

# Graduate Education Challenges and Opportunities

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# Learning Objectives

At the end of this presentation, participants should be able to:

1

**Describe** current challenges in graduate education

2

**Describe** opportunities for program innovation

3

**Describe** strategies for improving graduate program design

4

**Describe** the role of data tracking for accountability

# Presentation Outline

Trends

Challenges

Value

Opportunities

Improvements

Accountability



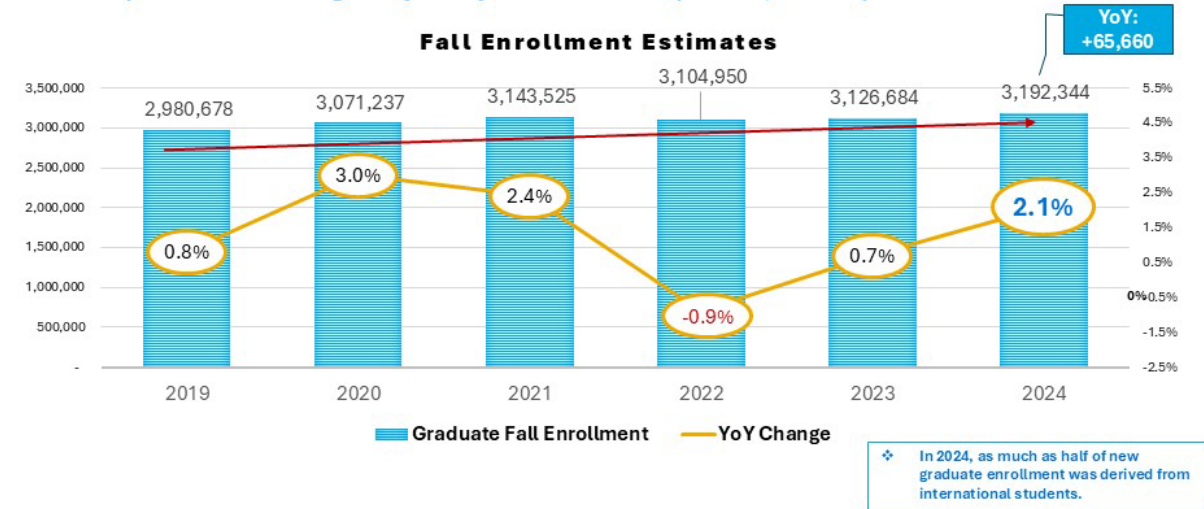
# Trends

## Attendance Trends

- Grad enrollment has risen steadily over the past 6 years
- Fall 2024: enrollment grew by 2.1%.
- Many schools rely heavily on international students
  - Heavy reliance = risk from policy and visa changes
  - Balancing domestic + international is key for stability

## Growth is strong – but not uniform.

...public institutions grew by nearly twice the rate of privates, and for-profits even more.

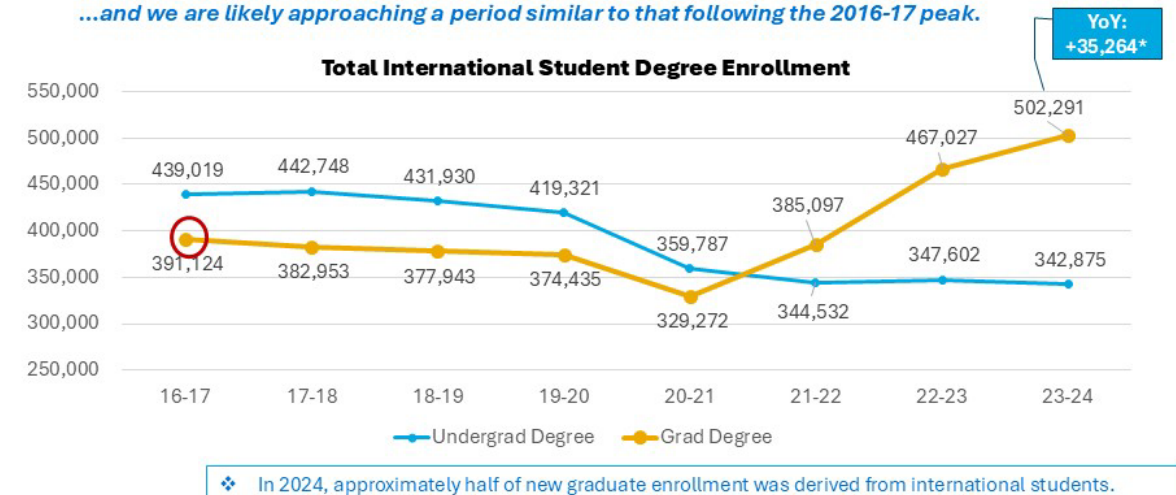


\*Source: RNL Analysis of "First Look at Fall 2024 Highlights" from National Student Clearinghouse [CTEE, Fall 2024](#) using reported YoY percent growth.

RNL 4

## Graduate programs have (again) become increasing dependent on international students.

...and we are likely approaching a period similar to that following the 2016-17 peak.



Source: [Open Doors 2024, Fast Facts](#) AND Historical [Fast Facts 2010-2023](#). Institute of International Education, November 2024.

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# Challenges in Graduate Education

- Loan Limits
  - › New federal borrowing cap
- ROI Questioned
  - › Harder to convince students that a graduate degree is “worth it”

**\$138,500**

limit for graduate  
or professional  
students  
(lifetime limit)

Per Year:

**\$50,000**

for professionals

**\$20,500**

for graduate

# Challenges in Graduate Education

- Virtual modality
  - › Students leaning towards flexibility to work and go to school online
- International students not wanting to come here now
  - › International students arriving on visas to the United States declined by 28.5% in July 2025 compared to July 2024

**73%**

Of online students  
are enrolled in  
their state of  
residence

**60%**

Will enroll  
anywhere (online)  
for the right  
program

# Challenges in Graduate Education

- Competition for graduate students is increasing
  - › More institutions expanding graduate offerings (including online-only competitors)
- Challenge of finding perspective students
  - › Harder to identify quality leads “graduate programs can be niche markets”

**60%**  
of enrollment  
leaders have  
higher  
enrollment  
goals with no  
budget  
increase.

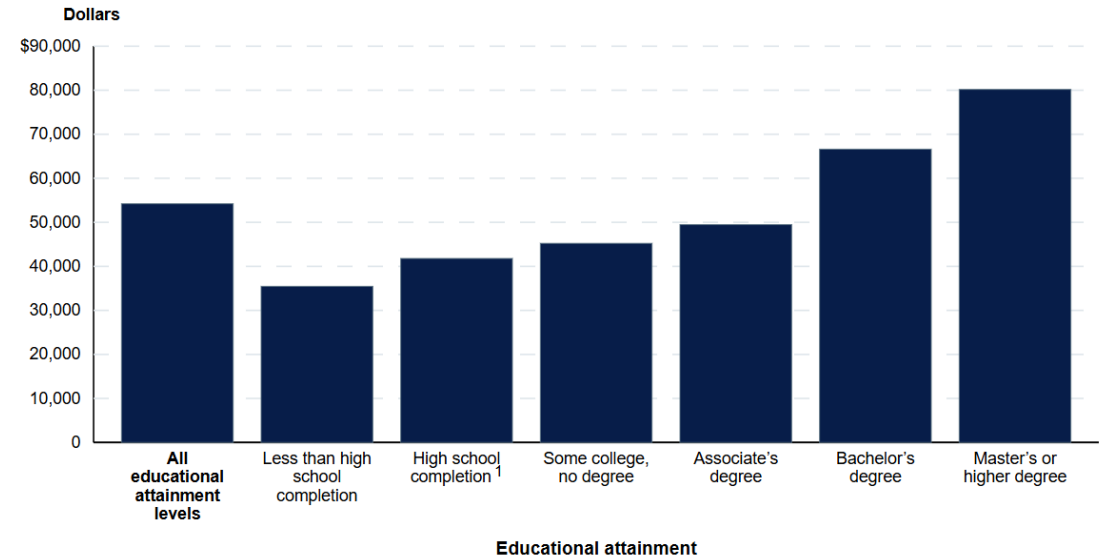
# Value Proposition

## Earnings Premium

- PhD degrees earn on average 20% more than master degrees\*
- Advanced degrees open broader career pathways
- Career Pathways Beyond the Bench: Expanding training for industry, policy, leadership roles

\*Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

Median annual earnings of full-time, year-round workers ages 25–34, by educational attainment: 2022



Source: National Center for Education Statistics



# Opportunities

## **Online/Asynchronous Learning:**

Feasible if no bench work required, Instructional Designer Addition

## **Partnerships with undergraduate institutions, Accelerated Pathways (3+2 / 4+1 programs):**

Faster completion = more attractive

## **Partnership with Industry, Co-Op / Industry Experience:**

Ability to work & study and receive higher job placement

# Opportunities

## **Credit for Prior Learning:**

Recognize student experiences, shorten time to degree

## **Competency-Based Learning:**

Not longer, but faster + career-aligned

# Improvements in Graduate Programs

- Revamped Curriculum
  - › Core competencies beyond research skills
- Career Readiness
  - › Emphasis on career development + options after graduation
- Industry Alignment
  - › Regularly check hiring needs & adjust programs

# Improvements in Graduate Programs

- Innovative Pathways
  - › Accelerated degrees, 3+2, stackable credentials
- Student annual reports and surveys; industry advisors; alumni

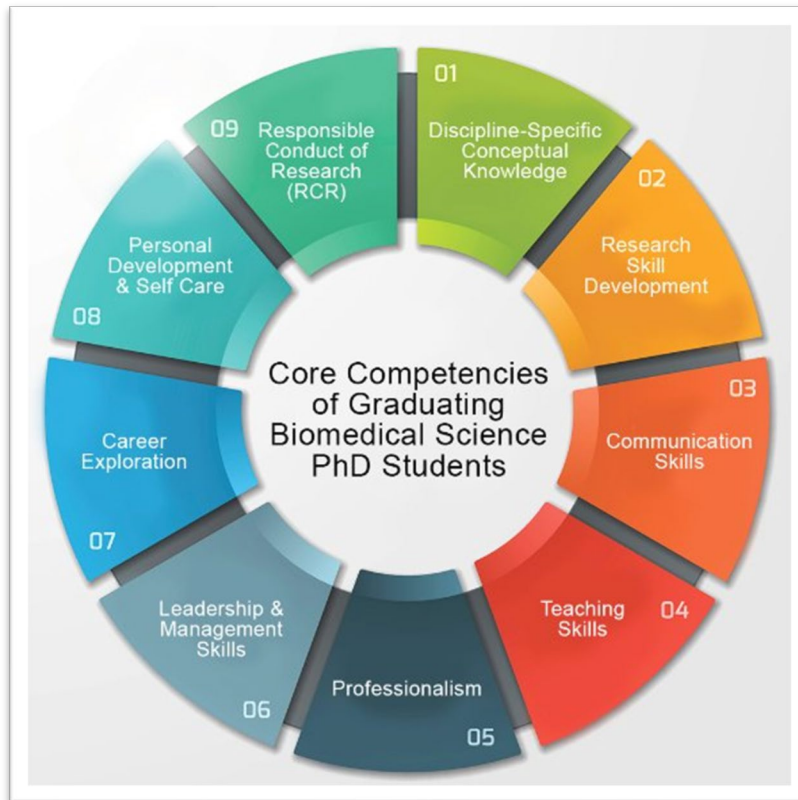
# Improvements (Core Competencies)

Core competencies are a combination of knowledge and skills that are acquired through didactic and experiential learning. The competencies are applicable for successful learning and living in multiple career paths.

Core competencies are continuously reviewed to ensure that they remain relevant to changes in graduate-education and trends in relevant career paths. The focus is on learner success.



# Improvements (Core Competencies)



Source: Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences and Professional Studies  
Drexel University College of Medicine

# Improvements (Outcomes)

- Streamlined programs; clear plan of study and expected outcomes
- Focus on fundamentals and where these are best learned
- For research-intensive programs: more time in the lab
- Decreased course- and professional-development-related work for faculty
- Students report feeling supported; the faculty and administration care
- No increased time-to-completion (also supported by published studies).
- Modernized websites and increased number of applicants. (The value of individual programs and “buzz” words)

# Improvements (Outcomes)

- Modernized tracking (e-forms)
- Facilitates targeted recruitment
- Increased number of publications; increased attendance at conferences
- Some programs closed and new programs created
- Increased online program opportunities
- Elevated reputation (affects recruitment and placement)
- Continuous assessment allows market-responsive changes

# Accountability

Federal Requirements – Track student outcomes (completion, debt, repayment)

Alumni Tracking – Follow graduates long-term (jobs, industries, impact)

Competency Transparency – Show how core competencies are created & assessed



# Acknowledgments

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# Questions?

