

A Long-Term Crisis: Peak Graduate Programs and Market Contraction

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I was asked to write about the rhetoric of disciplinary crisis for this Where We Are section of *Composition Studies*. I've been mapping field data for twelve years at <http://rhetmap.org>, and the job market and programmatic data largely informs my thinking about future challenges for the profession. Based on what I've seen at RhetMap, for the last decade especially, there are fewer new graduate programs and fewer job listings. What I'd suggest is that while the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s were a time of establishing new graduate programs and certificates in rhetoric and writing studies, supported by a more favorable ratio of jobs to doctoral degrees in the discipline, the 2010s and 2020s are a period of peak and contraction.

In 1987 and 2000, the field was optimistic about its future growth. In the spring 1987 issue of *Rhetoric Review*, David Chapman and Gary Tate predicted that "...graduate programs in rhetoric and composition seem likely both to grow and proliferate" (133). This sentiment continues well into the new millennium. In her 2000 *Rhetoric Review* article "At the Century's End: The Job Market in Rhetoric and Composition," Gail Stygall writes that "most of us in doctoral programs in rhetoric and composition know that our students are fairing well on the job market" (375). Stygall finds that from 1994 to 1998 "there are too few PhDs in rhetoric and composition for the jobs available" (375-76) and that "the numbers suggest that we are underproducing PhDs" (382). She concludes that "The Market for PhDs in rhetoric and composition is good: Demand still exceeds supply" but warns that "we must be cautious about simply accepting our good fortune. Administrators at the college and university level, well outside English departments, continue to erode tenure-line positions in favor of part-time and adjunct positions" (387). In Caroline Dadas's 2013 *College Composition and Communication* article surveying 57 job seekers from 2001/02 through 2011/12, she documents an important shift in the number of interviews for candidates during that period:

Some candidate participants who went on the market in the first third of the time period I studied (approximately 2001-2004) reported having anywhere between nine and twenty-one MLA interviews. Candidates who went on the market later reported lower numbers of MLA interviews, typically under ten. The reasons for this drop off are multiple, having to do with the worsening economy, the

related increase in phone and video interviews, and the delayed date of the conference. (80)

Since 2015 on the RhetMap PhD Program Map (<http://rhetmap.org/doctoral/>), there have been few new doctoral programs or concentrations in rhetoric and writing studies or related areas. I've only added four to the list for a total increase from 90 to 94 programs and concentrations; these numbers also include the removal of programs such as the doctoral concentration in rhetoric and composition at the University of Rhode Island, which ceased accepting applications in 2014. Some of the programs that are still on the list—such as the University of Mississippi—at one time had a membership in the Doctoral Consortium in rhetoric and composition but do not appear to have a program today. The point is that there hasn't been much movement in terms of program growth the last eight years, and I think this new era of contraction—both in graduate programs and their size—marks a departure from the 1990s and 2000s.

At the same time, according to the twelve years of RhetMap Market Comparison data I've collected, there haven't been over 300 job listings since 2014.¹ Since then, we have been in downward trend:

- 273 listings in 2015-16,
- 243 in 2016-17,
- 280 in 2017-18,
- 220 in 2018-19,
- 203 in 2019-20 (spring listings dropped once the pandemic started),
- 152 in 2020-2021 (there were just 73 listings by January 3rd 2021), and
- 95 as of November 5, 2022.

Rather than growth, the 2010s and now 2020s are a period where job listings in the discipline likely peaked in terms of job listings in 2014, and in that same period of time few new doctoral programs have been created.

In the 2022 *Rhetoric Review* article “Job Market Mentoring in Rhetoric and Composition and Technical Communication,” Moeggenberg reports that as the manuscript was revised, “I have friends who have done upwards of ten campus visits without offers. The number of jobs in rhetoric, composition, and technical communication has drastically decreased” (297). As Jennifer Sano-Franchini writes in her important 2016 *Conference on College Composition and Communication* article about the shifting job market: “economic and technological changes, together, have corresponded with a shift in the rhetoric of the academic job market toward a rhetoric of emotional crisis” (99). When I think about the future crisis of the discipline, I think about the present crisis of the job market for job seekers that Sano-Franchini and Moeggenberg

describe combined with limited possibilities for new programmatic growth at the graduate level.² These two, our graduate programs and our job market, are intricately connected in multiple ways, and one cannot exist in the same form without the other. Scholars such as Carrie Leverenz have documented the decline in tenure-track listings in the field, calling attention to not just the decline in listings but the type of positions advertised. The discipline went through a period in the 1990s and 2000s when many new doctoral programs were built, with great excitement, and I think that the discipline has scaled the number of doctoral programs beyond the number the current academic job market can support post-graduation. For the next decade, I expect to see continued contraction of existing programs in terms of new PhD cohorts, the formal closure of more programs, and perhaps the addition of one or two new programs that are in an institutional position to adequately support doctoral students. By support I mean not only competitive teaching loads during their degree completion, but also the additional security of postdocs for what is increasingly a more protracted job market experience, especially when family and geographic considerations are a factor.

Notes

1. There were 325 listings that year. Listings may include multiple jobs, but I use listings as a barometer for the general activity of institutions hiring in the field from year to year.

2. See also Josephine Walwema, and Felicita Arzu Carmichael's article "'Are You Authorized to Work in the US?' Investigating 'Inclusive' Practices in Rhetoric and Technical Communication Job Descriptions." which provides an important argument for how US labor law and hiring documents impact and discriminate against international scholars.

Works Cited

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