GRADUATE & PROFESSIONAL STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Graduate Student Success Is Student Success: Expanding the Student Success Imperative

Anne Converse Willkomm

Assistant Vice Provost, Associate Teaching Professor of Communication, Drexel University

Over the past four decades, the student success movement has reshaped higher education. Building on foundational scholarship about undergraduate student persistence, engagement, and learning, the Gardner Institute has helped lead the movement over the past two decades by encouraging colleges and universities to become more student-centered and student-ready by intentionally designing educational environments that foster learning, persistence, and success.

As the Gardner Institute expands that vision to include graduate education, it raises a timely question: What does it mean to be student-centered and student-ready for graduate students?

Today's graduate students are navigating a landscape that looks markedly different from even a decade ago. They are balancing careers, families, research, financial pressures, and increasingly complex educational pathways. At the same time, institutions are grappling with demographic shifts, undergraduate enrollment challenges, and constrained resources that understandably require significant attention.

The result is an unfortunate paradox: graduate students need greater institutional support precisely when institutional attention is increasingly directed elsewhere.

This is not an argument for shifting resources away from undergraduate education. Rather, it is a reminder that graduate student success and undergraduate student success are deeply connected. When graduate students thrive, undergraduate students benefit, faculty benefit, research advances, and institutions become stronger.

GRADUATE STUDENTS FACE A CONVERGENCE OF CHALLENGES

Graduate education has always required students to balance multiple responsibilities. Today, however, those responsibilities are being compounded by forces largely outside their control.

Recent changes to federal student aid policy under the One Big Beautiful Bill (OB3) have fundamentally altered how many graduate students will finance their education. According to National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, 74% of graduate students take student loans with an average loan amount of $25,300, which is $4,800 above the new annual cap of $20,500 (with a $100K aggregate limit). Per the National Association of Student Aid Administrators (NASFAA), effective July 1, 2026, federal loans will be prorated for terms with less than full-time enrollment. The Grad Plus loans which have been eliminated were often utilized to cover additional educational costs, as well as living expenses. This change will force students to seek high-interest private loans which currently charge as high as 17.95%, often have fewer protections. The overall borrowing limit, which combines undergraduate and graduate borrowing, has now been capped at $257,500. Furthermore, the ability to defer or claim financial hardship has been eliminated. As the borrowing options become more limited, some students will exhaust available federal aid before completing their programs, which could impact degree completion.

Financial uncertainty is no longer simply a budgeting concern; it is a student success concern.

Students who should be focused on research, clinical experiences, comprehensive exams, or capstone projects instead will devote significant cognitive energy to financial decision-making. Research, such as noted in a recent Forbes article, consistently demonstrates that financial stress contributes to anxiety, reduced academic performance, and lower persistence. Graduate students are no exception.

At the same time, international graduate enrollment faces growing uncertainty. International student enrollment had been increasing since COVID, and NAFSA: Association of International Educators, 2025 is projecting a 30-40% decline beginning in 2025. The implications extend beyond enrollment numbers. International graduate students contribute immeasurably to research, innovation, classroom learning, and institutional vitality, as well as contributions to the respective local economies.

As geographical tensions, immigration policies, and visa uncertainties influence where students choose to study, institutions may experience declining graduate enrollment, particularly in master's and doctoral programs. For students who do enroll, smaller international cohorts may make it more difficult to build community and establish as sense of belonging—both essential elements of student success. Institutions may also find themselves reducing course offerings, consolidating programs, or limited specialized learning opportunities as enrollment shifts. Each of these changes influences the quality of the graduate student experience for all graduate students.

Graduate students have experienced many of the same educational disruptions as their undergraduate counterparts, yet they have not received the same level of institutional attention. Many completed portions of their undergraduate education remotely, entered graduate school with uneven preparation in research or scholarly writing, or returned after years in the workforce needing to reacclimate to academic study.

At the same time, colleges and universities are making necessary investments in undergraduate recruitment, retention, and student support in response to the demographic changes and anticipated enrollment cliff. Institutions have expanded tutoring, advising mental health resources, and academic success initiatives to address learning disruptions that emerged during and after the pandemic.

Graduate students, however, are often absent from these conversations. As Keeling & Associates, a national leader in higher education consulting, observes, "It is often true in universities with graduate and professional schools that the student affairs division focuses primarily, if not exclusively, on undergraduates."

The assumption that admission to graduate school signals complete readiness overlooks the educational realities of today's learners. Graduate students may be more

advanced academically, but they are not immune to the lingering effects of disrupted educational pathways or need for intentional institutional support.

GRADUATE STUDENT SUCCESS STRENGTHENS UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT SUCCESS

One of the greatest misconceptions in higher education is that graduate student success only affects graduate education.

In reality, graduate students are woven throughout the undergraduate experience. They teach laboratory sections and recitations, lead discussions, grade assignments, hold office hours, mentor undergraduate researchers, supervise internships, and support academic departments. Graduate assistants also contribute to advising centers, student affairs offices, writing centers, and research initiatives that directly shape undergraduate learning and engagement.

For many undergraduate students, graduate students are the educators and mentors with whom they interact most frequently. They often provide a student's first meaningful introduction to research, helping transform academic curiosity into scholarly confidence and professional aspiration. Research by Chavez et. al, noted in a 2025, reinforces the importance of this relationship. The authors found that undergraduate students mentored by a graduate students gained greater confidence, strengthened their research skills, and deepened their scientific curiosity. Graduate mentors also help students build professional networks, develop presentations, writing, and technical skills, and, perhaps most important, fueled their aspirations for graduate education by preparing them for more advanced research opportunities.

These findings underscore an often-overlooked reality: investing in graduate student success is also an investment in undergraduate student success. When graduate students are equipped to thrive, they are better positioned to educate, mentor, and inspire the next generation of scholars.

Supporting graduate students, therefore, is not separate from supporting undergraduate students. It is an investment in both.

MOVING BEYOND INDEPENDENCE TOWARD INTENTIONAL SUPPORT

Graduate education has traditionally been built upon an expectation of independence. While independence remains an important development goal, it should not be mistaken for institutional disengagement.

The undergraduate student success movement demonstrated that student achievement improves when institutions intentionally design experiences that promote learning, belonging, persistence, and well-being. Graduate education deserves the same intentionality.

That does not mean replicating undergraduate programming. Graduate students have distinct developmental needs, professional aspirations, and life circumstances. Effective support may include proactive financial counseling, graduate-specific orientation and transition programs, writing and research support, career development, mentoring networks, community building opportunities, and data-informed approaches that identify barriers before they become reasons for attrition.

Most importantly, graduate student success should be a shared institutional responsibility rather than resting solely with individual faculty members or graduate schools.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

If graduate student success is to become the next evolution of the student success movement, institutions must move beyond assuming graduate students will simply "figure it out." Just as higher education transformed the undergraduate experience through intentional design, graduate education deserves the same thoughtful attention.

Rather than treating graduate students as an extension of undergraduate education, or as a population expected to navigate challenges independently, institutions should intentionally consider graduate student success across several priority areas:

- Institutional commitment – graduate student success should be a visible institutional priority, not an afterthought overshadowed by undergraduate enrollment and retention efforts.

- Belonging and community – graduate students, particularly part-time, online, and international students, benefit from intentional opportunities to build meaningful academic and social connections.

- Financial well-being – as financing graduate education becomes increasingly complex, financial wellness should be recognized as a component of student success rather than solely a financial aid issue.

- Data-informed decision-making – institutions should better understand the graduate student experience by examining persistence, engagement, financial stress, well-being, and post-graduate outcomes with the same intentionality applied to undergraduate students.

- Graduate students as institutional partners – graduate students are not only learners but also teachers, mentors, researchers, and leaders whose success strengthens undergraduate education, faculty scholarship, and the institution as a whole.

Each of these priorities deserves deeper exploration. Together, however, they reflect a broader shift in perspective: graduate student success should no longer be viewed as the responsibility of individual students or graduate programs alone. It is an institutional responsibility.

THE NEXT CHAPTER OF STUDENT SUCCESS

Higher education has spent decades demonstrating that student success does not happen by accident. It results from institutions intentionally creating the conditions in which students can thrive.

Graduate students deserve that same intentionality.

Not because they contribute to tuition revenue. Not because they teach undergraduate laboratories, conduct research, or support institutional operations. Those contributions are important, but they are not the reason. Graduate students deserve our attention because they are students.

As the Gardner Institute broadens the student success conversation to include graduate education, it challenges all of us to think more holistically about the educational experience. Graduate and undergraduate education should not compete for institutional attention. They are an interconnected part of the same learning ecosystem.

The next chapter of the student success movement is not simply about doing more for graduate students. It is about recognizing that student success has never been limited by degree level.

The question no longer is whether graduate students are ready to succeed. The question is whether our institutions are ready to support them. Graduate student success is student success.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anne Converse Willkomm is Assistant Vice Provost and Associate Teaching Professor of Communication at Drexel University, where she provides strategic leadership for initiatives supporting graduate students and serves as an advocate for their academic success and overall experience. Drawing on her experience in the corporate and nonprofit sectors, she teaches communication courses and writes Professional Buzz, exploring topics related to professional development, communication, leadership, and the workplace. She is also an active volunteer and nonprofit leader, including service with Bowdoin College and the West Philadelphia Alliance for Children.