

Post-Graduation Plans Among Graduate and Professional Students

Executive Summary

PURPOSE

Current discussion in higher education has focused on the greater demand in many professions for a graduate or terminal degree, and the challenge that despite heightened demand for students to pursue graduate degrees, there is a limited supply of traditional academic positions available for those who specifically desire a career in research, teaching, or the professoriate. This study utilized 2014 Student Affairs Graduate and Professional Student Survey (GPSS) data to explore UCLA graduate and professional students' expectations for their post-graduate work to answer the following questions:

What are the career aspirations of graduate and professional students and are there differences in career aspirations by degree type?

Do graduate and professional students change their career plans and if so, are certain students more likely to change? Why do students change their career plans

FINDINGS

Analysis revealed the following key findings:

- UCLA Graduate and Professional students are considering both academic and non-academic career options.
- Approximately one-third of graduate and professional students expect to pursue non-academic options, most of whom are masters' students. Specifically, 20.3% of doctoral students and 47.3% of masters' students report anticipating seeking non-academic positions.
- The likelihood of a student to change their career trajectory increases over the length of enrollment.
- Students' career plans vary based upon their field of study and degree type. About 21% report having changed their minds about post-graduate activity. The changes happen most often in the Division of Humanities, followed by the Life Sciences and Social Sciences.

IMPLICATIONS

As a result of these findings, advisors in academic departments, career counselors, and faculty should educate themselves on the variety of professional experiences attainable to students in various disciplines, in order to expose students to these possibilities. This includes both expanding learning and educational opportunities to advance students' career readiness skills and ensuring that faculty and advisors have the knowledge to support students exploring these options. Through specific and intentional career-related programs and one-on-one mentoring conversations, students can become familiar with a wide variety of ways to utilize their graduate or professional degree in a variety of work settings.

Introduction

Over time, a greater number of professions have come to require a graduate or terminal degree. According to the Educational Testing Service (ETS), the total number of jobs in the United States requiring an advanced degree is estimated to grow by 2.5 million before 2018. This projection would mean that the number of jobs requiring advanced degrees will increase by 18 percent, and those requiring a Ph.D. will increase by 17 percent. While there is heightened demand for students to pursue graduate degrees, there is a limited supply of academic positions available for those who desire a career in research, teaching, or the professoriate. Therefore, colleges and universities are expected to equip graduate students with versatile skills that will also prepare them for non-academic job opportunities (Inside Higher Education, 04/19/2012).

The purpose of this brief is to describe UCLA graduate and professional students' expectations for their post-graduate work, changes related to their career goals, and any variations in students' career choices by degree type, academic progress, or division. Accordingly, this brief seeks to answer the following questions: (1) What are career aspirations of graduate and professional students and are there differences in career aspirations by degree type? (2) Do students change their career plans and if so, are certain students more likely to change? Why do students change their career plans?

Method

All currently enrolled graduate and professional students across all UCLA academic divisions and departments were invited to participate in the Student Affairs Graduate and Professional Student Survey (GPSS) in the spring of 2014. Students shared their experiences and opinions related to campus climate, health and wellness, and professional development opportunities. This brief focuses on data collected from 3,820 UCLA graduate and professional students who responded to the survey (34% response rate). The sample was generally representative of the overall graduate and professional student population with respect to race/ethnicity and across academic divisions and degrees. Female respondents were slightly overrepresented compared to the overall graduate and professional student population (52% vs. 46%). International students were slightly under-represented compared to the overall graduate and professional student population (13% vs. 23%). (Additional information: <http://www.sairo.ucla.edu/Portals/2/Documents/2014GradDemoBackground.pdf>).

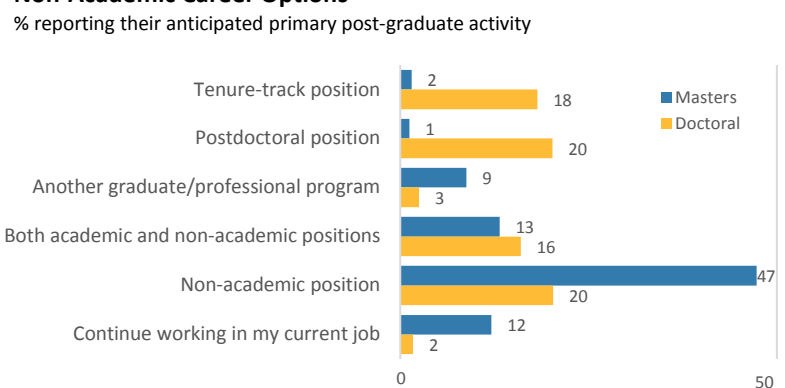
Findings

Analysis of graduate student career aspirations revealed differences across degree types and academic disciplines when exploring both expectations for post-graduate careers and changes to career plans during their time at UCLA.

Career Aspirations

Graduate and professional students held expectations for primary post-graduate activity that ranged from academic to non-academic opportunities (see Figure 1). The distribution of expectations for non-academic versus academic opportunities is different for Masters and Doctoral students. Not surprisingly, a majority of Masters' students plan to pursue non-academic career opportunities after graduation. Interestingly, while most Doctoral students desire academic positions, a considerable percentage of these students also consider non-academic opportunities.

Figure 1: Both Masters' and Doctoral Students are Interested in Non-Academic Career Options



Other response options included: fellowship, non-tenure track teaching, administration, residency, unsure, and other.

Specific to Doctoral students, many indicated a desire to pursue an academic position after graduation. Among these students, most of them planned to pursue a post-doctoral position (20%) or a tenure-track position (18%). Comparatively fewer Doctoral students indicated an interest in non-tenure track positions, fellowship positions, or college/university administrative positions (fewer than 2% for each). In addition, pursuing another graduate/professional program or continuing to work in their current position ranked as unlikely post-graduate activities for Doctoral students.

In contrast, Master's students are more open with their career pursuits. Almost half of Master's students (47%) expressed a desire to pursue non-academic options after graduation. In addition, they reported plans to consider academic and non-academic options (13%), continuing to work in their current job (12%), uncertainty in their career path (8%), or plans to pursue another graduate/professional program (8%).

Changes in Career Plans

The longer students are enrolled in their graduate program, the more likely they are to change their career plans (see Figure 2). In total, 21% of all respondents reported changing their minds about their primary post-graduate activity, and this likelihood increases by degree progress. Among Master's students, 16% reported changing their career plans. This compares to 21% of Doctoral students who have not advanced to candidacy (ATC), 34% of Doctoral students who are ATC but have spent 9 quarters or less enrolled, and 41% of Doctoral students who have spent more than 9 quarters beyond ATC. Overall, the findings revealed a strong association between academic progress and the likelihood of changing post-graduate career plans. Potential explanations for this finding may suggest that students who remain longer were either less certain of their career plan when they matriculated, or their academic experiences exposed them to new career options beyond those which they originally envisioned.

While 21% of all graduate students have changed their minds about their primary post-graduate activity, this change tends to occur with varying frequency depending upon the academic program (see Figure 3). Among those with the highest percentage of students reporting having changed their plans are the Division of Humanities (32%), followed by Life Sciences (29%), and Social Sciences (29%). It is important to note, however, that these data should be interpreted with caution, as the sample sizes when disaggregated by school are relatively small.

Figure 2. Changes in Career Plans by Academic Progress

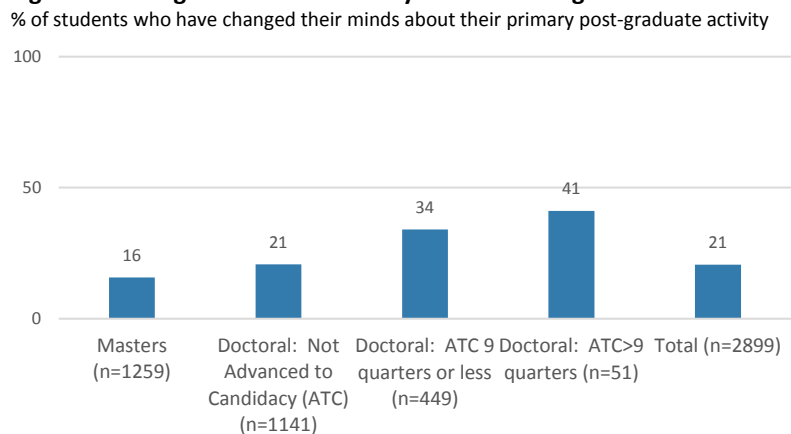
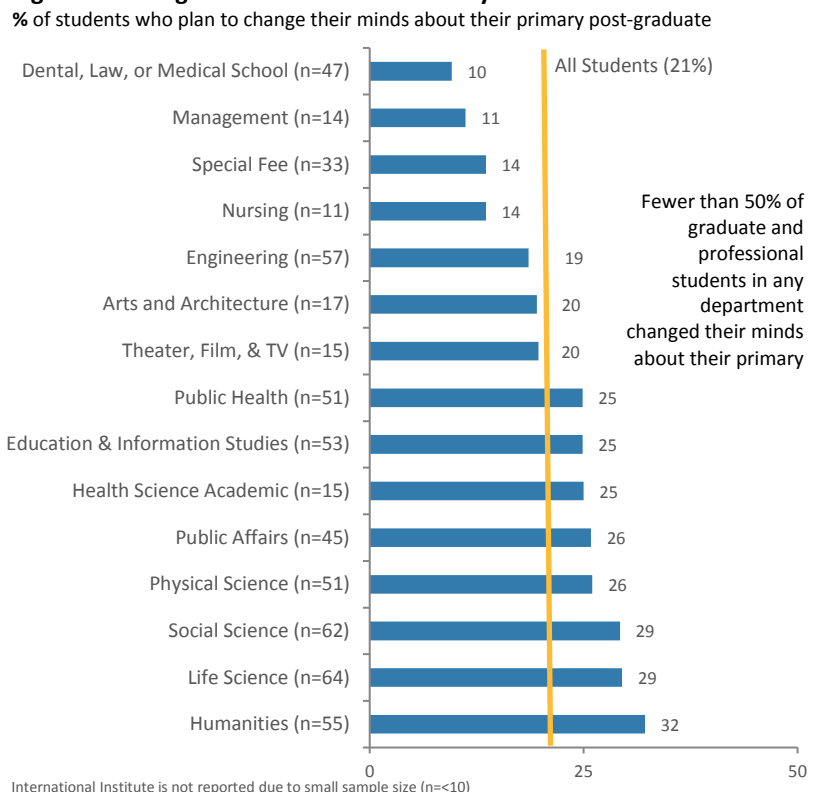


Figure 3. Changes in Career Plans Varies by Academic Division



As shown by the findings, graduate students' post-graduate plans vary based on their degree type, academic program, and degree progress. Unsurprisingly, the longer students are enrolled, the more likely they are to change their minds about their post-graduate plans. Respondents who indicated that they have changed their mind about the primary post-graduate activity they expect to pursue after graduation were prompted to provide additional explanation. The most common themes expressed included: uncertainty of career plans, desire to change from academia to industry, change in specialization, or interest in pursuing a doctorate (for master's students). There are both positive and negative circumstances that may motivate students' desire to expand their career options. A student who was expanding career options as a result of exposure to a positive on-campus opportunity explained,

“Especially after my first TA ship, I’ve become keener on the possibility of working either as a teacher, or pursuing some sort of community outreach/education position with an arts institution.”

In contrast, a student concerned about the current job market said,

“As it becomes clearer that there is a dearth of available faculty positions around the country to accommodate the number of postdocs we are producing, I am considering careers outside of academia and/or outside of my field.”

It is positive that the most common impetus for students' desire to change their career trajectory is experiencing expanding options. Said otherwise, the academic experience has led students to evaluate and question their career intentions when they started and led to a desire to explore new opportunities.

Conclusion and Implications

Interesting themes emerged from the 2014 Student Affairs Graduate and Professional Survey. Similar to national trends, UCLA graduate and professional students are expanding their career options to include a greater balance of both academic and non-academic pursuits. The longer students are enrolled at UCLA, the more likely it seems they will change their minds about their post-graduate plans. Among the academic divisions/schools in which graduate and professional students were enrolled, that with the largest percentage of students who change their career plans was Humanities. It is of utmost importance to recognize that both masters and doctoral students need advising and professional development opportunities that focus on the range of potential career paths – including those in non-academic settings. In conclusion, while graduate and professional students are encouraged to seek out university resources including, but not limited to faculty, staff mentors, and advisors in the Career Center, to receive guidance as they explore their career opportunities, the university must be fully equipped to provide these opportunities and engage in mentoring and conversations about a variety of career prospects. Furthermore, the university must evaluate and improve services offered to help graduate and professional students determine the best career fit for their individual goals and needs, as well as sharpen their skills to interview and negotiate career opportunities that maximize the education received in their academic program. As the job market continues to evolve over time, the University must adapt programs and stay on top of these trends.

References

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