

Seeking the Master's – Graduate Degree Enrollment Continues Surge

by Marilyn Gilroy



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Dr. William Pepicello, president,
University of Phoenix

The number of students seeking graduate degrees is at an all-time high, with minorities, women and international students enrolling in programs at record levels. According to the Council of Graduate Schools’ (CGS) latest survey report, *Graduate Enrollment and Degrees: 1996-2006*, enrollment of every racial/ethnic minority group was up 3 percent in 2006, compared to no growth among nonminority students. Minorities now represent 28 percent of overall graduate school enrollment while women represent 65 percent of master’s degree students.

“The ongoing gains in the participation of women and minority students in graduate education are very encouraging,” said Debra W. Stewart, CGS president.

Enrollment trend highlights include:

- Between 1996 and 2006, Hispanic enrollment grew faster than that of any other racial/ethnic group, averaging 5 percent a year, compared to flat growth for White students.
- First-time enrollment increased 1 percent overall last year, including a 10 percent rise in international students.
- Education and business remained the most popular fields of study.
- Health sciences continued to be the fastest-growing field, increasing by 7 percent in 2006, and the growth has been accelerating since 1996.

- The number of doctorates awarded in 2006 rose 5 percent with double-digit growth in health sciences (24 percent), business (16 percent) and engineering (11 percent).

The growth in graduate degree enrollment is being fueled by a variety of factors that make it desirable for students to go to graduate school and also make it cost effective for institutions to expand their offerings. Most experts agree that the increasingly complex economic environment means that students can no longer assume a bachelor’s degree is enough to stay competitive in the work force.

Master’s Programs Expanding

The CGS report shows that approximately 626,500 students sought master’s degrees at the nation’s public and private universities in 2006. The number of students earning these degrees has doubled since 1980.

College officials say the master’s degree is in high demand because students realize it is an avenue that can lead to better jobs and higher salaries. Government studies show average salaries of American workers who have earned an advanced degree are at least \$10,000 per year higher than salaries of those with a bachelor’s degree. Over the course of a lifetime, the difference in earnings could amount to \$1 million. The earnings bonanza is even greater in fields such as business and science. For this reason,

even when students take out huge loans to pay for their graduate education, they believe it will be worthwhile in the long run.

“The degrees can be expensive, but students have calculated how fast they will get their investment back,” said one university administrator.

According to CGS, about 20 percent of bachelor’s degree recipients go directly on to graduate school, especially if they are pursuing degrees in science or medicine. Ten years after completing undergraduate school, approximately 40 percent of students have enrolled in advanced degree programs.

mately 15,000 master’s degrees each year, reports that the number of individuals seeking online master’s degrees is growing, especially in business-related areas.

That trend is echoed nationwide, with statistics showing the master’s degree in business administration, including concentrations in finance, marketing or management, is one of the most popular choices in the online market. Some institutions have added the master’s in e-commerce to their roster of programs for those who want to work for companies doing a significant amount of busi-

ness on the Web. One of the leaders in online master’s degree programming is the University of Phoenix (UOP), a for-profit institution enrolling approximately 200,000 students. It awarded nearly 25,000 master’s degrees last year.

Dr. William Pepicello, president of University of Phoenix (UOP), said that the master’s degree has played an integral part in the doubling of the university’s size in the last 10 years.

“No doubt the master’s degree has contributed to our growth because it is the new standard people need to progress in their careers,” he said.

the University of Phoenix has played in offering opportunities outside the traditional mode of education.

“We have a social agenda at the University of Phoenix. We want to rebuild the middle class by giving access to students who might not otherwise have an avenue to higher education,” he said.

Many UOP students are already working in their field of interest or, in some cases, are part of the university’s large military population. The average age of a UOP student is 35, and most enroll because they are looking for advancement, said Pepicello. Classes are small, with

U.S. GRADUATE ENROLLMENT BY RACIAL/ETHNIC GROUP, FALL 2006

Ethnic Group	Total		Men		Women	
Total U.S. Citizens and Permanent Residents	1,227,352	100%	460,495	100%	755,716	100%
Native American/Alaska Native	9,197	1%	3,184	1%	5,886	1%
African American	155,230	13%	42,931	13%	111,829	15%
Asian/Pacific Islander	75,820	6%	34,397	6%	41,011	5%
Hispanic/Latino	96,570	8%	34,827	8%	61,127	8%
White, non-Hispanic	890,535	72%	345,156	73%	535,863	71%

NOTE: Because not all institutions responded to all items, detail variables may not sum to total. Percentages by gender are based on total of U.S. citizens and permanent residents.

Source: CGS/GRE Survey of Graduate Enrollment.

Online master’s degree programs have become very popular in the last few years because they offer flexibility and convenience for adults who are juggling work and family. With more than 57 percent of students enrolling in graduate school on a part-time basis, online programs offer the opportunity to study at home or while traveling.

The California State University system, which confers approxi-

ness on the Web.

Other hot online master’s programs are in education, especially for those already teaching. Current teachers not only increase their skills and knowledge while studying for the master’s, but become eligible for salary increases after earning 15 or 30 credits in a program. In addition, the higher credential can provide mobility into administration or a better school district.

Like the nonprofit sector of higher education, more than 67 percent of UOP’s graduate students are female, and there is a significant enrollment of minorities.

“We have had a large growth in minorities over the last few years, with 9 percent currently being Hispanic. The health care programs are especially popular with this cohort,” said Pepicello.

Pepicello is proud of the role that

an average online class size of 12 or 13 and an in-person class size of about 15. Programs are designed to fit work force needs.

“We add programs by tracking current and projected workforce needs,” said Pepicello.

Administrators at the University of Phoenix are currently conducting studies to ascertain which graduate programs might be offered in the future. The process is part

research and part crystal ball.

“Some people say the jobs that people will have 10 years from now don’t exist today,” said Pepicello.

Public universities are also trying to meet the current demand for master’s degrees as well as expand the market by offering new options. It is a move that offers economic benefits for institutions because the programs are good sources of revenue. Since graduate school classes are often small, sometimes as few as 10 or 15 students, adding three to five students per class increases income without adding costs. Many graduate programs carry higher tuition than do undergraduate programs, so expanding offerings also boosts growth without a significant drain on the budget.

Colleges and universities are promoting new curricular patterns, such as five-year bachelor’s/master’s degree combinations or dual master’s, which allow students to earn two master’s degrees by extending the traditional two-year graduate studies to a third year. Wesleyan University in (Conn.) touts its B.A./M.A. program in the sciences as a means of pursuing a master’s degree to enter research or teaching fields. It even waives tuition for the fifth year.

At the University of Wisconsin, students can earn dual master’s degrees in anthropology and museum studies by completing a 51-credit sequence that awards both degrees simultaneously at the end of the program.

Growing Minority and International Enrollment

The CGS report contained good news about minority enrollment in graduate school. The 3 percent overall increase in this category applied to Native Americans, African-Americans, Asian-Americans and Hispanics. The two largest disciplines of study for minority students are education and business. About 53 percent of African-American graduate students, 47 percent of Latinos and 44 percent of Native Americans are enrolled in these fields.

Some states have experienced especially strong growth in graduate enrollment in the 10-year period covered by the CGS report.

Dr. Ed Moore, president of the Independent Colleges and Universities of Florida (ICUF), which includes Barry University, Nova Southeastern University and the University of Miami, said Florida is “ahead of the curve” when it comes to enrolling minority students in graduate school. Twenty of the ICUFs offer graduate programs and, like their public counterparts, the schools are expanding graduate programs to meet the increased demand.

According to Moore, 47 percent of Florida residents enrolled as graduate students at ICUF institutions are minorities. The ICUFs train a majority, 55 percent, of Florida minorities who seek professional degrees in laws medicine, pharmacy and dentistry. These

institutions also enroll more than half of Florida’s graduate students in business and education.

“Our master’s degree programs offer unique opportunities for minorities who want to become leaders in their fields. We take considerable pride in our record of achievement and our history of reaching out to minority students,” said Moore.

Moore said the reason so many students choose graduate study at ICUFs is that the schools are committed to serving the communities in which they are located.

“Graduate students attending our institutions do not have to move from their homes and continue to work. Our scheduling is very flexible, and students can pick the option that works best for them,” said Moore.

The growth in minority enrollment isn’t the only piece of encouraging news. Many higher education officials also are pleased at the increase in the total international graduate enrollment, which was in the CGS report. A recently updated survey of the 2007 international enrollment shows an increase of 7 percent for last year alone – the largest gain since 2002.

The increase is due in part to more aggressive international recruiting by U.S. colleges and universities. CGS reports that an overwhelming majority of U.S. graduate deans – 87 percent – have participated in some type of international outreach during the last two years, with a substantial number traveling

overseas. The deans indicated in a CGS survey that they had attended international student recruitment fairs, and almost half – 48 percent – have visited foreign universities to build program partnerships.

“It is encouraging to see graduate school deans taking such an active role to recruit highly qualified international students. Continuing to attract the best and brightest students from around the globe to U.S. graduate programs is an essential part of maintaining our nation’s global leadership,” said Stewart.



But there are some concerns looming behind the positive news. CGS officials have been keeping an eye on graduate enrollment in physical sciences and engineering, which remained flat in 2006. Growth in these fields has been driven mostly by international enrollment, averaging 4 percent to 5 percent annually since 1996.

Of greater concern are data showing that, while 53 percent of international graduate students studied either engineering or sciences in 2006, only 16 percent of U.S. students did.

“We must continue to expand the domestic pipeline, especially in science and engineering fields, in order to produce the highly qualified workforce required to maintain America’s competitiveness,” said Stewart.



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