

Report on the Survey of Earned Doctorates, 2008–09

MLA Office of Research

ADE Bulletin 150 (2010)

Web Publication, April 2011

© 2011 by The Modern Language Association of America

All material published by the Modern Language Association in any medium is protected by copyright. Users may link to the MLA Web page freely and may quote from MLA publications as allowed by the doctrine of fair use. Written permission is required for any other reproduction of material from any MLA publication.

Send requests for permission to reprint material to the MLA permissions manager by mail (26 Broadway, New York, NY 10004-1789), e-mail (permissions@mla.org), or fax (646 458-0030).

Report on the Survey of Earned Doctorates, 2008–09

IN DECEMBER 2010 the National Science Foundation (NSF) released *Doctorate Recipients from U.S. Universities, 2009*, its annual report on the Survey of Earned Doctorates (SED), the federally sponsored census of persons who receive doctoral degrees from US universities each year. The 2009 SED counted 896 doctorate recipients in English and 602 in modern languages other than English who earned a research doctorate between 1 July 2008 and 30 June 2009.

Trends in the Number of Doctorate Recipients in English and Other Modern Languages

Figure 1 shows the number of doctorate recipients in English and in other modern languages, as reported on the SED from 1958 to 2009. For the first time since 1991 the total number of doctorate recipients in English fell below 900, and the 2009 data strengthen evidence of a downward trend, especially in the number of degree recipients in English language and literature. Unlike English, the trend line for the other modern languages shows only a slight decline from the levels reached in the mid-1990s. Over the past thirteen years the number of foreign language doctorate recipients has fluctuated in a range between 585 and 650, standing closer to 650 for the seven years 1997 to 2003 and closer to 600 for the six survey years since.

In 2007, creative writing was added to the SED questionnaire list of fields of study doctorate recipients can choose when completing the SED. For the years 2007, 2008, and 2009 recipients of doctorates in creative writing are included as part of the total for English. The NSF's data tables, however, do not fold creative writing degree recipients into the sum total for English. Instead, the NSF either lists creative writing degree recipients separately under "Letters" (as in SED table 14) or (as in SED table 15) includes them in the subcategory "Letters, aggregated" rather than in any of the three SED categories that, before 2007, enumerated degree recipients in English: "American literature," "English language," and "English literature."¹

When degree recipients in English and American literature are counted separately from those in creative writing, the downward trend, particularly in English language and literature, becomes more pronounced. Excluding creative writing, there were 820 doctorate recipients in English in 2009, 274 (25.0%) below the recent high of 1,094 reached in 1997. Of these 820 degree recipients, 539 (65.7%) were women and 281 (34.3%) were men. (The report on the 2009 SED does not provide a gender breakdown of creative writing degree recipients.) Since 1995, when the number of recipients of doctorates in the NSF subfield "English language and literature" grew to a recent peak of 752, the number has declined by 258 (34.3%), to 494 (fig. 2). From 1990 to 1996, on average, close to 70.0% of those earning doctorates in English and American language and literature took their degrees in English language and literature; over the years 1997 to 2009 the average was 60.4%, and in 2009

*Report on the Survey
of Earned Doctorates,
2008–09*

it shrank to 55.1%. The number of recipients of doctorates in American literature continued to increase through the 1990s, reaching 460, or 42.0% of the total, in 2000; since 2000, that number too has shown a declining trend, falling to 326 in 2009, 29.1% below the 2000 peak. In 2007 the SED census counted 21 doctorate recipients in creative writing; the number increased to 73 and 76 in 2008 and 2009, respectively, or from 2.3% of the 2007 total to 8.5% of the total for 2009.

Trends for the other modern languages and literatures show more complex patterns of increases and declines (see [fig. 3](#) and the accompanying thumbnails, [figs. 3a–3c](#), showing specific language fields).² French, German, and Spanish—the three language fields that on average graduate more than 80 doctorate recipients each year—all experienced significant growth from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s. Doctorates in French grew by almost 50%, from about 100 to about 150; in German by as much as a third, from about 75 to about 100; and in Spanish by nearly 60%, from about 130 to about 200. But of the three, only for Spanish has the increase been sustained. In 2009, the number of doctorate recipients in French and German was, respectively, 23.8% and 23.7% below the number in 1995; by contrast, the number for Spanish in 2009 was 13.4% above that for 1995. Over the eleven years 1987 to 1997 French, German, and Spanish graduated on average 124, 82, and 179 doctorate recipients each year, respectively. Over the dozen years since, 1998 to 2009, French and German have averaged an identical 124 and 82 degree recipients per year, respectively, while Spanish averaged 232 per year, 29.0% greater than its average for the years 1987 to 1997.

Fields graduating fewer than 50 degree recipients a year show similar patterns, if on a smaller scale. Like French and German, Russian and Slavic languages saw increased degree production from the 1980s into the 1990s but decreases since; Chinese has seen its number of degree recipients grow, as have Italian and Japanese (shown in [figs. 3a](#) and [3b](#)). [Figure 3c](#) shows degree recipients in Arabic, which have averaged 7 doctorates per year across the twenty-three-year period. Even where there have been increases, however, the number of degree recipients in these fields remains small, with considerable year-to-year fluctuations.

Postgraduation Plans and Job Placement

The SED inquires about doctorate recipients' postgraduation plans, although for the modern language fields the report presents information about graduates' placement to employment or postdoctoral study only at the aggregate level of "foreign languages"³ and (for English) "letters." In 2009, 526 (87.4%) of the 602 doctorate recipients in foreign languages answered the question about their postgraduation plans, as did 1,233 (87.2%) of the 1,414 doctorate recipients collected under "letters." Percentages of graduates placed in faculty positions, pursuing postdoctoral study, or employed in situations outside of postsecondary education are based on the number who answered the question.

Of the 1,233 responding doctorate recipients in letters, 53.0% reported having definite employment at the time of graduation, 8.7% had definite postdoctoral study, and 34.6% were seeking positions. Of the 526 responding doctorate recipients in foreign languages, 61.6% reported having definite employment at the time of

*Report on the Survey
of Earned Doctorates,
2008–09*

graduation, 3.8% had definite postdoctoral study, and 31.2% were seeking positions. (The remainder had “other” plans or placements.) [Table 1](#) presents these data along with those for the other humanities fields. [Table 2](#) shows additional detail about the types of placements graduates reported within each postgraduation status. Placements outside postsecondary education remain rare across the humanities; academia was the employment destination for nine-tenths of the 61.6% of graduates in foreign languages and the 53.6% of graduates in letters who had definite employment plans at the time of graduation.

As part of the presentation of the 2009 findings, the NSF provides supplemental data that trace placement trends over a twenty-one-year period, 1989–2009, for seven broad disciplinary areas: humanities, education, other non–science and engineering fields, social sciences, life sciences, physical sciences, and engineering. [Figure 4a](#) compares the trend line for humanities with those for education, social sciences, and other nonscience fields; [figure 4b](#) compares humanities with engineering, life sciences, and physical sciences.⁴ The figures make evident the decline in graduates’ placement prospects in the 1990s, the subsequent recovery, and after 2006 an apparent new decline. The drop in the 1990s was especially steep and deep in humanities and engineering—more than 11 percentage points, from 67.6% to 56.1% of humanities graduates with definite plans for employment or study at the time of graduation and from 67.6% to 55.7% of graduates in engineering.

While employment prospects for graduates in all fields rise and fall with economic cycles, graduates of doctoral humanities programs have consistently had the lowest rate of definite placement at the time of receiving the degree of all seven disciplinary areas. Only in engineering, the field where placement prospects have seen both the steepest declines and most pronounced recoveries, have graduates’ postgraduation prospects fallen to a level parallel with or below that for graduates in the humanities. Not to be ignored either is the coincidence of reduced placement prospects and the significantly increased numbers of doctorate recipients in English and other modern languages that characterized the 1990s.

At the same time, any assessment of placement trends for humanities doctorate recipients needs to be cognizant of the master’s degree as a *de facto* degree qualification for a large share of postsecondary faculty positions in four-year as well as two-year institutions. Information from the 2004 National Study of Postsecondary Faculty (NSOPF) documents the substantial population of humanities faculty members teaching off the tenure track with a master’s degree as their highest degree. Overall, in both two- and four-year institutions, humanities faculty members who hold a master’s degree number 76,700, or 45.1% of the entire complement of 169,900 faculty members teaching in the humanities disciplines, full- or part-time, on or off the tenure track. In four-year institutions—where 94.9% of the 55,200 tenured and tenure-track faculty members in humanities fields holds a doctorate—28,500 (57.2%) of the 49,800 non-tenure-track faculty members hold a master’s degree as their highest degree. As of fall 2003 (the data-collection period for the 2004 NSOPF), an estimated 32,200 (29.7%) of all 108,300 humanities faculty members in four-year institutions held a master’s degree as their highest degree.⁵

**Report on the Survey
of Earned Doctorates,
2008–09**

Thus teaching in four- as well as two-year colleges clearly figures as a significant employment destination for graduates from the field's master's degree programs.

Years to Degree and Amount of Educational Debt

In 2009, degree recipients in the humanities took a median of 9.5 years to complete their degrees after starting graduate school, well above the median 7.7 years for all fields and significantly shorter only than the median for education (12.3 years). In life sciences 2009 degree recipients took 7.0 years from starting graduate school to complete the degree, in physical sciences 6.7 years, and in social sciences 7.7 years. (See table 62 in the 2009 SED report.)

Recipients of humanities doctorates in 2009 held an average cumulative educational debt (graduate and undergraduate) of \$24,666. Only graduates in social sciences and education had higher levels of cumulative educational debt—\$25,531 in education and \$28,443 in the social sciences. Table 3 shows average debt levels for the seven broad fields of study and the percentage of graduates in each field that graduated debt free or with various levels of debt.

The complete set of 66 data tables and supplemental data and figures are included in the full report, available on the NSF Web site.

David Laurence

Notes

1. As constituents of the major category "Humanities," the SED includes "foreign languages," "history," "letters," and "other humanities." "Letters" aggregates American literature (U.S. and Canada); classics; comparative literature; creative writing; English language; English literature (British and Commonwealth); folklore; speech and rhetorical studies; letters, general; and letters, other. Where totals are broken out in more detail—by gender, for example, as in SED table 15—numbers for some subfields (like creative writing) that have smaller numbers of degree recipients are not reported separately but collected within a subcategory named, somewhat confusingly, "letters, aggregated."

2. To facilitate comparisons, y-axis scales in the thumbnail figures have been set to range from 0 to 300 for French, German, and Spanish and from 0 to 70 for the other languages.

3. "Foreign languages" aggregates Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Hebrew (not reported as a separate category after 2003), Italian, Japanese, Russian, Slavic (other than Russian), Spanish, and other languages and literatures.

4. Figures 4a and 4b are reconfigured versions of the NSF's figures 5-A and 5-B, which appear as part of the supplemental data on trends over time in graduates' postgraduation plans and commitments. See the "What are the postgraduation trends?" segments for science and engineering and non-science and engineering graduates in the Web-based presentation of findings from the 2009 report.

5. By comparison, 17.0% of faculty members in the social sciences and 16.8% of faculty members in the natural sciences at four-year institutions hold a master's degree as their highest degree.

Works Cited

Doctorate Recipients from U.S. Universities, 2009. Special Report NSF 11-306. *National Science Foundation*. Div. of Science Resources Statistics, Natl. Science Foundation, Dec. 2010. Web. 14 Dec. 2010.

2004 National Study of Postsecondary Faculty. Natl. Center for Educ. Statistics, 24 Apr. 2010. Web. 14 Dec. 2010.

Table 1
Doctorate Recipients' Postgraduation Plans: Percentage with Definite Employment, with Definite Postdoctoral Study, and Seeking Employment or Study

	All Humanities Fields	Foreign Languages	Letters	History	Other Humanities
Postgraduation status					
Definite employment	53.7%	61.6%	53.0%	53.6%	51.6%
Definite postgraduation study	8.4%	3.8%	8.7%	11.7%	7.8%
Seeking employment or study	34.3%	31.2%	34.6%	32.4%	36.1%
Other	3.6%	3.4%	3.7%	2.3%	4.5%
Number (basis for percentages)	4,273	526	1,233	934	1,580
All doctorate recipients	4,899	602	1,414	1,045	1,838

Source: *Doctorate Recipients from U.S. Universities, 2009*, data table 63.

Table 2
Doctorate Recipients' Postgraduation Plans: Percentage of Doctorate Recipients Placed in Different Employment Sectors and Forms of Postdoctoral Study

	All Humanities Fields	Foreign Languages	Letters	History	Other Humanities
Definite employment					
Academe	84.6%	90.4%	91.1%	81.2%	79.0%
Government	2.0%	±	±	5.4%	1.5%
Industry or business	3.5%	±	±	2.6%	4.9%
Nonprofit	5.0%	±	±	4.8%	9.9%
Other or unknown	5.0%	5.2%	4.4%	6.0%	4.7%
Number (basis for percentages)	2,294	324	653	501	816
Definite postgraduation study					
Postdoctoral fellowship	82.2%	75.0%	85.0%	85.3%	78.0%
Postdoctoral research associateship	13.9%	±	12.1%	±	16.3%
Other	3.9%	±	2.8%	±	5.7%
Number (basis for percentages)	359	20	107	109	123

Source: *Doctorate Recipients from U.S. Universities, 2009*, data table 63.

The ± symbol indicates cells where regulations governing reportage require data to be suppressed.

Table 3
Average Cumulative Educational Debt of 2009 Recipients of Doctoral Degrees (Percentage of Graduates with Various Levels of Debt)

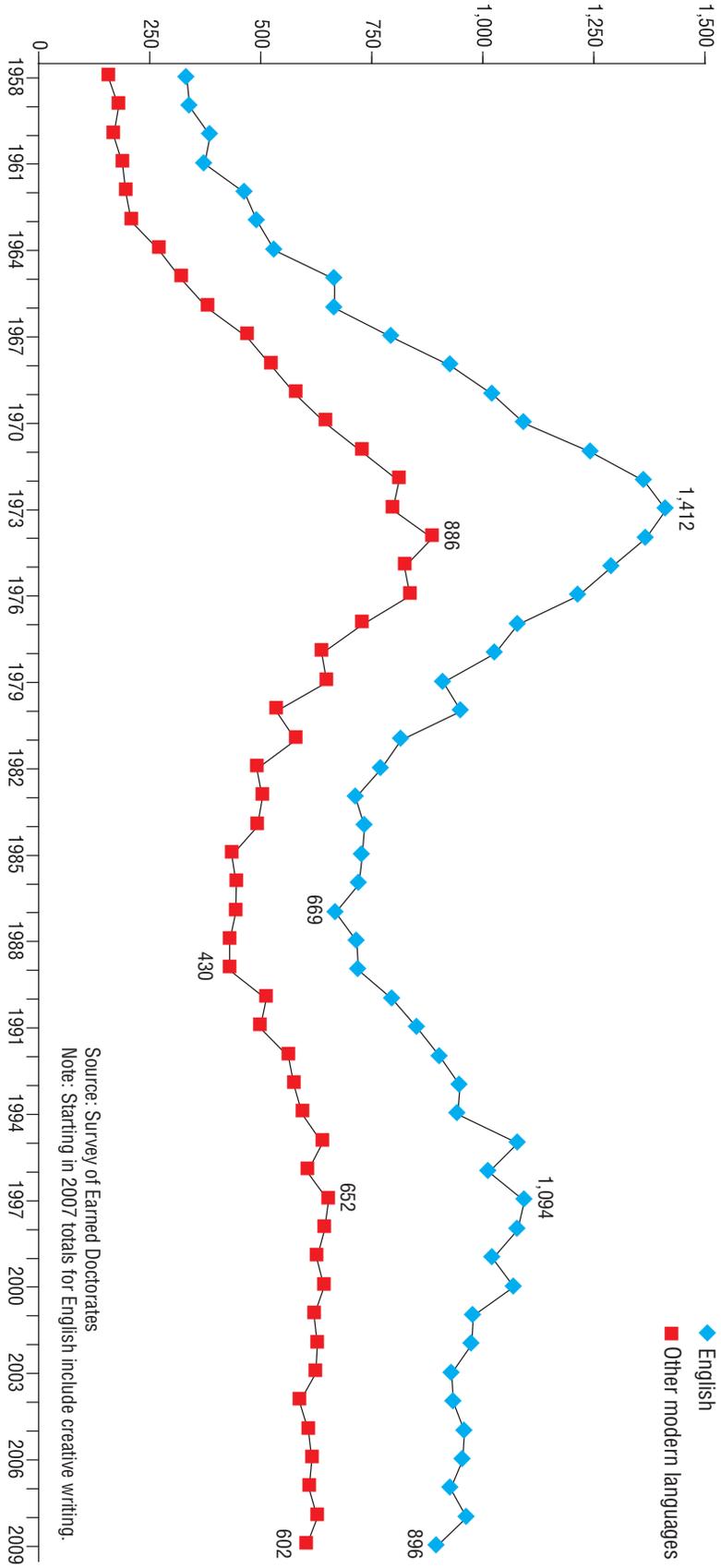
	Humanities	Life Sciences	Physical Sciences	Engineering	Social Sciences	Education	Other*
No debt	39.8%	51.9%	62.7%	66.2%	39.2%	43.5%	47.1%
\$10,000 or less	11.1%	11.0%	11.1%	10.2%	9.0%	9.3%	8.7%
\$10,001–\$30,000	17.5%	17.3%	13.4%	12.3%	15.5%	13.7%	13.9%
\$30,001–\$50,000	11.4%	8.3%	5.8%	4.5%	9.9%	11.0%	9.0%
More than \$50,000	20.1%	11.4%	7.0%	6.8%	26.4%	22.5%	21.3%
Number of recipients (basis for percentages)	4,462	10,529	7,681	7,040	7,021	5,915	2,596
Average cumulative debt	\$24,666	\$16,238	\$11,135	\$10,163	\$28,443	\$25,531	\$23,399

Note: Calculations are based on valid responses to the debt item on the questionnaire.

Source: *Doctorate Recipients from U.S. Universities, 2009*, table 35.

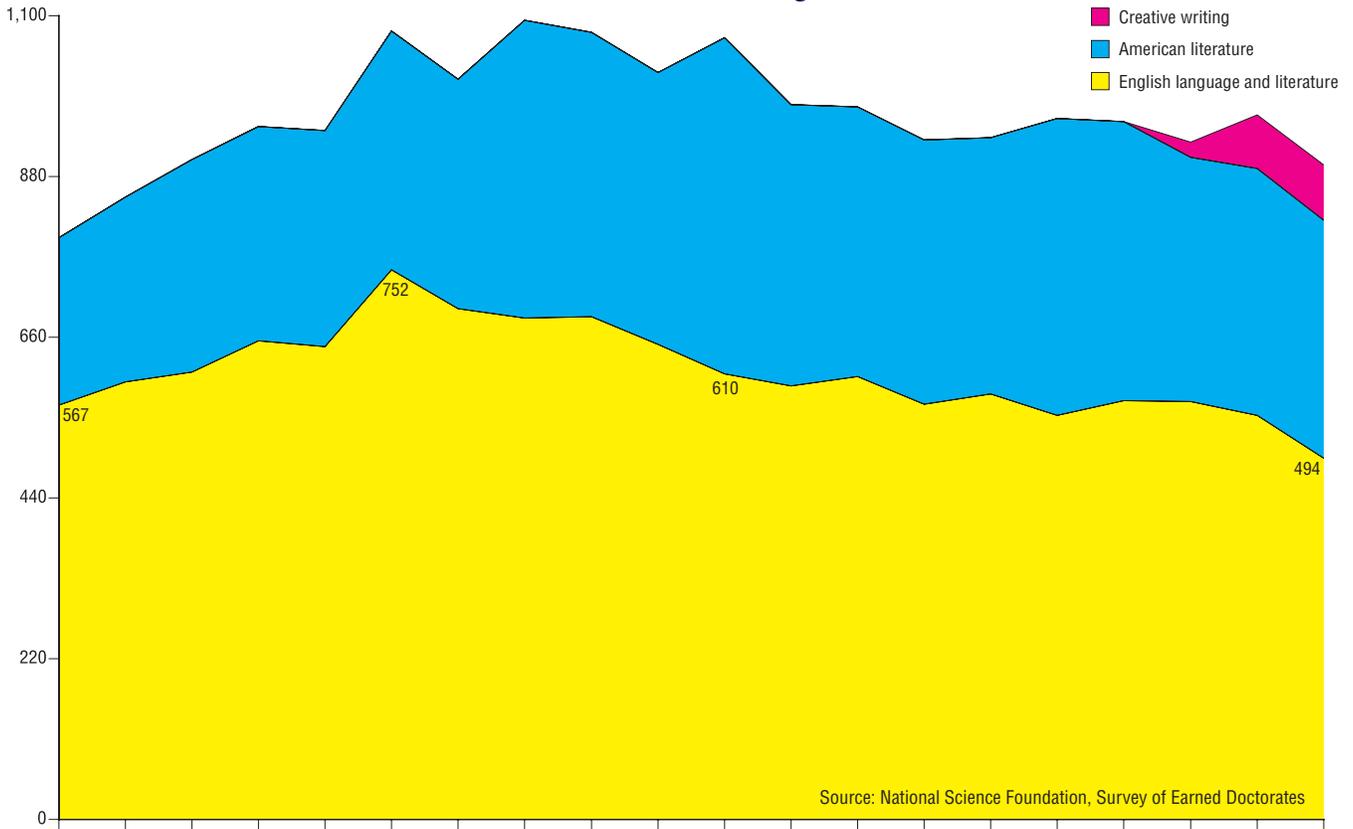
*Other = other non-science and engineering fields

Fig. 1
Doctorate Recipients in English and Other Modern Languages, 1958–2009



Source: Survey of Earned Doctorates
 Note: Starting in 2007 totals for English include creative writing.

Fig. 2
Numerical Share of All Doctorate Recipients in English Accounted for by Degrees in English Language and Literature, American Literature, and (Since 2007) Creative Writing, 1990–2009



Note: Portions are cumulative; in 2009 the SED counted 494 doctorate recipients in English language and literature, 326 in American literature, and 76 in creative writing, for a total of 896 doctorate recipients in English.

Fig. 3
Number of Doctorate Recipients in Spanish, French, German, Chinese, and Russian and Other Slavic Languages, 1997–2009

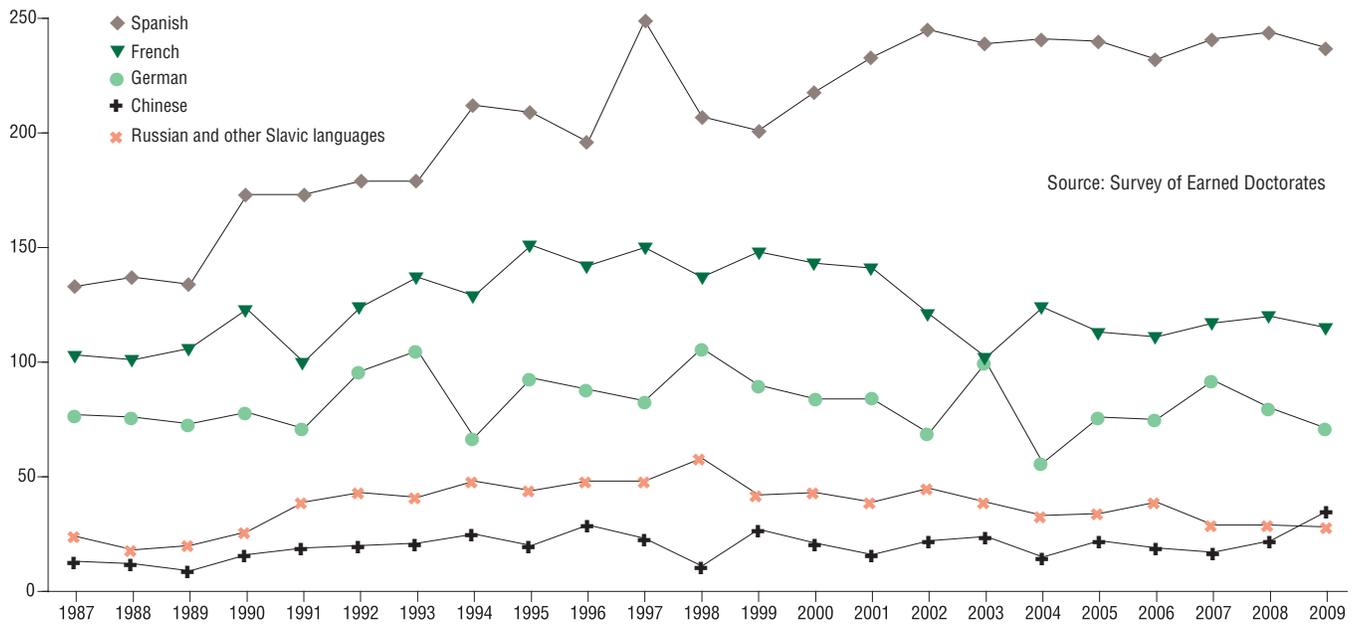


Fig. 3a
Number of Doctorate Recipients in Italian, 1987–2009

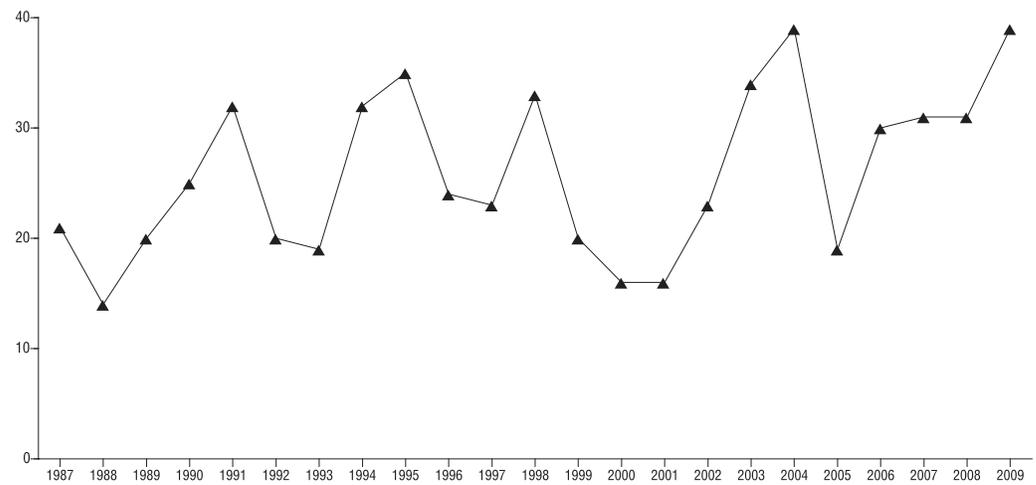


Fig. 3b
Number of Doctorate Recipients in Japanese, 1987–2009

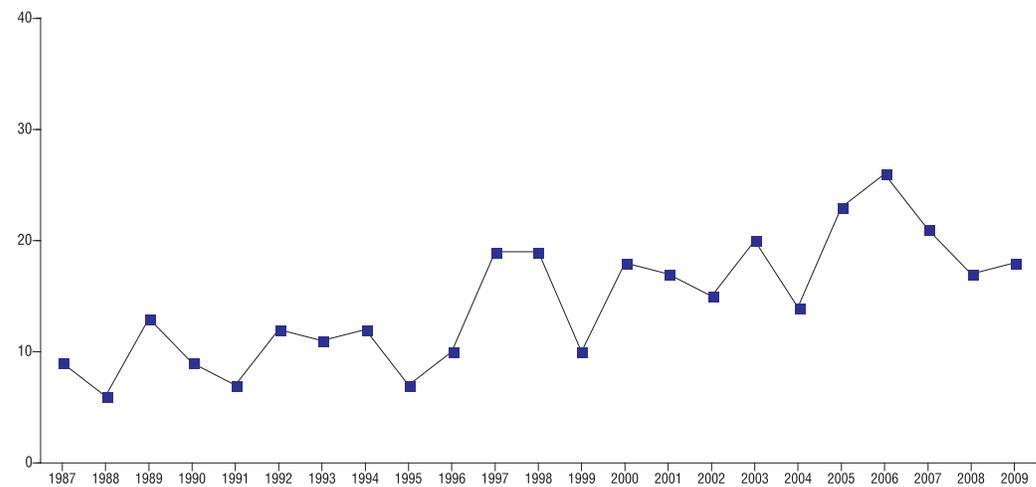


Fig. 3c
Number of Doctorate Recipients in Arabic, 1987–2009

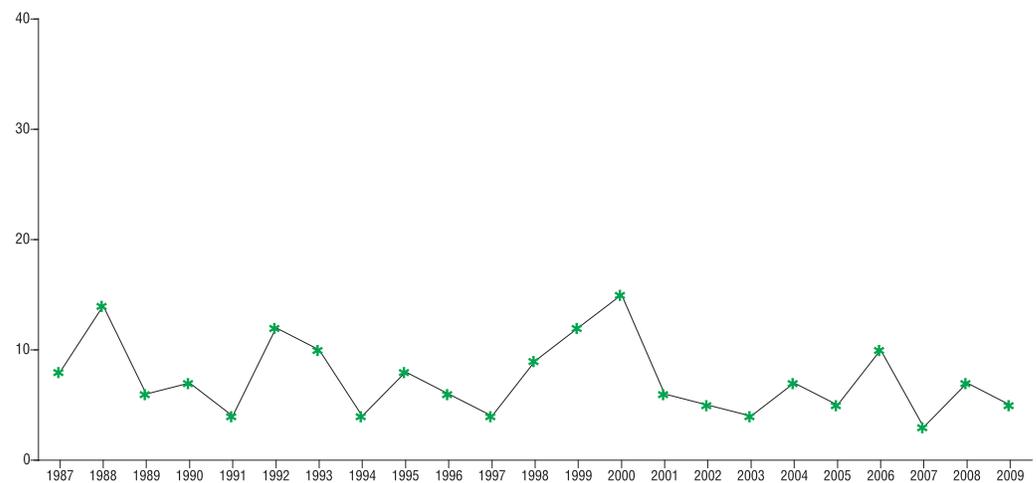


Fig. 4a
Percentage of Graduates with Definite Employment or Study Commitments at Doctorate Award: Humanities, Social Sciences, Education, and Other Nonscience Fields of Study, 1989–2009

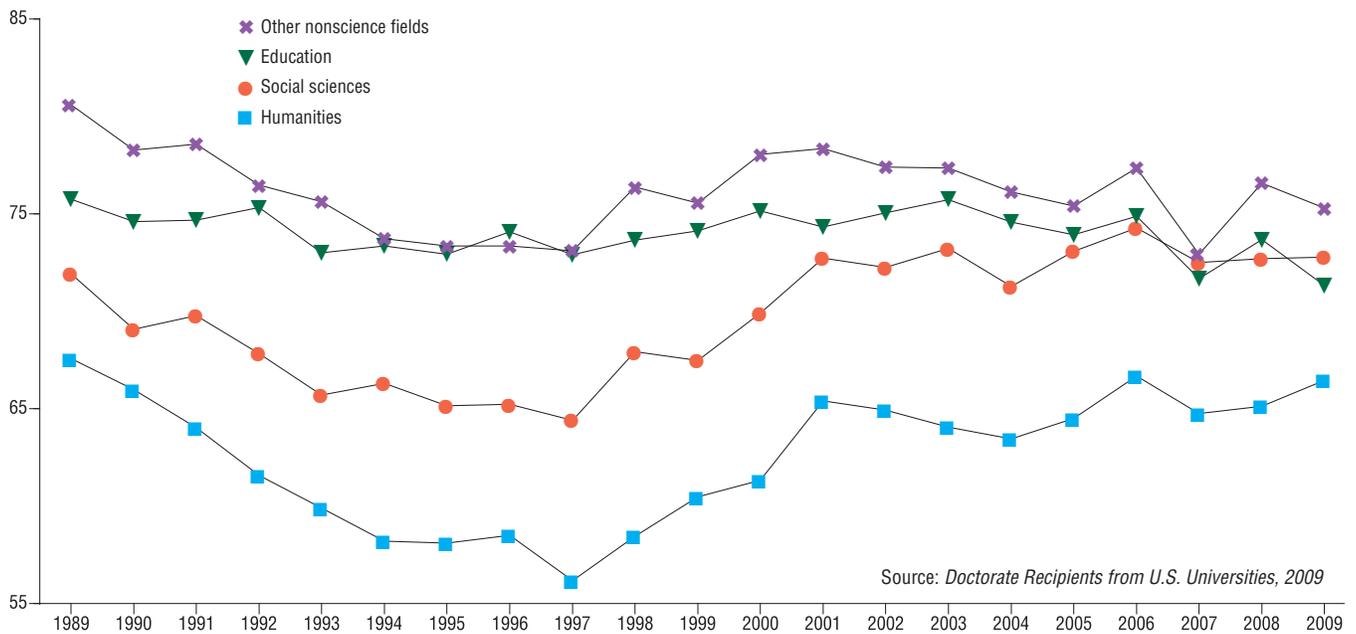
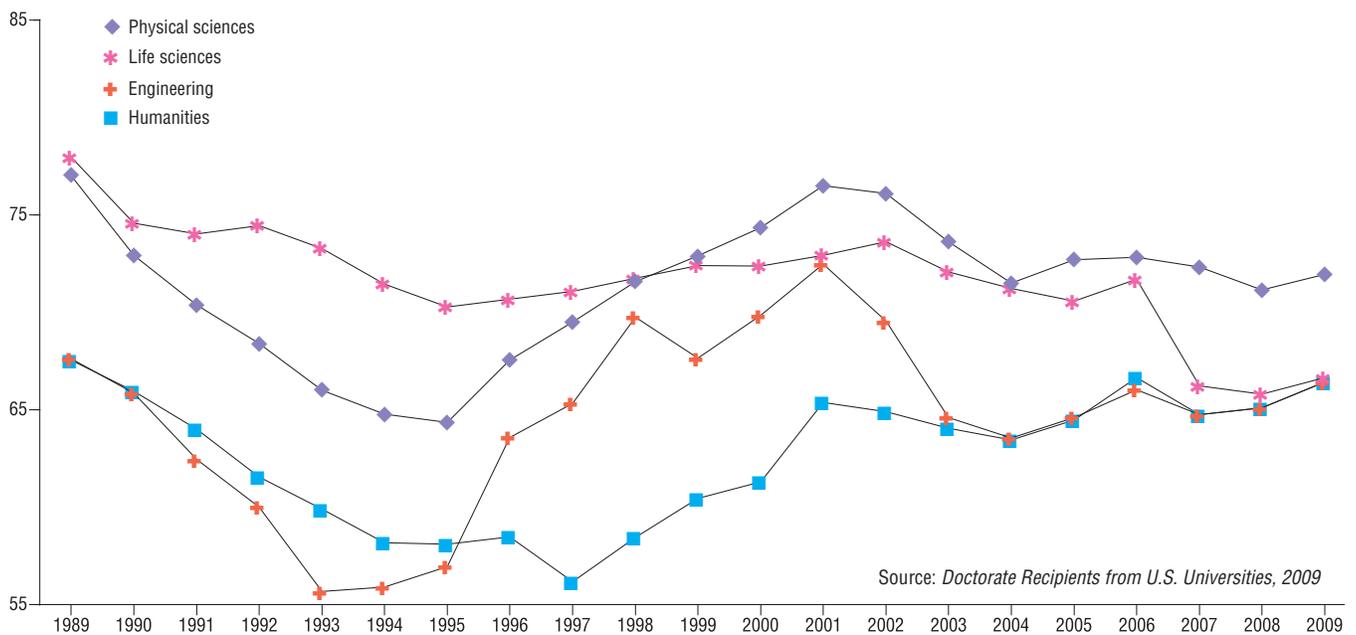


Fig. 4b
Percentage of Graduates with Definite Employment or Study Commitments at Doctorate Award: Humanities, Engineering, Life Sciences, and Physical Sciences, 1989–2009



Note: These figures are based on figs. 5-A and 5-B of the NSF report.