



The Graduate Program Viability Playbook



Set New Programs Up for Success—Before It's Too Late



CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION REPORT

Many schools “made the assumption that their program was going to exist in a static universe and didn’t allow for the idea that ... other schools were doing the same thing at the same time.”



Marketing Leaders Weigh In

“

We don't want the program to be unique—we just want it to be good.

“

Leaders often dramatically underestimate the ramp up time to launch a new graduate program.

“

If no one else is building a program the way you are, that should be a caution flag.

“

Admissions requirements = admissions barriers. Do you actually need to know that?



Program Viability

Increased Competition

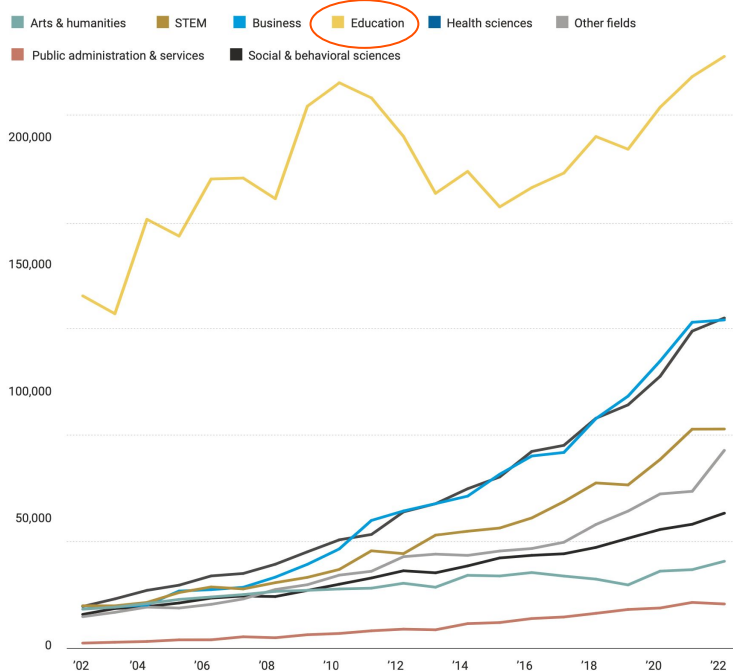
50% increase from 2002 to 2022
in graduate programs



10 Year – Certificates & Graduate

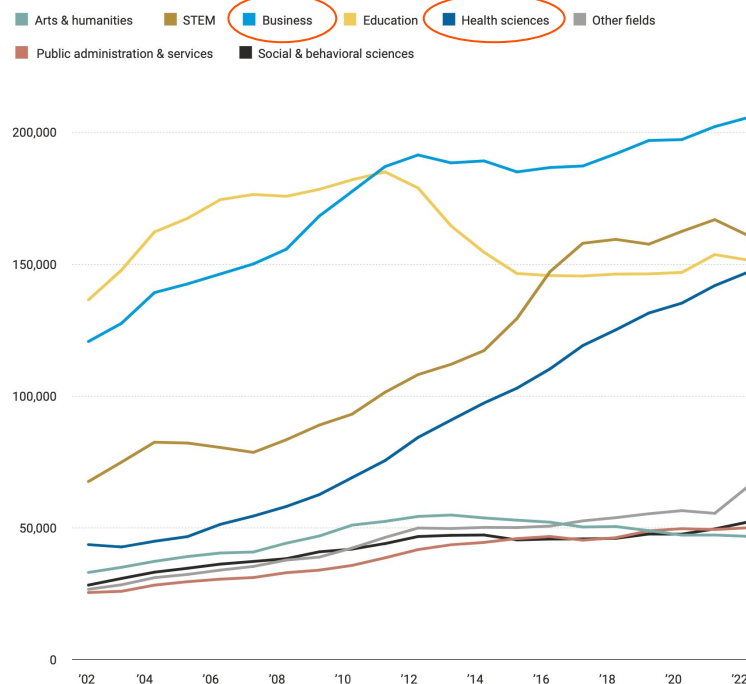
The Popularity of Certificates in Education

Among graduate certificates earned between 2002 and 2022, education consistently remained at the top.



Top Fields for Master's Degrees

Business, the STEM disciplines, education, and health sciences were by far the most popular master's degrees, based on the number of completions from 2002 to 2022.



“Product is one of the 5 P’s—if marketing isn’t at the table at the beginning, you’re shooting yourself in the foot.”



Why Program Viability Research Matters

Higher ed is more competitive than ever—institutions must be strategic about new program offerings.

Program viability research helps answer key questions:

- Is there student demand for this program?
- Is the job market growing for graduates?
- Are there too many competitors, or is there space to stand out?





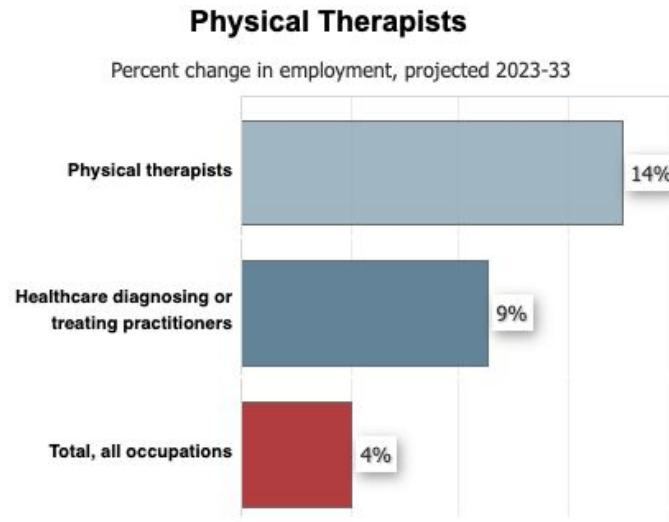
Measuring Program Viability

Student Demand: Are students actively looking for this program?

- Google search volume
- Historical program completion data (NCES)
- Social Media & Forums (Reddit, LinkedIn, etc.)

Job Market Demand: Are there real employment opportunities?

- Job listings on LinkedIn, Indeed, and Glassdoor
- Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) industry growth data
- Employer Demand & Industry Trends



Note: All Occupations includes all occupations in the U.S. Economy.
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Employment Projections program



Measuring Program Viability

Competitive Landscape: Can your institution compete successfully?

- How aggressive competitors are in their marketing
- How many similar programs exist in your state, region, or nationally?
- Are programs growing, staying flat, or declining in enrollments? (NCES data can help here!)
- Are new competitors entering the space, or are some programs shutting down?
- Are competitors running paid digital ads (Google, social, display)?
- Do competitors rank high in Google search for key terms?



Great, It's Viable! Can We Fill Seats?

- **Enrollment & Revenue Feasibility:** What's needed for this to succeed?
- **Minimum enrollments:** How many enrollments are needed to hit budget?
- **Marketing investment:** Given the market and competition, what should the marketing investment look like?
- **Program name: Do we have a program name that aligns with search?**
 - Master's in Cybersecurity vs. Digital Defense & Risk Management
 - Master's in Business Analytics vs Master's in Enterprise Decision Science

Monthly Volume ⓘ

1.8k

Range: 1.7k-2.9k

Monthly Volume ⓘ

No data



The Cost of Ignoring Viability Research

- **Missed Revenue:** Schools plan for tuition revenue that never materializes.
- **Frustrated Faculty:** Teaching a small, struggling cohort can be discouraging.
- **Frustrated Learners:** Unexpected changes to their academic plans
- **Burned-Out Marketing Teams:** Unrealistic enrollment goals create high pressure, low results.





The Cost of Ignoring Viability Research

- **Cohort Cancellations:** Low enrollment forces last-minute cancellations, leaving students stranded.
- **Poor Student Experience:** Small cohorts = fewer networking opportunities and limited course offerings.
- **Program Reputation Damage:** A failed launch can hurt future recruitment efforts.

Master program cancelled an hour before the first class

 British Columbia

Hey folks,

I was to attend a Masters of Education program yesterday, but it was cancelled due to low enrollment one hour before the start of the first class.

The prof said that due to one person pulling out the day before the program, it wouldn't be financially viable for the department to run, and was therefor cancelled for 2023 but we would be deferred to the 2024. I asked how many students are needed for a viable course and was told 10, while I can see that they have only ever had 8 registered. No other options were presented from the university and we as a cohort had to conduct our own brainstorming as to how to move forward with our education.

I feel as though I have been slighted. I planned a lot of my next career moves, financial moves, and life decisions around this program and to have to pulled away at the last minute, without any real plan on moving forward has left me feeling lost.

Any idea on what to do from here? I've never been the "I'm going to contact a lawyer!" type of person, but this feels like an extr

Thanks for the h



r/ucla • 8 mo. ago

Stunning_Command_788

My program got cancelled



r/AskAcademia • 11 yr. ago
mastersgone

Masters program I was applying to, CANCELLED. Only have the option for PhD now and I'm rethinking my choice. Advice please.

“Perhaps the key factor is that a conversation HAPPENS between those three often very separate departments. Institutions have such a strong tendency toward silos.”



Break Down Silos



Build Internal Collaboration Early

Marketing deserves a seat at the table. Bringing marketing in early allows for input on market demand, timelines, and realistic enrollment goals.

Alignment = Influence. When marketing, enrollment, and academic leaders are on the same page from the start, marketing can better guide critical decisions

- Program naming
- Positioning
- Launch timing
- Admissions requirements
- Enrollment expectations

Post-Launch Conversations Matter. Keeping an open dialogue after launch helps all three teams—marketing, enrollment, and academics—adjust strategies based on real-time performance.

“

Marketing isn't just here to promote a program—it should help shape it



Realistic Timelines

“Faculty and leadership don’t always understand the intricacies of launching a new program and tend to push to launch before it’s been properly marketed.”



Let's have an emoji moment.....

Drop an emoji in the chat that best represents your experience launching a program on a **less-than-ideal timeline!**



= Total chaos



= Launched, but it was a miracle



= A wild ride from start to finish



= We planned for 100 enrollments! (got 12)



= I still have flashbacks, please don't make me relive it



Develop a Realistic Timeline

Look at Historical Data

- Review enrollment trends and conversion timelines from similar programs.
- How long did it take from first inquiry to enrollment?
- Were there early bottlenecks in the admissions process?

Work Backwards from Cohort Start Date

- Start with when the first class begins and map out key milestones in reverse.
- Build in buffer time for delays in approvals, marketing, or admissions.

Account for Admissions Requirements

- If the program requires interviews, portfolios, or early acceptances, factor in extra time.
- Make sure there's enough time for students to gather materials, submit applications, and make decisions.



Develop a Realistic Timeline

Factor in Accreditation & Internal Approvals

- Accreditation isn't a quick process—programs can't be marketed until they have official approval.
- Understand how long internal governance processes (faculty committees, curriculum approvals) take at your institution.

Marketing Needs Time to Work

- Campaigns need a runway to build awareness, generate leads, and nurture prospective students.
- Don't expect last-minute advertising to fill a class—allow 6-12 months for a full marketing strategy to unfold.



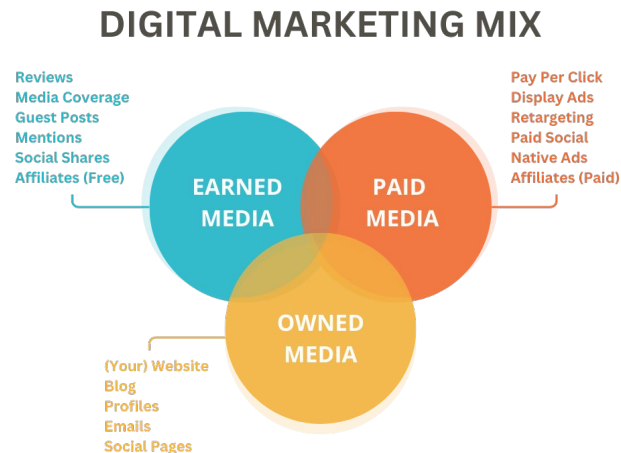
Marketing Launch Strategy

Marketing Launch Strategy



Determine Your Strategy Mix: Avoid lead gen tunnel vision

- **Paid:** Targeted media ads to drive inquiries and build awareness
- **Organic:** SEO, content marketing, and faculty thought leadership
- **CRO:** Ensuring landing pages, inquiry forms, and calls to action are optimized for higher engagement and conversion rates
- **Outreach Efforts:** Employer partnerships, industry events, and alumni engagement.
- **Email Nurture:** Follow-up emails that guide prospective students through the decision process.





Key Takeaways

1. **Program viability research is essential.** A strong launch starts with data—not just faculty interest.
2. **Marketing deserves a seat at the table early.** Involving marketing from the start leads to better program positioning, timelines, and enrollment outcomes.
3. **A well-balanced strategy drives success.** Schools need a mix of awareness, organic engagement, and conversion tactics—not just high-intent lead gen.
4. **Realistic timelines matter.** Programs need time to build awareness, generate leads, and nurture prospects before enrollment deadlines.
5. **Ongoing collaboration is key.** Marketing, enrollment, and academic teams must stay aligned before, during, and after launch.



Q&A



Feedback polls



Thank you for joining us!