

The Employment of Ph.D.'s in English: 1979–80

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THE EMPLOYMENT OF PH.D.'S IN ENGLISH: 1979-80

PLACEMENT statistics for the newest members of the English profession—the recipients of doctorates in 1979-80—continue to paint in chiaroscuro the state of higher education (see accompanying table). Optimists among us may point to the brightest theme in our personnel picture: responsiveness to the poor academic job market. The number of new Ph.D.'s and D.A.'s (hereafter not differentiated from Ph.D.'s) fell to 926, a figure that represents a decline of 20% over the three-year period ending 31 August 1980. The number of departments that did not grant the terminal degree in 1979-80 rose to 13, up from 7 the previous academic year and 4 the year before that. The percentage of last year's new doctors who found full-time faculty positions in higher education increased slightly, to 62% from 59.5%. Moreover, the percentage of revolving-door appointments (nonrenewable, for one year or less) decreased slightly over the previous year, from 6.7% down to 5.2%.

The pessimists among us will quickly retort that our canvas is less bathed in light than clothed in shadow. While the percentage of last year's Ph.D. class finding full-time academic employment increased, the number who landed tenure-track positions decreased to 378, down from 391 the previous year. As in 1978-79, several respondents remarked in the margins of the questionnaire that some of their graduates were in tenure-track positions before completing the degree; indeed, some were already tenured. Last year the number of degrees per department appeared to be on the decline; fewer departments, it seemed, continued to be major producers. This year's survey results dampen such optimism: 5 departments granted 20 or more degrees each; 1 of these granted 34. In 1978-79, 4 departments awarded 20 or more doctorates, none more than 30 (though in 1977-78, 1 granted 37). In 1979-80, 9 departments awarded between 15 and 19 degrees each, down from 10 departments in 1978-79 (and down from 19 in 1977-78). Although the percentage of new doctors who accepted positions in business, government, secondary schools, administration, and nonprofit organizations was lower than in 1978-79—12.9% as opposed to 15.5%—the 1979-80 figure is higher than the *average* of the previous three years, confirming statistically the obvious and necessary trend toward employment beyond academe.

In February 1980 the MLA Advisory Committee on the Job Market issued a statement on the poor prospects for academic employment. Based on place-

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ment figures for several years' Ph.D. classes and addressed to all departments granting degrees in language and literature, this statement evoked a variety of responses, ranging, as might be expected, from protestations that the statement was too mild—that academe is in worse shape than the committee indicated—to recriminations against the MLA for prophesying doom. While unemployment statistics for various age groups of Ph.D.'s in English and American literature do not by themselves support the belief that only a fraction of successful academic job candidates can remain in the profession, there are some data to justify such a conclusion (and to validate anecdotal evidence).

In its profile of Ph.D.'s produced in the United States between January 1936 and June 1978, the National Research Council finds that among English teachers in four-year colleges and universities 25.8% of those with 2 to 5 years' experience and 22.1% of those with 6 to 10 years' experience have non-tenure-track appointments.¹ How long do such appointments last? Frank Atelsek and Irene Gomberg, reporting for the Higher Education Panel of the American Council on Education, find that the average institution expects to fill non-tenure-track positions for a period of 3 years and then terminate the positions. In 1978-79, 22.6% of untenured faculty in the humanities were designated as non-tenure-track.² Of those faculty in tenurable positions who were considered for tenure, 29% at private institutions and 13% at public ones were denied tenure; 18% at private four-year colleges and universities and 25% at public ones had tenure decisions deferred (Atelsek and Gomberg, p. 9, fig. 4).

Our portrait of the professor remains an unfinished work. There is much we still do not know about the fate of Ph.D.'s in the humanities—in and out of academe. The 1979 profile developed by the National Research Council provides some information, unavailable before, on the size of the labor pool of doctorates beyond their initial appointments who are unemployed and seeking new positions.³ We remain concerned about the anomaly that many faculty positions go to M.A.'s while many

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Ph.D.'s cannot find such appointments: for 1976–77, Atelsek and Gomberg found that only 49% of new full-time faculty appointed in arts and humanities at four-year institutions had Ph.D.'s or claimed to be within two years of finishing their doctorates.⁴

Some of us feel that it is not the task of graduate departments to worry about placing their protégés—despite clear indications that most humanities Ph.D.'s expect to teach (traditionally 90% have moved into academe). There is a historical basis for this position. The first two American Ph.D.'s in language and literature were awarded 120 years ago to men who then went on to take law degrees.⁵ Neither abandoned his humanistic pursuits, and both left their mark on academe. We are still awarding doctorates to graduates who go on to law school and do not move into postsecondary teaching. Will their legacy to the profession be at all similar to that of the first two Ph.D.'s?

NOTES

¹ Calculated from tables of data supplied by the

Office of Planning and Policy Assessment, National Endowment for the Humanities (personal correspondence from Arnita Jones, dated 26 Sept. 1980).

² Interpolated from information presented in Frank J. Atelsek and Irene L. Gomberg, *Tenure Practices at Four-Year Colleges and Universities*, Higher Education Panel Reports, No. 48 (Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education, 1980), p. 3, Fig. 1.

³ Commission on Human Resources, National Research Council, *Science, Engineering, and Humanities Doctorates in the United States: 1979 Profile* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy of Sciences, 1980), pp. 42, 52. More informative is Table 11 of the background information provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities, because this table classifies the unemployed (those seeking employment) by age group.

⁴ Frank J. Atelsek and Irene L. Gomberg, *New Full-Time Faculty 1976–77: Hiring Patterns by Field and Educational Attainment*, Higher Education Panel Reports, No. 38 (Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education, 1978), p. 10, Table 1.

⁵ Don Cameron Allen, *The Ph.D. in English and American Literature: A Report to the Profession and the Public* (New York: Holt, 1968), pp. 6–7.

Placement of 1979–80 Doctorates in English and American Language and Literature

Category		Category	
Programs responding*	147	Teaching or administrative positions in secondary schools	30
Programs granting doctorates in 1979–80	135	Held by men	13
		Held by women	17
Doctorates granted	928	Positions in higher education administration	19
To men	463	Held by men	13
% of men in total	49.9	Held by women	6
To women	465	Positions in government	15
% of women in total	50.1	Held by men	11
Tenure-track appointments	379	Held by women	4
Of men	208	Positions in nonprofit organizations	15
Of women	171	Held by men	5
Renewable non-tenure-track appointments	149	Held by women	10
Of men	83	Positions in business or profession	41
Of women	66	Held by men	21
Nonrenewable appointments, 1 year or less	48	Held by women	20
Of men	26	Employed, still seeking post-secondary teaching position	18
Of women	22	Men	10
% of Ph.D.'s in last 3 categories	62.1	Women	8
% of Ph.D.'s in tenurable positions	40.8	Unemployed, seeking academic position in specific area	18
Men	44.9	Men	2
Women	36.8	Women	16
Part-time appointments	83	Unemployed, seeking academic position anywhere	25
Of men	26	Men	12
Of women	57	Women	13
Postdoctoral fellowships	19	Unknown or Other	88
Held by men	10		
Held by women	9		

* Includes two comparative literature programs reporting graduates with primary specialties in English or American Literature.