

Graduate school enrollment is on the decline at the University of Maryland, despite postbaccalaureate student rates trending upwards nationally.

The most recent data from the University's Institutional Research, Planning and Assessment department, which keeps counts of enrollment in every department and tracks their trends, shows that the University of Maryland in College Park's graduate school has been on a slow but steady decline since 2011. Only 9,834 graduate students are attending College Park as of October, an almost 4% decrease from last fall and a 9% decrease since Fall 2011.

The biggest drops have come in the past three years, with a bigger decrease every year. Between October 2020 and 2019, the university lost 398 students in its graduate school, almost doubling the loss from the decrease of 206 in 2019.

Some of this differential may be due to the Covid-19 virus pandemic. Students across the nation have been taking time off school, or "gap semesters" and "gap years," in the midst of the global public health crisis for reasons of suffering mental health, relaxation, economic decisions between online classes and in-person learning or desire to focus on other things in the meantime and plan to return to academia when it's resolved.

In an interview with The Lantern, the independent student newspaper at Ohio State University, the admissions director for the Ohio State College of Medicine Julie Brin encouraged students to take a break from academics before attending graduate or medical school during a pandemic. She advised that the extra time to completely applications without the stress of classes and impending graduations can often help potential postbaccalaureate candidates and emphasized that waiting to start school again during a pandemic would not be hurting anyone's chances of getting in.

For those that opted to start or continue with their graduate degrees this fall, it has not always been easy. Jacqueline Ford, 22, is a student at the University of Maryland in College Park working toward a master's degree in public policy. Ford, who finished undergraduate in May, has noticed the challenges that has come with online-learning in a discussion-oriented field like policy.

"It gives you that good opportunity to make relationships with your teachers who are practitioners on [Capitol Hill] or in federal agencies very close to Maryland," Ford said, "and with online school, it is kind of hard to mimic that discussion environment on Zoom."

Ford did give her professors and fellow students credit — everyone has been good with working to adapt to the situation and learning to speak up on conference calls and in online classrooms, even if interrupt each other.

However, that has not stopped her from noticing a different energy surrounding continuing academia in her classes and in her social circles. With the global economy suffering as a result of the pandemic, some opt not to continue school or to take a break due to financial concerns while others stick with it because it can feel like the only viable option.

"I'm actually in a weird way very thankful that I stuck with it in this unique situation where I had this fifth year to finish," Ford said. "It's no secret that the economy is pretty terrible. I did have some undergrad friends that were in the business school, and they had job offers lined up, but their offers got

rescinded or pushed back ... In some way, this helped me gain some sort of an advantage for this coming May when I'll be graduating again, and then eventually entering the workforce."

This phenomenon isn't exclusive to College Park. Across the University System of Maryland — the 12 institutions across the state that make up the University of Maryland, including Bowie State University and University of Maryland, Baltimore — graduate enrollment has also been on a downward trend, with a 12% decrease in graduate enrollment across all schools since October 2011. However, the biggest systemwide decrease was a 2,368 student drop between 2018 and 2019 fall semesters; this year's differential across the system was only 65.

To some students, continuing graduate school has been a kind of lifeline — a hope an extra degree will guarantee employment for them after graduation in December or May.

Jordan Conley, 22, started graduate school in August, working toward her master's in social work from the University of Maryland, Baltimore. As her life has changed since the pandemic, she said she's at least had some consistency, while some of her friends have been almost entirely derailed by the pandemic.

"Watching some of my friends struggle a little bit is sad," said Conley. "I knew I was going to grad school. My one friend knew she was going to grad school. My other [friend] knew she had this job ... and now it's just kind of sad to see everyone's plans change and not be exactly what everyone thought it was going to be."

It is unclear as to how graduate enrollment will change further in the ongoing pandemic, given that postgraduate enrollment was projected to increase by 3 percent by 2029, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

For Conley, even though the pandemic isn't going to be forever, she wants it to be resolved sooner rather than later for the sake of continuing education — not for her own postbaccalaureate degree but for children in elementary and middle school levels that need the interaction and whose enrollment statuses cannot change because of a public health crisis.

"It's just hard to watch everyone shift in virtual academic environment; I don't feel it's like a really good way to learn," Conley said. "This is a scary time, and we do need to take the necessary precautions, but I think that some things are just absolutely essential. We can't take precautions when it comes to them."