



UNDERSTANDING GRADUATE STUDENT DEBT DATA

Student borrowing and growing student loan debt continue to make headlines. These were issues in the recent presidential elections and will continue to be a focus throughout the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act. Claims about excessive graduate student debt and borrowing have been made, and are accompanied by data that seem to substantiate those claims.

To have a better understanding of whether those data support the claims being made, consider the following:

- What is the source of the data – Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS), Survey of Earned Doctorates (SED), or National Student Loan Data System (NSLDS)? Who collected the data – Department of Education, Federal Reserve, National Science Foundation, or a proprietary entity?
- Are the data from comparable years? Are the amounts adjusted for inflation? Are these national, regional or institutional data?
- What degree levels are the data representing – master's, doctoral, or first professional degrees? What degree programs are the data representing – MA, MS, MBA, PhD, EdD, JD, MD, DDS, DVM, or some combination thereof?
- Are the amounts provided for a single academic year, or for more than one academic year? Do the amounts provided represent all enrolled students or degree recipients only?
- Are the amounts provided cumulative, meaning for both undergraduate and graduate borrowing? Are the amounts only for graduate school? Are the amounts for a single graduate degree or for all graduate degrees earned?
- What do the figures represent – the median of borrowers only or all students, or the average for borrowers only or for all students? What percentage of the graduate student population do the figures represent? What is the sample size? What is the confidence interval?
- What relevant policies at the national, state and institutional levels regarding student financial assistance may have occurred that would impact the data? For example, the elimination of in-school interest subsidies for graduate students.