

Project Update

Academy Sponsors Humanities Research

Through the Initiative for the Humanities, the Academy is advancing our understanding of the state of the humanities today by developing the research and statistical tools necessary for sound policy-making. In the initial discussions leading to the creation of the Initiative, many Academy Fellows identified a need for gathering reliable data on the humanities and pointed to the influential *Science and Engineering Indicators* as an invaluable tool for decision-making. A similar tool for the humanities is long overdue, according to Academy Editor Steven Marcus (Columbia University), who co-chairs the overall planning committee of the Initiative.

Before a set of Humanities Indicators can be developed, a number of methodological and definitional issues need to be resolved. To address these methodological issues, the Academy convened a group of experts from humanities associations and educational research centers and commissioned research on undergraduate career paths and on the level of financial support within the colleges and universities for the humanities.

Two of these studies are now complete. In “Humanities Pathways: A Framework for Assessing Post-Baccalaureate Opportunities for Humanities Graduates,” Professor Edward St. John and co-author Ontario Wooden (both from Indiana University) have examined a variety of existing federal surveys to tease out conclusions about the future of undergraduates who take humanities degrees. Decisions about careers or further education in graduate or professional schools cannot be explained without reference to a large number of variables – including the availability

of financial aid, student loan burdens, family background, and previous work experience. But it is possible to draw some broad generalizations about patterns of undergraduate enrollments and later career choices:

- The percentage of college graduates choosing humanities majors declined substantially from the 1970s to the mid 1990s. However, in recent years, the humanities have regained some “market share” and now represent about 8 to 10 percent of all undergraduate degrees (see figure 1);
- Humanities graduates who enter the workforce with a B.A. degree typically earn less than graduates with degrees in all other fields except teaching and social work;
- A recent survey of the class of 2000 found that only 69 percent of all humanities graduates found full-time employment a year after graduation. While this figure is an improvement over the 59 percent

employment rate reported in 1991, humanities graduates still display one of the highest unemployment rates among all disciplines.

Perhaps the most important finding in St. John and Wooden’s survey of the data is that the undergraduate degree in the humanities, as the figure for full-time employment suggests, is becoming merely a stepping stone to advanced professional degrees. “Having undergraduate preparation in the humanities provides advanced problem-solving skills that are critical to many professions,” St. John and Wooden note, “but these professions now usually require advanced degrees.”

And, despite the discouraging findings about immediate post-employment, the authors point out that humanities majors tend to fare as well as, if not better than, other undergraduate degree holders in competitive examinations for admission to law, medical, and business schools.

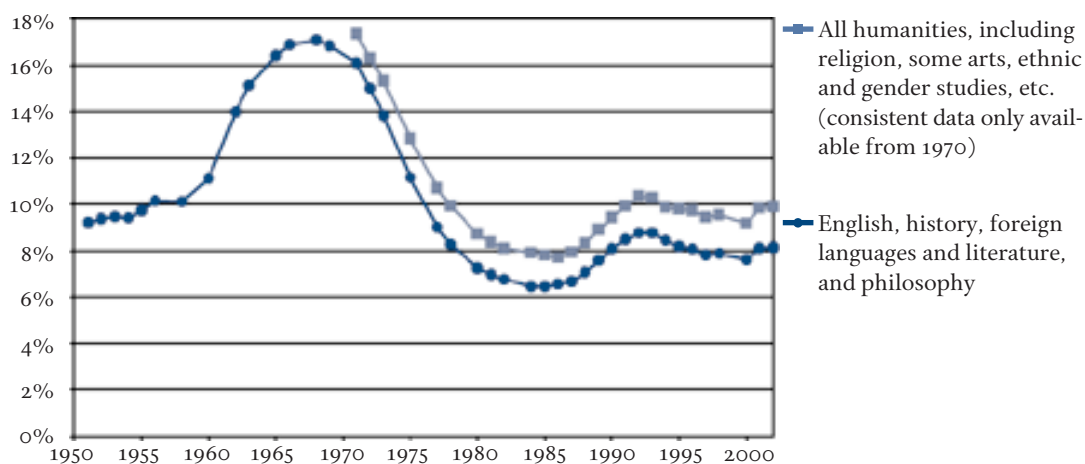
The authors also address the question of how to invest scarce funds for further research in this area. St. John and Wooden suggest that

existing federal databases, especially the on-going surveys in the *Baccalaureate and Beyond* series conducted by the National Center for Educational Statistics (a unit of the U.S. Department of Education) could be better employed to discern patterns of course taking, post-graduate employment, and graduate education that may be unique to the humanities. They cautiously suggest that with the saturation of the academic market for Ph.D.s in the humanities, students might be better served both by better undergraduate advising and by new hybrid graduate programs that would combine academic preparation in a specific discipline with internships in other professional areas besides university teaching. A key goal of new research studies should be to analyze the linkages between choice of graduate fields, the types of undergraduate institutions attended, and post-graduate employment.

Despite the relative optimism of some observers about the career prospects for humanities majors, critics of the contemporary university have argued that the hu-

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Figure 1: Humanities as a Percentage of all Bachelor’s Degrees in the United States, 1951 – 2002



American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2004. Sources: 1986 – 2002: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics, IPEDS survey [Computer File]. 1968 – 1985: U.S. Dept. of Ed., NCES, HEGIS survey [computer file]. Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research, Ann Arbor, MI (distributor). 1948 – 1966: U.S. Dept. of Ed., NCES, “Earned Degrees” series. Note: Education Department data on total degrees before 1961 counted all first professional degrees along with bachelor’s degrees: Academy numbers disaggregate bachelor’s degrees from 1948 – 1961 by extrapolating historical ratios of bachelor’s to first professional degrees.

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manities are losing ground not only in the labor marketplace but, more alarmingly, inside the university itself. A second Academy-sponsored research paper, "Funding the Core: Understanding the Financial Contexts of Academic Departments in the Humanities," by Professor James Hearn (Vanderbilt University) and his graduate assistant, Alexander Gorbunov, examines the methodological challenges involved in measuring internal university financing of humanities departments. Hearn cautions that it is easy to draw invidious comparisons between academic units if cross-subsidization or other hidden subsidies are not calculated. State subsidies at public universities, recovery of university overhead through indirect cost rates, and the allocation of general endowment funds must be taken into consideration along with the number of student credit hours and tuition revenues. In the end, Hearn and Gorbunov find that no existing study, including

an in-depth examination of the costs of instructional time at three hundred colleges and universities commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education, adequately covers all of these factors.

Even with the complexities of internal accounting, there are some areas of agreement. The Delaware study of instructional costs, the extensive review of three hundred participating institutions mentioned earlier, found that humanities departments consistently ranked among the lowest in costs per student credit hour. At the same time, Hearn and Gorbunov note that the variation among humanities disciplines is often substantial, and that departments teaching large survey courses have an inherent advantage in these comparisons. So, while the humanities as a whole remain among the least expensive units within the modern research university, some instructional programs – notably in foreign languages and the performing arts – have much higher costs associated with the

need in these fields for intensive faculty-student interactions.

Hearn and Gorbunov think that a carefully controlled comparative study, ideally surveying a range of institutions and not just research universities, would be the best way to fully understand how these factors interact. Before such an examination can be launched, case studies could be especially useful next steps in refining a research model. The Academy has identified one such study, an in-depth look at the University of Washington by Donald Summers, which the Academy will publish as a companion piece to the methodology paper. Summers, who serves as director of development for the humanities at the University of Washington, employs a number of measures, including comparisons of instructional costs, teaching loads, and student demand, to look at the status of the humanities at one well-regarded public university. On the whole, Summers' existing data tends to support the more pessimistic claims about the humanities, but he intends to build upon

his case study by obtaining comparable data from other public research universities.

The Academy is also interested in external sources of support for the humanities and is working with the Foundation Center to create a long-term study of private support for the humanities. While Foundation Center reports on funding for the arts include some partial data about the humanities, they employ a very limited definition of the humanities that excludes certain fields (such as foreign language study and comparative religion) normally viewed as intrinsic parts of the humanities. The Academy has commissioned an analysis of foundation funding from 1992 to 2002, to be conducted by the Foundation Center, that takes a comprehensive view of the humanities at both academic and non-academic institutions. The results, which will be released by the Academy and the Foundation Center in the early summer, should provide a useful baseline for subsequent studies. ■