

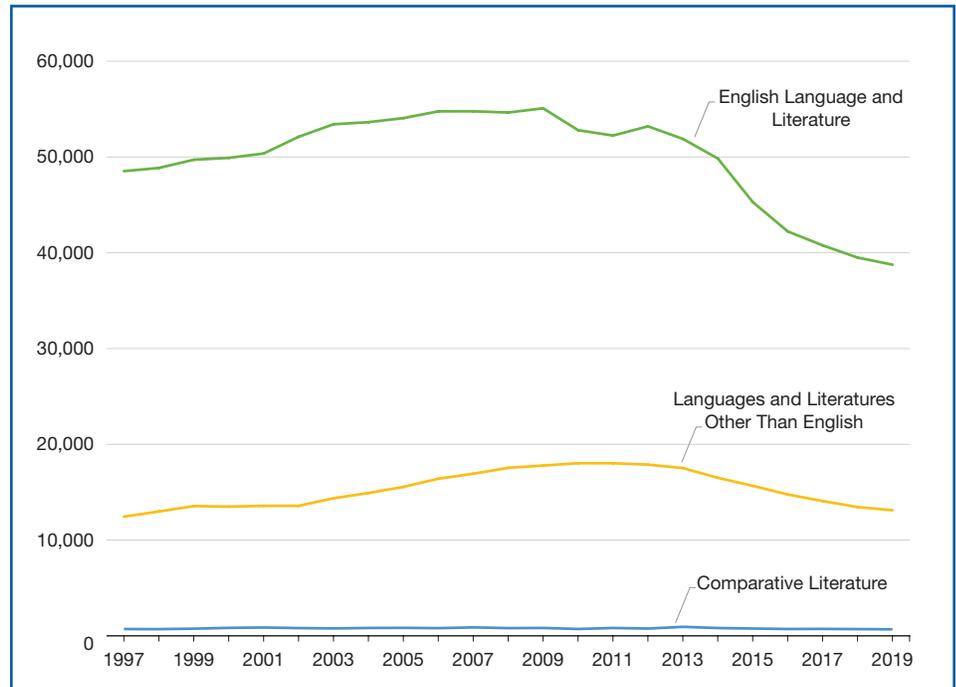
## Where Have All the Majors Gone?

After rising gradually from the late 1990s through the 2000s, the number of undergraduates earning degrees in modern languages and literatures declined sharply in the decade following the Great Recession. From 2009 to 2019, the number of bachelor's degrees awarded across all subjects in the discipline fell 29%.

The trend in English language and literature degrees seems particularly troubling, as the number awarded in 2019 fell below 40,000 for the first time in three decades (fig. 1). At its peak in 2009, the discipline conferred 55,087 degrees. The trend for modern languages other than English was only marginally better, as the number of new degrees fell to 13,447 from a high in 2011 of 18,024. The number of degrees awarded in the category of comparative literature tends to vary a bit more from year to year but also fell from a peak of 938 degrees in 2013 to 702 in 2019.

Unfortunately for modern language departments trying to argue for institutional resources based on the number of majors they are attracting into their programs, the number of undergraduates in other academic programs continued to grow (particularly in the health sciences). As a result, the market share for majors in modern languages has been falling faster than the number of degrees. As of 2019, language and literature students accounted for 2.6% of the bachelor's degrees awarded, the lowest share in records that extend back to 1949. For comparison, in 1971, modern languages accounted for almost 10% of all bachelor's degrees, but then fell to nearly 4% in the mid-1980s before rising back above 6% in the 1990s.

Perhaps most notably, the recent changes have occurred across almost



**FIGURE 1.** Bachelor's Degrees Awarded in Modern Languages and Literatures, 1997–2019  
Source: IPEDS Completions Survey from Department of Education, tabulated using the NCSSES Data Tool at [ncesdata.nsf.gov](https://ncesdata.nsf.gov).

all demographic groups and institution types. Of the 1,318 colleges and universities that awarded a bachelor's degree in modern languages in 2009, just 298 (23%) were conferring a larger number of degrees a decade later. In comparison, 73 other institutions awarded no degrees in modern languages in 2018, and another 894 were conferring fewer degrees. The trends for both English and languages other than English were similar in this regard.

Even among those institutions with an increase in degrees, very few showed substantial growth. Southern New Hampshire University stood out with the largest numerical increase in modern language bachelor's degrees, rising from 27 degrees in 2009 to 512 in 2019. This increase occurred after the insti-

tution developed and marketed a substantial online education program, and all degrees awarded were in English. Among institutions awarding degrees in languages other than English, only two (Florida International University and the University of North Carolina, Charlotte) reported increases of more than 50 bachelor's degrees across all language subjects.

The demographics of students receiving degrees in modern languages does not explain why students are shifting to other fields, but it does point to some potential areas of concern. Even before the recent declines, the modern languages were distinguished in academia by the exceptionally large share

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## PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

# Advocating for One Another

Comment on this column at [president.mla.hcommons.org](https://president.mla.hcommons.org).

**THESE ARE HEADY DAYS FOR HIGHER** education. Various initiatives under consideration by Congress would establish federal-state partnerships to address some of the most intractable issues facing students and educators in the United States. Student debt, stubborn barriers to access, and the adjunctification of the academic labor force are all squarely in the public eye. In April 2021, the MLA's Executive Council endorsed the proposed College for All Act, which would mandate that public institutions achieve

all kinds attempt to address this vexed history in the wake of the murder of George Floyd. These developments remind us that we must redouble our efforts to advocate for one another and for our students—not only sharing research and teaching resources but speaking out for ethical workplace standards and academic freedom.

To that end, the Executive Council and Delegate Assembly Organizing Committee (DAOC) have been developing a new network to enhance our

across the United States and beyond. Ideally, this information should flow in multiple directions—among delegates who may share concerns, from individual members to their delegates to the DAOC and Executive Council, and from the MLA back to individual institutions. Only by ensuring this networked flow can we hope to empower members while also keeping the MLA responsive to what occurs on the ground.

The DAOC has begun consulting with current delegates on how best to open these lines of communication: delegates hope to report on local conditions on their campus through a periodic survey, and they note that more frequent online meetings of the Delegate Assembly, beyond the official annual meeting at the convention, will help them share impressions and organize.

How might advocacy work under this new remit? We encourage delegates to remind their colleagues and administrations about MLA statements on various key issues (e.g., such as those at “Career Resources”), from academic freedom to salary recommendations to guidelines for search committees and job seekers. Contingent faculty members may wish to point to the “Statement on Contingent Labor” created by members of the Executive Council, in consultation with the Committee on Contingent Labor in the Profession. Conversely, members are encouraged to approach their delegates—geographic, special-issue, or forum (“Members”)—to alert them to any particular challenges or situations of concern on their campuses.

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a seventy-five-percent tenure-track workforce, building employment security for many (*Statement on Proposed College*).

Although the outlook is improving at the federal level, a number of states are passing increasingly intrusive legislation that threatens to curtail academic freedom at public institutions while ostensibly securing so-called viewpoint diversity. It is no coincidence that much of the legislation targets efforts to teach the history of race and racism in the United States, even as institutions of

ability to advocate for members at their institutions. While this initiative is designed for the long term, members may already be getting a sense of how important it will be to use our collective voice. In January 2021, the Delegate Assembly overwhelmingly approved adding advocacy to delegates' roles. Now the work truly begins, as we imagine together what on-campus advocacy might look like.

On-campus advocacy requires us to understand what is happening to our colleagues and their institutions

Sima Godfrey, of the DAOC, recently shared how she used MLA guidelines at her institution, the University of British Columbia. When faculty members from various departments sought to produce a document on the responsibilities of graduate supervisors and the

Responsibilities has stressed the importance of consultation and protections to tenure amid financial pressures (“Statement on Administrative Overreach”).

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rights of graduate students, Godfrey pointed them to *Improving Institutional Circumstances for Graduate Students in Languages and Literatures: Recommendations for Best Practices and Evaluative Questions*, issued by the Committee on the Status of Graduate Students in the Profession in January 2013, thereby providing them with a carefully crafted starting point and saving many hours of reinventing the wheel of graduate supervision. Were this to occur today, Godfrey might also point to the May 2020 *Report of the MLA Task Force on Ethical Conduct in Graduate Education* (updated Feb. 2021).

As institutions continue to grapple with the long tail of the pandemic, the opportunities to invoke MLA statements that establish best practices have multiplied. The MLA has weighed in on everything from pausing time-to-degree and tenure clocks to gendered inequities in childcare and eldercare responsibilities; the Committee on Academic Freedom and Professional Rights and

in our workplaces, the better off we will be, both as a professoriat and in allied professions. My somewhat dogged insistence on these very concrete matters—far from the intellectual passions that led many of us to our profession in the first place—stems from my conviction that we need to look out for one another and for those of our colleagues who come under increasing political and financial pressures.

We continue to gather ideas from our members and from current delegates on how best to implement this initiative. A special session at the 2022 convention in Washington, Using Our Power: The MLA, Advocacy, and Academic Labor, organized by Meryl Winick, our delegate representing full-time contingent faculty members, invites members to share their thoughts on how to engage under this new remit. I urge you to attend—and to send us your thoughts on this key matter.

Barbara Fuchs

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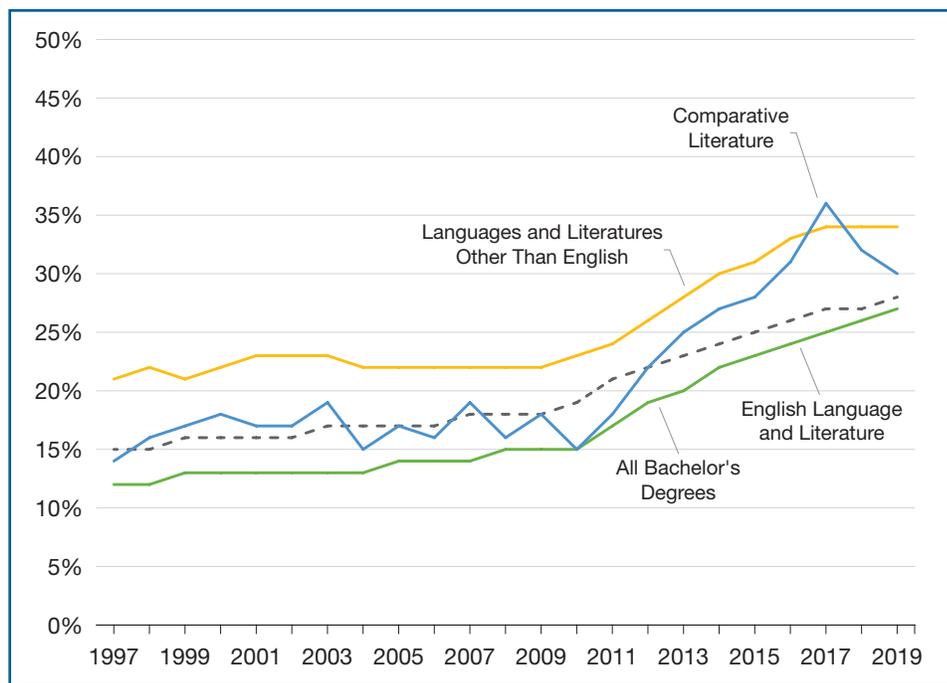
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of women earning degrees in the field: women earned 68.6% of the degrees in modern languages in 2009, compared with 57% among all bachelor's degree recipients. Since that time, the number of language degrees awarded to men has been declining more rapidly than it has for women (down by 31% for men, by 25% for women). There was a notable divergence between English and languages other than English: in English, the number of degrees awarded to men has fallen more quickly than the number of degrees awarded to women, but in modern languages other than English, the opposite occurred. But because English programs award more degrees than programs in other languages do, the share of women earning degrees in the modern languages overall has grown, to more than 70% in 2019, while women's share among all bachelor's degree recipients remains at 57%.

The overall trend in language degrees would look considerably worse, if not for a surge in the number of degrees awarded to Hispanic and Latino students (the label used in the Department of Education's survey). The number of students in this category who earned language degrees increased 30% from 2009 to 2019, with the largest increase (50%) among those receiving degrees in English language and literature. In comparison, the number of students earning degrees in modern languages fell 38% among white students, 37% among Asian American students, and a more modest 22% among Black students.

As a result of the rise in Hispanic and Latino students alongside the larger declines in white and Asian students, the share of traditionally underrepresented students earning language degrees has increased sharply—from 23% in 2009 to 34% in 2019 among students earning bachelor's degrees in languages and literatures other than English (substantially higher than their share among all bache-



**FIGURE 2.** Share of Traditionally Underrepresented Minority Students Receiving Bachelor's Degrees in Languages, 1997–2019.

Source: IPEDS Completions Survey from Department of Education, tabulated using the NCSES Data Tool at [ncesdata.nsf.gov](https://ncesdata.nsf.gov).

lor's degree recipients) and from 15% to 27% among those receiving undergraduate degrees in English (about the same as their share among all bachelor's degree recipients).

Regrettably, the data do not speak to the why of these trends, only the where and the who. But the modern languages are not alone among the humanities in experiencing a substantial decline in college graduates. Area studies, classical studies, history, and religion have all experienced comparable declines in the number of degrees awarded over the past decade. Nevertheless, a few disciplines that are closely related to the modern languages have grown: the number of undergraduate linguistics degrees increased 51% from 2009 to 2019; communication degrees increased 23%; and degrees in cultural, ethnic, and gender studies increased 13%. It is difficult to draw a direct connection between the declines in English and the growth in

these related programs, in part because their growth began long before English degrees began to fall. But it does speak to a larger pool of students interested in and engaged with the use of language. The reasons for these shifts, and what modern language departments might do to reverse the trends, remain unclear.

#### NOTE

1. This tabulation, taken from the IPEDS Completions Survey from the Department of Education, includes all degrees coded as modern languages or literatures by the Humanities Indicators ([www.amacad.org/humanities-indicators](http://www.amacad.org/humanities-indicators)), using the Department of Education's six-digit Classification of Instructional Programs.

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## The Value of a Humanities Degree

Visit these sites to get resources to make the case for the value of a degree in languages, literature, and other humanities disciplines.

- *Study the Humanities*, an initiative of the National Humanities Alliance, has information on effective recruiting strategies, data and articles on the value of studying the humanities, and more. [https://www.nhalliance.org/study\\_the\\_humanities](https://www.nhalliance.org/study_the_humanities)
- *The Humanities Indicators*, a project of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, provides data on humanities study, the humanities workforce, and the humanities in public life. <https://www.amacad.org/humanities-indicators>
- *Humanities Works* offers posters, postcards, and handouts aimed at busting myths about majoring in the humanities. <https://humanitiesworks.org/>
- *Lead with Languages*, a campaign of the American Council of Teachers of Foreign Languages, includes information on the range of careers that use language skills, testimonials from professionals and students, and tools for advocating for language learning. <https://www.leadwithlanguages.org/>
- *Dear English Major* features interviews with English majors who are using their degrees in a range of professions as well as articles to support English majors in their job search and beyond. <https://www.dearenglishmajor.com/>
- *4Humanities* sponsors humanities advocacy projects, publishes research, and aggregates resources about the value of the humanities. <https://4humanities.org/>

# Fighting Back against Employment Myths

Many of our students believe—wrongly—that majoring in language or literature puts their future employment at risk. Their parents believe it too; each of us has had in our office a student who says, “I’d like to major in English (or comparative literature), but my parents want me to major in something more practical.” Some university administrators, advisers, and admissions officers believe it. The stereotype of our majors as career dead ends—perhaps typified by the figure of the English major working at Starbucks—forms a critical part of the mythology of education today.

The most important thing to say about this mythology is that it’s simply not true. Data consistently show that majors in languages and literature and in other humanities fields end up employed at roughly the same rate as majors in a wide variety of other fields, including business, chemistry, or psychology (*Economic Value*). And the same data show that our majors end up making, on average, salaries comparable to those earned by majors in many other fields. Venture capitalists, Silicon Valley CEOs, philanthropic leaders, and business journalists all repeatedly articulate the worldview behind this data: humanities skills are indispensably foundational to innovation, design, and development (“Frequently Asked Questions”).

That’s why we started *Humanities Works* ([www.humanitiesworks.org](http://www.humanitiesworks.org)), which provides posters, postcards, and images that work to counter some of these myths. We want to give students (and their parents) the information they need to make good decisions about their education.

There is of course much more to a college education than the job stu-

dents get afterward, but we should help students understand that majoring in languages and literatures or history or philosophy does not require sacrificing their future financial security. If students are choosing or being compelled to choose a major on the basis of impressions of its financial returns, rather than on the basis of what motivates and engages them, we can meet them on that terrain. The three of us don’t always agree on how to define the humanities, but we’re united in our data-driven belief that the knowledge and skills students learn in their humanities courses not only are essential to civic life but will be financially and professionally valued after college. In short: we’re not saying you should major in a humanities field to get rich. We’re saying you shouldn’t avoid majoring in a humanities field out of fear that you won’t find a good job or earn a good living. Because that’s not accurate. Faculty members, administrators, career counselors, academic advisers, and families need to hear and spread the message.

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# MLA Newsletter



**The 2022 MLA Annual Convention  
will be held in Washington, DC,  
from 6 to 9 January.  
Stay up to date at [mla.org/MLA-2022](https://mla.org/MLA-2022)!**

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