

Report on Trends in the MLA *Job Information List*, September 2007

Advertisements in the MLA *Job Information List (JIL)* provide an important source of information about academic career prospects for graduates of doctoral programs in language and literature. The association has kept a count of the number of positions advertised in the *JIL* since 1975–76. In the 1980s, we began analyzing positions announced in the October lists systematically for characteristics such as field specialty, rank and tenure status, and department and institutional type and geographic location. Since the academic year 2000–01, ads have been stored in digital form that can be subjected to machine analysis. Supplementing analysis of *JIL* listings and the positions they announce are the series of MLA surveys of PhD employment placements, of which there have been twelve since 1977, and the United States government–sponsored Survey of Earned Doctorates (SED), which provides an authoritative annual census of doctorate recipients from United States universities. Still timely also are findings from an MLA survey, conducted in the fall of 2004, canvassing hiring departments about the outcome of searches during the academic year 2003–04.

Positions advertised in the *JIL* in 2006–07 increased by 16.9% in foreign languages and 6.3% in English over the number of positions in 2005–06. In 2006–07 the *JIL*'s English edition published 1,573 listings announcing 1,793 positions, 106 more than the 1,687 positions announced in 2005–06 and 54 more than the 1,739 announced in 2004–05. The 2006–07 foreign language edition published 1,436 listings announcing 1,591 positions, 230 and 222 more than the 1,361 and 1,369 positions announced in 2005–06 and 2004–05, respectively. (Listings that appear in both the English and foreign languages editions are counted twice in the breakdown for each edition.) In English, the number of jobs was the best showing since 2000–01, when 1,828 positions were advertised. In foreign languages the increase was especially strong, with the number of positions even higher than the total for 2000–01, which was 1,482. The number of foreign language jobs exceeded the 1,500 benchmark level for the first time in seventeen years (the number of English jobs has been above the benchmark for nine consecutive years). This past year's numbers, however, remain 13.6% (English edition) and 15.1% (foreign language edition) below the historical highs, attained in 1988–89, when the *JIL*'s English edition announced 2,075 positions and the foreign language edition announced 1,873. Counts of *listings* derive from machine analysis of the *JIL* data tables; counts of *positions* reflect the number of jobs that departments announced in those listings and are based on a reading of the ads.

Virtually all positions advertised in the *JIL* are full-time; the annual count of positions advertised in the *JIL* thus provides no insight into hiring for part-time academic positions, which claim so substantial a share of faculty appointments in postsecondary English and foreign language departments. Furthermore, not all departments in four-year institutions and very few departments in two-year institutions advertise in the *JIL*. The *JIL* therefore does not provide a census of available positions. Increases and declines in the number of positions in the *JIL*, however, do serve as a reliable indicator of increases and declines in full-time academic employment opportunities at four-year colleges and universities.

Figure 1 graphs the number of positions announced in the *JIL*'s English and foreign language editions across the thirty-two-year period 1975–76 to 2006–07. The trend lines show how since 1998–99, when a modest recovery began following the difficult job market of the 1990s, the number of positions in foreign languages has lagged significantly below the number in English. But the foreign language deficit, which has been as large as 370 positions, shrank this past year to just over 200 positions.

Table 1 (for the *JIL*'s English edition) and table 2 (for the *JIL*'s foreign language edition) disaggregate the annual totals to show the number of positions advertised in each seasonal issue—October, December, February, April, and Summer. Figure 2 and figure 3 display the same information pictorially and make more readily apparent how the proportion of listings claimed by the October list has declined in the past few years. The change is likely a consequence, at least in part, of the re-creation of the *JIL* as an electronic database searchable online over the World Wide Web. With the shift from print to online, new listings are added to the database weekly, and missing the deadline for the October print issue affects departments' job-search schedules far less adversely.

All but a small number of ads come from four-year colleges and universities, although two-year colleges may post ads at no charge. In 2006–07 32 two-year colleges posted 47 listings.

How departments index their listings provides insight into the characteristics of the positions departments seek to fill. Categorized by tenure status and academic rank, listings in the 2006–07 *JIL* clustered as follows:

- Of the 1,573 listings in the English edition, 1,221 (77.6%) were tenure-track and 1,005 (63.9%) were for the rank of assistant professor (and only that rank); an additional 221 listings (14.0%) included assistant professor as one of several index terms for rank that the department selected.
- Of the 1,436 listings in the foreign language edition, 860 (77.6%) were tenure-track and 790 (55.0%) were for the rank of assistant professor (and only that rank); an additional 193 listings (13.4%) included assistant professor as one of several index terms for rank that the department selected.

Two pie charts, figure 4 and figure 5, show the breakdown of listings in the English and foreign language editions of the 2006–07 *JIL* by tenure status and academic rank called for. Listings for tenure-track assistant professors make up 56.2% of the *JIL*'s English edition and 44.7% of the foreign language edition. The proportion of ads calling for non-tenure-track positions is correspondingly higher in foreign languages than in English: listings for non-tenure-track positions account for 20.0% of the English edition and 38.3% of the foreign language edition. Unfortunately, the ads provide no insight as to whether the significantly higher percentage of non-tenure-track positions in foreign languages indicates that foreign language departments hire more full-time non-tenure-track faculty members than English departments do or only that foreign language departments advertise more of their full-time non-tenure-track positions in the *JIL* than English departments do. My educated guess, supported by data from the 2004 National Study of Postsecondary Faculty (NSOPF), is that the latter interpretation is the more likely. The NSOPF indicates that the percentage of all full-time faculty members in four-year institutions who hold non-tenure-track positions varies only slightly between English and foreign languages: 29.6% in English as compared with 27.5% in foreign languages.

Table 3 presents information for the past seven years' *JIL* databases about the number and percentage of index terms (and combinations of terms) for rank of appointment that departments used when submitting listings. What stands out is the consistency in the percentage of listings indexed for various ranks. Across all seven years, listings indexed for the rank of assistant professor make up 65% plus or minus three percentage points of the English database and 58% plus or minus three percentage points of the foreign language database. In the foreign language edition the percentage of listings at the rank of instructor has risen over the past seven years, from less than 15% to 21%.

Starting in 2004–05 departments were able to indicate the tenure status of their listings. Tables 4A, 4B, and 4C show the tenure status of listings in the *JIL*'s English edition for the past three years. As table 4A shows, close to 80% of all listings in the English edition are indexed as tenure-track. Table 4B and table 4C, which are limited to listings at the rank of assistant professor and instructor, respectively, show that close to 90% of English listings at the rank of assistant professor are tenure-track, while the percentage of listings at the rank of instructor indexed as non-tenure-track has increased from 71% to 87%.

Tables 5A, 5B, and 5C show parallel information for listings in the *JIL*'s foreign language edition for the past three years. Of foreign language listings at the rank of assistant professor, 80% or more are tenure-track. The percentage of foreign language listings at the rank of instructor indexed as non-tenure-track has increased from 88% to 96%. (Listings at the rank of instructor make up between 17% and 21% of all foreign language ads and between 8% and 9% of all ads in the English edition for those years.)

How departments index their listings provides a rough indicator of the demand for scholars in different specialty areas. Table 6 shows the number and percentage of listings in the English edition for which various index terms were selected over the past seven years. Table 7 shows parallel information for the *JIL*'s foreign language edition. In English three terms are used to index more than 20% of all listings: "Composition and rhetoric," "British Isles literature," and "American literature." (Up to five terms may be used to index any one listing, so uses of index terms sum to far more than 100% of the total number of listings.) In the foreign language edition, across the seven years the term "Spanish" is used for upwards of 43% of all listings. "French" is used for between 16% and 20%, and "Germanic and Scandinavian" for between 10% and 12% of all listings.

The MLA's count of positions announced in the *JIL*'s English and foreign language editions now stretches across a temporal span of more than three decades, from 1975–76 to 2006–07. Across the thirty-two years, the curve defined by the number of positions advertised in the *JIL*'s English and foreign language editions points to an index of structural demand centered on 1,500 positions annually, increasing or decreasing by 300 to 500 positions as economic conditions and opportunities for full-time academic employment either improve or worsen. The 1,500 figure may be regarded as a benchmark against which to assess the level of academic employment opportunities in four-year postsecondary institutions in any given year, especially at the beginning assistant professor level. As noted above, the upturn in *JIL* positions that began in 1998 has been distinctly more pronounced in the English than in the foreign language edition. The number of positions announced annually in foreign languages fell below the 1,500 benchmark in 1991–92 and remained below it for fifteen consecutive years until this past year's number surpassed the benchmark. The number of positions in English crossed the 1,500 benchmark in 1998–99 and has remained above it each of the nine years since.

Information about the Early Career Paths of Recent Graduates

For some time, members of the field have noted the accumulating evidence of experience and anecdote that many, and perhaps the majority of, graduates from doctoral programs gain placement to a tenure-track appointment two, three, or more years after receipt of their degrees. The career path to becoming a professor of literature and language in higher education can be expected to include a significant postdoctoral period of non-tenure-track teaching, whether in a full- or part-time faculty position or a postdoctoral fellowship. Consequently, the roughly 40% rate of placement to tenure-track positions reported across the series of MLA PhD placement studies presents what some regard as an overly pessimistic view of the field's placement record, because the surveys limit the record to placements *in the year graduates receive their degrees*. On the other hand, the emergence of a significant period of de facto postdoctoral work as normal for the career path of doctorate recipients in language and literature adds concerns about lengthening time to career employment to frequently voiced concerns about lengthening time to degree (now on average more than eight years). Adding years in temporary non-tenure-track positions to years spent in graduate school implies increases to the already high opportunity costs of entry into an academic career.

Findings from the MLA's 2004 survey of hiring outcomes provide some systematic evidence documenting the scale of competition new degree recipients face from prior years' graduates. These data provide an important context for understanding information from the *JIL* about the number of full-time academic positions departments seek to fill in relation to information from the SED about the number of new doctorate recipients being graduated annually. Asked about the prior employment situations of candidates hired to tenure-track assistant professor positions:

- Four-year English departments that had advertised in the *JIL* reported that 19.8% already held tenure-track positions at another institution, while 30.6% were hired from full-time non-tenure-track positions, 10.8% from part-time positions, and 4.5% from postdoctoral fellowships; 32.3% were classified as still in graduate school. There were also 1.0% hired from employment outside academia and 1.0% hired who were unemployed.
- Four-year foreign language departments that had advertised in the *JIL* reported that 16.2% held tenure-track positions at another institution, while 35.2% were hired from full-time non-tenure-track positions, 4.8% from part-time positions, and 2.4% from postdoctoral fellowships; 37.6% were classified as still in graduate school. There were 2.4% of candidates hired from employment outside academia and 1.4% hired who were unemployed.

A question aimed at determining the year in which candidates hired to tenure-track assistant professor positions had received their degrees yielded similar results. When four-year departments that advertised in the *JIL* hired candidates who held the PhD to positions announced as tenure-track assistant professor positions:

- 33.8% of candidates hired received their doctorates in 2004
- 42.3% of candidates hired received their doctorates in 2001, 2002, or 2003
- 23.9% of candidates hired received their degrees in 2000 or before

The percentages do not differ significantly between four-year English and foreign language departments.

In the case of two-year-college hires to any position (whether tenure-track or non-tenure-track), when candidates hired held the PhD:

- 15.8% received their doctorates in 2004
- 42.1% received their doctorates in 2001, 2002, or 2003
- 42.1% received their doctorates in 2000 or before

Of course, many two-year-college departments hire candidates who hold master's degrees as well as candidates who hold the PhD. Of the tenure-track hires made by two-year colleges that responded to the 2004 survey of hiring outcomes:

- 45.6% of candidates hired held a master's degree other than the MFA (the figures are 61.8% in the case of hires by two-year departments that did not advertise in the *JIL* and 20.0% in the case of two-year departments that did)
- 34.4% held the PhD (16.4% for the non-*JIL* group, 62.9% for the *JIL* group)
- 14.4% were ABD
- 4.4% held the MFA

The findings provide at least a preliminary indication of the distribution of two-year-college departments where the PhD or the MA degree is regarded as the appropriate qualification for appointment to a full-time faculty position. The small number of two-year-college departments that use the *JIL* set themselves apart in their preference for candidates who have the PhD, while, insofar as the non-*JIL* two-year-college departments that responded to the survey are representative, the far larger number of two-year-college departments that do not use the *JIL* hire mainly from the pool of candidates holding MA degrees.

Two-year-college departments that hired MAs also showed a preference for candidates who received their degrees less recently. When candidates hired by two-year-college departments held the MA, only 3.8% received their degrees in 2004; 43.4% received their degrees in 2001, 2002, or 2003; and 52.8% received their degrees in 2000 or before.

The findings from the 2004 survey of hiring outcomes confirm explicitly what the record across twelve MLA surveys of PhD placement has long suggested implicitly: the number of new PhDs in any given year is very far from being an account of the pool of candidates competing and being hired for entry-level academic positions leading to professorial careers. [Figure 6](#) and [figure 7](#) track the number of English and foreign language doctorate recipients reported on the SED each year since 1975 against the number of doctoral degree recipients reported placed to tenure-track positions in English and foreign languages on each of the twelve surveys of PhD placement that the MLA has conducted, the most recent covering graduates who received degrees in 2003–04. The record of the placement surveys suggests a higher education system with the structural capacity to absorb on the order of 400 *new* English and 260 *new* foreign language

doctorate recipients to tenure-track appointments each year, plus or minus 100 placements as economic conditions strengthen or weaken.

Count and Coding of the 2006 October *Job Information List*

The information presented above focuses on numbers of listings and positions in the full-years' databases through 2005–06. In addition to analyzing the *JIL* database at the conclusion of each subscription year, staff members in the MLA's English and foreign language programs offices read all ads in the English and foreign language editions of the October list, count the number of positions that ads announce, and code each position for a variety of characteristics. The October lists, which replicate the database as it is first released for searching in mid-September, provide a 30% to 40% sample of the year's total, a good basis for assessing the geographic distribution, degree type, and other characteristics of departments that are hiring and the fields in which they are seeking new faculty members.

The results of the count and coding of the October 2006 *JIL* are shown in the series of tables O-1 to O-11. The contents of the tables are as follows:

- Table O-1 shows numbers and percentages of positions announced in the October 2006 English and foreign language editions by key characteristics of the advertising departments and their home institutions and the tenure status and academic rank of the positions. The October list contains the highest percentage of tenure-track positions; a larger proportion of non-tenure-track positions is advertised later in the *JIL* year.
- Table O-2 shows the areas of literary specialization sought for positions advertised in the English edition of the October 2006 *JIL*. Each October, British literature, American literature (including multiethnic literatures), and rhetoric and composition each claim something on the order of 20% of the positions announced. Table O-3 selects out and regroups the subfields of British literature, American literature, rhetoric and composition, and creative writing to show the relations of scale among these four areas and their component subfields. Figure O-1 shows trend lines over the twenty-two years 1985 to 2006 for the percentage of positions in the October *JIL* in five major subfields of English: British literature, American literature, multiethnic literature, rhetoric and composition, and creative writing. The graph makes apparent the emergence and then establishment of multiethnic literature as a subfield.
- Table O-4 shows the percentage distribution of positions in different language areas in the foreign language edition of the October 2006 *JIL*. Positions in Spanish and Portuguese represent 43.8% of all positions announced in the October foreign language *JIL*, positions in French 14.9%, and positions in German 7.2%. Figure O-2 shows trend lines over the twenty-two years from 1985 to 2006 for the percentage of positions in the October *JIL* in Spanish, French, German, and Russian. The graph makes apparent the alteration in the relations of scale among Spanish and the other three language areas that occurred between 1985 and 1995. Over the five years 1997 to 2001 positions in Spanish made up between 45% and 50% of all positions announced in the October *JIL*. Over the past four years, the percentage has fallen to between 40% and 45%.
- Table O-5 shows the percentage distribution of areas of literary specialization sought for positions advertised in the October 2006 foreign language list.

- Table O-6 shows the relations of scale among types of language-teaching expertise sought for positions advertised in the October 2006 foreign language *JIL*.
- Table O-7 and table O-8 show the balance of language-teaching expertise and literary specialization sought for positions advertised in the October 2006 foreign language *JIL*. As the figures in table O-7 make apparent, the balance of capacities differs markedly depending on the highest degree granted by the department. Three-quarters of departments that grant the BA as their highest degree seek to fill positions that call for expertise in both language teaching and literature; just under three-fifths of departments that grant the PhD announce positions that call for literary expertise only. The tenure status of positions advertised also differs depending on the expertise sought, as the figures in table O-8 document.
- Table O-9a and table O-9b show the record of positions advertised since 1985 in the October English list for each specialty field, with the year 1982 (the historic low point) included for comparative purposes. Table O-9a shows the number of positions counted; table O-9b shows the percentage share.
- Table O-10a and table O-10b show the number and percentage of positions advertised since 1985 in the October foreign language list for each language area, with the year 1982 included for comparative purposes.
- Table O-11a and table O-11b show the number and percentage of positions advertised since 1985 in the October foreign language list for each literary specialization, with the year 1982 included for comparative purposes.

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