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The Shrinking of the Scholarly Ranks

By Megan Zahneis

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When a smattering of doctoral programs announced last spring that they wouldn't admit an incoming class in fall 2021, the idea felt drastic. To some, it felt desperate. But as the summer and fall wore on, more departments announced that they, too, would close their application portals. Nor were the pauses limited to small programs at less wealthy institutions; doctoral programs at seven of eight Ivy League schools and a coterie of other high-profile institutions decided to forgo new cohorts. A list of admissions suspensions maintained by *The Chronicle* since September now includes 131 programs. Still more programs admitted smaller cohorts than normal.

The rationale for the moves was near universal: administrators wanted to use the funds they would've awarded to prospective new students in admissions packages to ensure current students could stay on track. Students already working toward their degrees, after all, faced myriad disruptions to their education: locked-up labs and libraries, canceled travel, frozen grant funding.

These twin phenomena—an admissions standstill and a shaken-up research enterprise—might seem relatively minor when set against what else the pandemic has wrought. Budgetary carnage. Possible college closures. Downstream threats to college completion.

But, surveying the years following the pandemic, observers of graduate education acknowledge an alarming possibility: that, in the United States, frozen admissions, curtailed graduate cohorts, and stalled-out research could severely squeeze the ranks of professional researchers for at least the short term, and maybe longer. In other words, the pandemic may have set about a

shrinking of the scholar class.

Wait, hold on. Aren't the admissions pauses temporary? It's not that simple. Though shaving spots off a doctoral program's admissions target might be intended as a temporary measure, building programs back up to pre-pandemic levels could be unrealistic in some cases.

That's because belt-tightening across the academy has left administrators "feeling that their hands are tied," says Joy Connolly, president of the American Council of Learned Societies. Program leaders, she predicts, are "going to have just a hugely hard row to hoe in justifying up the administrative ladder, or to their fellow deans, that there is real, strong justification for keeping up the numbers."

For public universities, whether they can make that case will depend, in part, on state-budget plans that will be finalized this spring, says Suzanne T. Ortega, president of the Council of Graduate Schools. Reductions in state funding could result in the loss of teaching assistantships or other forms of university-provided support for doctoral students. But by and large, "any program that depends on institutional resources to support students is likely to have downward pressure on class size," Ortega says. She speculates that programs could feel that pressure for two more years.

If and when graduate programs declare themselves open for business, attracting students who've put their education on hold is no cinch. Suzanne Barbour, dean of the graduate school at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, says she expects schools like hers that historically haven't had to compete too hard for classes may find that changed by the pandemic. Programs may need to "change their

recruiting strategies, their advertising strategies to some extent, to make it clear to potential applicants that our programs are viable,” she says. And even well-resourced institutions like her own may have to change their tune. “Sometimes we can get a little bit complacent because the students just come,” Barbour says. “We may have to work a little bit harder for them in the future.”

Data collected by the Council of Graduate Schools indicate that undergraduate students who’d planned before the pandemic to pursue a PhD still plan to do so, but say they’ll have to wait a while. Maintaining contact with those students, Ortega says, is crucial. “I worry that if we’re not smart about staying in touch with them, we will lose them.”

That may be particularly challenging when it comes to international students, who, Barbour says, have deferred fall admission at a higher rate than usual. Their reasons for doing so were obvious—an inability to travel because of the pandemic, difficulty obtaining visas, concern about the political situation in the US. Some who deferred for fall-2020 admission asked to do so again for January 2021. “At some point, students are going to stop deferring and say, Forget it, I’m not going to the US to do my PhD,” says Barbour. “I think that we have to worry about that.”

Whether by cohort reductions or would-be students leaving the pipeline, graduate education will reach an eventual new equilibrium that may not match the graduate-student populations of the last decade, says Earl Lewis, who was president of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation from 2013 to 2018 and is now director of the University of Michigan’s Center for Social Solutions. “By the time we get to ’25 or ’26, we may look back and realize that we’ve reached a new plateau, that it was not as high as it was in 2010, let alone 2015,” Lewis says.

Even though they were the supposed beneficiaries of admissions pauses, current graduate students face disruptions that could affect their professional prospects. Traditionally, a graduate student’s trajectory hinges on their funding—particularly in the hard sciences, where

federal grants often bankroll the work that forms a dissertation. The pandemic exposed the inextricability of degree progress and funding when labs shut down in 2020. “If the grant is paused, but the grant has to keep paying the students, but the science hasn’t gotten done, how is that going to work?” asks Chris M. Golde, a longtime scholar of graduate education who works as a career coach at Stanford University’s career-education center.

Federal agencies will shoulder much of the pressure to end that cycle, say Golde and Debra W. Stewart, a senior fellow at the research organization NORC at the University of Chicago. “Whether this is a 12-month or 10-month delay, or whether it is a five-year delay, is in part a question of money in federal investment,” says Stewart, who is a president emerita of the Council of Graduate Schools.

Ortega, Stewart’s successor at the council, says funding agencies have taken important strides to create flexibility for primary investigators, but uncertainty remains for early-career researchers seeking grant funding for new projects because in many cases, agencies are prioritizing funds requested to finish existing projects.

The future trajectory of that all-important federal investment is uncertain. COVID-19, Ortega says, is also likely to increase the rate at which other countries outspend the US on research and development.

That’s because other nations have been able to reopen their labs and rebound more quickly from COVID-19 closures than the United States has, giving them a jump on American researchers, says Holden Thorp, editor in chief of the *Science* family of journals, citing China, Singapore, Australia, and Germany as examples. “All of these places are getting more research done in the same amount of time that we are, and so, yeah, that probably is a big threat to the United States’s hold on the research enterprise,” Thorp says.

Countries that have managed to control COVID-19—Taiwan and New Zealand among them—may also make more attractive destinations for young scholars, says Luis A. Echegoyen, the 2020 president

of the American Chemical Society. “If I had a choice and I was a postdoc now, I definitely would not come to the US, not at this point, until things somehow clear up.”

On average, 67 percent of institutions’ STEM research was disrupted by the pandemic, according to a survey of 300 graduate-school deans conducted by NORC. “One thing that we don’t know is, will the federal government do anything to try to make up for all of that lost research?” Thorp says.

Some STEM programs are managing to thrive amid the uncertainty. Take Emory University, which has a strong reputation in public health. In the past year, Emory has seen an 11-percent increase in the volume of grant submissions, racking up a record \$831 million in research funding. At the same time, graduate-school applications are up, particularly in the sciences—Emory’s nursing program fielded a 60-percent increase in applications—marking what Deborah Watkins Bruner, Emory’s senior vice president for research, calls a “halo effect” highlighting researchers’ work during the pandemic. But Bruner sees past the halo. “Adrenaline and opportunity,” she says, may account for some of that productivity. “But,” Bruner says, “what we know about human stress is that adrenaline cannot sustain us over the long run.”

Applications, too, could slow down as the lingering stresses of the pandemic discourage students from traveling for a doctoral education, Bruner says. That concern may be most acute for international scholars, who make up 46 percent of Emory’s postdoctorate population.

The University of Texas at El Paso’s chemistry department is seizing on the flagging job market to hire four new faculty members, says Echegoyen, a chemistry professor there. “You have to be very opportunistic, in a way.”

Echegoyen’s team has been opportunistic in other ways, too, using time outside the lab to catch up writing on papers and review articles. That proved a welcome way of coping with pandemic life. “People don’t have anything to do better than actually do some work as they just sit

at home,” Echegoyen says. “It’s really the only useful thing to do.”

But during the two months they were locked out of the lab, Echegoyen made sure to keep in regular touch with his team. He wanted to ensure that his students were “not mentally disconnected from reality and depressed,” and that they knew he supported them.

Without such support and mentoring, early-career scholars could flounder. Several doctoral students who participated in focus groups for a joint report from the American Educational Research Association and the Spencer Foundation reported delays to their work. One student had to put his dissertation on hold because he was unable to access restricted data at his university during campus shutdowns; another reported altering the scope of their dissertation, shifting from a practical framework based on data collected in the field to a more theoretical approach.

In a project as all-important as the dissertation, those sorts of pivots can be devastating, says Golde, the Stanford career coach. “I think there is a lot of loss there of people’s projects that were two-thirds of the way finished or conceptualized” for researchers who haven’t yet gone into the field and fear they never will, Golde says. “I don’t know how one tallies that up, but I think there’s definitely loss there.”

The already-solitary experience of being a doctoral student, too, has become all the more isolating. One doctoral student in the AERA/Spencer report described what they called “fake working.” “The other day, I was at my computer almost from 9 to 9,” the student said. “I would have never done that under normal circumstances, but I had to get things done. But my brain was everywhere.”

The pandemic’s stresses take an added toll on international doctoral students, who are more likely than their domestic peers to have to abandon their studies. While 32 percent of NORC study respondents expected a moderate decrease in domestic-student retention, more than three-quarters anticipated either a moderate or large decrease in international-student retention. Those figures don’t bode well for

STEM fields, where international students make up a “very significant portion” of the research enterprise, Stewart says.

Many doctoral students are balancing current stresses with uncertainty about next steps in their careers. “One of the conversations that I have been having with mentors just in the last couple weeks is about, ‘Am I going to try to potentially extend my time in the doctoral program for another year, so as not to graduate into what is bound to be, like, the worst, job market ever?’” one student in the AERA/Spencer report said.

The academic-job market has suffered for years, but austerity measures imposed by the pandemic promise to worsen that crisis at many institutions. Stewart notes recent news from William Paterson University, which is considering eliminating a quarter of its full-time faculty members’ jobs to ease a budget deficit, and Ithaca College, where a proposal calls for eliminating more than 100 employees.

“When you slash faculty numbers at that level, that’s going to have an impact if it becomes a trend across the country,” Stewart says.

Graduate-program leaders, too, anticipate having to cut costs. Two-thirds of graduate deans in the NORC survey, for which Stewart served as primary investigator, expected budget reductions in their programs. Faculty-recruitment efforts were most likely to absorb those losses, the deans said, with 63 percent saying they’d need to make major cuts in that area.

For students hoping to land one of those coveted professorships, setting their work apart could be a more difficult task in the pandemic era. As some students are forced to delay completion of their dissertations, a publication bottleneck could manifest itself in the next several years, says Lewis, the former Mellon Foundation president. He envisions “all of a sudden, this big bulge of people, particularly in trying to get manuscripts out.”

Lewis and Thorp hope allowances will be made for situations like those. Flexibility and understanding, Thorp says, will be key for academic gatekeepers of all sorts—whether hiring committees weighing a

candidate’s delayed graduation date or grant funders’ willingness to overlook a potentially yearslong gap in a scholar’s productivity.

Such flexibility has been one bright spot amid all the upheaval in graduate education. For example, the shift to remote work has prompted archivists to open more digital access to materials. At Chapel Hill, Barbour says, librarians have worked feverishly to scan and digitize materials for students who couldn’t hit the stacks in person. “Before that, to do that kind of research, you had to be the kind of person who could basically drop everything else in your life and jump on a plane and fly to wherever to access the archive,” Barbour says. Those access improvements will be especially useful in the long run, she says: Demographic shifts point to an older graduate-student population whose day-to-day lives may make travel-based research unrealistic.

The nature of scientific research makes that kind of digitization more difficult, but Stewart notes a similar positive development in laboratory science: a movement away from equating student quality with the number of hours that student logged at the bench. In Stewart’s time as the graduate dean at North Carolina State University, she says, many faculty members believed that “the very best students were those who were there when the faculty arrived and there long after the faculty left.” That notion is problematic, Stewart says, because it disadvantages entire populations of students—under-resourced students who hold down a second job, for instance, or those who have families.

Lately, though, limited access to labs has dismantled that concept. Lab spaces have had to operate at reduced density and with more “intentionality,” Stewart says; students who didn’t need to actively use lab resources might instead work from home on data analysis or writing.

Universities’ pivot to remote work—and ubiquitous use of videoconference software like Zoom—could ease the way to increased collaboration, says James Grossman, executive director of the American Historical Association. Grossman envisions

regional consortia of four or five doctoral programs, each of which would admit smaller cohorts to ease their tight budgets. Those programs' students could meet virtually for joint graduate seminars, perhaps augmented by in-person meetings once or twice in a semester. Grossman doesn't know whether such a model would work, but, he says, "it's at least thinkable, and it was not thinkable a year ago." Global cataclysm makes many things "thinkable," including the ever-elusive prospect of wholesale reform of graduate education.

Advocates of such reform have often met with disappointing results, as their efforts have "dwindled or fizzled out," write Leonard Cassuto and Robert Weisbuch in their book *The New PhD: How to Build a Better Graduate Education*. They and other experts are quick to rattle off a list of systemic issues that have plagued graduate education for decades: a dwindling academic-job market, a disregard for nonacademic positions that could employ doctorates, nebulous degree-completion timelines. "There were people writing about it in the '90s, the '80s, the '70s, the '60s," Golde says. "Like everything, the ratchet just keeps getting tighter."

The tumultuous events of 2020 and 2021 may have tightened that ratchet irrevocably.

"At some point, something has got to give. And I think we may be at that point," says Maria LaMonaca Wisdom, director of graduate-student advising and engagement for the humanities at Duke University. "If a global pandemic doesn't do it, maybe nothing will."

But reimaging doctoral education is a daunting task, even without a pandemic raging, and not many are willing to take it on.

During his five years as president of the Mellon Foundation, Lewis says, he'd welcome presidents, provosts, and chancellors to the foundation's offices on the east side of New York City. "I would say, I'll give you all the money you need if you will engage in a whiteboard exercise, if you go back to your school and say, We want to redesign this institution for the second half of the 21st century, and everything is on the

table," Lewis recalls.

But he got no takers. It was, he says, "the hardest dollar I ever tried to give away as president of the Mellon Foundation." "I'd be second," Lewis says several friends told him. "But no one was willing to be first."

Sure, Lewis would like to be optimistic about the changes the pandemic could spur in doctoral education. But, he says, "I'm not so sanguine. I've run this experiment now long enough to know that we are guardians of the status quo." ■

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