



The new American graduate student

Graduate students today are older, more experienced and more diverse than ever before. There are implications in the admissions marketplace, in the classroom and elsewhere.

The profile of the American graduate student is shifting. Fifteen years ago, most graduate students came directly from the ranks of college seniors. Today, American graduate students are older with careers underway, more often women, often married with family responsibilities. They are shopping for flexible graduate programs that will help them forge ahead in their careers. Graduate schools are courting these savvy consumers with expanded academic offerings and refined recruiting strategies.

Considerable demographic changes

The National Center for Education Statistics conducted National Post-secondary Student Aid Studies (NPSAS) during 1993 and again during 1999-2000. There has been an upsurge in graduate enrollment among formerly under-represented groups.

For example, women's enrollment among doctoral students has increased from 38 percent in 1993 to 50 percent in 2000. Minority enrollment also rose sharply. In 1993, 14 percent of master's students and 17 percent of doctoral students were minorities. In 1999-2000, those numbers rose to 25 and 24 percent respectively.

NPSAS studies show an average age of 33 among master's and doctoral students in 1993 as well as 2000. However, in 2000, more than 30 percent of them were over age 40, a significant change. In 2000, most graduate students were married and the vast majority were employed.

Expanded academic options and recruiting strategies

"We have a growing number of programs for people who have been out of school for a while," says Steven Ullmann, vice provost and dean of the graduate school at the University of Miami. "One of our more successful programs is the masters in liberal studies. Their average age is 50, many of them empty nesters who are back in school. Another example is our Ph.D. in interdepartmental studies. It's one of our fastest growing. Their ages range from 22 to 60, with most in their mid-30s."

How do you recruit the traditional younger students and the more mature students too? "Everyone is trying to learn how to get people on their web sites," says Richard Wheeler. "That's really the key to letting students know who you are and what you have to offer. When a student decides to make a connection, he or she is much more likely to get on the web than to send for a catalogue or make a phone call."

Graduate degrees are tools to advance careers and schools are incorporating career outcomes in their recruiting. "We've put together a graduate college career services center to address issues that are important to our students, such as, how to put together a good resume or vita and how to recognize the skills that they have," says Richard Wheeler, dean of the graduate college at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. "Our students have

more options coming into school, and they want more options coming out," Wheeler says.

Graduate schools rely less on standardized test scores to gauge the potential of older applicants. "If an applicant has been out of school for a number of years, it can affect his or her test scores," says Steven Ullmann.

Questions beyond the classroom

The new American graduate student presents opportunities and some uncertainties for graduate schools. More mature students enrich the classroom experience with their real-world experiences and perspectives.

Interesting challenges lie ahead. "The age at which many people graduate and begin their careers is well

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into their 30s now," says Suzanne Ortega, vice provost and dean of the graduate school at the University of Washington. "Rather than working for 30-35 years, many may be working for 20-25 years. What are the implications for starting families and raising children? What are the implications for employers and retirement systems?"

Richard Wheeler adds, "We need to be able to offer graduate programs with integrity as research or professional degrees, while we also meet the newest need that's coming from the market. That is a real challenge." ■



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