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The Humanities, Arts, and Education



Academy Data Forum

Danger Signs for the Academic Job Market in Humanities?

Each year, PhD candidates and others interested in the academic job market closely examine the employment ads posted with the scholarly societies to assess job prospects and draw broader implications about the health of the disciplines.¹ Since the reports are published serially throughout the year by the disciplinary societies, the annual studies by the societies (along with secondary reports in the media) tend to offer little analysis of the relationship between the job ads posted in one humanities discipline and trends among the other disciplines.

In an effort to place the job advertisements in the broader context of the humanities field, staff members at the Humanities Indicators gathered up the numbers reported by the larger societies back to 2001. The following chart summarizes data reported by the largest disciplinary societies in the humanities and highlights a pattern of decline among the disciplines that began with the recession and continued through the most recent reports. Job ads for each of the disciplines peaked in the 2007–2008 academic year (2007 for philosophy, which reports by calendar year only). As of the most recent reports from each society, the number of positions advertised was at least 30% lower in every discipline except classical studies (which was down 14% from the peak).

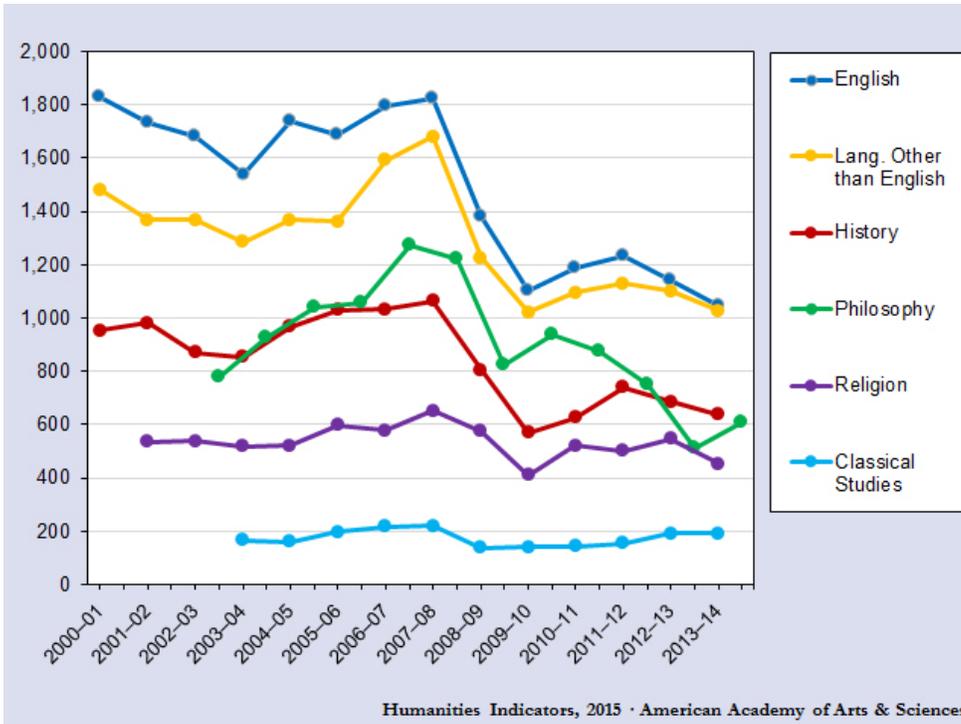
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Sources: Information drawn from published data from the national scholarly society for each field. (See endnote below for complete list of sources.) Counts represent the total de-duplicated number of positions advertised in the previous year. Philosophy counts are for the previous calendar year, while counts for all other disciplines are for previous academic year.

Are these declines an indication of trouble for the disciplines and the field as a whole? And do they capture the whole picture of the state of demand in the humanities at large and in these disciplines in particular? The numbers need to be read with considerable caution.

Viewed simply as data, for instance, the numbers reported by each discipline are contingent on a variety of factors that are lost in a simple view of the time series. In every case, the job advertisements do not represent a systematic annual collection of every job opening in the field. They are gathered from individual advertisers who have made a decision about where (and if) they will advertise. Placing an advertisement for a position comes with a cost, and often a decision about where to publish the advertisement is made among an array of alternative outlets for the discipline. In philosophy, the PhilJobs web site was created in 2011–2012 as an alternative to the job listings at the American Philosophical Association. (The two job listings merged in 2013.) Likewise, H-Net has provided an alternative venue for job advertisements in history since 1993.

To assess the merits of the society job advertisements as data for measuring trends in academic employment for the humanities, we invited an authority on employment issues and higher education. In the comment below, Ronald Ehrenberg (Irving M. Ives Professor of Industrial and Labor Relations and Economics at Cornell University and a director of the Cornell Higher Education Research Institute), discusses the risks and challenges of using the job ads as trend data, and offers some guidance on how they should be read.

ENDNOTE

¹ For examples of recent reports for particular disciplines, see: *Classical Studies*: Classical Studies Association, “Joint APA/AIA Placement Service Participation Statistics, 2003-2014;”

History: Allen Mikaelian, "The Academic Job Market's Jagged Line: Number of Ads Placed Drops for Second Year," *Perspectives on History* (September 2014); *Languages*: MLA Office of Research, "Report on the MLA Job Information List, 2013–14;" *Philosophy*: American Philosophical Association, "Number of Jobs Published in JFP by Year;" *Religion*: Society of Biblical Literature and American Academy of Religion, "Job Advertisement Data 2013-2014."

March 3, 2015

The Usefulness of Societies' Job Listings Data

posted by Ronald G. Ehrenberg

There are many reasons to be cautious when using scholarly societies' job listings as data about the job market for new PhDs. In addition to those mentioned in the report, they include the fact that academic listings are for all ranks (not just new assistant professors); that the same job may be listed multiple times during a year; that the aggregate numbers tell us nothing about the types of academic jobs listed (tenured, tenure track, full-time nontenure track, part-time nontenure track); and that nonacademic positions may be less frequently listed than academic ones.

Nonetheless, in a forthcoming paper, Jeffrey Groen – an economist at the U.S Bureau [More...](#)

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Nonetheless, in a forthcoming paper, Jeffrey Groen – an economist at the U.S Bureau of Labor Statistics and one of the authors of *Educating Scholars: Doctoral Education in the Humanities*¹ – presents substantial evidence that societies' job listings data are useful measures of the demand for new PhD recipients.² Using up to thirty years' worth of job listings data for each of seven fields – anthropology, classics, economics, English, history, philosophy, and political science – Groen shows that the movement of these series over time are correlated with a set of variables that plausibly should influence the demand for new PhDs. These correlations include the national unemployment rate (negative), state appropriations per full-time-equivalent student at public academic institutions (positive), expenditures per student at public academic institutions (positive), and average faculty salary levels (positive).

Furthermore, using job outcomes data for new PhD recipients from the *Survey of Earned Doctorates*, as measured by their responses to a set of questions regarding whether respondents have definite plans for employment or postdoctoral study as of the date of the survey, Groen finds, after controlling for other variables, that job listings measures for the seven disciplines are positively correlated with respondents' likelihood of having definite plans for employment and postdoctoral study. Together these two types of evidence suggest, in his words, that “the number of job listings is a credible measure of the demand for new doctorate recipients.”

With this established, Groen then estimates whether the demand for new doctorates in the seven fields has any impact on decisions by existing PhD students to complete their

degrees in a given year or to continue on in their PhD programs. His estimates suggest that, holding other factors constant, the number of job listings in a field is uncorrelated with both the probability that a student completes his or her PhD and with expected time to degree. He concludes that cyclical variation in labor demand is not responsible for observed changes over time in average times to degree.

Another important issue is whether the number of job listings in a field in a given year has any impact on the number and academic quality of new students who enroll in PhD study in the field. While some impressionistic evidence suggests that top programs in the humanities have shrunk their sizes over time³ in response to worsening job market conditions, the growth of new programs has apparently not led to substantial reductions in overall new PhD program enrollments. And somewhat surprisingly, little formal research has been conducted on whether new PhD program enrollments in a field and the quality of entering PhD students are sensitive to job market conditions. Groen is in the process of using job listings data for the seven fields, as well as other sources, to formally address these questions.

ENDNOTES

¹ Ronald G. Ehrenberg, Harriet Zuckerman, Jeffrey A. Groen, and Sharon M. Brucker, *Educating Scholars: Doctoral Education in the Humanities* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

² Jeffrey A. Groen, "The Impact of Labor Demand on Time to the Doctorate," *Education Finance and Policy*, forthcoming. A recent working paper version is available at http://jeffreygroen.weebly.com/uploads/4/2/9/0/42906623/groen_ttd_oct2014.pdf.

³ Broad discussions of these issues have been offered by Robert Townsend for history (<http://bit.ly/srcZiL>) and David Laurence for the Modern Language Association (<http://bit.ly/1cOvG4W>).