

UW-MADISON GRADUATE SCHOOL DATA INSIGHTS

WHAT ARE THE CAREER INTERESTS OF OUR MASTER'S STUDENTS?

Over the past decade, UW-Madison has seen significant growth in master's program enrollments. This brief explores the career interests of these students.

The past decade at UW-Madison has been marked by pronounced enrollment growth in master's degree programs. From 160 master's programs enrolling 3,800 students in 2015, the university now offers 200 master's programs enrolling approximately 5,000 students.¹ One contributing factor to this growth has been the concurrent rise of master's programs operating under a "service-based pricing" tuition model², from just 27 programs in 2015 to 70 programs in 2024. Service-based pricing programs now enroll the majority (60%) of all master's students on campus.

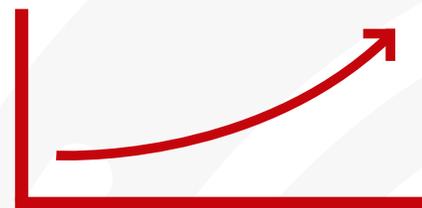
Also contributing to master's program growth has been a steep increase in the number of international students pursuing master's degrees at the university. Over the past decade international enrollment in master's programs grew by 65% compared to growth of just 14% in domestic enrollment. International students now represent one out of every three (33%) master's students enrolled. Additionally, nearly two out of every five students (37%) who are enrolled in service-based pricing programs are international.

As at other peer institutions students are often drawn to pursue master's degrees at UW-Madison due to career considerations—a desire to enter a new career

or to advance in their current career—and a belief that earning a UW-Madison master's degree will help them achieve their career goals. Career training is therefore a fundamental component of master's degree programs. And career advising becomes particularly important for those students pursuing a master's as a pathway to a new career.

MASTER'S PROGRAM GROWTH

	2015:	2024:
MASTER'S DEGREES	160	200
STUDENTS ENROLLED	3,800	5,000



¹ Calculations by author using campus enrollment record (SIS) data. Reported numbers are for admitting master's programs in fall 2015 and fall 2024.

² Service-based pricing programs operate under a "non-pooled" tuition model in which tuition dollars are retained and reinvested by the program instead of going into a general campus tuition pool as is the case under the more traditional pooled tuition model. Service-based pricing programs are meant to have a professional training orientation in response to labor market demand, and to provide more flexible scheduling and course delivery options for non-traditional adult learners. However, students in service-based pricing programs are not permitted to access student services that are funded by the general tuition pool, including career, learning support and advising services offered outside of the program's home academic unit. More information on service-based pricing programs can be found at <https://policy.wisc.edu/library/UW-1033>.



Career advising services for master’s students at UW–Madison are highly decentralized, however. Advising services and career events such as job fairs may be variously offered by the career office at the student’s school or college, by the student’s academic department, or by the student’s academic program itself. These services are supplemented by limited career advising services within the Graduate School, as well as career exploration and development programming offered through the Graduate School and other university offices such as the Writing Center. Further complicating the campus career advising landscape for master’s students, university policy states that students enrolled in service-based pricing programs are not entitled to use of career resources or advising services on campus funded via pooled tuition funds. Students in these programs therefore typically rely on advising and job search assistance

provided primarily through their program, with some supplementary services provided by the Division of Continuing Studies and on-demand career platforms, such as Beyond Graduate School, sponsored by the Graduate School.

This data brief provides insights on the career interests of master’s students at UW–Madison. Given the recent growth in service-based pricing master’s programs on campus, as well as the growth of international student enrollment in master’s programs more generally, the brief also explores whether master’s student career interests appear to differ by program funding type (i.e. service-based pricing vs. pooled tuition) or student citizenship. The brief is the first in a series meant to provide campus stakeholders with data-informed insights into the career interests, advising, and post-graduation plans of master’s students at UW–Madison.

KEY FINDINGS

CLARITY OF CAREER On average one in four master’s students (25%) report starting their program without a specific career in mind. However, this rate differs by program tuition type with students in service-based pricing programs significantly more likely to report not having a career in mind compared to their peers in pooled tuition programs (**Figure 1**). International students are also more likely than their domestic counterparts to report not having a specific career mind. This difference is most pronounced in service-based pricing master’s programs but is also evident in pooled tuition programs.

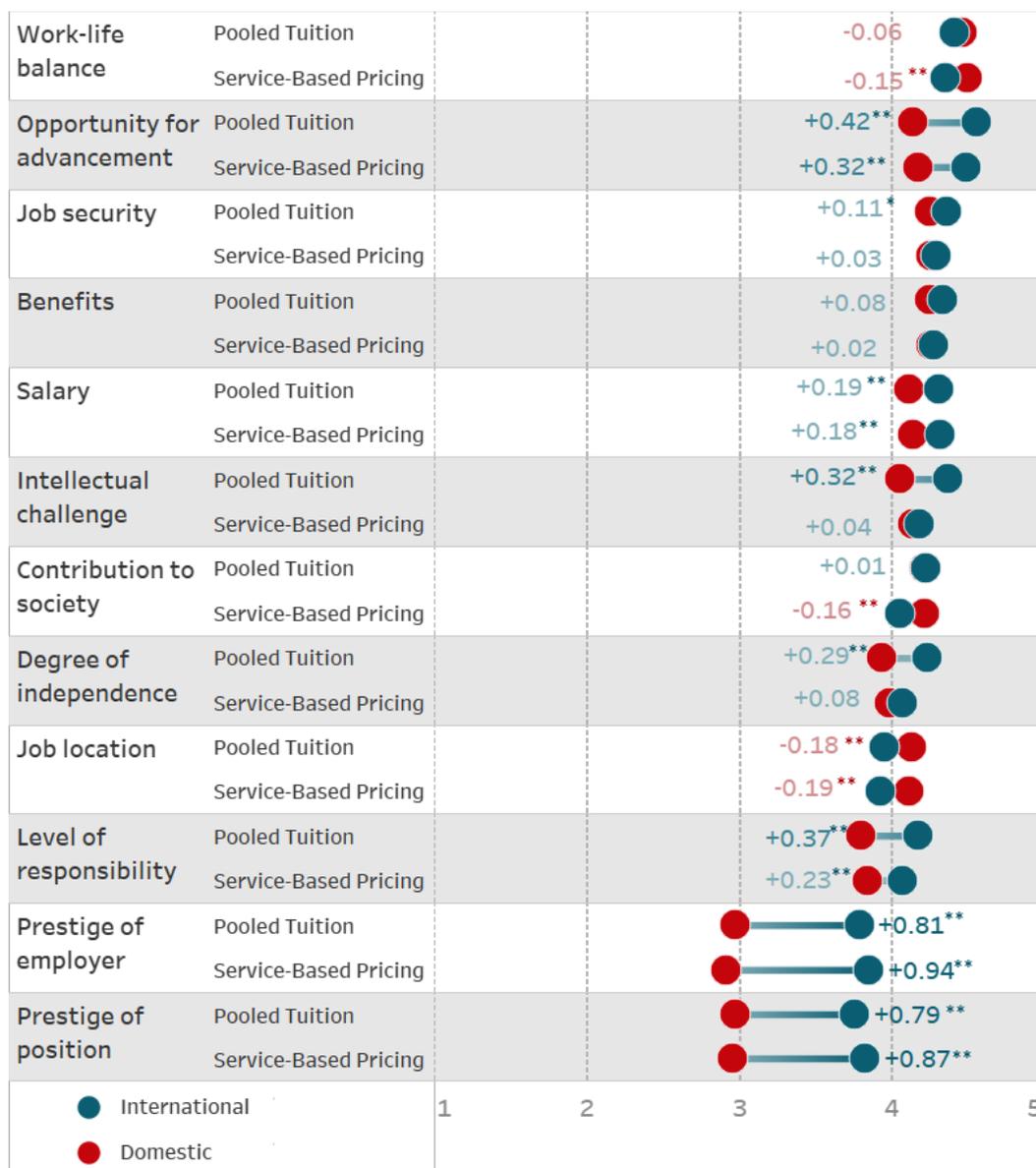
Figure 1. Percent Responding “No” to Survey Item, “Did you have a specific career in mind when you began your graduate program?” by Student Citizenship and Program Tuition Type.





FACTORS IMPORTANT TO CAREER CHOICE Both international and domestic master’s students report work-life balance, opportunity for advancement, job security, and benefits among the most important factors in their career choice—rating each as “very” to “extremely” important on average (**Figure 2**). Both groups ascribe somewhat less importance to the social prestige of position or employer compared to other factors in their choice of career. However, international students rate the importance of employment prestige significantly higher overall compared to domestic students—a pattern that persists regardless of program type.

Figure 2. Difference in Mean Response by Citizenship to Survey Item, “How important are the following factors in the career you would like to pursue?”.

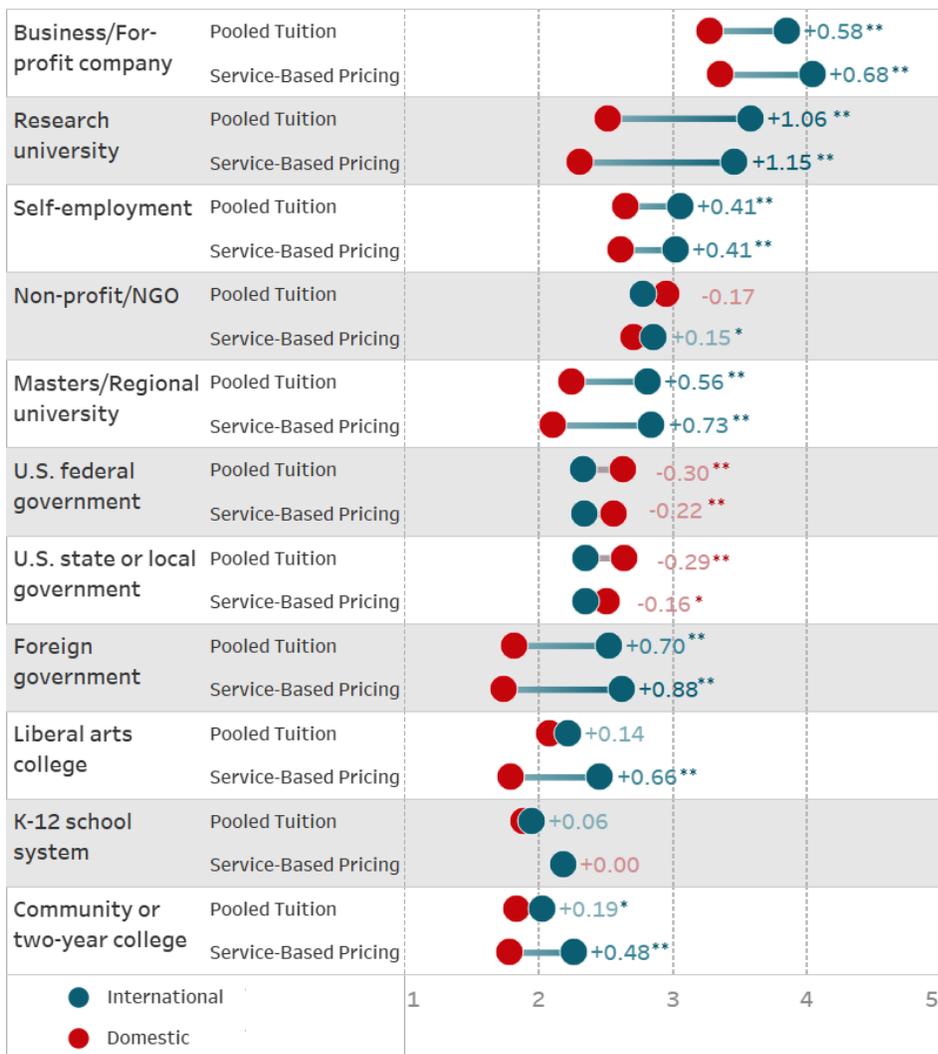


1=Not at all; 2=Slightly;
 3=Moderately; 4=Very; 5=Extremely
 *p<.01; **p<.001



DESIRABILITY OF EMPLOYMENT SECTORS Jobs in the for-profit/business sector are considered the most desirable by both international and domestic master’s students (**Figure 3**). This is true among students in both pooled tuition and service-based pricing master’s programs. Notably, international students appear significantly more likely than domestic students to desire employment in academic institutions—particularly at research universities. This pattern is evident in the data regardless of pooled vs. service-based pricing program tuition type. Also notable is the relative desirability of self-employment among both domestic and international master’s students. On average, both groups rate self-employment as the third most desirable employment sector after jobs at for-profit companies (domestic & international students), at non-profits (domestic students), and at research universities (international students). However, international students appear to view self-employment as more desirable overall compared to their domestic peers.

Figure 3. Difference in Mean Response by Citizenship to Survey Item, “How desirable are the following employment sectors for the career you would like to pursue?”.



1=Not at all; 2=Slightly; 3=Moderately;
 4=Very; 5=Extremely
 *p<.01; **p<.001



CHANGE IN EMPLOYMENT SECTOR INTEREST When asked if their interest in specific employment sectors changed over the course of their master's program, between fifty and seventy percent of students overall report no change. Among students who do report a change, however, both international and domestic students report increased interest in careers in business and self-employment. This is true both in service-based pricing programs (**Figure 4**) and in pooled tuition programs (**Figure 5**). Interest in non-profit and government employment also increases among domestic students. And interest in research university employment increases slightly among international students regardless of program tuition type. Notably, interest in employment at other types of postsecondary institutions such as regional universities, liberal arts colleges, and community colleges tends to decrease somewhat among domestic master's students, and in a more pronounced way among their international peers.

Figure 4. Net Change in Career Sector Interest Among Students in Service-Based Pricing Programs Who Reported a Change. Figure Displays Percentage Point Difference Between Those Responding "More Interested" and Those Responding "Less Interested" to Survey Item, "How did your interest in the following employment sectors change from the time you started your graduate program to now?"

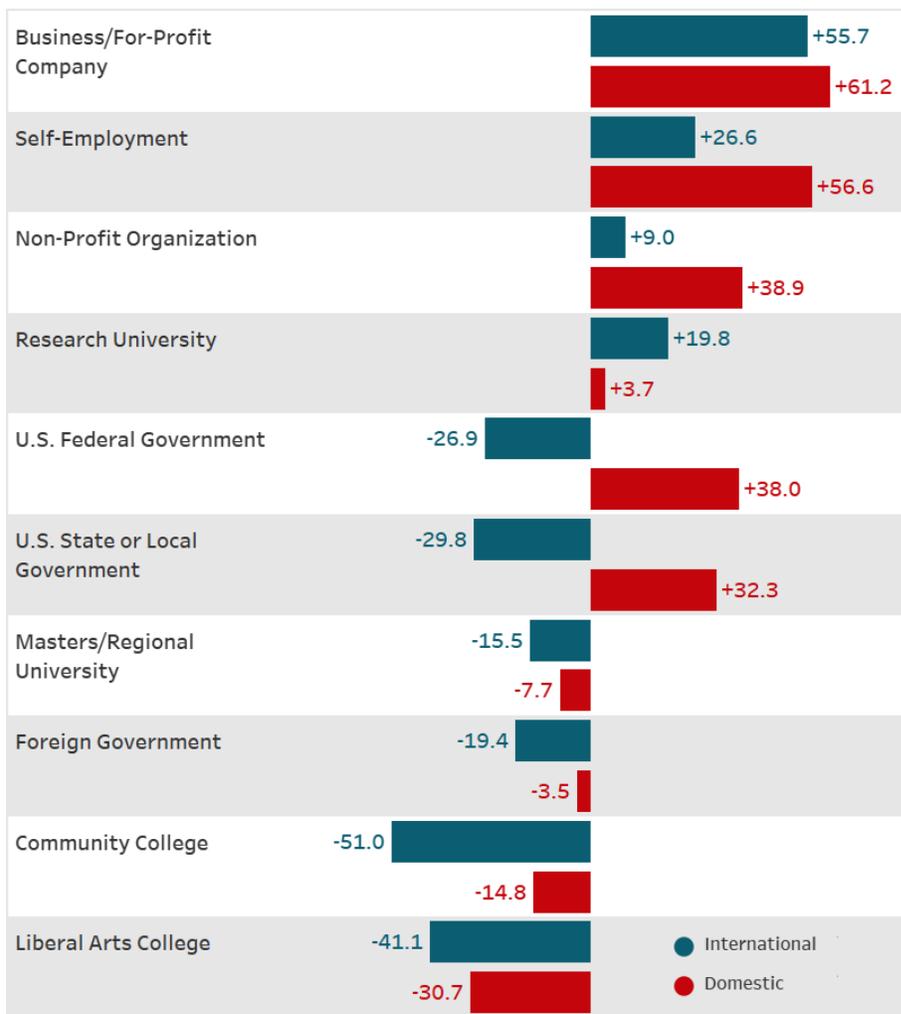
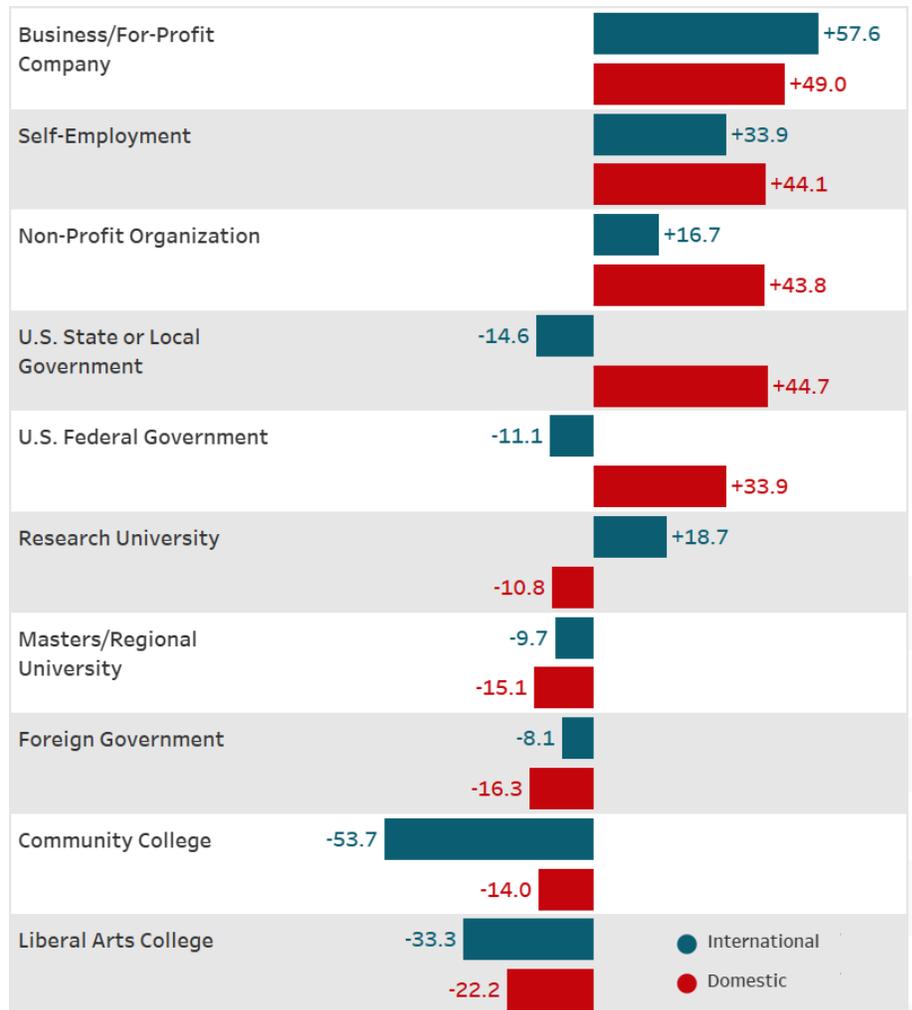




Figure 5. Net Change in Career Sector Interest Among Students in Pooled Tuition Programs Who Reported a Change. Figure Displays Percentage Point Difference Between Those Responding “More Interested” and Those Responding “Less Interested” to Survey Item, “How did your interest in the following employment sectors change from the time you started your graduate program to now?”





TAKEAWAY POINTS

1. An estimated one-quarter of all UW–Madison master’s students including nearly a third of all international students in service-based pricing programs start their program without a specific career in mind. These students may therefore be in particular need of career exploration and advising services during their master’s training.
2. Despite intended differences between pooled tuition and service-based pricing master’s programs in their respective orientations to the labor market, the career interests of students in both types of programs appear very similar. While pooled tuition programs are often seen as having a more academic focus and are frequently meant to serve as bridges to higher doctoral or professional degrees, students in these programs still desire employment in business and for-profit companies at rates very similar to their peers in service-based pricing programs. On the other hand, students in more professionally oriented service-based pricing programs desire research university employment at rates very similar to their peers in pooled tuition programs.
3. International and domestic master’s students appear to have distinct differences in their career interests regardless of whether they are in pooled tuition or service-based pricing programs. Most notably, international students appear to view careers in academia—particularly at research universities—as significantly more desirable than their domestic counterparts. Perceived social prestige of the employer and position also seem to play a more important role in career choice among international master’s students.
4. Somewhat surprising is the relatively high level of interest among both domestic and international master’s students in self-employment. Although

the overall desire to be self-employed is moderate, increased interest in self-employment over the course of their program is common among master’s students. International students also appear to view self-employment as significantly more desirable compared to their domestic counterparts.

CAMPUS CAREER ADVISING RESOURCES

UW–Madison master’s students are encouraged to explore the following career advising resources on campus:

- [Beyond Graduate School](#) – This career training platform features on-demand modules to help master’s students explore career options and learn job search strategies.
- [Individual Career Advising from the Graduate School](#) – Students in research-based, pooled master’s or doctoral programs, not otherwise served by a career office, can meet with an advisor to discuss career exploration, goal setting, job materials review, networking, interview prep, negotiation, and more.
- [DiscoverPD](#) – Graduate students can assess their professional development needs, explore related resources, and define clear goals for their Individual Development Plans.
- [Handshake](#) – This platform allows students to browse and register for career events, explore job and internship opportunities, and receive personalized job recommendations.
- [Big Interview](#) – This online tool combines training and practice to help students improve their interview techniques and build confidence.
- [Career Advising](#) – Schools, colleges, departments, and programs are often best positioned to provide tailored advice on career exploration and job search within a master’s student’s discipline. Students are advised to check with their advisor or graduate program coordinator for guidance, or visit careers.wisc.edu.



ABOUT THE DATA SOURCE AND SAMPLE

This brief is based on data from the UW–Madison Graduate School Master’s Exit Survey (MES). Since 2019, the Graduate School has administered the MES to graduating master’s students as a required component of degree processing and conferral. Collected data therefore represent a near census of master’s program graduates at the university. The survey gathers a variety of information from students on their academic experiences, as well as on their career interests, use of career advising services, and post-degree plans. More information on the MES can be found on the Graduate School KnowledgeBase website.³

Analyses in this brief are based on data collected from master’s program graduates between academic years 2021 and 2024 (summer 2020 through spring 2024). The final analysis sample (n=5,339) was limited to students who entered their master’s programs prior to entering a Ph.D. or other doctoral level degree program. The sample therefore generally represents students who intended to earn a master’s, rather than doctoral students who earned a master’s degree as a component of their doctoral program. Sample sizes by student citizenship, program tuition type, and academic division are as follows: Domestic (n=3,733); International (n=1,606); pooled tuition (n=2,416); service-based pricing (n=2,923); Arts & Humanities (n=265); Biological Sciences (n=807); Physical Sciences (n=1,765); Social Sciences (n=2,502).

THE GRADUATE SCHOOL DATA INSIGHTS SERIES

This data brief is part of the Graduate School Data Insights Series. Series publications, which include both shorter data briefs and longer data reports, are meant to highlight and provide data-informed insights into topics relevant to graduate education policy and practice at UW–Madison. Graduate education stakeholders on campus—including administrators, student support office staff, program faculty and graduate students themselves—are encouraged to use Graduate School Data Insights publications to initiate and guide conversations aimed at improving the support and academic success of graduate students at UW–Madison.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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³ Graduate School Surveys: <https://kb.wisc.edu/grad/56327>