



# Council of Graduate Schools

## Data Sources: Changes in the Enrollment Status of Graduate Students

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Year-to-year changes in the share of graduate students enrolled full-time or part-time are minimal at most colleges and universities, but an examination of enrollment status at the national level over time reveals some interesting shifts. While the data show a clear picture of a trend, the cause of the shift, however, is less clear.

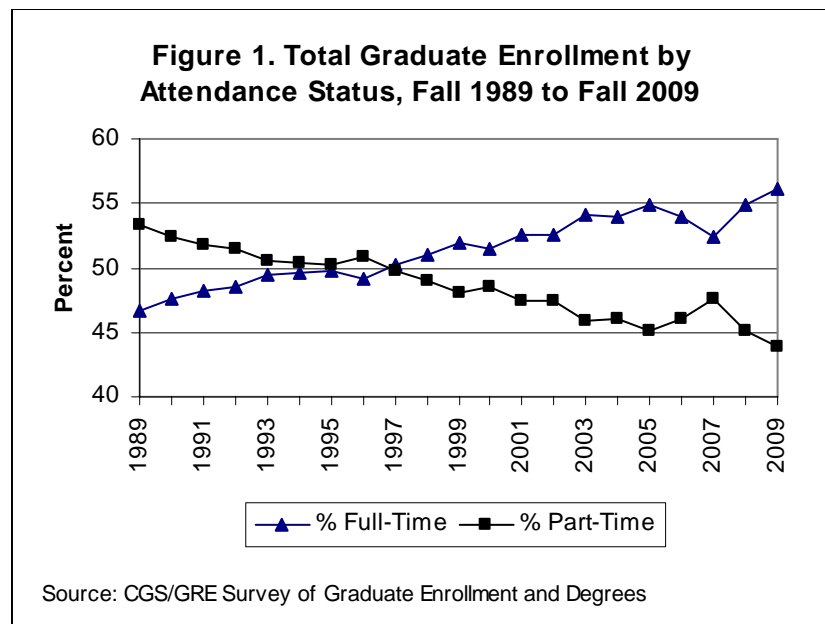
### *Changes in Enrollment Status, 1989 to 2009*

Data from the CGS/GRE Survey of Graduate Enrollment and Degrees show that over the past two decades there has been a gradual increase in the percentage of graduate students who are enrolled full-time (Council of Graduate Schools, 2010). In fall 1989, 47% of all graduate students attended on a full-time basis. By fall 1997, half of all graduate students attended full-time, and by fall 2009, 56% were enrolled on a full-time basis (see Figure 1). The trend toward a greater share of full-time enrollees was relatively constant over the past 20 years with the exception of fall 2007 in which the trend temporarily shifted toward greater growth in part-time graduate enrollment.

The majority of both male and female graduate students are now enrolled full-time. While men are still more likely to be enrolled full-time than women, women have contributed to more of the overall increase in full-time graduate enrollment than men over the past two

decades. Among male graduate students, 60% were enrolled full-time in fall 2009, a seven percentage point gain from 53% in fall 1989. Among female graduate students, 54% were enrolled full-time in fall 2009, a 13 percentage point gain from 41% in fall 1989.

Increases in full-time enrollment occurred in all broad fields between fall 1989 and fall 2009 (see Table 1). Increases were largest in business (from 37% full-time students in 1989 to 56% in 2009), education (from 27% to 41%), and health and medical sciences (from 52% to 62%). Despite the large increase in full-time



enrollment in education, it is the only broad field in which part-time students still outnumber full-time students. Full-time enrollment increased least in arts and humanities and in physical and earth sciences, increasing by just two percentage points in each of these broad fields between 1989 and 2009.

While it would be interesting to examine, data from the CGS/GRE Survey of Graduate Enrollment and Degrees cannot shed light on changes in enrollment status by citizenship and race/ethnicity, and the data on enrollment status cannot be disaggregated by degree level (master's vs. doctoral).

### *Discussion and Conclusions*

This brief examination of the data on enrollment status raises some interesting, and in some cases

counterintuitive, points. First, however, it should be noted that the data presented above do not control for changes over time in the numbers of institutions responding to the survey. Overall, 699 institutions responded to the CGS/GRE Survey of Graduate Enrollment and Degrees in 2009, and 469 responded to the survey in 1989. But, controlling for consistent survey response does not change the outcome. Among the 452 institutions that responded to the survey in both 1989 and 2009, 47% of all graduate students attended on a full-time basis in 1989, and 56% attended on a full-time basis in 2009 – the same figures as those presented above for all survey respondents.

It is also important to note that even though a smaller share of graduate students studied part-time in 2009, the actual numbers of both part-time and full-time enrollees increased over the past two decades. Among the 452 institutions that responded to the survey in both 1989 and 2009, part-time graduate enrollment increased 15% between 1989 and 2009, translating to an increase from 485,870 part-time enrollees in 1989 to 568,745 in 2009. Full-time graduate enrollment increased 41% at these same institutions over the past two decades, growing from 424,554 full-time enrollees in 1989 to 724,220 in 2009.

But, is this increase in full-time enrollment real or simply a reflection of changes over time in how colleges and universities define “full-time” enrollment? In the CGS/GRE Survey of Graduate Enrollment and Degrees, full-time enrollment includes “students enrolled for credit in graduate degree programs who are engaged full time in training activities in their field...” No specific number of credits is specified, and respondents are instructed to report enrollment status according to their own university's definition. If institutions have changed their own definition of “full-time,” this could partly explain the growth in full-time enrollment. For example, students in the dissertation stage may previously have been considered part-time but might now be counted as full-time. In addition, the definition of full-time varies from institution to institution. For example, one primarily online institution reports all of its graduate students as full-time regardless of credit hours, while other institutions consider graduate students full-time only if they are

**Table 1.** Total Graduate Enrollment by Broad Field and Attendance Status, Fall 1989 and Fall 2009

Broad Field	% Enrolled Full-Time	
	Fall 1989	Fall 2009
Total	47%	56%
Arts & Humanities	66%	68%
Biological & Agricultural Sci.	75%	78%
Business	37%	56%
Education	27%	41%
Engineering	64%	69%
Health & Medical Sciences	52%	62%
Mathematics & Computer Sci.	56%	63%
Physical & Earth Sciences	79%	81%
Public Administration & Services	52%	58%
Social & Behavioral Sciences	64%	70%
Other Fields	47%	50%

Source: CGS/GRE Survey of Graduate Enrollment and Degrees

taking nine credits or more. Changes in the definition of full-time, as well as the growth of online graduate education, could account for some of the increase in full-time enrollment over the past two decades.

The increase in full-time enrollment also seems counterintuitive given the increase in the numbers of non-traditional graduate students in recent years. For example, the number of graduate students 40 years of age and over increased 87% between fall 1987 and fall 2007, compared with a 58% overall increase in graduate enrollment in the same time period (Bell, 2009). Since older graduate students are more likely to be enrolled part-time than their younger peers (Redd, 2007), the increase in the share of students who are non-traditional in terms of age seems contradictory to the increase in full-time enrollment over the past two decades.

One factor in particular could indicate that at least part of the growth in full-time enrollment is real. Since international students on F-1 visas are required to study full-time, an increase in the share of graduate students who are international could result in an overall increase in the share of graduate students who are full-time. Indeed, there was a slight increase in international graduate students between fall 1989 and fall 2009, with non-U.S. citizens on temporary visas increasing from 14.4% of all graduate students to 15.5% (Council of Graduate Schools, 2010). However, this increase can explain only a small portion of the overall increase in full-time enrollment over the past two decades.

The shift from part-time to full-time students as the majority in graduate education is an interesting trend, but clearly the data alone cannot tell the full story. The data indicate that women have driven much of the increase in full-time enrollment, and that the fields of business, education, and health and medical sciences have contributed to much of the gain, but putting the data into the context of graduate education reveals that there is likely much more to the story. The degree to which changes in the definition of full-time, the growth in online education, and the increases in the numbers of international and non-traditional students have contributed to changes in enrollment status over time is beyond the scope of this article, but clearly each of these factors has had an impact on the aggregate trend.

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#### *References:*

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