

# Conceptualizing the Master's Degree

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TRADITIONAL CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF ACADEMIC AND PROFESSIONAL DEGREES have designated the use of various titles to be conferred on students in academic, professional, and vocational programs upon their satisfactory completion of coursework. As universities and colleges and their academic programs have grown in number and diversity in the past half century, the content, structure, and meaning of academic degrees have also expanded. Master's education exemplifies the complexity of this process. Throughout its long history, the master's degree has been variously characterized by graduate faculty and deans as an intermediate degree signifying its location following the baccalaureate and preceding the doctorate, as a "predoctoral" or "intermediate" year of graduate school or stepping stone to the doctorate, as a "terminal" degree for those concluding their formal education, or as a "consolation prize" denoting failure to advance to Ph.D. candidacy or completion. The use of the words *intermediate* and *terminal* indicates placement of the master's degree within a continuum of officially recognized titles such as the Master of Business Administration (M.B.A.) or the Master of Fine Arts (M.F.A.), conferred on students upon completion of a program of academic or professional study and certifying their qualification to practice in a professional field. These multiple meanings of the master's degree reflect a number of trends, both institutional and global, that are altering the purposes of higher and postsecondary education and changing the trajectory of graduate and professional education. Moreover, master's degrees in the United States may be awarded by doctoral/research or master's institutions, consistent with the Carnegie classification system that was recently revised (Carnegie

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Foundation, 2001). Six categories are used to classify the U.S. system of higher education: doctoral/research universities—extensive and intensive, master’s colleges and universities (formerly comprehensive I and II), baccalaureate (liberal arts and general), associate’s colleges, and a broad category of specialized and technical institutions. At least 148 institutions (3.8 percent) fall into the category “doctoral/research universities—extensive” based on conferral of fifty or more doctorates per year in at least fifteen disciplines, another 2.9 percent are “doctoral/research universities—intensive” based on conferral of at least ten doctorates annually in three or more disciplines, and 16 percent are master’s colleges and universities offering a wide range of bachelor’s degrees and twenty or more master’s per year. Baccalaureate colleges comprise 15 percent, associate’s colleges 42 percent, and specialized institutions 20 percent (Carnegie Foundation, 2001, p. 7).<sup>1</sup>

By 2001, 15.9 million students were enrolled in 4,074 American colleges and universities; 2.2 million were enrolled in graduate and first-professional programs, more than half of them—1.4 million—at the master’s level. Graduate enrollments rose about 38 percent between 1985 and 2001; first-professional enrollments increased 13 percent between 1990 and 2001 (Snyder, Tan, and Hoffman, 2004). More than 1.8 million degrees were awarded in 2001, 482,118 of them at the master’s level and 308,647 at the first-professional level. Three times as many institutions award master’s degrees (1,508) as doctorates (548). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) projects that in 2013, 556,000 master’s degrees will be awarded (Gerald and Hussar, 2003).<sup>2</sup>

This study provides analyses of the meaning of these numbers in terms of the multiplicity of clienteles enrolling in traditional and innovative master’s programs, the factors that have historically motivated their participation, and current and future trajectories for the growth and diversity of master’s education. Theoretical studies of the restructuring of disciplinary knowledge and the extent of its professionalization provide a conceptual vocabulary for understanding the complex factors and manifold mechanisms that contribute to its development in the professions and in the liberal arts and science. The next chapter provides some historical background about the master’s degree. The historical exposition of master’s education, however, tells only one part of the story, and that chapter plus the next one contextualizes the author’s analysis

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of master's education (Klein, 1993, 2000); Nowotny, Scott and Gibbons, 2001) and its professionalization in the university (Abbott, 2001; Brint, 1994; Collins, 1990). Data about the changing demographics of master's education—the new generation of graduate students who now account for almost half a million part-time and full-time enrollments in master's programs—are also included.

Professional master's programs are gaining impetus from a number of forces—globalization, privatization, accountability, and demographic changes in the composition of graduate students. The core of the book contextualizes these developments and contains descriptions of five fields that exemplify fully professionalized programs (accounting, business, education, engineering, and public administration). A separate chapter is devoted to the natural sciences (bioscience, geoscience, chemistry, and physics) where the master's degree plays a more prominent role, and another discussion reviews mixed trends in the humanities and social sciences where professionalization has assumed multiple meanings in some disciplines and, in the same institutions, interdisciplinary degrees are promoted as “nonprofessional.” Interdisciplinary fields focus on the early examples of American Studies and liberal studies, now being reconceptualized to encompass disparate fields, and the emerging but vibrant field of women's studies.

The last two chapters look at some of the trends in master's education and summarize the findings of this study.

Throughout, this study takes the position that the master's degree has become a pivotal force in the economic growth of the university. Operating at the interstices of academic degrees, it contributes to the discourse of interdisciplinary innovation and organizational change. Its compatibility with emergent institutional forms and its short-term nature enhance its potential for development by master's and doctoral-granting institutions, whether they are public, private, or for-profit, operating in traditional or nontraditional modes of teaching and learning. Four mechanisms that will continue to propel the professionalized trajectory of master's education relate to technological advances, global initiatives, quality control and accountability, and the convergence of academic and professional fields across disciplinary, departmental, and institutional boundaries.

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An earlier monograph points out a number of disincentives to restructuring master's education in a period of fiscal retrenchment (Glazer, 1986). Innovation and change occurred primarily at the margins in undergraduate and continuing education programs, experimental colleges, and Universities Without Walls. This customary practice is no longer the norm. External and joint degrees, cooperative education, interuniversity consortia, multidisciplinary programs, and online and distance learning have been institutionalized and, in many fields, are replacing more traditional models of graduate and professional education. Addressing the challenges implicit in this realignment of academic structures and intellectual content will contribute to a more informed dialogue on the outcomes of graduate and professional education among faculty, students, practitioners, and academic leaders.