

Supply and Demand for PhD's in Modern Languages in Higher Education: Present Circumstances and Future Directions

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Abstract

The Jeffersonian ideal for modern languages articulated in the charter for the University of Virginia in 1818 included French, German, Spanish, and Italian. When the MLA was founded in 1883, these and especially German were the languages taught by those founding fathers. While during the twentieth century, languages were in or out according to politics, economic or immigrations, by 1977 when the Russian Sputnik spun into orbit, western languages were still predominant in the undergraduate curriculum. Nothing, however, made the nation's linguistic consciousness rise as much as Sputnik. The MLA's first surveys of student enrollments at the college level show an increase of 27.8% from 1958 to 1960 when an exceptional 16% of the college student body was studying languages. (*Reports*, 1961, and Brod and Welles, Table 3,25)

For the last twenty-five years the percentage of students studying languages has remained stable at about 8%, which at least should make it fairly simple to assess the needs for instruction in higher education. However, now because of 9/11 and continued terrorist attacks we are faced with another language jolt, that is the need for the languages of Middle Eastern or Islamic cultures. Besides Arabic, we now think about Farsi, Dari, Pashto, but only Arabic has been seriously taught in the academy, and it has a very small piece of the enrollments, just five tenths of one percent, and ranks thirteenth out of the fourteen more commonly taught languages in our 1998 survey.(Brod and Welles, 23)

Whether the supply of PhD's is adequate for the demands of the market has to do with two main factors: first, what languages are being taught now and in the future and whether the numbers of PhDs being trained are adequate for those languages; secondly, whether the preparation of graduate students related to what they will be asked to teach and do once they are part of a department of modern language, literature, and culture. To explore these issues, I use data from the MLA's analysis of its Job Information List, (JIL) the MLA placement survey for 2000, The Survey of Earned Doctorates, (SED) the MLA 1998 enrollment survey, and the MLA Melon supported project about department practices.

The MLA's October Job Information List is analyzed annually to identify the type of position, the language, and the special requirements in each advertisement. The *JIL* count is not

a census of academic job opportunities in the modern languages because not all positions are advertised there. Over time, however, the list has served as a useful indicator of changes in the need for full-time academic employment opportunities in four-year colleges and universities.

The October 2002 *JIL* contained a total of 535 positions in the foreign language edition, registering a decline of 140 or 20.7% in comparison to October 2001. (Laurence & Welles, 2003). This October's decline was not unexpected, given how closely academic job opportunities have historically mirrored the national economy. The decline is especially pronounced in public institutions, indicating the direct relation between academic job opportunities in public universities and state budgets. In the foreign language list, public institutions advertised 105 fewer positions than in October 2001, representing 75% of the net decline of 140 positions.

The survey of Earned Doctorates (SED), which gives us information about PhD's in 8 languages and a large category called other, shows that the number of doctorate recipients fell by 22 or 3.4% from 641 to 619, from 2000 to 2001. Table A shows the distribution of PhD's granted by language from 1999 through 2001. Except for the rise in the numbers of degrees in Spanish, few trends are visible here.

Table A: Distribution by language of PhD's granted 1999-2001

	1999	2000	2001
Arabic	12	15	6
Chinese	27	21	16
French	149	143	141
German	90	83	84
Italian	20	16	16
Japanese	10	18	17
Russian; Slavic	43	43	39
Spanish	201	218	233
Other languages	76	73	61

(SED data for 1999 & 2000: Doctorate Recipients by Subfield 75; app. table B1. For 2001, Doctorate Recipients from United States Universities: Summary Report 2002. Chicago: National. Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago, 2001.

The comparison of the numbers of jobs in Table 8 with the number of PhDs for the same cycle shows that there was an oversupply in French and German but for other languages the

numbers of PhD's was about right for the number of jobs except in Spanish: the field is in the anomalous situation of having a shortage of job seekers.

The MLA's eleven placement surveys, (1976-2000) show that the percentage the PhD recipients hired on tenure -track lines in their first year on the market has been around 44% since 1991. (Welles, 2000, p 8). In 2001, 629 PhD's were in the candidate pool. Overall placement to tenure lines was 38.6%, and varied according to language; in Spanish, it was 60.5%, while only 35.9% in Asian languages, 32.8% in French and Italian, 27.3% in German, 19.6% in Near Eastern languages, and. 16.1% in Slavic languages.

Since the 1998 MLA enrollment survey shows that 79.2 % of undergraduates are studying French, German, or Spanish, (Brod & Welles, 1998, p.26), it seems that higher education is well served by having a sufficient pool of candidates to choose from in all but Spanish.

The analysis of preferences in position listings shows what the expectations of undergraduate departments are for new assistant professors. The listings (467 out of 535 or 87%) show that most departments link their openings to distinct literary specialties most often defined by period. But besides a literary research specialty, expertise for teaching both language and literature is the most common desideratum, characteristic of 53.9% of tenure-track positions. Literary expertise alone was preferred in 36.9% instances, language only was advertised in only a very few instances. Familiarity with technology was listed as desirable in 24% of the cases.

Another source of information about departmental needs can be found in the MLA project supported by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation which identifies departmental practices associated with successful undergraduate programs. A survey in the fall of 1999 collected information about the distribution of teaching, curricular, and administrative arrangements, as well as 1995 and 1999 data about enrollments in introductory and advanced courses and the number of majors. Successful departments were defined as those, with growing enrollments and increasing number of majors. Recently MLA staff analyzed program features associated with increasing advanced enrollments and numbers of majors of which I will mention only the most important.

- The phenomenon most often associated with rising enrollments at advanced levels and increasing numbers of major is first growth in enrollments at the introductory level. A language

program coordinator at the lower levels of instruction is a feature often associated with growth at the upper levels.

- Secondly study abroad programs stand out as key practices that serve to attract students at all levels and in most languages.
- In the curriculum, relatively traditional courses based on the study of the canon (organized by genres or periods) appear to be the strongest thematic draw students to advanced level courses, but not to majors. Courses that combine study of the canon with non-canonical texts, or include in their discussion approaches based on class, race, and gender, offer the curricular emphasis most frequently associated with growth in numbers of majors and double majors. These findings are borne out in the kinds of job descriptions that appear in the *JIL* that emphasize literature by period and expertise in the teaching of both language and literature.
- Educational practices, outside the regular the classroom schedule like immersion programs, internships, service learning, language houses and so forth is also attract students as does the use of technology for study, practice outside of class, and distance learning, but not classroom teaching.
- Programs for heritage learners are associated with growth in advanced enrollments and not in majors. The availability of language study in combination with programs in professional schools proves a strong draw for majors (and double majors), but has only a modest association with increases in advanced enrollments.

While new PhDs are well prepared in literature and research, new assistant professors face a number of different challenges in and out the classroom. While it is impossible to prepare for all of them, it would be useful if their graduate programs- as many may already do- encouraged reflection about teaching, curriculum design, and departmental service as these are the activities most likely to bolster enrollments and lead to departmental success, at least in the eyes of institutional administrators.

Again, turning to national trends in student enrollments, Spanish enrollments have increased to more than half of the total. However, enrollments in many of the less commonly taught languages increased slightly, This means that of those students not taking Spanish, a greater number are studying a greater number of different languages. (Brod & Welles, 26). Does this suggest that we are not preparing enough PhD's in those other languages, like Arabic, to teach what the students will probably demand?

It is very distressing, then, to see the decrease in state funding for their universities that I noted had been an important factor in the drop in the job market. This decrease will undoubtedly have an impact on the funding of graduate programs as well: two thirds of the graduate programs that produce the greatest number of PhD's are in large public research institutions: The economic downturn is not the only reason for concern. States have for some time been directing moneys away from higher education to other priorities and have demanded that the funding for teaching staff and classes be based on the number of full-time equivalents. We cannot, however expect students to learn languages where no programs exist. With or without government funding, colleges and universities need to make opportunities, graduate and undergraduate to learn besides French, German and Spanish, other languages however small the enrollments. Greater institutional support for small programs might have provided a greater supply of educated Arabists when they were needed. Only in higher education can students gain the deep knowledge of language and culture that make them into world citizens and only advanced understanding obtained though graduate education can provide the depth of knowledge we need now

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**Table 8. Foreign Language Positions Advertised in the October 2001 and
October 2002 Editions of the Job Information List, by Language**

LANGUAGE(S)	2001		2002	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Spanish and Portuguese	333	49.3%	232	43.4%
Spanish	324	48.0%	224	41.9%
Spanish and Portuguese	3	0.4%	3	0.6%
Portuguese and/or Lusophone	6	0.9%	5	0.9%
French and Italian	115	17.0%	102	19.1%
French	86	12.7%	72	13.5%
Italian	29	4.3%	30	5.6%
Germanic	56	8.3%	46	8.6%
German and Germanic	56	8.3%	46	8.6%
Slavic	20	3.0%	14	2.6%
Russian	18	2.7%	12	2.2%
Other Slavic	2	0.3%	2	0.4%
Asian	35	5.2%	30	5.6%
Japanese	14	2.1%	8	1.5%
Chinese	14	2.1%	13	2.4%
Other Asian	3	0.4%	5	0.9%
Asian (general)	4	0.6%	4	0.7%
Other	21	3.1%	17	3.1%
Arabic	3	0.4%	5	0.9%
Hebrew and Judaic Studies	8	1.2%	2	0.4%
African Languages	2	0.3%	2	0.4%
Classical Languages	2	0.3%	4	0.7%
Romance Languages	5	0.7%	4	0.7%
Other Languages	1	0.1%	0	0.0%
Not Specified	95	14.1%	94	17.6%
Several Languages	2	0.3%	2	0.4%
Choice of Languages	28	4.1%	16	3.0%
Not Specified	65	9.6%	76	14.2%
TOTAL	675	100.0%	535	100.0%

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