

Episode 52 – What’s In the 2025 CGS Graduate Enrollment and Degrees Report?

Happy 2026 and welcome to Grad-post! I’m your host, Brian S. Mitchell, and we’re here to talk about all things related to graduate school and advanced degrees. 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.

2025 was a tumultuous year for higher education in general, but graduate education bore an inordinate amount of that upheaval due to its strong dependence on federal research funding as I discussed in Episodes [33](#) and [35](#) last Spring. I continue to monitor the impacts of seismic policy shifts and changing public opinion on the diminution of graduate education I outlined in [Episode 38](#), and there’s no stronger leading indicator than graduate school enrollment trends. Fortunately, the Council of Graduate Schools’ annual report on Graduate Enrollment and Degrees was just released in December, so there’s plenty of fodder for our discussion. You can find it [here](#).

The Graduate Enrollment and Degrees report – GED as it’s known - is arguably CGS’s most anticipated and accessed report, especially now that the [Department of Education](#) has suspended its key educational statistics activities. There are still statistics collected on advanced degrees through NSF’s [National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics \(NCSES\)](#), particularly its [Doctorate Recipients from U.S. Universities](#) report and the [Survey of Earned Doctorates](#) database, but like most things coming out of the government these days, it’s not clear how long these reports will continue to be collected, how the data will be analyzed and distributed, nor how the categories of information collected – or not collected – will be manipulated to pass agency [apparatchik](#) approvals. So, the GED provides some continuity and analysis from an independent research organization that is welcome in an environment of informational chaos.

Having said that, there are some limitations to the GED. First, the data are a year old. The just-released 2025 report is for enrollment and degree data collected as of Fall, 2024. Second, while the response rate to the survey is generally high – 71% - it is sent to only 760 colleges and universities in the United States. There are over [1,000 doctoral-granting institutions alone in the U.S., and over 1,800 that grant master’s](#) degrees, so the responses of some 536 institutions hardly represent the entire graduate education landscape in the United States. Nevertheless, most of the largest producers of advanced degrees participate in the survey, and on a percentage basis the trends are a good reflection of what is happening in the broader industry. So, let’s dive in!

First, let’s see what the broad takeaways are according to CGS. I’m just picking three of their six highlights. Compared to 2023, CGS found that:

- Small and medium institutions faced greater enrollment challenges compared to large institutions;
- First-time and total enrollment for international students was down across the board; and
- Fewer degrees were conferred at both doctoral and master’s levels.

The first finding shows that graduate enrollment dropped at both small and medium-sized institutions, and that they struggled to reach pre-pandemic enrollment levels. I’m not surprised by the decline in total enrollment as the pandemic caused many students already in graduate programs to delay graduation until 2022 and 2023. There were [9% and 10% more master’s and doctoral degrees awarded](#), respectively, in 2023 over 2022 as the pandemic-delayed students completed their degrees and the job market opened back up. But the disproportionate drop in enrollment at small and medium institutions relative to the larger institutions is disturbing. As federal student loan programs are downsized, the availability of funds specifically for master’s level programs like nursing become limited, and international enrollments are

curtailed, expect the pressure on small and medium institutions to grow. Program and institutional closings and consolidation cannot be far behind.

The second CGS finding that international enrollments is down is not surprising at all. Remember – this is all BEFORE the immigration crackdown, withholding research funding from institutions for any number of reasons, enhanced screening of F-1 visa applicants for social media activities, higher fees for the H1-B visa program, and mostly recently travel bans to some common countries of origin for international graduate students. [Karin Fischer of the Chronicle of Higher Education](#) has been reporting on decreased international student enrollment for months now, and the situation is not going to improve. Look for international student enrollments to plummet at ALL institution sizes in the coming years. To me, this is the single largest area of concern to graduate program viability, the creation of a highly-skilled workforce, and American competitiveness in all areas.

The third point about drops in the number of advanced degrees conferred has already been discussed in the post-pandemic context, but CGS has some interesting analysis here. They point to students extending or abandoning their studies, shifts from full-time to part-time enrollment, and increasing affordability issues as key contributors. While these factors do indeed play a role, there is also a time lag between when factors like these become important and when degrees are conferred. See, for example, my analysis of [visa policy influences on graduate degree production](#). So, these factors – and others – won't really have an impact until 2030 for doctoral degrees. But just like enrollment, things are going to get worse before they get better.

CGS does a very good job of staying focused on the data and avoiding controversial interpretations of their findings. They have a government advocacy arm after all, and taking pot shots at federal policies while advocating for graduate education with lawmakers can be counterproductive. I don't have that encumbrance, however, so let me point to two additional findings in this report that I find really interesting.

First, let's talk acceptance rates. The big takeaway is that 40% of applicants to graduate programs in the United States get accepted. That's probably a conservative figure since the 536 participating institutions in this survey include most of R-1 institutions with competitive doctoral programs. The institutions not participating in this survey would have even higher acceptance rates on average by my estimation. The breakdown of that 40% acceptance rate by master's/doctoral and broad degree fields is shown here. There's no surprise that master's acceptance rates continue to be higher than for doctoral programs, and that fields like education and public administration have some of the highest acceptance rates in both master's and doctoral programs. Business also has a high acceptance rate at the master's level, so if you're looking for that MBA now is as a good a time as any to get in. The CGS data show that acceptance rates at private institutions continue to be lower than for public institutions in virtually all fields regardless of degree level, and the toughest programs to get into are doctoral programs in arts, humanities, and social sciences. No surprises there, either.

Turning to the demographic data in the CGS admissions and enrollment report, my final observation is that men made up 44% of first-time enrollees in doctoral programs and 41% of first-time enrollees in master's programs for Fall, 2024. This is a historical downward trend, and as I discussed previously in Episode 38

Table 3. Acceptance Rates by Doctoral Degree and Field, 2024

Doctoral Degree	Percent
Highest Acceptance Rates	
Education	45%
Health Sciences	38%
Public Administration and Services	24%
Engineering	21%
Lowest Acceptance Rates	
Social and Behavioral Sciences	12%
Biological and Agricultural Sciences	14%
Mathematics and Computer Sciences	15%
Business	15%

Table 4. Acceptance Rates by Master's/Other Degree and Field, 2024

Master's/Other Degree	Percent
Highest Acceptance Rates	
Education	70%
Public Administration and Services	69%
Business	56%
Other Fields	56%
Lowest Acceptance Rates	
Physical and Earth Sciences	38%
Arts and Humanities	38%
Mathematics and Computer Sciences	45%
Health Sciences	46%

is one of the factors that will contribute to the down-sizing of graduate education in the coming years. There are fields that are still male-dominated like Mathematics/Computer Science, Engineering, and the Physical and Earth Sciences, and we need to redouble our efforts to bring gender parity to these fields. But the least represented doctoral degree area for men is in Public Administration and Services. Recall that these fields have some of the highest acceptance rates. Men constitute only 25% of the current enrollment in this discipline. There aren't many subdisciplines in this broad category: only community organization/advocacy; public administration by itself; youth services; and social work. Virtually all of these fields offer a master's degree as the terminal or highest degree, although some doctoral programs do exist. But for the master's of social work degree – MSW - the [Council on Social Work Education](#) reports that in 2022-23, only 14% of enrollees were men. The percentage is almost exactly the same for enrollment in practice doctorate social work programs. Interestingly, the race and ethnic distribution in these programs roughly follow national demographics.

I highlight this statistic of men in graduate programs because there is an intense social conversation about the role of men in our workforce, particularly young men under 30. In the context of higher education and graduate programs specifically, there is a tendency to designate young men as under-represented. I can't argue with that – the statistics don't lie if interpreted correctly: 44% of first-time enrollees in graduate programs were men in 2024. That's under-represented when a little under 50% of the population identifies as male. I'm actually going to stop there because to go further into the males-as-underrepresented-minorities conversation requires additional time and context, and I want to save that analysis for an upcoming episode. Consider this statistic from the report a "teaser." But it highlights an increasingly formidable challenge for institutions of higher education as they make the case for their advanced degree programs to the policy makers and the public.

Should you download and ingest the Graduate Enrollment and Degrees report? If you're a prospective or current graduate student, probably not. But if you are a faculty member – especially if you are on the admissions committee – a graduate administrator or a graduate education researcher, it is a must read. Put an annual reminder on your calendar. This report comes out in early December each year in advance of the CGS Annual Meeting.

Thank you for joining me today. All of the links provided on my podcasts are available on my website at [grad-post.com](#). There you'll find additional information and resources to help you start your adventure for an advanced degree.

An advanced degree takes ability and desire – and an opportunity. Every one of them counts.

Links

- https://cgsnet.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/CGS_GED-2025_Report_Final.pdf
- <https://ncses.nsf.gov/>
- <https://ncses.nsf.gov/pubs/nsf25300#>
- <https://ncses.nsf.gov/surveys/earned-doctorates/2024>
- https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d22/tables/dt22_318.60.asp?current=yes
- <https://cgsnet.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/GED-2024-1.1.pdf>
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- <https://share.google/RQJEssVxwRBzhG3pM>