There is a trickle-down effect, of course, if universities can't make their budgets balance because of reduced operating costs, but the stipends themselves should not be in jeopardy. If the stipend is a carve-out for underrepresented groups, then that's a different story and falls under the anti-DEI efforts. But, in general, NIH grants should have student support available to continuing students, at least in the short term.

The problem is that it is hard to project years down the road. Admitting a student to a PhD program with a six-year average time to degree means that the institution will have to support that student for that long. Even if the current NIH grant could support them for the remaining one, two, or three years of the grant, there is great uncertainty as to whether these grants will be renewed given the huge cuts to NIH and NSF

funding that are being proposed. So, what are universities and graduate programs to do besides suspend admissions?

The institutions we are talking about here – research intensive universities with multiple programs in the biomedical sciences – have enormous endowments – almost without exception. They typically draw the federally-required minimum of 5% from these endowments each year to supplement operating costs and special programs. So, if you have a \$10B endowment (not uncommon), then some \$500M is available annually to help pay faculty and staff salaries, support campus upkeep, and even keep the lights on. That's a lot of money, but it doesn't go as far as you'd think. And if the endowment is more modest, that number is even smaller. However, I'm calling on university presidents – the leaders who make these tough decisions – to dip into these reserves using whatever financial mechanisms they have at their disposal. Get board approval. Declare financial exigency. Whatever. There are implications to doing this, of course. Universities have bond ratings just like companies and municipalities do, and the institution's ability to borrow money and issue bonds can suffer if the endowment is depleted. But desperate times call for desperate measures. If the endowment can't be used to honor commitments to educate the next generation of humanists, artists, scientist and even politicians, then what is the university even there for? Put a crowbar in your wallet university presidents and leverage your resources to maintain admissions to your graduate programs. If you are a faculty member or admitted student, lobby your university administration to dip into endowment funds to benefit graduate programs. Student organizations lobby university administrations all the time to divest endowment funds from companies and organizations they find socially irresponsible. That is a much harder ask than what we're talking about here – simply spending more money. And university presidents: if you are concerned about impending federal taxes on university endowments, wouldn't now be a good time to spend them down? What if the stock market goes down this year and your endowment loses 5% of its value? Won't you regret not having spent that money while it was available on something as existential as graduate student support?

Enough opining. What does all this mean for you - the graduate student - who received an informal offer of admission but is now putting your life on hold until the university decides if it will honor that offer or not? My first bit of advice is to be patient. I know that's hard, but you should know that the people in the program that made that informal offer and even the people in the dean's office and school really want you to come. They just have to find a way to do it and make sure they don't run astray of university policy. It takes time to formulate that policy, and as we are seeing, it can vacillate. Second, have a Plan "B". If you received a formal offer of admission and it is rescinded for this coming fall, you may be given a deferral to enter at a later date when the "all clear" is given. What will you do for the next year? Maybe you'll continue in your current job, maybe you'll take a gap year. But think through this now while holding out hope that your offer of admission will be honored.

I'm optimistic that this will all get sorted out and universities will – for the most part – resume admissions to their graduate programs, even in the biomedical sciences. They really put their institutions at risk if they don't, because most faculty are there to do their research and scholarship. Most of them can't do it effectively without graduate students.

Now, more than ever, every degree counts.

Links

<https://www.statnews.com/2025/02/19/trump-funding-freeze-grad-student-postdoc-acceptances-paused-nih-research/>

<https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-025-00608-z>

<https://www.chronicle.com/article/this-years-ph-d-admissions-cycle-is-leaving-students-in-the-lurch>

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/u/0/d/1FLiILMkKFHgKwUawLqdwW2o84CLfBARQux5n-Pnbc40/htmlview>