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# National Humanities Alliance

## Discussion Paper

### *The Crisis in Humanities Employment for Recent Doctoral Degree Recipients*

January, 2010

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## Background and Scope of the Problem

### THE FINANCIAL CRISIS

**The current economic crisis is suppressing employment in the humanities at higher education institutions around the country.** The financial downturn which began in late 2007, in conjunction with the recession that followed, has pressed college and university budgets from several directions.

- Investment losses have reduced endowment payouts.
- Declining state tax revenues mean shrinking support for public universities.
- Young people facing uncertain job prospects, and workers seeking to retool their skills, are swelling undergraduate enrollments and placing new cost pressures on higher education institutions.

As a result, many institutions confronting the combination of high fixed costs and lower revenues have declared the need to curtail or freeze hiring; others have instituted staff furloughs and layoffs. Making matters worse for young workers, more senior faculty members postpone retirement as they behold the diminished balance in their 401(k) and 403(b) accounts. The employment situation is particularly critical for the most vulnerable workers: new PhDs who have acquired the requisite education to join the academic teaching force but now face a 'jobless market'.

### EMPLOYMENT PROSPECTS FOR NEW PHDS, 2008-2011

**We estimate that there will be a shortage of roughly 1000 jobs per year for new humanities PhDs entering the academic workforce over the next 2-3 years. *If current economic trends hold or worsen, a third of our nation's most talented, highly-trained scholars could be permanently lost as researchers and teaching faculty for their fields.***

Hiring Downturns – Newly released data on academic employment listings (a relied-upon measure of hiring trends) indicate a severe downturn in job openings in major humanities fields. In December, 2009, the Modern Language Association (MLA) reported that 2008-09 job listings for English had

declined by 24% over the past year, with a decline of 27% for Foreign Languages<sup>1</sup>. The American Historical Association (AHA) released similar figures this January showing a 24% decrease in history job postings<sup>2</sup>. Neither of these figures include unusually high numbers of departmental candidate searches that were subsequently cancelled. Fields covered by the AHA and MLA job listings reports encompass nearly 70% of all humanities doctorates<sup>3</sup>. A follow-up survey by the AHA indicates that about 15% of all openings were cancelled after the positions were advertised. In addition, twenty percent of the respondents to a departmental survey carried out by the American Historical Association worried that pending retirements from their faculty would not be replaced.

- The University of California system, a particularly dramatic but by no means completely exceptional case, has not only reduced its faculty hiring plans significantly, it has also had to furlough its existing faculty.
- The community college system in the state of Washington suffered a budget cut of 10% in the current fiscal year, even as enrollments increased by 16%, with the result that class sizes were increased and waiting lists were instituted for many humanities courses, while many adjunct faculty were let go, and tenured professors now face layoffs<sup>4</sup>.

As existing job paths are structured, the primary employment track for new humanities PhDs is postsecondary teaching and research. Thus, if the young scholars completing their doctoral degrees over the next 2-3 years do not find employment at a postsecondary institution, they are unlikely to find work in their field of expertise.

- Data drawn from the 1995 *Survey of Humanities Doctorates* (administered by NSF and funded by NEH until 1996) shows that over 73% of humanities PhDs who had their doctorates five years or less held faculty jobs in postsecondary institutions.<sup>5</sup>
- According to the NSF *Survey of Earned Doctorates*, a total of 4,722 doctoral degrees were awarded in 2008 for all humanities fields. Of those reporting definite employment upon graduation in 2008, 85.4% were employed in academe.<sup>6</sup>

In a *normal* year, one would expect roughly 3,500 new humanities PhDs to secure academic employment at a postsecondary institution (about three-fourths of total doctoral awards reported in the humanities for 2008).<sup>7 8</sup> Based on AHA and MLA job listings reported for the previous academic year (2008-09), we estimate that there was an actual decrease of 25% in jobs available for new PhDs across all humanities fields (862 jobs total). These organizations are anticipating a second drop-off on the order of 25%, going into the 2009-10 academic year. We project a cumulative drop-off for the two-year period of 33% (1,150 jobs). Assuming a freeze at these levels going into a third year (i.e., no further decrease), the job market will still be depressed from its norm by about one-third (i.e., down by another 1,150 jobs), with a **three-year total projected cumulative shortfall of 3,162 jobs.**

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<sup>1</sup> *Report on the MLA Job Information List, 2008-09*, Modern Language Association Office of Research, September 25, 2009, [http://www.mla.org/pdf/jil\\_report200809.pdf](http://www.mla.org/pdf/jil_report200809.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> *Annual Job Report: A Grim Year on the Academic Job Market for Historians*, American Historical Association, January 4, 2010, <http://www.historians.org/Perspectives/issues/2010/1001/1001new1.cfm>.

<sup>3</sup> Humanities Indicators, [Indicator II-11: "Disciplinary Distribution of Advanced Degrees in the Humanities"](#) (2008 Prototype).

<sup>4</sup> "Two-Year Colleges Can't Absorb Further Cuts Without Turning Students Away", Amy Kinsel, *Olympia Newswire*, January 27, 2010, <http://www.olympianews.org/2010/01/27/kinsel/>.

<sup>5</sup> Humanities Indicators, [Indicator III-7: "Occupations of Humanities PhDs"](#) (2008 Prototype).

<sup>6</sup> NSF Survey of Earned Doctorates, 2007-08, Data Table 40, <http://www.nsf.gov/statistics/nsf10309/>.

<sup>7</sup> Extrapolated from data reported in the *Humanities Indicators*, Indicator III-7, "Occupations of Humanities PhDs" and Indicator II-10: "Doctoral Degree Completions in the Humanities" (2008 Prototype).

<sup>8</sup> NSF Survey of Earned Doctorates, 2007-08, Data Table 40, <http://www.nsf.gov/statistics/nsf10309/>.

## What's At Risk

### INVESTMENT IN TRAINING YOUNG WORKERS

While it takes a relatively long time to earn a PhD in the humanities, a sudden economic change can close, perhaps permanently, the short window during which recently-trained scholars can gain a foothold in the profession they have worked hard to join. This potential loss is not borne by individuals alone; substantial public and private investment has also been made. Most doctoral students receive financial aid from their universities and third parties; the enterprise of graduate education itself is subsidized broadly by university and social sources, as are K-12 and undergraduate education. Much high-value human capital is liquidated in any academic job crisis. The severity of the present crisis threatens to deprive the nation of the demonstrated talents of what many worry will become a "lost generation" of scholars as teachers, researchers, and leaders in their fields.

### STUDENT ACCESS TO HUMANITIES COURSES AND FACULTY

The reduction in new faculty hires in the humanities, combined with freezes and layoffs of at colleges and universities around the country, means a shortage of teaching faculty and reduction in class offerings. At the same time that the teaching workforce is contracting, student enrollment has been increasing at four and two-year postsecondary institutions around the country, while demand continues for courses in history, literature, writing, foreign languages, philosophy, religion and other humanities fields. The result is diminished opportunity for students to pursue a liberal arts education through the humanities, either as a humanities major or in combination with other fields.

***Implications for K-12 Education*** – College and university faculty play a central role in the education of our nation's K-12 workforce. Today's undergraduates are tomorrow's teachers, and lack of access to high-quality instruction in core humanities fields has implications for: (1) attraction of talent for the K-12 workforce in *humanities fields* and (2) the breadth and level of teacher preparation in *all fields of instruction*. There is particular concern in some fields about the severe impact of the financial crisis on humanities instruction at community colleges, where many K-12 teachers complete many of their general degree requirements.

***Value to Society*** - For many Americans who are able to attend college, the undergraduate years provide the first (and last) formal exposure to a broad range of humanities subjects, such as philosophy, ethics, world history, U.S. history (at any level of depth), constitutional law, comparative religion, and more. This opportunity is not only enriching to the individual, it strengthens our collective ability to make informed assessments of the past and present, and better decisions for the future.

Unfortunately, the unique role played by colleges and universities in teaching and identifying talent in the humanities may grow increasingly important as many school districts around the country, also facing budget shortages, continue to de-emphasize traditional subjects (such as history, or foreign languages), in favor of scientific fields or technical training deemed 'essential'.

## AMERICA'S LONG-TERM ECONOMIC RECOVERY AND COMPETITIVENESS

Our nation's long-term economic success demands a broadly educated workforce prepared to compete on an international scale. To survive in the increasingly knowledge-based and global economy of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, our businesses and citizens need information and training acquired through humanities fields, from strong communication and analytical skills, to understanding of civic institutions, to knowledge of world history and cultures, to multiple language proficiencies. Numerous reports have come out in recent years that demonstrate severe deficits in the global competency of our nation's workforce and student population, including foreign language proficiency and area expertise—deficits that *pre-date* the current financial crisis.

We will never reach our *full* economic potential as a nation unless we invest *broadly* in our nation's human resources. And to do that, we must identify and cultivate the full range of talents, capabilities, and creative pursuits of our citizens, whether their abilities and interests lie in the math and sciences, or in languages, creative writing, history, cultural anthropology, or a growing number of interdisciplinary fields.

## TRADITION OF LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION

Our nation's long tradition of fostering broad access to liberal arts education is increasingly looked to by nations around the world as a unique driver of U.S. economic leadership and innovation in the last century. Nevertheless, recent federal policy has placed almost exclusive emphasis on fostering excellence in scientific, technological, engineering and math (STEM) fields. While STEM support is critical, parallel federal and institutional investment in the humanities is desperately needed to ensure continued opportunities to study basic subjects—such as history, literature, writing, foreign languages, philosophy, religion—at all levels of learning. The financial crisis threatens to diminish such access beyond the current economic contraction, particularly if realignment of educational resources becomes permanent. The humanities represent core fields of knowledge and capacities that enrich individuals, undergird our civic institutions, and aid society in addressing complex challenges. Our nation's long-term economic success depends on cultivating a broadly educated workforce that can compete in the knowledge-based, global economy of the 21st century; the humanities demand our support. It is a strategic mistake to turn away from a historic strength of the U.S. educational system at the very moment that other nations around the world are moving in the opposite direction.

## Humanities Scholarship and Expertise

### A NATIONAL RESOURCE

*The cohort of new PhDs entering the current job market is a national resource.* Through both field-specific and interdisciplinary research, humanities faculty produce new knowledge and understandings of the world that are critical to our citizens, businesses, and the nation at large. We especially need to cultivate and support younger scholars, who are newly-trained and immersed in current technologies and emerging trends in their fields.

### ADDRESSING COMPLEX CHALLENGES

The humanities provide critical insights and context for addressing domestic and global challenges. There are few complex problems facing Americans as individuals, local communities, or as a nation, that can be solved by technology alone. All human problems have a common component: they involve humans. And they require effective human interaction and analysis of the human context for their solution – from the successful deployment of vaccines, to national defense, to judicial decision-making, to international commerce. Knowledge of history and local culture, ability to speak and write in the languages spoken and written by people all over the world, understanding of our own nation’s history and political institutions – the humanities represent essential capacities that require public support.

### A LONG-TERM INVESTMENT

There is a significant length of time required to build a pipeline of expertise in any field. It takes years to train individual scholars and experts, and *decades* to build up domestic capacity in specific fields of expertise. The nation’s ‘knowledge base’ cannot be manufactured on-demand, or as-needed at a time of crisis.

### THE HUMANITIES WORKFORCE

A newly released *Humanities Indicators* estimates the direct size of the humanities workforce at 2.5 million.<sup>9</sup> This count does not include humanities majors (or non-majors who have taken humanities courses), who fill the ranks of a multitude of professions that employ *millions of Americans* and draw on humanities content and training--from government, to industry, to law, to the non-profit sector.

***Contributions of Humanities Faculty*** – Faculty in U.S. colleges and universities make a significant contribution to American life and civic institutions through their teaching, research and service activities. Humanities faculty engage in significant public service, lending their time and expertise to local press, community groups, businesses, non-profits, law enforcement and government agencies across the country and around the world.

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<sup>9</sup> Humanities Indicators, Indicator III-1: “Size and Occupational Distribution of the Humanities Workforce” (2008 Prototype).

## ACLS New Faculty Fellowships: a Model Program

### BACKGROUND

The *New Faculty Fellows Program*, a recent initiative of the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS), provides a possible model for addressing this crisis. In 2009, ACLS launched an emergency effort, with support from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, to stimulate temporary faculty positions for recent PhDs entering the academic workforce during the current collapse in the job market. As the severity of the jobs crisis began to emerge over the last year, ACLS worked with foundation and higher education partners to mount a fellowship competition that would quickly identify qualified doctoral recipients and facilitate their placement in two-year teaching and research positions created by partnering institutions.

### COST-SHARING AND AWARD STRUCTURE

The model program works in partnership with institutions offering appointment to awardees by requiring them to share in the cost of that employment. This cost-sharing requirement helps maximize funds available for addressing the employment crisis, and assures that the college or university receiving these promising young scholars is financially as well as morally invested in the success of, and the need for, the new, term appointment. New, otherwise jobless PhDs will be able stay in the academic workforce and will be better positioned to win tenure-track teaching jobs in the future. Universities and colleges hiring new PhDs will receive high-quality, doubly certified young scholars who will augment the teaching force and refresh faculties that might not otherwise have the capacity to engage new scholars.

The ACLS initiative works to stimulate faculty positions by making awards that lower the cost to eligible institutions of appointing awardees to term positions offering teaching, research, and mentoring opportunities. In the current formulation of the program, awards are for two years, and provide a stipend of \$50K, health insurance, modest (\$5K/year) research and travel funds, and a one-time moving allowance of \$1.5K. Appointees agree to teach a specified number of courses per year. To receive awards, applicants must accept any bona-fide offer of appointment. Universities assume one-third the cost of awards; colleges pay one-quarter the cost. Due to limited funding and the need to deploy assistance as rapidly as possible, ACLS limited eligibility in the initial round to a pre-defined group of select universities and colleges. **With federal support, the ACLS model could be quickly adapted and expanded to a scale that would permit broader institutional participation, including a large number of public institutions that were not eligible to participate in the initial competition.**

### DEMONSTRATION OF NEED

The ACLS' initial call for applications received a remarkable response. In the course of only a few weeks, 800 applications to participate in the program were received from graduate students – evidence not only of the need for this measure but of the sizeable quantum of educational achievement at risk of being lost. **In this financial crisis, higher education institutions need help to renew their teaching force. College and university deans have responded eagerly to the opportunity provided by the ACLS program.** Unfortunately, the ACLS competition was limited in scope and will aid only fifty young scholars, or six per cent, of those who applied.

## Federal Role

### NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES

As the impact of the economic recession continues to deepen at two- and four-year colleges and universities around the country, new humanities PhDs are facing a dramatic, 25% annual projected shortfall in humanities job openings at postsecondary institutions. Significant, immediate intervention is needed to address the crisis in humanities employment and:

- address a growing shortage of undergraduate teaching faculty in fields vital to America's continued global leadership in higher education
- send an important signal of renewed federal investment in liberal arts education
- preserve our investment in talented young scholars as teachers and researchers in their areas of expertise

**The National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) has a decades-long record of supporting competitive fellowships for humanities scholars through its Research and Education divisions.** Federal funding through NEH could be used to administer an extended and adapted version of the ACLS model directly, or in partnership with private sector organizations, including (but not necessarily limited to) the American Council of Learned Societies.

### RECOMMENDATION

**We urge Congress and the Obama Administration to support emergency funding through NEH to support teaching fellowships for *recent doctoral degree recipients* entering the academic workforce over the next two years.** We recommend a level of \$60 million in federal funding, which would enable the award of at least 200, two-year fellowships per year over a two-year period beginning in 2010. This funding would:

- create **400 two-year faculty jobs over a three-year period (equivalent to 800 person-years)** at an average cost of \$75,000 per position\*
- **enhance** access to high-quality teaching, learning and research opportunities for **thousands of students at colleges and universities across the country**

\*These numbers could be increased depending on final structures determined for stipends, cost-sharing, and geographic distribution.

***Modest, but sufficient funds should also be set aside for assessment, evaluation, and ongoing reporting on the accomplishments and effectiveness of the program.***

### SUMMARY

We cannot afford to ignore what is happening to the most vulnerable members of the academic workforce. Federal support for new PhDs will not only help mitigate loss of new scholars for to our nation's colleges and universities, it will protect a significant public investment that has already been made in training these young workers. It may help prevent a permanent contraction of humanities departments and programs. And it will also send a strong signal of support to younger scholars with the talent and interest to pursue an advanced degree in the humanities, who might otherwise be deterred from considering an academic career path due to lack of financial resources or other barriers of opportunity.

# Is the Current Economic Crisis Having a Disproportionate Impact on the Humanities?

*The answer to this question may, unfortunately, be 'Yes'.*

## **GREATER DEPENDENCE ON NON-FEDERAL SOURCES OF FUNDING**

Humanities departments, faculty, and students have been hit hard by the current crisis. There is growing anecdotal evidence that college and university budget cuts, especially at publicly-funded institutions, are impacting humanities programs and departments disproportionately. Over the last half century, the disparity in federal support for STEM, vs. humanities disciplines, has grown. According to its FY 2009 report, the annual budget of the National Science Foundation (only one of several federal agencies that support science R&D) represents 21 percent of the total federal budget for basic research conducted at America's colleges and universities. In contrast, humanities faculty, students, and programs rely almost exclusively on private and local sources of support-resources that have been drained by the financial crisis.

Aggravating this situation is the fact that the **2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act did not provide funding for any of the major federal grant programs that provided targeted support for the humanities at higher education (or other) institutions.** This applies to both the National Endowment for the Humanities and the U.S. Department of Education.

- Direct federal funding for humanities research and related activities to higher education institutions is less than \$200 million<sup>10</sup>. By contrast, the National Science Foundation received a regular, FY 2009 appropriation of \$6.5 billion— in addition to \$3 billion allocated to the agency through the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. According to NSF's FY 2009 *Financial Report*, R&RA competitive awards have already supported more than 6,700 investigators in all 50 states— many of them located at the same institutions served by humanities faculty.
- In several instances, university furloughs (a common response to the financial crisis) have exempted faculty with active research grants, creating a 'double-whammy' effect for humanities faculty who—even under normal circumstances—do not have nearly the same opportunities to compete for project funds.

**While there is widespread support for federal investment in STEM fields, there is increasing concern that the lack of balance in U.S. federal funding for research and education is accelerating already negative trends in institutional investment in the humanities. Inclusion of the humanities in the Administration's innovation agenda is essential.**

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<sup>10</sup> Includes competitive grants funds for the National Endowment for the Humanities and the U.S. Department of Education.

## FEWER ALTERNATIVE EMPLOYMENT PATHS FOR RECENT PHDS

Alternative, field-specific paths of employment may be under-developed in the humanities. New humanities PhDs tend to enter the academic workforce at higher rates than their STEM and social science counterparts<sup>11</sup>, and are thus much more dependent on finding a job at a postsecondary institution, if they are to remain employed in their fields of expertise. (See data cited earlier in this discussion from the 1995 *Survey of Humanities Doctorates* and the 2008 NSF *Survey of Earned Doctorates*.)

## FINANCIAL NEED

Graduate students in the humanities receive less support than students in other fields, acquire more debt, and thus are in greater peril if they cannot find employment. Data drawn from the *Survey of Earned Doctorates* indicate that doctoral students in the humanities rely more heavily on teaching as a source of income than did those in any other discipline. Humanities doctoral students were also more likely to draw on their own resources than students in the physical sciences, the life sciences, and engineering. Average debt levels reported by humanities students recently were some of the highest in the U.S. academic world.<sup>12</sup>

In 2005, new humanities PhDs reported an average graduate educational debt load of just over \$14,000. This average, however, masks a “feast or famine” situation with respect to the ability of students to secure graduate funding. Over 50% of all humanities students awarded doctorates in 2005 emerged from their graduate programs with no educational debt. But approximately 23% of humanities students incurred more than \$30,000 in debt, and over 14% carried debt loads in excess of \$50,000.<sup>13</sup>

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January 2010. National Humanities Alliance, 21 Dupont Circle NW, Washington, DC, [www.nhalliance.org](http://www.nhalliance.org).

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<sup>11</sup> Humanities Indicators, [Indicator III-6: “Job Status of Humanities Ph.D.’s at Time of Graduation”](#) (2008 Prototype).

<sup>12</sup> Humanities Indicators, Indicator II-16: “Paying for Graduate School” (2008 Prototype).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

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