

GRADUATE STUDENTS

Economic Realities Have Altered Ph.D. Recipients' Plans for Future

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People who earned doctoral degrees in the United States last year were less likely to report taking jobs at American higher-education institutions than at any time since the dawning of this century, according to new data from the National Science Foundation.

Of those who reported having committed to employers, 48.5 percent said they planned to take jobs in academe in the United States, marking the fifth straight year that that proportion has declined and the lowest point it has reached since 2001. By contrast, the share taking jobs in business or industry stood at 32.4 percent, a sharp increase from less than 23 percent 10 years earlier.

In every broad field of study except education, academe's role as an employer of newly minted doctorates diminished slightly over the year before, according to yet-unreleased data gathered as part of an annual federal census of doctoral-degree recipients.

Over all, the job market for 2015's doctoral-degree recipients remained weak. Of those who answered a survey question about their future plans, 28 percent reported having committed to an employer as of graduation — down from about 36 percent in 2008, just before the onset of the Great Recession.

Although many had turned to postdoctoral study as a means to pay the bills, 38 percent said they had neither a job nor a postdoc lined up. As of 2008, fewer than 31 percent of respondents had reported confronting such uncertainty.

The data, gathered as part of an annual Survey of Earned Doctorates sponsored by the NSF and other federal agencies, represents only a snapshot of doctorate recipients at about the time they received their degrees. It does not track them over the long run to determine where they eventually end up, and its results regarding employment prospects can be skewed by variations in the hiring cycles of fields that students hope to enter, cautioned Mark K. Fiegener, who analyzes the survey data as a project officer for the National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics.

"We don't know exactly how many of those who really will have jobs shortly after graduation simply have not signed on the dotted line at the time this survey was administered," Suzanne T. Ortega, president of the Council of Graduate Schools, said Monday.

Hironao Okahana, the council's assistant vice president for research and policy analysis, noted that, over time, doctoral-degree recipients have much lower unemployment rates than other segments of the population.

Nevertheless, the survey has found high levels of uncertainty among doctoral recipients in enough consecutive years to make clear "this is not some sort of temporary anomaly," said Leonard Cassuto, a professor of English at Fordham University who closely monitors graduate education.

Rosemary G. Feal, executive director of the Modern Language Association, said in an email that the latest survey's findings "testify to the increasing difficulty graduates of doctoral programs face securing employment or postdoctoral fellowships directly after receiving their degrees."

The survey found that nearly 40 percent of survey respondents who reported having committed to future plans said they were taking on postdocs, up from just under 36 percent in 2005 and about 30 percent in 1995. The likelihood of their taking on postdocs varies significantly by field, however, and actually has fallen in the past five years among those in fields related to science and engineering, while rising substantially among those in the humanities and the arts.

"Departments are offering these positions to their own graduates because that is a way of helping their graduates stay market-viable a little while longer," Mr. Cassuto said. "It gives them an opportunity to bolster their credentials."

The discussion of postdoctoral study is clouded, Mr. Cassuto said, by variations by field in how the term is applied. In contrast with the sciences, where postdocs tend to work in laboratories, postdocs in the humanities often have teaching classes as their primary responsibility, effectively making them part of higher education's instructional work force even as faculty jobs elude them.

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