



## RESEARCH REPORT

### Data Sources: Non-Traditional Students in Graduate Education

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In recent years, a number of colleges and universities have developed graduate programs specifically designed for older students returning to school, often part-time or online programs that offer the flexibility non-traditional students require. Institutions cite the increase in the numbers of non-traditional graduate students on their campuses as the impetus for these new programs, but is this population truly growing? This article uses three data sources to explore the changes in the participation of older students in graduate education over time.

#### *Graduate Students by Age Group*

Data from the U.S. Department of Education's Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) reveal that there has been only a small shift over time in the age distribution of graduate students in the United States. In fall 2007, 22% of all graduate students were 40 years of age and over, compared with 23% in fall 1997, and 18% in fall 1987 (Table 1). While the percentage of graduate students 40 years of

**Table 1.** Graduate Enrollment by Age, Fall 1987, Fall 1997, and Fall 2007

	Fall 1987		Fall 1997		Fall 2007	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
<b>All Students</b>	1,452,075	100%	1,753,489	100%	2,293,593	100%
Under 18	767	0%	312	0%	215	0%
18 and 19	566	0%	406	0%	931	0%
20 and 21	9,371	1%	13,071	1%	18,751	1%
22 to 24	201,505	14%	254,702	15%	401,589	18%
25 to 29	416,707	29%	544,030	31%	701,462	31%
30 to 34	288,114	20%	301,834	17%	390,025	17%
35 to 39	219,008	15%	202,236	12%	258,480	11%
40 to 49	208,215	14%	300,486	17%	318,074	14%
50 to 64	51,591	4%	96,936	6%	175,838	8%
65 and over	7,494	1%	5,753	0%	6,483	0%
Age unknown	48,737	3%	33,723	2%	21,745	1%
<b>29 and under</b>	628,916	43%	812,521	46%	1,122,948	49%
<b>30 to 39</b>	507,122	35%	504,070	29%	648,505	28%
<b>40 and over</b>	267,300	18%	403,175	23%	500,395	22%

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics*, 1990, 1999, and 2008

age and over increased over the past two decades, the percentage 30 to 39 years of age declined, from 35% in 1987 to 28% in 2007. Combining the two categories reveals a slight overall decline in the percentage of graduate students 30 years of age and over, from 53% in 1987 to 50% in 2007 (Snyder, et al., 2009, and earlier editions).

Although there has been little change in the age distribution of graduate students over the past 20 years, there has been a large increase in the sheer numbers of non-traditional students. Between 1987 and 2007, the number of graduate students 40 years of age and over increased 87%, from about 267,000 to 500,000, and the number of graduate students 30 to 39 years of age increased 28%, from 507,000 to 649,000. These figures compare with a 58% overall increase in graduate enrollment in the same time period.

Projections suggest that the number of non-traditional students will continue to increase over the next decade, but these older students will comprise about the same share of all students in ten years as they do today. Projections data by age are not broken out by level (undergraduate vs. graduate), but they indicate that about 3.4 million students 35 years of age and over will be enrolled in higher education in 2018, up from about 3.0 million in 2007. Students in this age group are expected to account for 16.4% of all students in higher education in 2018 compared to 16.5% in 2007 (Hussar and Bailey, 2009).

#### *Average Age of Graduate Students*

Age data are also collected as part of the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS), a sample survey conducted every four years by the National Center for Education Statistics. Data from the survey show that there has been little change in the average age of graduate students in recent years. As of December 31, 2007, the average age of graduate students was 32.4 years old, while four years earlier in 2003, the average age of graduate students was 32.5 years old. Both figures are nearly identical to those for 1999 and 1995, when the average ages of graduate students were 32.6 and 32.4, respectively (NCES, various years).

The NPSAS dataset also includes age data by degree program and field of study. By degree program, the average age of students in 2007 was highest in Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) programs (42.3) and lowest in Doctor of Psychology (Psy.D.) programs (28.3). In all other master's degree and doctoral programs, the average age ranged from a low of 31.1 in Master of Public Health (MPH) programs to a high of 33.2 in Master of Education or Teaching programs. The average age of students in post-baccalaureate certificate programs was 36.8. By field of study, the average age of graduate students was highest in family and consumer sciences (38.4); theology and religious vocations (37.1); and library science (36.6), and lowest in architecture (27.5); parks, recreation, and fitness studies (28.4); and biological and biomedical sciences (28.5).

#### *Median Age at Receipt of Doctorate*

A third source, the Survey of Earned Doctorates (SED), collects data on the median age of individuals at the time they earn a research doctorate in the United States. While the median age of new doctorate recipients increased gradually in the late 1980s and early 1990s, this figure has actually declined over the past decade. In 2006, the latest year for which data are currently available, the median age of new doctorate recipients was 32.7 years old. In 2001, the median age was 33.3 years old, and in 1996, it was 34.1 years old. The median age of new doctorate recipients today is nearly identical to the median age at receipt of the doctorate in 1983 (32.8), and only one year older than the median age in 1978 (31.7) (Hoffer, et al., 2007, and earlier editions).

## Conclusions

Data from these sources indicate that the number of non-traditional graduate students has increased in the United States over the past two decades, but their share of all graduate students has changed only slightly. However, two of these sources (IPEDS and the SED) do not capture any data on graduate certificate-level and master's-level students enrolled part-time only in the summer, populations that might include larger numbers of non-traditional students. While the NPSAS data may include these students, it is likely that they are underrepresented in the survey data. Therefore, it is possible that the current sources of data on student age fail to capture the true change in this population over time.

Even if current data sources are unable to provide a full picture of the participation of non-traditional students in graduate education, it is clear that the population is growing in sheer numbers and that this growth will likely persist for at least the next decade. To serve this growing population, U.S. graduate schools will need to continue to offer flexible programs, delivered in a variety of formats, to meet the needs of these older students.

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## References:

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