

# Report on the Survey of Earned Doctorates, 2009–10

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MLA Office of Research

Web publication, April 2012

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# Report on the Survey of Earned Doctorates, 2009–10

IN DECEMBER 2011 the National Science Foundation (NSF) released the data tables for *Doctorate Recipients from U.S. Universities, 2010*, its annual report on the Survey of Earned Doctorates (SED), the federally sponsored census of persons who receive doctoral degrees from United States universities each year. The 2010 SED counted 1,007 doctorate recipients in English and 603 in modern languages other than English between 1 July 2009 and 30 June 2010.

## 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 2010. For the first time since 2000 the total number of doctorate recipients in English exceeded 1,000. Unlike English, the trend line for the other modern languages remains fairly flat over the past five years. Since 1997 the number of foreign language doctorate recipients has hovered between 585 and 650.

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 to 2010, 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 15) or (as in SED table 16) 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."<sup>1</sup>

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—until 2009–10, when an uptick registers. Excluding creative writing, there were 926 doctorate recipients in English in 2010, 77 (7.0%) below the recent high of 1,094 reached in 1997 (**fig. 2**). Of these 926 degree recipients, 560 (60.5%) were women and 366 (39.5%) were men. (The data on the 2010 SED do not provide a gender breakdown of creative writing degree recipients.) Since 1995, when the number of recipients of doctorates in English language and literature grew to a recent peak of 752, the number has declined by 187 (24.9%), to 565. From 1990 to 1996, on average, close to 70% of those earning doctorates in English and American language and literature took their degrees in English language and literature; over the years 1997 to 2010 the average was about 60%; and in 2010, 56.1% of those who received doctorates in English took their degrees in English language and literature. The number of recipients of doctorates in American literature continued to increase through the 1990s, reaching 460, or

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42.0% of total recipients of English doctorates, in 2000. Since 2000 that number too has generally shown a declining trend; despite rising slightly from 326 in 2009 to 361 in 2010, the number of recipients of doctorates in American literature is still 21.5% below the 2000 peak. In 2007 the SED census counted 21 doctorate recipients in creative writing; the number increased to 73, 76, and 81 in 2008, 2009, and 2010, respectively, or from 2.3% of the 2007 total to 8.0% of the total for 2010.

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).<sup>2</sup> 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 2010, the number of doctorate recipients in French and German was, respectively, 27.2% and 31.2% below the number in 1995; by contrast, the number for Spanish in 2010 was 11.0% 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 thirteen years since, 1998 to 2010, the averages for French and German—123 and 81 degree recipients per year, respectively—have barely changed, while Spanish averaged 232 degree recipients per year, 29.6% greater than its average for the years 1987 to 1997.

Fields graduating fewer than 50 degree recipients a year show similar patterns on a smaller scale over the years 1987–2010. 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 8 doctorates per year across the twenty-four-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"<sup>3</sup> and (for English) "letters." In 2010, 524 (86.9%) of the 603 doctorate recipients in foreign languages answered the question about their postgraduation plans, as did 1,346 (88.7%) of the 1,518 doctorate recipients collected under "letters." Percentages of graduates placed in faculty positions, pursuing postdoctoral study, or employed in situations outside postsecondary education are based on the number who answered the question.

Of the 1,346 responding doctorate recipients in letters, 50.0% reported having definite employment at the time of graduation, 8.6% had definite postdoctoral study, and 38.0% were seeking positions. Of the 524 responding doctorate recipients

in foreign languages, 53.2% reported having definite employment at the time of graduation, 7.1% had definite postdoctoral study, and 36.3% 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 almost nine-tenths of the 53.2% of graduates in foreign languages and the 50.0% of graduates in letters who had definite employment plans at the time of graduation.

**Figure 4a** compares the job placement 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.<sup>4</sup> The figures make evident the decline in graduates' placement prospects in the 1990s, the subsequent recovery, and an apparent new decline after 2006. The 1990s drop in the number of graduates with definite plans for employment or study at the time of graduation was especially steep and deep in humanities and engineering—more than 11 percentage points, from 67.6% to 56.1% of humanities graduates and from 67.6% to 55.7% of graduates in engineering.

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, in both two- and four-year institutions. 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.<sup>5</sup> 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. As the ADE Ad Hoc Committee on the Master's Degree reported in 2011, 50.8% of non-tenure-track faculty members in four-year institutions and 71.2% of non-tenure-track faculty members in two-year institutions held a master's as their highest degree (21, fig. 3).

### Years to Degree and Amount of Educational Debt

In 2010, degree recipients in the humanities took a median of 9.3 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 12.5 years for education. In life sciences, 2010 degree recipients took 6.8 years from starting graduate school to complete the degree, in physical sciences 6.7 years, and in social sciences 7.7 years (table 31 in the 2010 SED report provides full data). **Figure 5** shows time to degree (since baccalaureate and since starting graduate school) for humanities doctorate recipients in selected years since 1970, showing a gradual increase in the time to degree since starting graduate school, from 6 years in 1970 to a peak of 10.4 in 1990 and then down to 9.3 in 2010.

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**Table 3** shows average debt levels for the seven broad fields of study. Recipients of humanities doctorates in 2010 held average undergraduate educational debts of \$7,446, 15.9% higher than the \$6,426 mean for all disciplines; average graduate debt of \$20,041, 42.0% higher than the \$14,115 mean for all disciplines; and total average cumulative debt of \$27,352, 33.9% higher than the \$20,429 mean for all disciplines. Only graduates in social sciences and education had higher levels of average cumulative educational debt—\$28,156 in education and \$32,172 in the social sciences.

### Race and Ethnicity

**Table 4** reports race and ethnicity for 2010 recipients of doctorates in humanities disciplines. In foreign language and literature, 70.2% of recipients were white, 19.3% Hispanic, 4.6% Asian, and 2.1% black. In English (here aggregated as “letters”), 81.2% were white, 4.9% black, 4.7% Hispanic, and 4.3% Asian.

The complete set of 70 data tables and supplemental data and figures are available on the NSF Web site.

*Doug Steward*

### Notes

1. As constituents of the major category “humanities,” the SED includes “foreign languages,” “history,” “letters,” and “other humanities.” “Letters” aggregates American literature (United States 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 16—numbers for some subfields (like creative writing) that have smaller numbers of degree recipients are not reported separately but collected within a subcategory named “letters, aggregated.”

2. To facilitate comparisons, y-axis scales have been set to range from 0 to 250 for French, German, and Spanish in **figure 3** and from 0 to 40 for the other languages in **figures 3a–3c**.

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 and updated versions of the NSF’s figures 5-A and 5-B from the 2009 report, 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.

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**Table 1**  
**Humanities 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
Definite employment	49.1	53.2	50.0	46.8	48.2
Definite postgraduation study	9.4	7.1	8.6	13.1	8.7
Seeking employment or study	38.4	36.3	38.0	37.1	40.2
Other	3.2	3.4	3.4	3.1	2.9
Number (basis for percentages)	4,392	524	1,346	911	1,611

Source: *Doctorate Recipients from U.S. Universities, 2010*, data table 67

**Table 2**  
**Humanities 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
<b>Definite employment</b>					
Academia	81.9	88.5	86.8	79.3	76.8
Government	2.3			6.1	1.9
Industry or business	4.7	2.2	4.5	4.0	6.2
Not-for-profit	5.2			5.6	9.4
Other or unknown	1.3	6.5	6.7	4.9	5.7
Number (basis for percentages)	2,155	279	673	426	777
<b>Definite postgraduation study</b>					
Postdoctoral fellowship	83.3	62.2	87.1	84.9	84.3
Postdoctoral research associateship	12.6	18.9	11.2	13.4	11.4
Other	4.1	18.9	1.7	1.7	4.3
Number (basis for percentages)	412	37	116	119	140

Source: *Doctorate Recipients from U.S. Universities, 2010*, data table 67

Blanks indicate cells where regulations governing reportage require data to be suppressed.

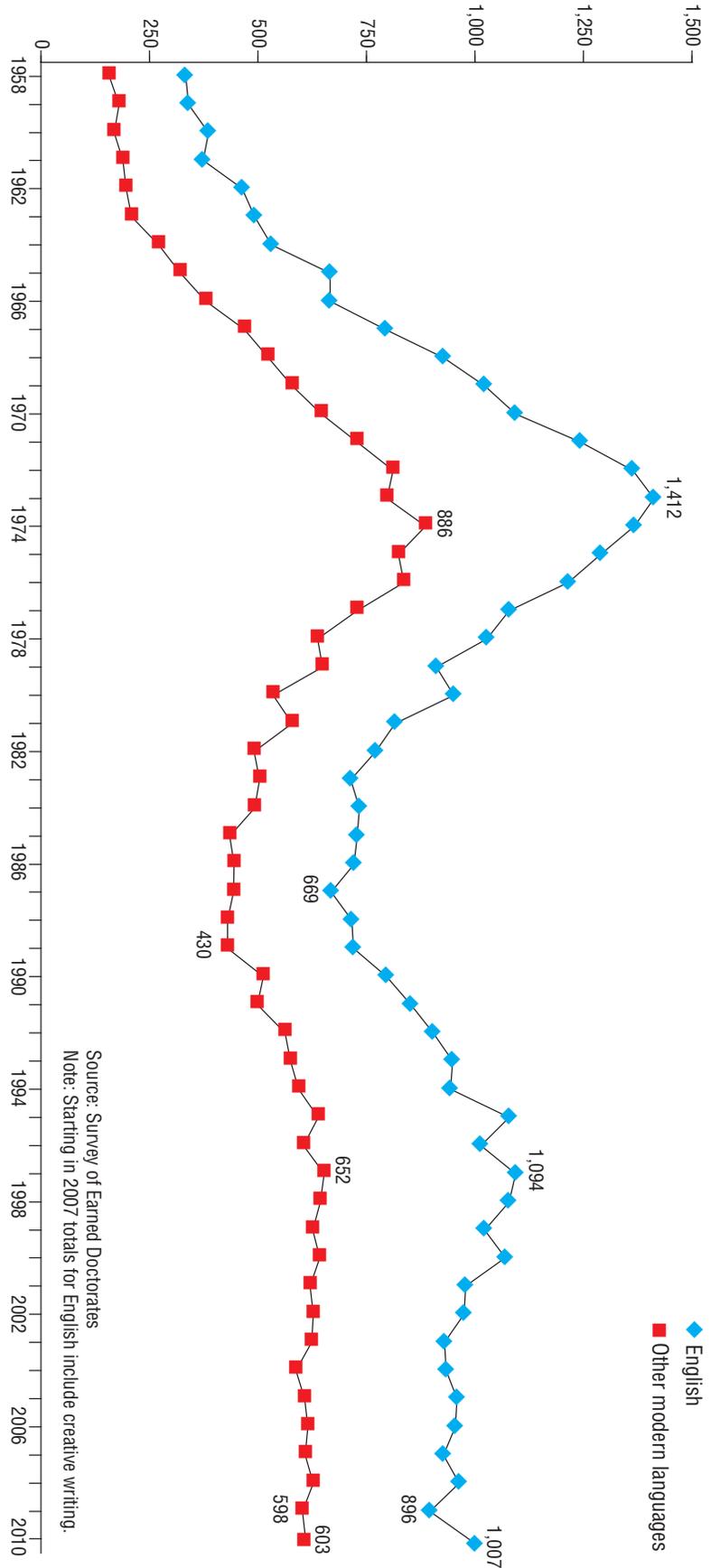
**Table 3**  
**Cumulative Educational Debt of 2010 Doctorate Recipients, by Percentage**

	Total	Humanities	Social Sciences	Education	Life Sciences	Physical Sciences	Engineering	Other
No debt	52.3	39.8	39.2	44.3	53.6	63.6	66.2	48.2
\$10,000 or less	9.5	10.7	8.4	8.5	10.1	9.6	10.0	8.4
\$10,001–\$30,000	14.5	16.8	15.0	13.0	16.2	14.0	12.1	11.9
\$30,001–\$50,000	8.0	10.8	9.9	10.8	7.8	5.5	4.9	9.1
More than \$50,000	15.8	22.0	27.6	23.5	12.2	7.4	6.8	22.5
Number of doctorate recipients (basis for percentages)	44,096	4,569	7,010	4,795	10,456	7,699	6,995	2,572
Mean cumulative total debt	\$20,429	\$27,352	\$32,172	\$28,156	\$17,245	\$11,766	\$10,962	\$26,337
Mean graduate debt	\$14,115	\$20,041	\$24,621	\$21,590	\$10,461	\$6,234	\$6,352	\$20,611
Mean undergraduate debt	\$6,426	\$7,446	\$7,716	\$6,750	\$6,872	\$5,582	\$4,681	\$5,937

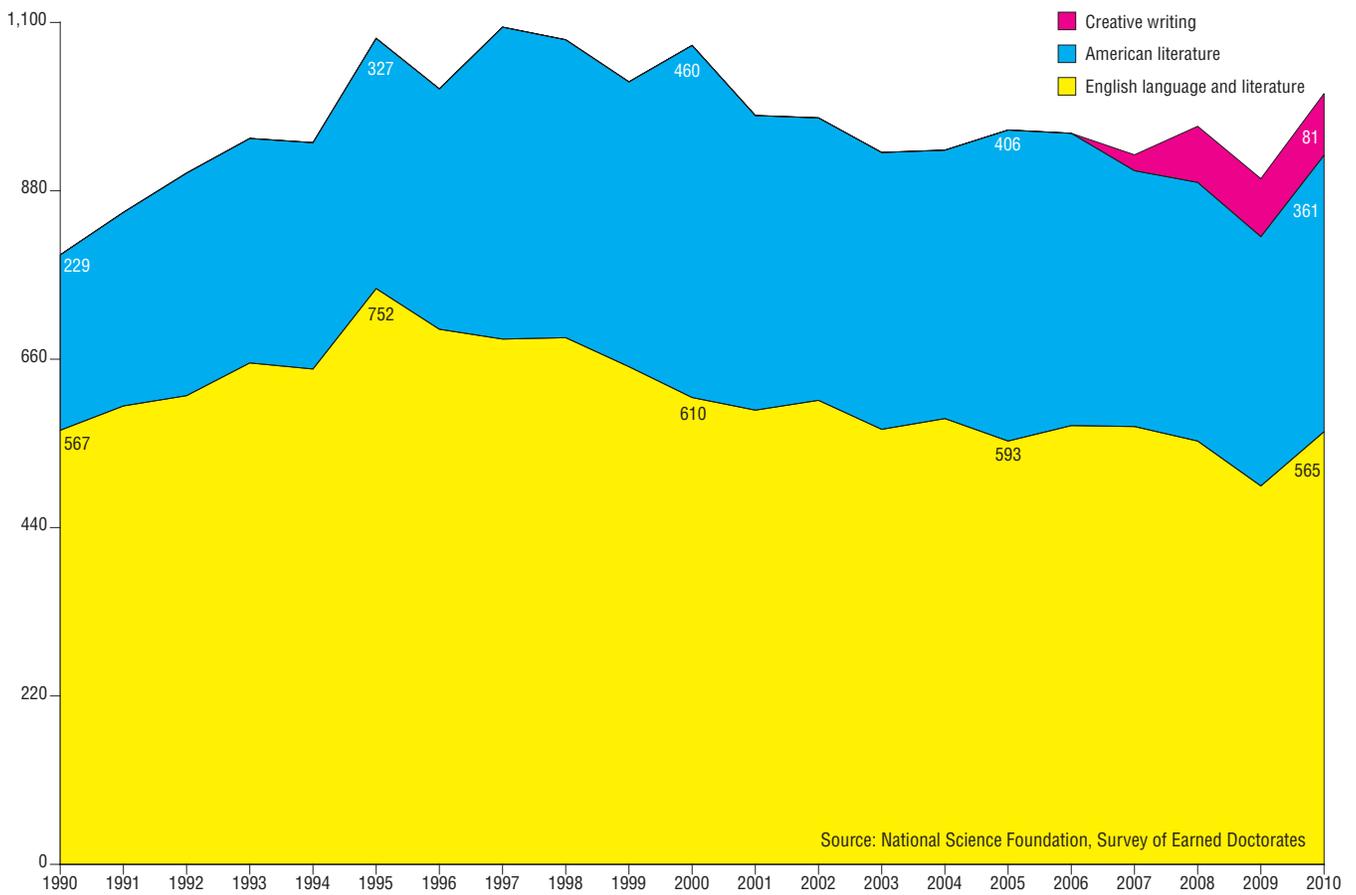
**Table 4**  
**Race and Ethnicity of 2010 Recipients of Humanities Doctorates, United States Citizens and Permanent Residents, by Percentage**

	All Humanities Fields	Foreign Languages	Letters	History	Other Humanities
American Indian / Alaska Native	0.4	0.0	0.4	0.6	0.4
Asian	4.7	4.6	4.3	3.6	5.6
Black	4.5	2.1	4.9	6.1	4.0
Hispanic	6.9	19.3	4.7	6.1	6.2
White	79.0	70.2	81.2	79.1	79.2
Two or more races	2.2	1.5	2.4	2.3	2.3
Other / unknown race	2.3	2.3	2.2	2.4	2.3
Number (basis for percentages)	4,021	389	1,288	842	1,502

**Fig. 1**  
**Doctorate Recipients in English and Other Modern Languages, 1958–2010**

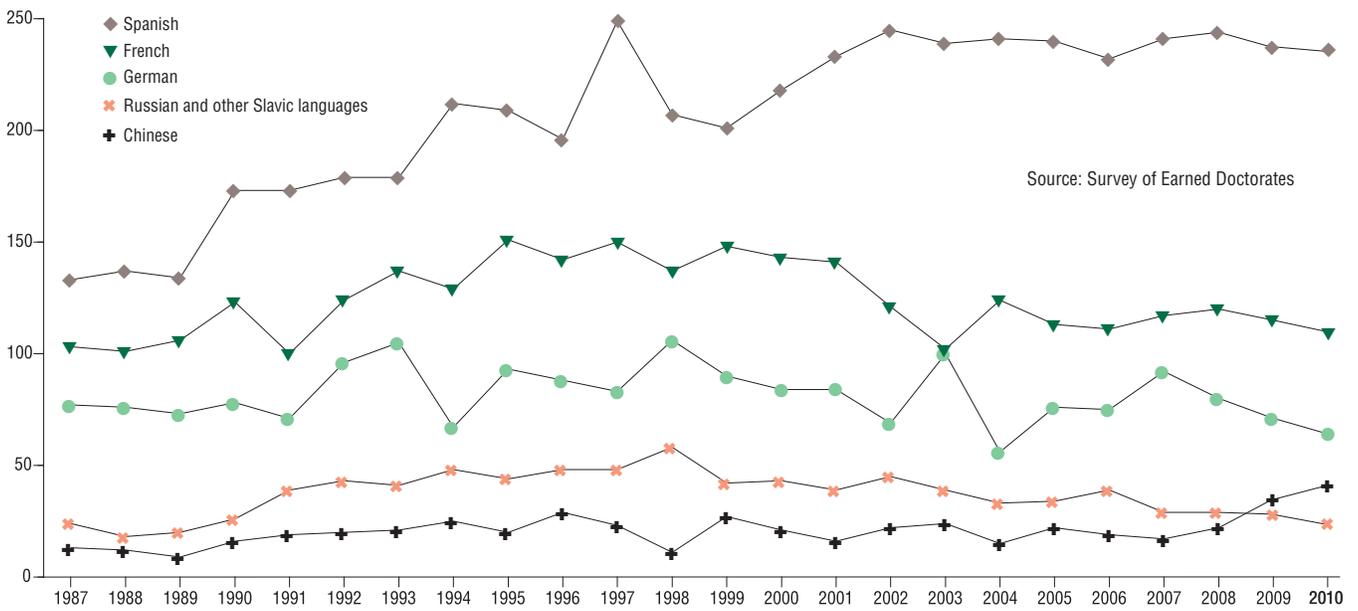


**Fig. 2**  
**Numerical Share of All Doctorate Recipients in English Accounted for by Degrees in English Language and Literature, American Literature, and (since 2007) Creative Writing, 1990–2010**

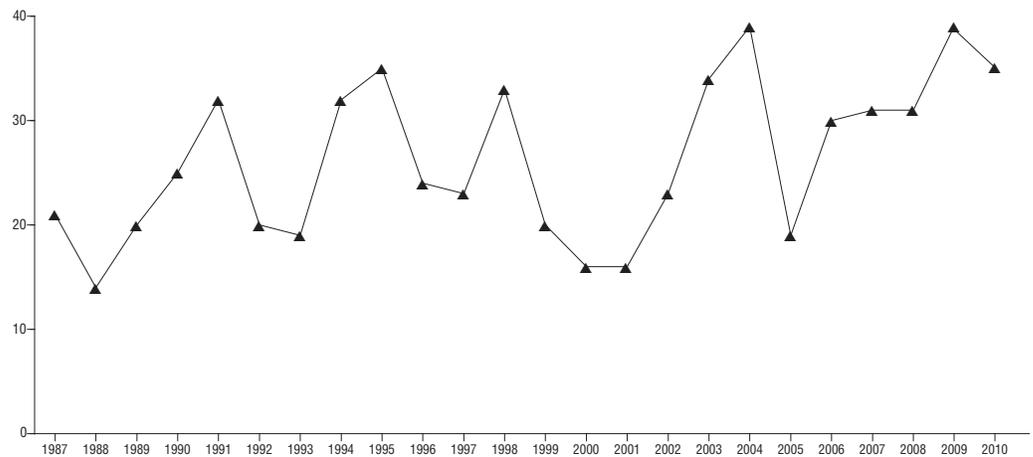


Note: Portions are cumulative; in 2010 the SED counted 565 doctorate recipients in English language and literature, 361 in American literature, and 81 in creative writing, for a total of 1,007 doctorate recipients in English.

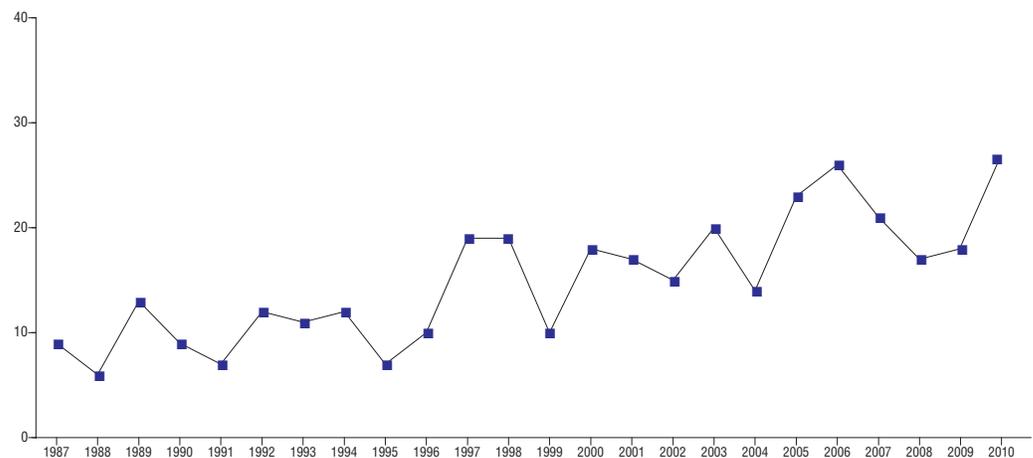
**Fig. 3**  
**Number of Doctorate Recipients in Spanish, French, German, Chinese, and Russian and Other Slavic Languages, 1987–2010**



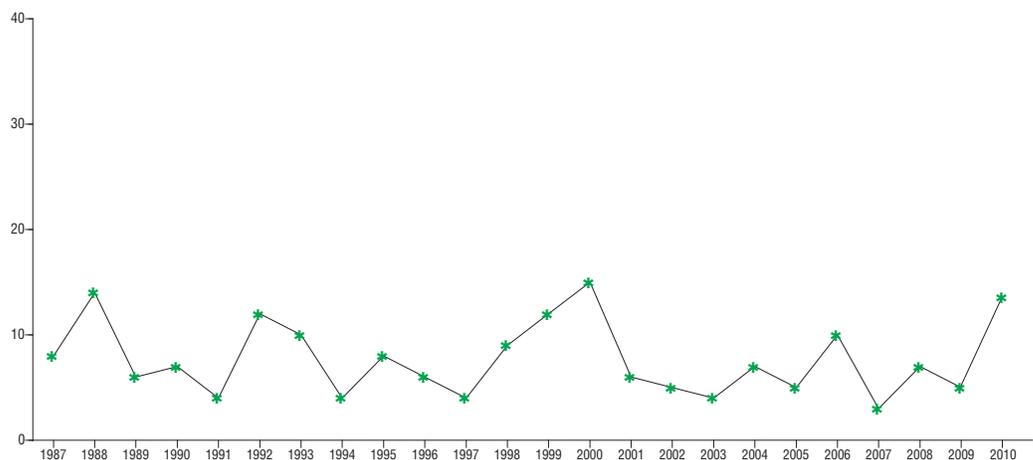
**Fig. 3a**  
**Number of Doctorate Recipients in Italian, 1987–2010**



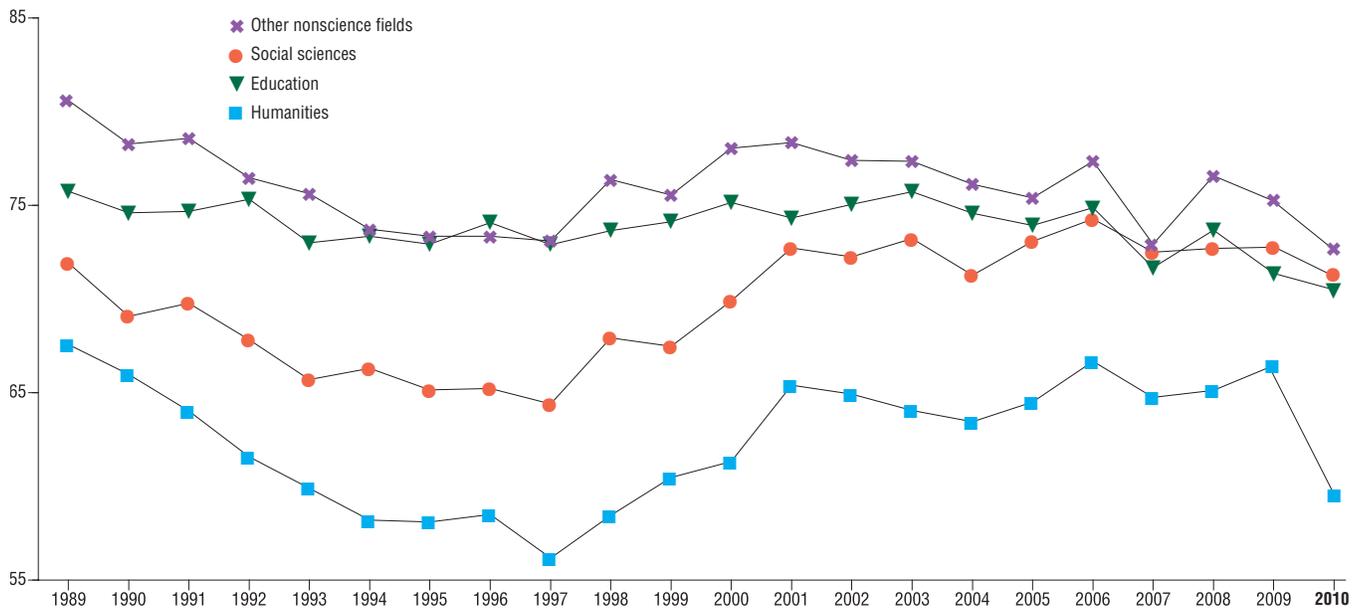
**Fig. 3b**  
**Number of Doctorate Recipients in Japanese, 1987–2010**



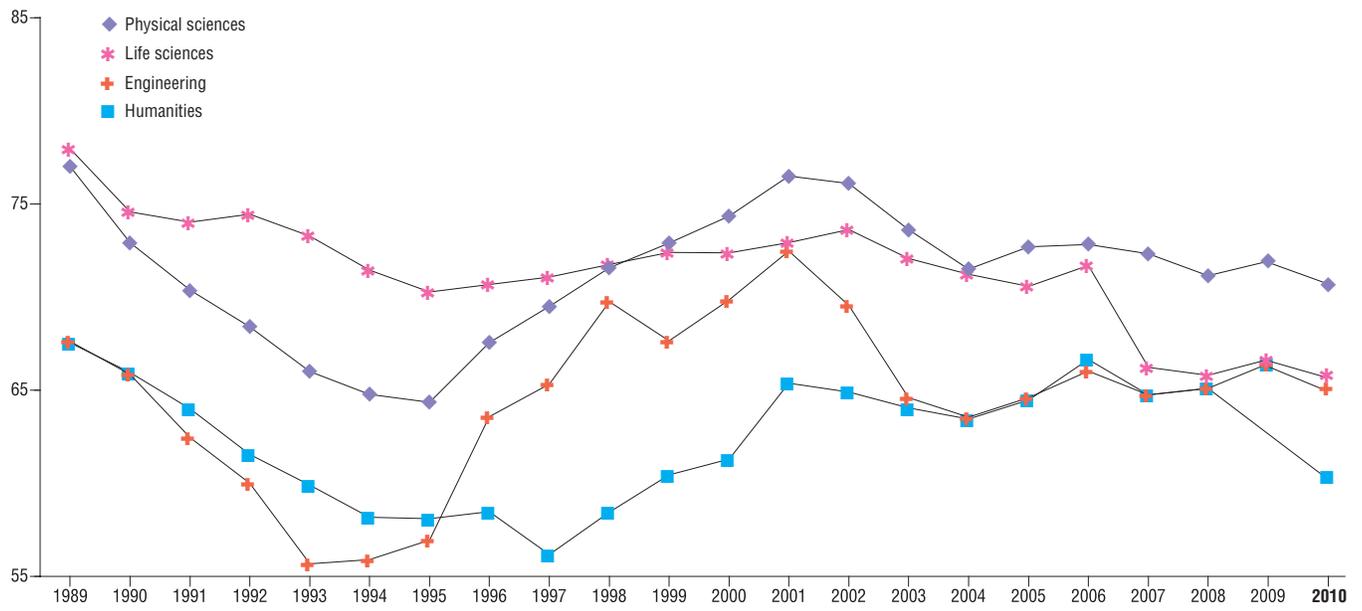
**Fig. 3c**  
**Number of Doctorate Recipients in Arabic, 1987–2010**



**Fig. 4a**  
**Percentage of Graduates with Definite Employment or Study Commitments at Doctorate Award: Humanities, Social Sciences, Education, and Other Nonscience Fields of Study, 1989–2010**

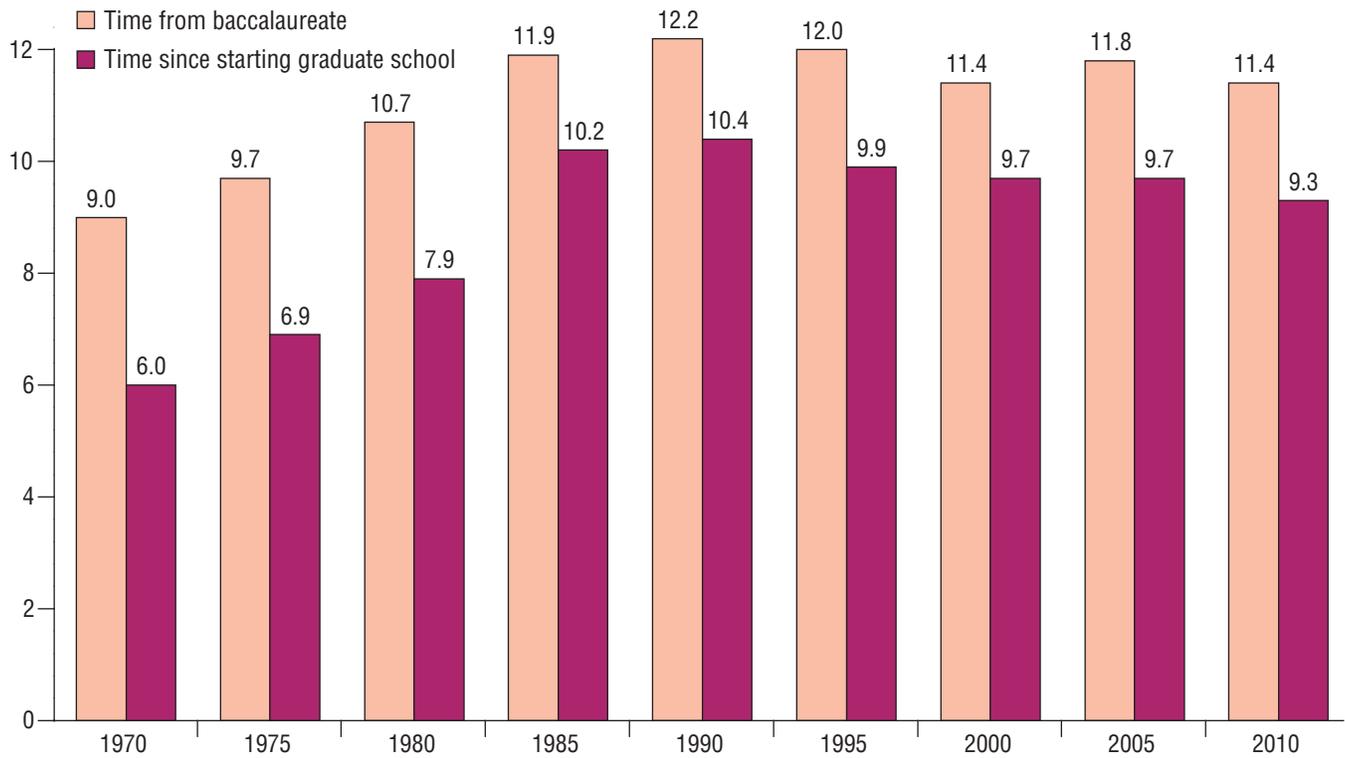


**Fig. 4b**  
**Percentage of Graduates with Definite Employment or Study Commitments at Doctorate Award: Humanities, Engineering, Life Sciences, and Physical Sciences, 1989–2010**



Note: These figures are based on figures 5-A and 5-B of the 2009 NSF report; percentages for 2010 are drawn from the 2010 report.

**Fig. 5**  
**Years to Degree for Humanities Doctorate Recipients, Selected Years**



Note: In 1970, 1975, and 1980, time since starting graduate school was measured as years registered in graduate school, not as years since recipients first enrolled in graduate school, as for 1985 to the present.