



Council of Graduate Schools

Data Sources: Graduate School Aspirations of American Freshmen

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The path to graduate school begins long before prospective students start the graduate school application process, and progress along that path is often shaped by students' aspirations earlier in the educational process. The higher education plans of college freshman are an indicator that can potentially shed light on future graduate enrollment.

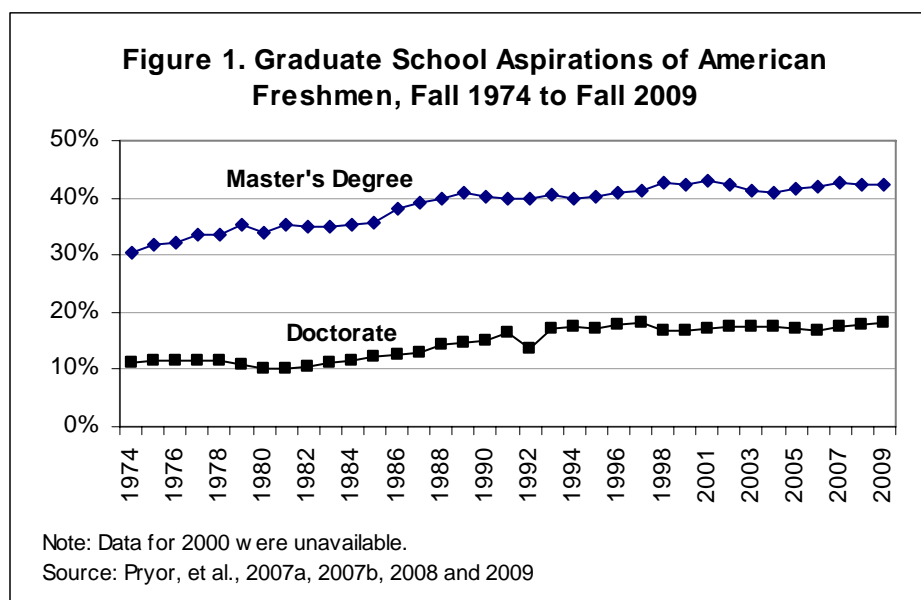
For over 40 years, the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) at the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA has conducted a nation-wide survey of American college freshmen. Each year, a representative sample of freshmen provide data on their working, studying and socializing behaviors; political, ideological and religious beliefs; opinions on current issues; and academic and non-academic pursuits. In 2009, 219,864 first-time, full-time first-year students at 297 four-year colleges and universities in the United States responded to the survey (Pryor, et al., 2009). The survey includes two questions that deal with the graduate school aspirations of first-year undergraduates; the data from these two questions will be examined in this article. The first question asks students to state the highest academic degree they intend to obtain at *any* institution, and the second asks students to state the highest degree they plan to earn at their *freshman* institution.

Graduate School Aspirations at Any Institution

When asked to state the highest degree they planned to earn at *any* institution, the majority of respondents indicated plans to obtain a postbaccalaureate degree at some point. About one-fifth (22.1%) of the CIRP survey respondents in fall 2009 indicated that their highest planned degree was a bachelor's. Some 42.4% indicated that they planned to obtain a master's degree as their highest degree, and an additional 18.2% of respondents indicated plans to earn a doctorate, meaning that six out of ten freshmen (60.6%) had plans to pursue a graduate degree at some point. Among the remaining respondents, 14.6% said they had plans to earn a first-professional degree such as an M.D., J.D., or D.V.M., 1.4% indicated that they expected to earn less than a bachelor's degree, and the remaining 1.3% marked 'other' as their intended highest degree.

Over time, the percentage of freshmen with graduate school aspirations has gradually increased. In fall 1974, 30.4% of the respondents to the CIRP survey indicated that they planned to earn a master's degree at some point; by fall 2009, that figure had increased by about one-third to 42.4% (see Figure 1 on the following page). A similar increase occurred for the doctoral degree. While 11.1% of freshmen in 1974 had plans to earn a doctorate, 18.2% of freshmen in 2009 planned to do so.

Graduate school aspirations increased for both men and women over the past 35 years, with some differences by level (see Table 1 on the following page). In 1974, women were four percentage points more likely to aspire to a master's degree as their highest degree than men (28.5% of male freshmen vs. 32.5% of female freshmen). This four percentage point gap in aspirations shrank to less than one percentage point in 2009 (42.0% of male freshmen vs. 42.7% of female freshmen). While aspirations to a master's degree increased for both men and women between 1974 and 2009, the increase was greater for men than for women.



A slightly different story emerges for aspirations to a doctoral degree. Once again, aspirations to a doctoral degree increased for both men and women between 1974 and 2009, but the increase in this case was greater for women than for men, more than doubling for women, but increasing by less than 50% for men. Women were less likely than men to aspire to a doctorate in 1974 (9.2% vs. 12.1%), but slightly more likely to do so in 2009 (18.9% vs. 17.4%).

Table 1. Graduate School Aspirations of American Freshmen
by Gender, Selected Years, Fall 1974 to Fall 2009

Year	Master's Degree		Doctorate	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
1974	28.5%	32.5%	12.1%	9.2%
1979	34.4%	36.2%	11.8%	9.9%
1984	34.9%	36.0%	12.2%	11.3%
1989	39.9%	41.5%	14.9%	14.5%
1994	38.8%	40.6%	17.6%	17.3%
1999	42.0%	42.5%	16.5%	17.1%
2004	40.6%	41.2%	17.3%	17.5%
2009	42.0%	42.7%	17.4%	18.9%

Source: Pryor, et al., 2007a and 2009

Graduate School Aspirations at their Freshman Institution

The CIRP survey results reveal that many freshmen enter college with the realistic expectation that they will likely change institutions before earning a graduate degree. When asked to state the highest degree they planned to pursue at their *freshman* institution, 69.4% of first-year college students in fall 2009 indicated a bachelor's degree, 20.2% a master's degree, and 3.4% a doctorate. The remaining respondents indicated that they expected to earn less than a bachelor's degree or a first-professional degree at their freshman institution.

These data contrast significantly with the statistics presented above on the highest academic degree college freshmen intend to obtain at *any* institution. For example, while 42 out of every 100 college freshmen in fall 2009 expected to earn a master's degree from any institution, less than half that number (20 out of 100) expected to earn that master's degree at their freshman institution. Similarly, while 18 out of 100 college freshmen planned to obtain a doctorate, only three out of 100 expected to earn a doctorate at their freshman institution.

Over time, degree aspirations at the freshman institution have remained relatively stable. In 1974, 70.9% of respondents indicated that the highest degree they intended to obtain at their freshman institution was a bachelor's degree; this figure was 69.4% in 2009. The changes were slightly larger at the graduate level. In 1974, 13.1% of respondents expected to earn a master's degree at their freshman institution; in 2009 20.2% did so. For those students aspiring to a doctoral degree at their freshman institution, the figures were 2.0% in 1974 vs. 3.4% in 2009.

Implications

In fall 2009, nearly all freshmen (97%) entered college expecting to earn at least a bachelor's degree, and three-quarters (75%) of all freshmen had plans to earn a graduate or first-professional degree at some point. Yet, many of these first-year students will never even earn the bachelor's degree they hope to obtain. Among full-time, first-time college students entering four-year institutions in 2001, the six-year graduation rate among degree-seeking students was just 57% (Knapp, et al., 2009). While some of the remaining 43% of students will likely complete their undergraduate degree at some point beyond the six-year time frame, many other students will not.

The graduate degree aspirations of college freshmen are clearly not in line with the statistics on undergraduate completion. While some students may underestimate the rigor of their undergraduate program, and while personal or financial issues may impede the progress of others, the reality is that many of the students who enter college with the goal of earning a graduate degree will never make it through the first hurdle in that educational process. Among those students who do successfully navigate the pathway through the undergraduate degree, aspirations appear to change or fail to materialize. Six out of ten freshmen enter college planning to earn a graduate degree, but data from the National Center for Education Statistics show that only 35% of bachelor's degree recipients enroll in a master's or doctoral program within ten years of completion of the baccalaureate (Nevill and Chen, 2007). Future increases in graduate enrollment depend not only on improving undergraduate completion rates, but also on cultivating the postbaccalaureate plans of undergraduates so that those who successfully complete their degrees transform their graduate aspirations into graduate applications.

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