

The Long-Term Growth and Changing Patterns of Communication Degrees in the United States

By Phoebe Schwarz

<https://datawrapper.dwcdn.net/n5N2d/1/>

Communication is one of the most essential parts of life; it shapes every relationship, interaction, and decision we make. We do it constantly, often without even thinking, whether we're speaking, listening, writing, or expressing ourselves in small everyday ways. As communication has grown in younger generations socially, academically and professionally more students have chosen majors related to communication and journalism. Using the national data from 1970 to 2018, it shows the key trends in communication degrees including growth, gender shifts and differences across degree levels.

The data shows a strong growth and rapid expansion occurred during the 1970s and 1980s when communication gained national recognition as a legitimate academic discipline. During this time, universities expanded programs in journalism, broadcasting and mass communication to meet growing public interest. According to Elliot Lewis, a lot of people view a degree in communications as a good general-purpose degree in today's society in the same way that a degree in English may have been seen as a good general-purpose degree in the 1970s. Lewis, the Graduate Program Director of Broadcast and Digital Journalism, also speaks about how a number of students who apply to Newhouse's master's program in broadcast and digital journalism come from institutions where that was the approach in their undergraduate curriculum, and they look to our graduate program to fill in the gaps. There was another surge in growth in the early 2000s that was driven by the rise of digital media, online journalism, and emerging communication technologies. As the internet transformed how information was produced and consumed, students increasingly pursued communication degrees to prepare for new media landscapes. However, growth began to slow between 2012 and 2018, with enrollment leveling off and even declining slightly in the final year, suggesting a period of stabilization rather than continued rapid expansion.

<https://datawrapper.dwcdn.net/n5N2d/1/>

One of the most notable trends is the growth in gender representation. In 1970 – 71, women earned only 35 percent of bachelor's degrees in communication. However, by the early 1980s, women surpassed men in earning communication degrees. Today, communication stands as a female dominated field with many different female oriented academic disciplines including public relations, strategic communication, journalism, advertising, health communication, and digital and social media studies. [Within communication-related fields there are areas of growth: digital communication and multimedia degrees increased by about 3.35 percent in 2023, and communication technologies degrees grew by around 1.44 percent during the same period, indicating continued interest in technology-oriented communication skills.](#) This shift reflects the expanding opportunities for women in media and communication-related professions and mirrors broader societal changes in higher education, workforce participation, and career pathways. This shift highlights the expanding opportunities for women in media and communication related professions and reflects the changes in society in higher education and career pathways.

There are also trends that differ across the degree levels. The amount of bachelor's degrees show steady growth over time but grew slowly slightly after 2012. Masters degrees experienced stronger growth, and they had an increase of more than 23% during the some five year periods. For example, between 1970–71 and 1975–76, communication master's degrees saw significant growth as the discipline gained academic legitimacy, and similar strong increases

occurred during 1975–80 and 2000–05 as digital media expanded the field. Even in later years such as 2010–11 to 2015–16, graduate degrees remained on the rise, highlighting sustained demand for advanced communication skills. This pattern shows the professionalization of the field and demand for specialized skills in areas such as strategic communication, public relations and digital media management. Doctoral degrees increased slowly and they support research in fields such as media effects, political communication and digital culture.

This data is important because it shows how communication education has evolved alongside changes in media technology and society. It shows significant shifts in gender representation and helps explain why communication remains a popular academic career pathway. As communication continues to shape everyday life, it is logical that students are drawn to continuing their studies. Communication programs will likely continue to adapt and expand as technology and media platforms evolve.

Enrollment data from communication programs also reflects broader stabilization and shifts in student interest. For example, [The National Communication Association reports that only about 15 percent of programs indicated growth in undergraduate enrollments between 2020 and 2023, while a majority reported either stable or declining enrollments, highlighting the recent plateauing of student populations in communication majors.](#)

The trends in communication degrees from 1970 to 2018 reflect how the field has been evolving alongside social change, technological advancements and workforce demands. Long term growth of communication programs, the increasing participation of women, and the rising importance of graduate-level education all highlight the discipline's adaptability and relevance. Although recent years show signs of stabilization rather than rapid expansion, communication remains a vital and attractive academic pathway because of its broad applicability across industries. As media platforms continue to evolve and new forms of digital communication emerge, communication education will likely remain central to preparing students for careers that rely on effective storytelling, information sharing, and public engagement.