

ESSENCE, SCOPE AND STRUCTURE OF AMERICAN GRADUATE EDUCATION

First of all, let's talk about general aspects of the American graduate programs.

All graduate, or as they are sometimes called, post-graduate programs, require a completed Bachelor's degree or an international equivalent, such as the post-Soviet 5-year university degree. Therefore the name "graduate" – designed for the college graduates. In today's world, college education is as widely spread, accepted and valued as high school education was 50 years ago. It is impossible to get a well-paid job without college education today, just as it was impossible to get it without a high school degree then. However, when everyone has a college degree as a minimum, the next-level degree provides better employment opportunities. This is why graduate programs are becoming increasingly popular.

Scope

It is hard to say how many colleges and universities in the United States have graduate programs, as they are not required to report the data and provide it voluntarily. Besides, there is a certain degree of mobility: some graduate programs are terminated while new ones are being introduced. However, we still can get an idea from the available statistics.

As of 2015, a total of 3,026 colleges and universities in the United States grant Bachelor's degrees. It is estimated that about a third of them have various graduate programs. The Council of Graduate Schools reports that for its 2012 survey it had solicited data from 787 colleges and universities with graduate programs and received reliable responses from 675 institutions. If you are interested in deep research on the trends in graduate enrollment and degrees, you can find this detailed report in full here:

http://cgsnet.org/ckfinder/userfiles/files/GEDReport_2012.pdf. This is also a good example of a rigorous and highly professional meta-analysis research study on higher education.

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reports that in 2012-13, American higher educational institutions conferred upon their graduates 1,840,164 Bachelor's degrees, 751,751 Master's and 175,038 Doctorates. To make sure we are on the same page here: this is the number of graduates who received the degrees, not the number of graduate programs. The breakdown of these stats by professional fields and gender can be found here: https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d14/tables/dt14_318.30.asp. In general, NCES is a good source of reliable statistics on various educational aspects in the United States.

One more interesting fact relating to international students: in the recent years graduate programs report a slight decrease in enrollment of American students but a significant increase in international enrollments. Some reports

(<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2013/07/12/new-report-shows-dependence-us-graduate-programs-foreign-students>) even describe this as a problem of US public universities' dependence on foreign students. So if you get accepted into an American graduate school you will be a part of this upward trend.

Structure

Graduate programs in the United States include two levels: Master's and PhD (doctorate).

Master's programs generally last 1-2 years, depending on whether it is a skills- or research-oriented program. Master's degree programs provide specialized preparation in a field of study.

- *Skills-oriented programs* are often referred to as “professional” Master's (not to be confused with a professional degree, which prepares someone for a particular licensed profession such as law or medicine by emphasizing skills and practical analysis over theory and research). For example, such programs exist in communication and journalism, where the professions are not licensed to get a professional degree, but the practitioners still would like to get an upgrade to their skills.

These programs are designed for those people who already have a lot of solid professional experience and would like to upgrade their basic professional and analytical skills as applied to their professional field. These programs are very popular as they provide an upgrade for the professionals who need a boost in their education without taking too much time for the studies and away from their profession. Such programs usually last one year and as an output produce a professional project (a film, a business plan, a new start-up idea, a professional evaluation of a business or program with recommendations for improvement, etc).

- *Research-oriented programs* are more focused on theory and research and generally last two years, typically with the last semester devoted to a graduate thesis. Such programs are designed to prepare people to continue their studies at the PhD level or teach at a college level.

Note that some fields of study offer what is called a “terminal” master's degree. It literally means that the Master's degree is the highest, therefore terminal, in the field and the PhD simply does not exist. For example, terminal Master's professional degree is awarded in Business Administration (MBA), Architecture (MArch), or Fine Arts such as Theater, Dance and Film (MFA). Some professions even require a master's degree, not Bachelor's, in order to work in that field.

Some master's degrees are designed as an intermediate step toward the PhD. In many fields, however, students can enter the PhD program directly after completing a bachelor's degree.

A doctorate, or a PhD program, is all about original research. It is designed to prepare highly qualified teachers and researchers for universities, analytical institutions and research think tanks. It is a very narrow and incredibly competitive niche, and a PhD in hand does not guarantee a job. But it certainly improves your chances of getting hired by a research institution or university if you see this as your career path. Keep in mind that generally a PhD program lasts 4-5 years, and most universities guarantee funding for three years and encourage the doctoral candidates to find outside sources to fund their doctoral research in the last one or two years.

Most PhD programs in the US exist in conjunction with the Master's. What it means is that if you are accepted into the Master's program, you will have an option to continue into a doctorate once you graduate (depending on the availability of funding, of course). In that case, most of your Master's coursework, especially if it is from the same university, will be counted toward your PhD, which will cut a year or two of coursework from your doctoral studies.