

More Doctoral Programs Suspend Admissions. That Could Have Lasting Effects on Graduate Education.

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More than 50 doctoral programs in the humanities and social sciences won't be admitting new students in the fall of 2021 — a response to the pandemic and ensuing economic turmoil. It's a sort of financial triage to help the programs devote funding to their current students, many of whom will be delayed in completing their degrees because of the disruptions. Suspending admissions for a year, some administrators say, will also allow them to reimagine their doctoral curricula to account for the flagging Ph.D. job market.

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Princeton University's sociology department was among the first to announce its decision, in mid-May, and other programs followed throughout the summer. More dominoes fell this month — and entire graduate divisions opted for universal pauses — as the University of Pennsylvania decided to suspend all school-funded admissions in its School of Arts and Sciences, and most programs in Columbia University's social-sciences and humanities departments said they'd do the same. Nearly all cited the desire to support existing students.

That decision was a unanimous one for faculty members in Princeton's sociology department, Dalton Conley, the director of graduate studies, said in May. Not only were many of the department's students forced to halt in-person research — like ethnographic interviewing — or book a hasty return to the United States from their field-work sites as borders closed, but some, as parents, also confronted immediate child-care needs.

“We did a lot of careful analysis, as a social-science department, about the systemwide effects going forward and came to the conclusion that regular studies might be disrupted for quite some time,” Conley told *The Chronicle*. “We needed to take a bold and aggressive action to make sure that we could support our students that we already had matriculated.”

The department considered several models for doing so, including admitting fewer students over several years. In the end, Conley said, “we wanted to have a situation where we weren't continually kind of having to go in and tinker here and there and cancel some admission slots, revisit the question, cancel additional slots. We wanted to have some buffer.” Taking a “one-time hit” and suspending admissions for a year, Conley and his colleagues decided, made it less likely that they'd have to revise enrollment numbers in the future.

Andrew Needham, director of graduate studies for New York University's history department, which also suspended admissions, said his department reasoned that admitting a smaller cohort would also diminish the students' experience.

“Almost all faculty thought that a cohort that was shrunk by half or two-thirds would come at such intellectual cost to those students that forgoing admissions was, pragmatically but also pedagogically, the thing that made the most sense,” Needham said in June. “My perspective was always, I feel a much greater obligation to these actual people rather than to these imagined people that could be here.”

In deciding whether to suspend admissions, Needham reached out to a former adviser in the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor's history department, which once paused admissions for a year after more students than expected accepted admissions offers the previous year. Michigan's history department, Needham's adviser told him, hadn't suffered any reputational costs as a result.

Thus far, that observation has been borne out in Needham's communications with prospective applicants, who he said “seem a combination of disappointed but also impressed” by the department's decision to support its current students — NYU will offer students in their second through fifth years a funding extension of either one semester or one year, with every student in a particular cohort receiving the same extension.

Departmental responses to the pandemic, Needham said, could become a barometer of a program's commitment to its doctoral students. “‘What did your department do during the Covid pandemic?’ should be a question that the prospective applicants ask now for the next decade,” he said.

‘Forced Our Hand’

At the University of Pennsylvania, the decision to pause school-funded admissions in its doctoral programs in the School of Arts and Sciences was precipitated by the “moral and ethical imperative” to support current graduate students, said Beth S. Wenger, the school’s associate dean of graduate studies, but also by more immediate financial pressures. Penn announced in mid-August it would roll back fall tuition prices, triggering a “long-term budget shortfall” that Wenger said “certainly forced our hand.”

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That doesn’t mean there won’t be any new doctoral students at Penn in the fall of 2021. A handful of departments, particularly in the natural sciences, will still be able to admit students with external funding, Wenger said, and Penn is also honoring deferrals from the fall of 2020.

Regardless, decision-makers at Penn thought it best to take a schoolwide stance. “We felt that all graduate groups had to take an equal stake in what we were doing,” Wenger said. “As painful as the decision is, to make it by deciding between departments, I think, would have caused a lot of resentment.”

Penn has also made a priority of shorter-term aid for current students, including setting up an emergency-funding mechanism in the spring and offering grant programs to help doctoral students with technological expenses, health insurance, and childcare costs. “We’ve made a commitment to train them as scholars. We made that commitment before we saw any global pandemic coming down the line,” Wenger said, “but now we have to make good on it.”

In a statement, the Penn graduate-student union said that the decision “caught us all by surprise” and that the money saved should be used to grant a universal, one-year extension of funding to all current graduate students.

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Columbia University’s Graduate School of Arts and Sciences decided that all of its social-science and humanities divisions would be asked to institute some sort of pause in their graduate admissions, although whether to do so in a single year or admit two smaller cohorts in consecutive years was left up to the departments, said Sarah Cole, the dean of humanities. Most departments, she said, decided on the one-year pause because they felt it would be the least disruptive option while also allowing them to best support current graduate students.

“Part of the willingness of the faculty to do something so big is because we do realize that this is unprecedented, and we do realize that we’re in a very, very bad situation,” Cole said, “and we just all have to be willing to be creative and be collective in our thinking.”

Columbia, too, will honor deferrals. The ways that individual departments are supporting their graduate students vary, but Cole said more teaching fellowships are being extended to sixth-year students, some additional summer funding was provided, and postdoctoral lectureships are being made available to those finishing their Ph.D.s in 2021.

Such forms of support may, in the long term, help to strengthen graduate education by ensuring that already-matriculated students are able to finish their degrees, said Kathleen Canning, dean of the School of the Humanities at Rice University. All five of Rice’s humanities doctoral programs will suspend admissions for a year.

Rice's humanities school is small, admitting a maximum of 25 doctoral students for five-year terms under normal circumstances. So once it became apparent that disruptions to doctoral study would stretch into the 2020-21 academic year, administrators realized they'd have to choose between admitting a new class of students and funding those who wrapped up their fifth year this spring.

To Canning and her colleagues, the choice was clear. "If they don't finish and if they don't find a way into a profession that is meaningful for them, we haven't succeeded," she said. That notion, she said, should supersede any individual faculty member's feeling that, as she put it, "'a constant stream of grad students is really necessary for my own sense of being a research-oriented faculty member.'" The humanities school will admit only three students in 2021, all of whom deferred admission this fall.

For Canning and for Jeffrey J. Kripal, Rice's associate dean of the humanities, the pause also represents a chance to rethink doctoral education in times of crisis — not just the pandemic but the declining humanities job market more broadly. Rice's administrators have renewed their dedication to offering wide-ranging career preparation.

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"That conversation was really theoretical, for the most part, last fall," said Kripal. Now it's urgent, and everybody's like, 'Of course.'"

Long-Term Effects

What will the impact be on doctoral admissions in 2022 and beyond? That remains to be seen.

Needham, at New York University, said students applying in 2022 may see "a really difficult admissions year," as competition increases for spots at programs that closed admissions in 2021. That effect could spill over into 2023, when students who would have been admitted in 2022 under normal circumstances, will try again for admission.

And while economic downturns typically result in ballooning graduate-school applications, both Cole, at Columbia, and Wenger, at Penn, said it's hard to predict whether the Covid-19 crisis will follow that trend.

A one-year pause in doctoral admissions may have long-term implications for the pipeline, said Suzanne T. Ortega, president of the Council of Graduate Schools. In addition to students who deferred their admission this spring, including international students who experienced pandemic-related visa delays along with changing guidance from the Trump administration, many state universities are facing budget cuts. Those could mean a reduction in teaching assistantships and other university-provided sources of funding for doctoral students. And focus groups that the Council of Graduate Schools has conducted with doctoral-program directors have also revealed an increase in the number of students considering taking a gap year, Ortega said.

"While they might have been planning to apply in 2021, they're now thinking they'll wait a year to apply because they're concerned about availability of funding," she said. "How do we make sure that if students do decide to postpone going to graduate school for a year, we don't lose contact with them and we continue to remain connected and to encourage them to enter graduate programs at a later date?"

All of the administrators *The Chronicle* interviewed for this story said they saw their one-year pauses as a chance to re-evaluate their curricula and departmental priorities. Ortega, too, sees that potential. “With every unexpected and unpleasant occurrence, if we’re smart, we can use it as an inflection point, a moment to make changes that perhaps were overdue,” she said.

But the pause is also “squeezing the pipeline into graduate school” in a way that could reverse progress in the diversity of graduate-student cohorts, Ortega said. Many of the same prospective students who delay their doctoral education because of the pandemic are the ones who would contribute most to “creating a really dynamic, culturally, demographically diverse student body.”

So will the net effect of the pandemic on graduate education be positive or negative? Ortega doesn’t know. “I guess it’s my *Tale of Two Cities*: good and bad.”

The Chronicle has compiled a partial list of doctoral programs that have announced they will suspend admissions. Is your program among that number? Let us know by filling out the anonymous form below.