

# Problem Solver

## Decline in Diplomas

Students aren't seeking public service careers the way they used to.

Whether it's anti-government rhetoric or budgetary uncertainty hanging over public agencies, one can understand why recent graduates have been a little timid about jumping into public-sector careers.

The latest data from the U.S. Department of Education shows that several of the top government-related academic fields—including criminal justice, political science and public administration—have seen the number of degrees awarded level off or dip slightly over the past few years. This signals a departure from the previous several decades, including the immediate post-recession period, when schools handed out more diplomas in most fields as workers sought to enhance their résumé during the economic slump. Degrees awarded for many public-sector professions have since plateaued or declined slightly. What's hard to say is whether it's a temporary adjustment or a longer-term trend.

Nationally, degrees awarded for all fields rose sharply over the past several decades, but they too have slowed recently. Since the 2012-2013 school year, total bachelor's and master's degree completions have increased only about 2 percent. That's still somewhat better than many public service-related degrees.

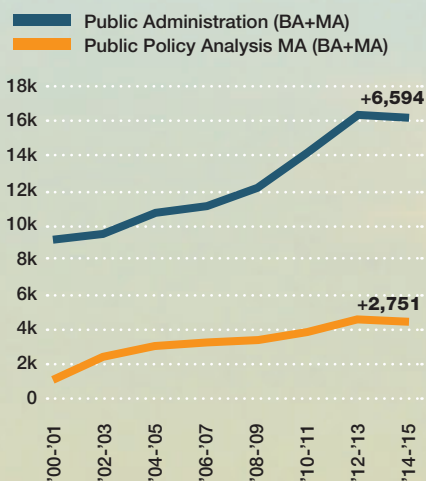
The following charts show the number of degrees awarded in recent years, using data compiled from the federal National Center for Education Statistics.

### Public Administration and Policy Analysis

Public administration and policy programs enjoyed strong growth in recent decades. Following the recession, adults returning to school, coupled with an interest in public service among young people, propelled degree completions to new highs.

But since the 2012-2013 school year, numbers of graduates have dipped slightly. Part of that could just be a result of the economic recovery and improving job prospects for those who might otherwise return to school. It's also possible that reductions to the public workforce, which still hasn't recovered from deep cuts in many places, have led some to leave the sector rather than advance their careers.

Data further indicates that more master's of public administration students are



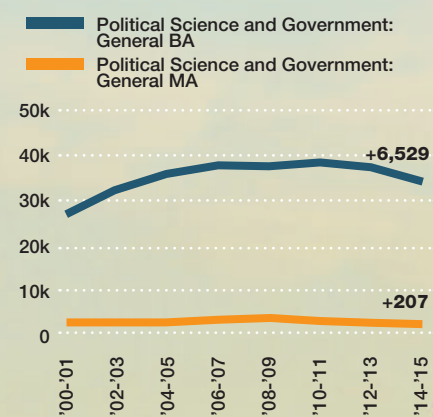
women, accounting for nearly 60 percent of graduates in 2015.

After graduation, students are increasingly taking their skills to the private or nonprofit sectors. "It's not necessarily universities adding degrees, but expanding how far their degree is reaching," says Stacy Drudy of the Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs and Administration. The latest NASPAA survey found just under half of employed master's graduates worked in government six months after graduation.

### Political Science and Government

Political science and government degrees didn't experience the same kind of steep growth as other fields in earlier decades. This trend has persisted more recently, with national statistics indicating that total bachelor's and master's graduates declined each of the past three years. They remain popular among many undergraduates, however, with about 34,000 completing bachelor's degrees in 2015.

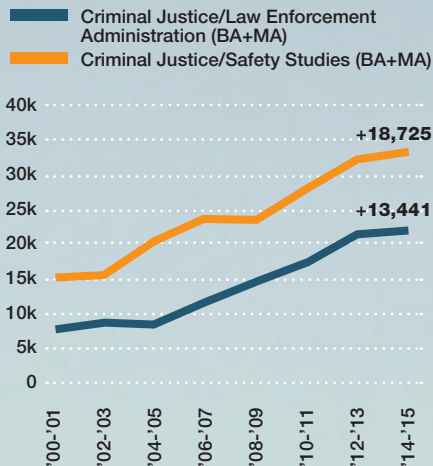
Although political science and government graduates may end up in government, many also follow career paths with private companies or nonprofits.



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By Mike Maciag



### Law Enforcement

While top criminal justice degrees have roughly tripled over the past two decades, they, too, have leveled off in recent years.

For entry-level police officer jobs, candidates with degrees enjoy only very minimal hiring advantages, says Joseph Pollini of the John Jay College of Criminal Justice. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, only a quarter of local police in 2013 worked for departments that required entry-level officers to have college diplomas, most of which were two-year degrees. Education becomes much more crucial, however, when one seeks a promotion or a spot in a specialized unit.

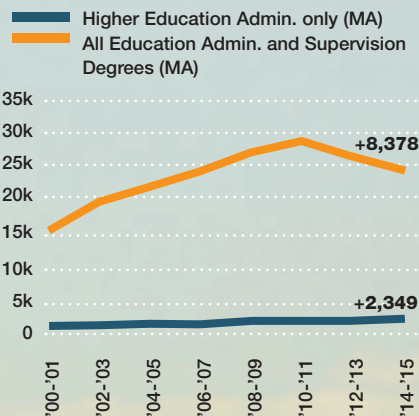
Pollini says he's also noticed a shift in the classroom. Years ago, primarily mid-career and older students sought degrees, but now it's mostly students in their 20s. Interest in criminal investigations and forensic science has particularly taken off, thanks in part to their portrayal on popular television shows. "Everyone wants to be a detective or investigator, but no one wants to be a patrol officer on the street," Pollini says.

### Education Administration

Like other fields, education administration and supervision recorded rapid growth throughout the 1990s and 2000s. But since the 2009-2010 school year, master's degree completions have declined about 19 percent.

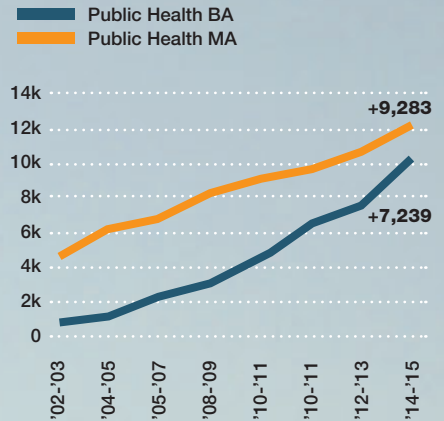
Part of the fluctuation is driven by shifts in certification requirements. For school administrators and principals, some states accept degrees in noneducation fields with additional coursework.

Susan Printy, who researches educational administration at Michigan State University, suspects increasing demands on school administrators may also play a role in declining numbers of graduates.



"There's a lot of pressure on principals," she says. "The challenges have escalated and the salaries haven't necessarily kept pace, so it's a difficult profession to enter."

By contrast, more students are concentrating on a small segment of the field: higher education administration. One possible explanation, Printy says, is that many of these students work for universities with generous tuition reimbursement programs, while those in K-12 education have seen their benefits reduced.



### Public Health

If there's one major government-related area where interest hasn't cooled off, it's public health. Public health schools, many of which are relatively new, graduated about 22,700 students in the 2014-2015 school year, up from only 8,000 a decade earlier.

Millennials' awareness of public health issues and interest in social justice are contributing to greater demand, and schools are responding with new degree offerings, says Christine Plepys of the Association of Schools and Programs of Public Health. More than 172 public health schools and programs were accredited in 2016, up from 100 in 2006, according to the Council on Education for Public Health. "When schools start up, they might have 20 students the first year, then the next year it will be 200," Plepys says. The hottest fields of study include epidemiology, health policy and management, and health education/behavioral science. **G**

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