

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

Elizabeth B. Welles, MLA

Executive Summary.

This paper introduces the topic by tracing the ups and downs of status of modern languages in higher education from Jefferson's ideals (1818), through the issues raised by the terrorist attacks of 9/11/2001.

An adequate supply of PhDs is concerned first with the match of PhDs in various languages to languages taught and positions available and, second, the preparation of graduate students in relation to the challenges of teaching in today's modern language department. 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 1998 MLA enrollment survey, and the MLA Mellon supported project about department practices.

The MLA's October 2002 Job Information List, registered a decline of 20.7% in comparison to October 2001. The decrease in positions in public institutions represented 75% of the net decline. The MLA's 2000 placement surveys show that the percentage the PhD recipients hired on tenure-track lines was 38.6%, (down 5.4% from the average) and varies according to language. A comparison of the numbers of PhDs with the number of positions available in the same cycle shows that there was an oversupply in French and German, an under-supply in Spanish, and about the right number in other languages. Looking at enrollments, there is a trend for students who choose not to study Spanish to take a greater number of different languages, many of them less commonly taught, suggesting that more PhDs in these languages will be required.

In analyzing hiring preferences, I show that 87% of the listings in the JIL are linked to distinct literary specialties, but otherwise, expertise in 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. Further information about desirable expertise comes from the MLA project supported by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, which identifies departmental practices associated with successful undergraduate programs. It shows that growth in enrollments at the introductory level, study abroad were most often associated with growing enrollments at advanced levels, while a literary curriculum, opportunities for language practice outside the class, and the use of technology were also important. While it is impossible to prepare new PhDs for all of the challenges they will meet, graduate programs should encourage reflection about teaching, curriculum design, and departmental service as well as research towards publication.

I conclude that a greater investment in language education must be made to ensure that future needs are met. 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 through graduate education can provide the depth of knowledge we need now.