

More Master's Courses Designed To Expedite Students Into Jobs

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At Northeastern University in Boston, there are new master's degree programs in biotechnology, bioinformatics, leadership and information assurance -- the increasingly popular program that prepares professionals in various fields for careers in safeguarding data.

Adelphi University in New York still offers a traditional master's in psychology, but more students are interested in the newer, more targeted degrees in school psychology and mental health counseling.

These programs are career-oriented -- the biggest trend in master's-level education, which enrolls 1.1 million students (including thousands online).

Master's level enrollment grew 3 percent annually for nearly 20 years, according to the Council on Graduate Education, but there was a 7 percent boost between 2004 and 2005.

Its popularity is increasing because its importance is: A master's degree is now necessary to get a job in many nursing and counseling jobs, some areas of engineering and a host of other fields, said Marcia G. Welsh, provost and senior vice president for academic affairs at Adelphi University.

And because employers have placed such a premium on hiring those with advanced degrees, schools are tying their master's programs, and some of their doctoral programs, too, more closely to professional ambitions, according to Adam F. Falk, dean of the School of Arts and Sciences at Johns Hopkins University.

Schools are creating new programs by combining courses from different disciplines and adding applied, rather than strictly theoretical, components.

For example, the new professional science master's program was developed by educators in concert with various industries and is available at 45 U.S. institutions. It is designed to give targeted education to students working in such fields as insurance, banking, consulting, technology transfer and research management. The two-year programs also include practical experience in the workplace.

Now that jobs are the focus, however, graduate business schools are worrying about declines in enrollment. At schools offering master's degrees in business administration -- second in enrollment only to schools offering master's in education -- there has been a double-digit drop over the past six years.

Educators say U.S. corporate scandals have taken a toll, as well as the recent opening of U.S.-accredited business schools in other countries. As a result, schools in this country are seeking to find ways to appeal to new groups of students, according to Linda A. Livingstone, dean of the School of Business and Management at Pepperdine University.

Pepperdine, for example, is starting a part-time master's program to appeal to stay-at-home parents who want to get back into the workforce, Livingstone said.

Classes for part-time programs are generally held at night and on weekends, which is how New York state Sen. Malcolm A. Smith (D) just earned his MBA. He wanted one, he said, because his job demands that he "be at the top of my intellectual game when I am confronted with issues and challenges."

-- Valerie Strauss