



Sept. 13, 2006

Diversity Up for Grad Students

By Scott Jaschik

The enrollment of graduate students increased by 2 percent — to more than 1.5 million — from 2004 to 2005, according to a report released today by the Council of Graduate Schools.

While the 2 percent increase is modest, data in the report suggest that those in the pool of faculty candidates in the future may be less likely to be white males than they are today. The enrollment increase for women outpaced that for men, 3 percent to 1 percent, leading to a one percentage point increase in the overall female share of the grad student population, to 58 percent. The gender gap is particularly pronounced among black graduate students, 71 percent of whom are female.

Underrepresented minority groups also saw healthy increases, although their total share continues to lag. Black enrollment was up 6 percent. First-time Hispanic enrollment was up 10 percent. And these increases took place during a period in which many universities found themselves being forced to change the rules on fellowships for minority graduate students, facing threats that they might be sued if they didn't do so.

Also notable in the data are increases for black and Hispanic graduate students in selected science and technology fields where their numbers have been extremely low. Black enrollment was up 11 percent in engineering and Hispanic enrollment was up 16 percent in the biological sciences, for instance.

The study also confirmed reports previously conducted by the council projecting a rebound for international graduate enrollments. First-time enrollment of foreign graduate students was up 4 percent in 2005, the first increase in four years. Total international enrollment was down slightly (-1 percent), but it had been falling by larger percentages in recent years. Foreign enrollment levels are crucial for certain fields, as non-American students make up 48 percent of those in engineering programs and 40 percent in the physical sciences.

Debra Stewart, president of the Council of Graduate Schools, called the minority figures "the most encouraging of the numbers," and she noted the importance of this progress for creating future faculty members. "This is the pool," she said.

While she was pleased with the progress, she said that it was clear that "a lot needs to be done" for colleges to continue both to attract more students to graduate study and to diversify their student bodies. She said that one important thing universities need to do is show minority students "a clear career path" for pursuing graduate education. For those from families without a lot of money or who are the first in their families to go to college, it's vital that people see the opportunities — in and out of academe — available to those with graduate degrees.

The University of Washington provides an example of how colleges are making progress.

Underrepresented minority students make up about 8 percent of graduate students there, 50 percent more than five years ago. Suzanne Ortega, vice provost and graduate dean, said that the progress is now starting to take off, and that a wide range of strategies are being used. The graduate program is trying to recruit more undergraduates, promoting research careers in local schools, and creating new partnerships.

For instance, Washington's materials research center started a partnership with Norfolk State University, a historically black college clear across the country, more than two and a half years ago. There have been faculty and student exchanges, joint research projects, and many other activities. This fall, three Norfolk State graduates are enrolling in the doctoral program at Washington.

“Our approach has been to create partnerships and also to give them time to flourish,” Ortega said. “These things have a life of their own,” she said. “If you attract a cohort of students, and provide them with the mentoring they deserve, they will be doing a lot of recruiting for you.”

Following are some tables showing the trends highlighted in this year’s report.

Graduate Enrollment by Field and Citizenship, Fall 2005

Field	Total	% U.S. Citizens and Permanent Residents	1-Year % Change	Average Annual % Change, 1986-2005
Biological sciences	68,952	73%	+2%	+1%
Business	219,953	83%	-1%	+1%
Education	306,704	96%	+0%	+2%
Engineering	108,086	52%	+0%	+2%
Health sciences	111,846	91%	+12%	+4%
Humanities and arts	100,678	86%	+1%	+2%
Physical sciences	105,170	60%	+0%	+1%
Public administration	54,309	95%	+0%	+2%
Social sciences	115,345	84%	+1%	+2%
Other fields	104,933	90%	+6%	+1%
Total	1,517,976	84%	+2%	+2%

When comparing the data for different ethnic and racial groups, clear patterns are evident by discipline. There are nearly twice as many black as Asian graduate students in the United States (counting only U.S. citizens and permanent residents). But the number of Asian students is more than twice the number of black students in engineering. Black students are much more likely than Asian students to enroll in education programs.

The following table shows the percentage of various groups enrolled in different disciplines.

Racial and Ethnic Groups’ Disciplinary Choices, Fall 2005

Discipline	African American	American Indian	Asian	Hispanic	White
Biological sciences	2%	5%	6%	4%	5%
Business	19%	13%	24%	15%	14%
Education	31%	29%	13%	31%	28%
Engineering	3%	4%	13%	4%	5%
Health sciences	8%	10%	11%	7%	10%
Humanities and arts	4%	8%	5%	8%	9%
Physical sciences	4%	4%	11%	4%	6%
Public administration	8%	7%	3%	6%	4%
Social sciences	10%	12%	8%	11%	9%
Other fields	11%	8%	6%	10%	9%

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