Applications to the nation's graduate schools in fall 2017 decreased by 1.8 percent from the previous year. For the first time in six years, both applications and enrollments for master's programs had been increasing about 2 percent annually. In fall 2017, applications dropped 1.8 percent and enrollment declined 1 percent. China and India continue to be the two largest countries of origin, even though India, in particular, is sending fewer students since 2015.

While there isn’t a “traditional” or “nontraditional” age for master’s students because people pursue the degrees at many different ages to start, enhance, or change careers, some data suggests that the age might be getting younger, perhaps because of growth in jobs that require master’s degrees for entry level.

More Women Than Men

In fall 2017, the majority of students enrolled in master's programs were women—59.2 percent. This marked the eighth year in a row in which women have made up the majority of graduate students and earned the majority of graduate degrees.

Institutions experienced the overall decline in 2017 differently. In fall 2017, the majority of students enrolled in master's programs were women—59.2 percent. It marked the eighth year in a row in which women have made up the majority of graduate students and earned the majority of graduate degrees. While men are still receiving the lion’s share of graduate degrees in STEM, women have fueled the largest master’s level enrollment increases in mathematics and computer science over the past five years.

Comparisons of Applications by Country or Region

For the second year in a row, international graduate applications and first-time enrollments declined at U.S. colleges and universities in fall 2018. Applications were down 4 percent, and enrollment down 1 percent. China and India continue to be the two largest countries of origin, even though India, in particular, is sending fewer students since 2015.

Comparisons of Applications by Country or Region

Changes in Applications, by Broad Discipline, 2016 to 2017

Most Widely Held Degrees

Many master's degrees require a bachelor's degree in the same field, such as a master of business administration, but many also require a different bachelor's degree, such as a master of fine arts in studio art or a master of social work.

Changing Interests and Pursuits

Changing Applications, by Broad Discipline, 2016 to 2017

What Does All This Mean for Graduate Schools?

Applications to specific disciplines generally are in line with the fastest growing fields. However, engineering, in 2017, experienced a significant drop, which might have been driven by the decline in international students applying to graduate school in the United States.

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