

Trends in Bachelor's Degree Awards, 1989–90 to 2005–06

IN SEPTEMBER 2007 the United States Department of Education released the latest findings from the degree completions component of the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) survey series, providing a count of degree awards from United States postsecondary institutions for the academic year 2005–06. Bachelor's degrees in English accounted for 55,096 (3.7%) of the 1,485,242 bachelor's degrees granted in 2005–06, an increase of 665 (1.2%) over 2004–05. Once again, however, the growth in degree awards in English did not keep pace with the increase in bachelor's degrees overall, which grew 2.0% from 2004–05 to 2005–06. This pattern—a small increase in the number of bachelor's degrees in English and a small decrease in the number of English degrees per 100 bachelor's degrees overall—has persisted for a decade. And with the exception of the single year 2001, the number of bachelor's degrees in English per 100 bachelor's degrees overall has decreased slightly every year since 1992 (between 1992 and 1997 both the absolute number of degrees and the number of English degrees per 100 degrees declined). Over the period 1992–93 to 2005–06, English lost a full percentage point of its market share, declining from 4.7 to 3.7 of every 100 bachelor's degree awards.

This year the WebCASPAR online database system, which makes IPEDS degree completions data available over the Internet, updated its categories to match those the Department of Education adopted in 2002–03, so that comparative literature degrees, which had been grouped with English, are counted with foreign languages. The change marks a good occasion to review bachelor's degree data for English since the late 1980s and early 1990s, when both the absolute number and percentage of bachelor's degree awards in English were increasing, and chart comparisons with other pertinent fields. Because of the change in how degrees in comparative literature are reported, totals

reported here vary slightly from those the *ADE Bulletin* has provided previously. The change does not affect trends.

Table 1 shows the number of bachelor's degree awards in English and in all fields for six selected years from 1987 to 2006; the degrees in English are broken out by the eight separate subfields in the Department of Education's Classification of Instructional Programs (CIP) that institutions can use to report their degree awards in English (the numerical codes are the six-digit CIP codes used to identify each degree program). As of 2005–06, the absolute number of bachelor's degrees in English is just below the high reached in 1993, but the number per 100 bachelor's degrees has fallen to just above the level for 1987, the initial year for the IPEDS series, when degrees in English represented 3.56 of every 100 bachelor's degrees. (The historic low for English is 3.24 bachelor's degrees per 100 degree awards total, recorded in 1983. The historic high is 7.64, recorded in 1971.)

Figure 1 shows the trend line, 1987 to 2006, for bachelor's degrees in all fields. It suggests three phases in bachelor's degree production over the twenty-year period. During the first phase, between 1987 and 1993, bachelor's degrees increased sharply, by 17.5%. But between 1993 and 1998 degree production remained flat, and the number of bachelor's degrees grew by a mere 1.7%. After 1998 increases in bachelor's degree awards again accelerated, growing 23.9% between 1998 and 2006 (no data were published for 1999).

Between 1987 and 1993, degree awards in English grew 54.8%, from 35,733 to 55,329, a rate significantly greater than that for bachelor's degrees as a whole; hence English's share rose from 3.56 to 4.69 of every 100 degrees. As bachelor's degree production leveled off in the mid-1990s,

the number of bachelor's degrees in English declined by 12.0% and the number per 100 degrees fell to 4.10. Since 1997, however, as bachelor's degree production has resumed its growth, the share of degrees in English has continued to slip.

The trend for English since 1997 is not typical, even for other fields in the arts and humanities. In foreign languages, history, philosophy and religion, and visual and performing arts, the percentage share of bachelor's degrees has either increased or remained steady. The field of visual and performing arts has seen particularly strong growth since 1997—its share of degrees increased from 4.23 in 1997 (as compared with 4.09 for English) to 5.61 in 2006 (as compared with 3.71 for English)—a development that surely cannot be unrelated to the notable increase within English of degrees in creative writing (see table 1). Communications has also seen its share of bachelor's degrees increase significantly since 1997. Like English, communications and journalism saw its share of bachelor's degrees decline during the 1990s, from 4.75 in 1992 to 4.01 in 1997; but, unlike English, its share of degrees has rebounded since then, reaching a high of 5.05 in 2004 (its

share stands at 4.98 in 2006). Psychology shows an inverse pattern: as increases in overall degree production stagnated in the 1990s, psychology's share of degrees increased sharply, from 5.10 in 1990 to 6.30 in 1997; during the subsequent increase in overall degree production, psychology's share retreated to 5.81 in 2003; it stands at 5.93 in 2006. Degrees in interdisciplinary studies also saw notable growth in market share in the 1990s, from 1.57 in 1990 to 2.32 in 1996, after which they have remained steady at just above 2.00 degrees per 100.

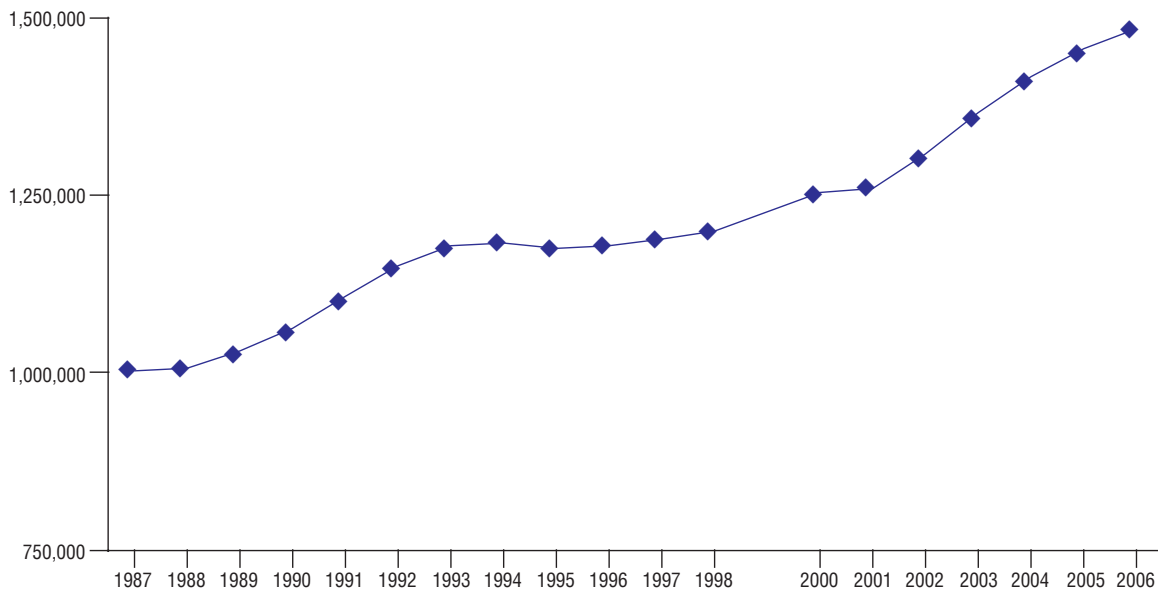
The series of figures on pages 6 and 7 shows trends in the number and percentage share of bachelor's degrees for eight arts and humanities fields across the seventeen-year period 1989–90 to 2005–06: English, foreign languages, history, philosophy and religious studies, psychology, visual and performing arts, communications and journalism, and multi- and interdisciplinary studies. I welcome comments on these data and how the patterns they exhibit reflect experience on your campus.

David Laurence

Table 1

Degree Program (6-Digit CIP Code)	1987	1993	1997	2001	2006
23.0101 English language and literature, general	25,795	41,595	37,598	37,676	42,034
23.0401 English composition	147	307	293	377	504
23.0501 Creative writing	468	872	1,044	1,254	1,950
23.0701 American literature (United States)	26	135	25	53	107
23.0801 English literature (British and Commonwealth)	1,319	1,494	1,165	1,140	874
23.1001 Speech and rhetorical studies	6,817	9,605	7,164	8,570	8,074
23.1101 Technical and business writing	130	106	199	311	454
23.9999 English language and literature/letters, other	1,031	1,215	1,201	1,226	1,099
Total for English language and literature	35,733	55,329	48,689	50,607	55,096
Grand total for all fields	1,003,532	1,179,278	1,187,567	1,260,308	1,485,242
Number of degrees in English per 100 bachelor's degrees	3.56	4.69	4.10	4.02	3.71

Fig. 1
Number of Bachelor's Degrees Awarded in All Fields, 1987–2006¹



1. In this and subsequent figures, no data were published for 1999.

Fig. 2
Bachelor's Degrees Awarded in Various Fields, 1990–2006

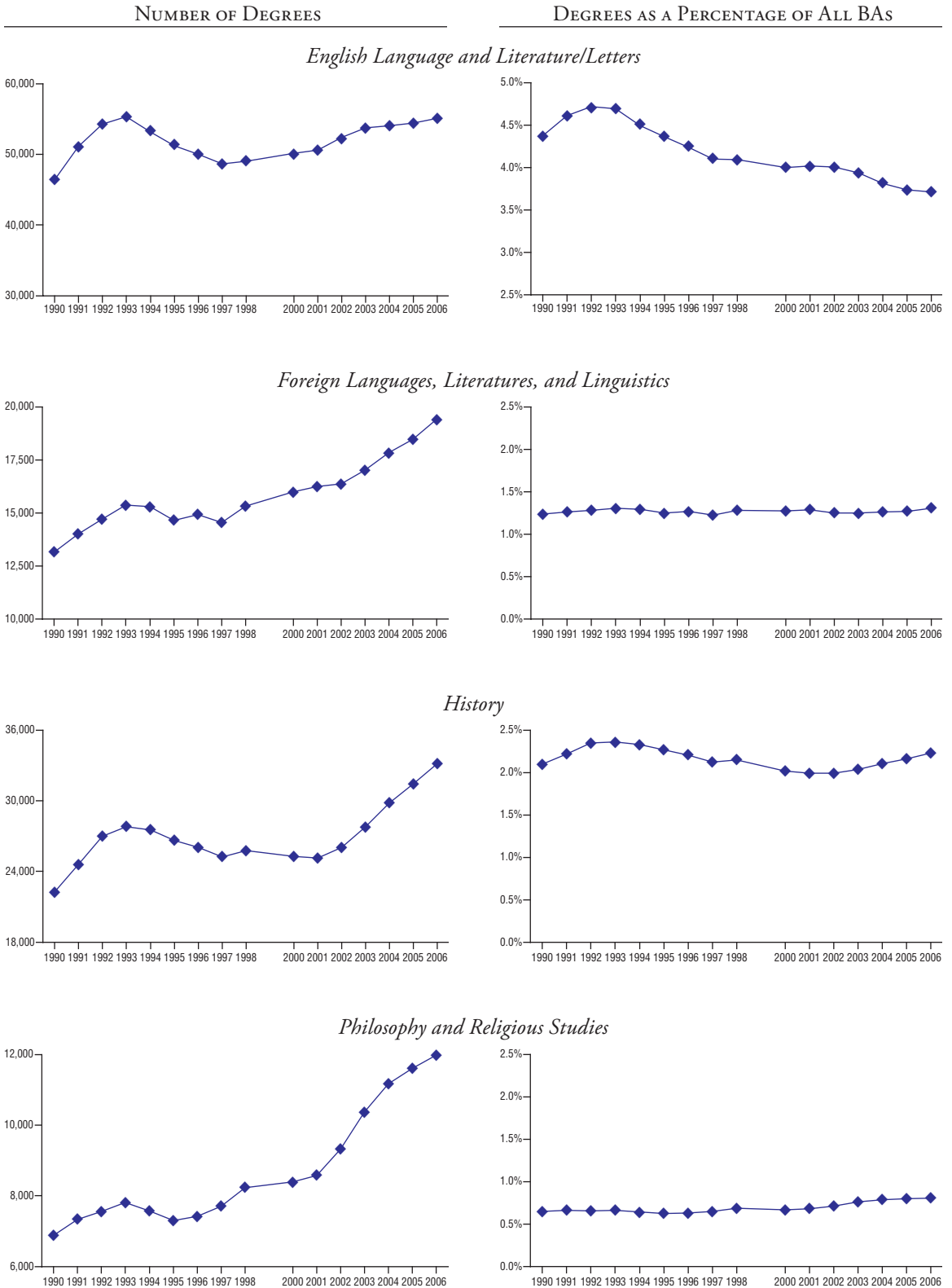


Fig. 2 (cont.)

