

## **What Counts in the Humanities: A Closer Look at *The 2007–08 Humanities Departmental Survey***

*The 2007–08 Humanities Departmental Survey* report provides essential new information on personnel and students in a number of humanities disciplines, offering snapshots of teaching faculty, work-life issues, and classes. At the same time, the results also highlight some of the challenges involved in surveying the diverse programs of the humanities.

The survey—and the larger Humanities Indicators project of which it is a part—caps a decade of effort by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, which has been trying to provide a better picture of this area of the academy. In the late 1990s Academy fellows and staff noted a troubling lack of information about the humanities disciplines, particularly in comparison with the science fields, which for many years have been quantified and analyzed in detail by a wide variety of federal surveys. (For more on the survey template and the larger Humanities Indicators project of which it is a part, see Solow 2002 and Humanities Indicators at <http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/>.)

To fill this gap, staff at the Academy turned to the disciplinary and subject societies in the humanities, trying to energize those communities to develop systematic information for their fields. Only a few of the societies gathered information, however, and those that did were working with a variety of survey instruments, asking questions oriented to the particular interests and concerns of their discipline. Staff at the Academy had to focus these disparate efforts and develop both an instrument and procedures for conducting a common survey.

In the end, they elicited support from six disciplines: art history, English, foreign languages, history (with a smaller history of science sample), linguistics, and religion. Each of the disciplines brought a distinct mix of questions and concerns to the table (ranging from specific questions about the undergraduate classes taught in their subject to concerns about the personnel policies in their departments). Some of the surveyed disciplines were represented at a comparatively small number of institutions. Over the course of three years and with the assistance of the research staff at the American Institute of Physics (AIP), a new survey instrument was forged that represented a consensus of the different disciplines, and sampling procedures were developed that could take account of the variations in population.

During the 2007–2008 academic year, staff at the AIP distributed the survey to a sample of departments in the participating disciplines at four-year colleges and universities, stratified by the Carnegie classifications of their host institutions. The results described in the survey report provide basic information about department personnel, information about students and their classes, and information about personnel policies and practices.

Because the report is based on a sample of data, the information discussed here is only a representative estimate of the larger universe of departments in the surveyed disciplines. On some questions, we can compare the results with similar evidence from the U.S. Department of Education and past surveys from the societies and feel some confidence in the results. But the results still have to be read as, at best, close approximations of

current conditions. While the following analysis treats the results as essentially accurate as presented, please take note of the report's discussion of the survey methodology, including cautions about sampling and estimation (see pp. 91–109, esp. 107–109, of the *Humanities Departmental Survey* report).

### **Personnel**

While the disciplines selected for inclusion in the Humanities Departmental Survey are often lumped together under the umbrella of the humanities, the results of the survey highlight the wide variations in the shape and organization of the different fields. English and foreign languages departments, for instance, are more or less ubiquitous because of the essential role of basic writing and introductory language classes in higher education. The survey report estimates that the United States has 1,098 English departments, 1,389 foreign languages departments, and another 156 combined English and foreign languages departments. In comparison, the survey found only 929 programs in history, 544 in religion, 329 in art history, and 140 in linguistics. Only the fields of English and history are evenly spread among different types of institutions. Art history, foreign languages, and linguistics departments are more heavily concentrated in doctoral institutions, whereas religion departments are more likely to be found in baccalaureate institutions.

The number of personnel staffing the departments in the surveyed subject areas also differs significantly. Because of their substantial responsibilities for a core general education subject, English departments are the largest programs in the humanities, averaging almost 28 faculty members per department. This is significantly more than foreign languages and history (which average a bit more than 16 faculty members per department) and art history and religion (which average fewer than 10). As the differences in the average number of personnel and the number of departments suggest, faculty member totals in the different subjects vary significantly, ranging from an estimated 30,680 in English to just 1,630 in linguistics.

Faculty in the humanities tend to be heavily concentrated in institutions that award doctoral degrees. More than 60 percent of the faculty members in art history, foreign languages, and linguistics and more than 40 percent of the faculty members in English and history are employed at institutions classified as doctoral universities by the Carnegie Foundation (though many of the employing departments do not confer doctoral degrees). Religion was the only discipline in which a plurality of faculty members were employed in baccalaureate programs.

Despite their differences on a range of demographic issues, we know from other surveys that faculty in humanities share the problem of uncommonly low salaries compared with other areas in academia. A separate survey conducted in the 2007–2008 academic year found that average salaries in the humanities ran 9 percent or more below the average for all fields (College and University Professional Association for Human Resources 2008). The reasons for lower average salaries in the humanities are disputed, and factors often cited as driving down salaries in the humanities, such as the balance of contingent faculty members or women in the discipline,

are shown in the *Humanities Departmental Survey* report to vary widely among the surveyed disciplines. Almost half of the faculty members in English and foreign languages departments were employed off the tenure track, whereas a third or less of the faculty members in art history, history, and religion were so employed (fig. 1). And while the *Humanities Departmental Survey* report found that the proportion of women in art history, English, and foreign languages was at or above 55 percent, women accounted for just over a third of the faculty members in history departments and even less in religion departments.

Although these data are not a clear refutation of the possible links between demographics and lower salaries in the humanities fields, they do leave open the possibility that other factors common to the humanities play a role in depressing salaries.

### **Classes and Students**

The study reports similar variations among disciplines in their engagement with students, particularly at the different institutional levels. The study found approximately 350,000 students majoring in the six humanities fields in the study and around 84,000 graduate students.

The survey found that in 2006–2007 English departments conferred the most bachelor's degrees (an estimated 54,690), averaging almost 50 degrees conferred per department (fig. 2). History programs conferred significantly fewer degrees (close to 42 bachelor's degrees per department), but both disciplines reported the same approximate number of majors per department (116) in 2007–2008. In comparison, the other departments had significantly fewer majors per department, ranging from an average of 25 in religion departments to 54 in foreign languages departments.

English and linguistics departments had comparable numbers of graduate students per department (slightly over 28). In comparison, history departments averaged only about 22 students, while art history, foreign languages, and religion departments all averaged between 10 and 13. The higher average number of graduate students per English and linguistics department reflects the much larger proportion of students earning master's degrees in those departments.

The Humanities Departmental Survey also intended to provide information on undergraduate classes. Regrettably, it was not able to elicit valid information on lower-level undergraduate courses, which leaves a large gap in the information it provides. The designers of the survey (including this author) tried to craft a question that could distinguish between introductory general education courses (intended primarily for non-majors), and lower-division courses (intended for freshmen and sophomores who might major in the field). Unfortunately this seemed to stymie department staff, who often either declined to answer the question or answered in ways that made the results unusable.

Nevertheless, the survey does provide a useful measure of the significance of humanities departments in the lower-level undergraduate curricula of most colleges and universities, because about 90 percent of

humanities departments reported that their subject was part of the core distribution requirements at their institution (only in linguistics departments was this figure below 75 percent). However, the relatively high proportion of departments reporting classes in the core curriculum suggests the need for an additional question that can separate courses required for graduation (such as basic composition or U.S. history surveys) from those that may be taken to fulfill general humanities distribution requirements.

Departments did report useful information on upper-division courses that demonstrates the potential value of these questions for lower-level courses. The survey report reveals the significant number of course sections being taught at the upper level and indicates that these are primarily being taught by full-time faculty members (just a handful of such courses are taught by faculty members with contingent appointments or by graduate students). We know from earlier surveys of faculty in these disciplines (most notably the 1999 Coalition on the Academic Workforce study; for results of this study, see American Historical Association 2000) that contingent faculty are primarily used to teach lower-level courses. The *Humanities Departmental Survey* report suggests the mix of faculty providing instruction at the upper level has changed little in the last decade. Unfortunately, the lack of available data on lower-division courses means we are still without essential information on the use of contingent faculty in humanities classrooms.

By drawing information from the departments rather than through institutional data sources, we can identify other patterns in departmental practices. For instance, the survey results indicate that assessment practices have deeply penetrated the practices of humanities disciplines. Between 48 and 75 percent of the departments in each discipline reported some basic assessment practices, though the particular blend of portfolios and standard tests varied widely. English and foreign languages programs appear to have the most-developed strategies for assessment, with three-fourths of these departments having some policy or practice in place. Whether this points to similarities in practice or to a better professional network among the departments in these disciplines is unclear, but it does suggest that they are doing a better job of getting out ahead of an emerging trend in higher education.

Finally, the estimated number of degrees conferred by many of these disciplines is higher than the numbers institutions have traditionally reported to the U.S. Department of Education. This discrepancy is an important reminder that humanities departments encompass a wide range of educational activities. In history, for instance, the disparity arises from a wide array of specialized degrees—in teaching and other types of specialized practical work—that tend to be tabulated elsewhere in the U.S. Department of Education's numbers. The range of activities being taught in many humanities programs is much broader than is suggested by the perception that humanities degrees represent only abstract sets of skills. Whether the shift toward the teaching of more "practical" skills is growing in the humanities remains to be seen (but does appear to be the case in history). However, tracking this sort of information over time would provide a valuable clue to these sorts of changes in the humanities departments.

## Personnel Policies and Practices

Beyond the demographic information on faculty, students, and their classes, the *Humanities Departmental Survey* report also provides essential information on the ecology of employment in the disciplines—from first hires to tenure decisions to final departures from departments.

Some of the most interesting findings in the survey relate to the amount of movement taking place in the surveyed disciplines. Notably, the survey indicates that an average of 2–3 percent of the tenured or tenure track faculty members had retired or left employment in humanities departments in the 2006–2007 and 2007–2008 academic years. The report also suggests that prior to the recent round of hiring freezes, departments and programs in the humanities were hiring more faculty members than they were losing.

The survey estimates that approximately 1,960 faculty members in the surveyed disciplines left their departments (due to retirement, death, or other reasons) in each of the 2006–2007 and 2007–2008 academic years. In comparison, the departments hired almost 3,475 new faculty members for the 2007–2008 academic year, and were planning to recruit another 2,965 for 2008–2009 (just before many institutions applied the brakes to any new hiring).

The net increase in some disciplines—for example, history—parallels a dramatic increase in the number of undergraduate students majoring in these subjects since 2001. (For more on relative trends in degree recipients, see Townsend 2009.) In the current economic climate, however, this sort of data takes on a different function. Knowing that the average department loses about 5 percent of its faculty every two years makes it easier to estimate how quickly hiring freezes may have a direct impact on students (who will not be able to find the courses they need to finish their major requirements) and faculty members (who will have to take on larger class loads to fill the gap).

In addition to providing data about attrition and hiring in the departments in the period just before the current crisis in higher education, the *Humanities Departmental Survey* report also provides useful information on tenure practices. About 45 percent of the departments in the smaller disciplines reported some tenure activity in the prior two years. In contrast, almost two-thirds of history and English departments reported that at least one member of their faculty had come up for tenure.

The survey also provides valuable data on the attrition rate in the tenure process, indicating that almost a third of the candidates for tenure in humanities departments fail to receive it. About 8 percent of candidates were explicitly denied tenure, and almost a quarter left before a tenure decision was reached. Among the disciplines surveyed, history had the lowest attrition rate in the tenure process (with barely a quarter falling by the wayside and just 2 percent denied tenure), while almost 40 percent of the candidates for tenure in foreign languages fell short or left prior to a decision (fig. 3).

The survey found a consistent emphasis on publications as an essential aspect of tenure decisions, with at least 52 percent of departments in each discipline declaring publications essential to tenure. Curiously, the

two disciplines that appeared the most different in their tenuring practices—history and foreign languages—were quite similar in the proportion of departments emphasizing the essential nature of publications: two-thirds of the departments in each discipline reported that publications were required for tenure.

### **Moving Forward with the Survey**

The American Historical Association has already incorporated a number of the questions from the Humanities Departmental Survey into its annual survey of departments (which is distributed each fall). As this summary suggests, *The 2007–08 Humanities Departmental Survey* report highlights the types of valuable information that can be gathered with a few necessary refinements to the survey instrument.

Unless the U.S. Department of Education decides to restore the National Study of Postsecondary Faculty, the disciplinary societies will need to take over these sorts of surveying activities. The challenge of refining a common survey instrument and developing a pattern of collection and analysis remains. But the results from the Humanities Departmental Survey demonstrate its significant value for clarifying the work and health of the humanities.

### **Reference List**

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- Townsend, Robert B. 2009. Feds Report Rising Undergraduates and Declining PhDs in History. *Perspectives on History*, May 2009, <http://www.historians.org/Perspectives/issues/2009/0905/0905new2.cfm>. Accessed January 8, 2010.

Figure 1: Faculty in Discipline Employed Off Tenure Track or Female, Fall 2007

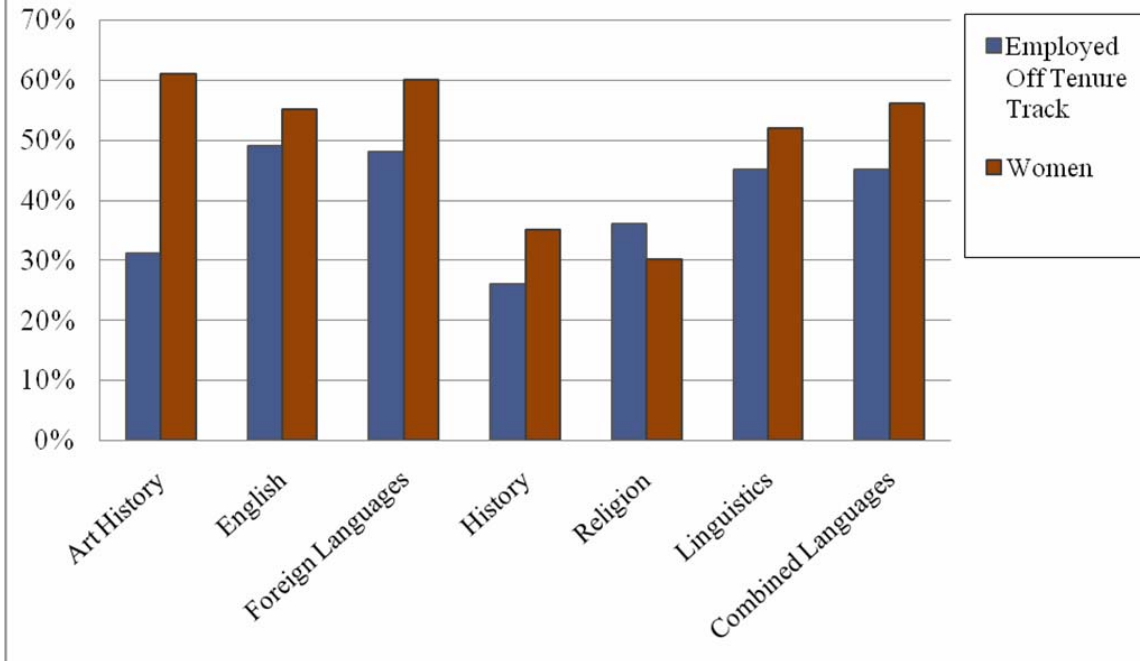


Figure 2: Average Number of Students of Type Per Department in Discipline

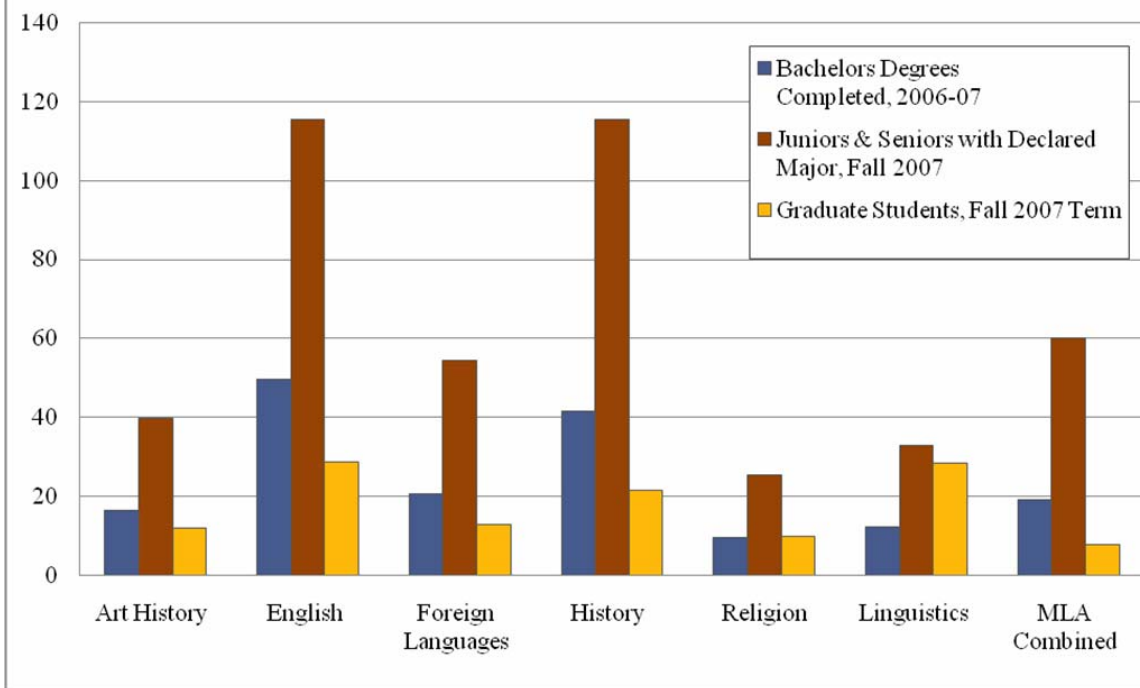


Figure 3: Proportion of Tenure-Eligible Faculty with Change in Status

