

The Career Paths of Modern Language PhDs: Findings from the 2017 MLA Survey of Doctoral Program Graduates

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AS COMPETITION has increased for what has been a chronically limited supply of tenure-track faculty job opportunities, the call for doctoral programs to track the employment outcomes of their graduates has intensified—and revealed the inadequacies of the data-collection infrastructure for developing information about humanities graduates' careers. In 2012 the MLA and the American Historical Association (AHA), with the support of grants from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, embarked on parallel initiatives to discover the current occupations of PhD recipients who completed their programs since 1995—the last year humanities graduates were canvassed for the federal government's Survey of Doctorate Recipients (SDR).¹ The AHA and MLA studies used Internet searches to find public information about the current employment of a random sample of graduates; the MLA's sample included 2,590 graduates who received their doctorates between 1996 and 2011. A report on the MLA's research appeared as "Where Are They Now," a February 2015 post on *The Trend*, the *Commons* blog of the MLA office of research (Laurence). The AHA's report, "The Many Careers of History PhDs," was published in spring 2013. In 2018 the AHA published "Where Historians Work," an online interactive data set that expands its initial research to catalog the career outcomes of 8,515 historians who earned PhDs at universities in the United States between 2004 and 2013 (see "Career Diversity Resources" for both AHA projects).

In July 2017, the MLA's office of research reached out to the 1,949 individuals in the original sample for whom we had found e-mail addresses and invited them to complete a survey about their employment since they received the doctorate. The survey received responses from 310 (15.4%) of these doctorate recipients. The respondents completed their doctoral studies between 1996 and 2010, with the exception of one graduate from outside our initial sample who received the degree in 2015.

Table 1 shows the distribution of the 311 respondents, grouped into four roughly equal-size cohorts, according to the years when respondents received the PhD. To gain at least some insight into the effect of the 2008 financial crisis, the 2006–15 cohort is subdivided into pre- and post-2008 segments. Because responses were anonymous, survey respondents cannot be tied to the individual *Dissertation Abstracts International* (DAI) records that were the source for our original sample. Thus, the fifteen respondents who did not provide the year they received the degree in their survey responses are listed as missing.

The information the 311 respondents provided is illuminating. At the same time, the small number of respondents reminds us how enormously far tracking efforts have to go before the profession can claim to have anything approaching a comprehensive picture of the occupations and employment histories of the tens of thousands

of living individuals who hold doctoral degrees in English and other modern languages. What our 311 respondents have provided is a set of suggestive illustrations that should spur the further research needed to gather information that will confirm or correct the findings presented here.

Job Placement and Career Paths to 2017

Because responses to the MLA's 2017 survey were anonymous, it is not possible to map the characteristics of the 2017 response group in relation to the *DAI* records of the 2013 sample; nevertheless, the occupational distribution suggests greater congruity than incongruity between the two groups, as can be seen in [figure 1](#) and [figure 2](#). Of the 311 respondents to the 2017 survey, 79.2% report that they are employed in a postsecondary institution ([fig. 1](#)), compared with 77.1% of the 2,198 living graduates from the 2013 study ([fig. 2](#)). The percentage of graduates working outside higher education is similar between the groups: 20.9% of respondents to the 2017 survey and 21.6% of the graduates identified in 2013. And an expected movement of individuals from tenure-track to tenured faculty status is evident in the increased fraction in 2017 of faculty members with tenure and the reduced share in tenure-track appointments (possibly including some who in 2013 were classified as occupying positions whose tenure status we were not able to determine).

Of most interest, however, may be what the 2017 survey respondents had to say about the turns their careers took between receipt of the degree and their current positions. Asked about the first job they held after receipt of the degree, 35.5% reported their first position as a full-time, tenure-track faculty position; 42.9% started in a non-tenure-track faculty position, 28.7% full-time and 14.2% part-time; 6.5% held a postdoctoral fellowship; and 15.2% found placements other than as postsecondary faculty members ([fig. 3](#)).

How much movement is there from non-tenure-track to tenured faculty positions or back and forth across the boundary separating nonfaculty occupations in or outside higher education from tenured faculty posts or other teaching or administrative positions in higher education? [Table 2](#) shows 2017 respondents' first job after receiving the PhD and the job they held at the time of the survey. Of the 163 respondents who reported holding a tenured faculty position in 2017, 84, or 27.0% of all respondents, had been hired directly from graduate school to a full-time, tenure-track faculty position. Forty-five, or 14.5%, went from graduate school to a full-time non-tenure-track position; 13, or 4.2%, took part-time, non-tenure track faculty positions; and 13 (4.2%) proceeded to postdoctoral fellowships. Two respondents who went directly from graduate school to positions in higher education administration were tenured faculty members in 2017; five who started their postgraduate careers outside higher education had returned to the academy and become tenured faculty members at the time of the survey. That is, of the 163 respondents employed as tenured faculty members in 2017, just over half (51.5%) secured a full-time, tenure-track faculty position as their first job after graduate school; 27.6% started in a full-time, non-tenure-track position; 8.0% began in a part-time, non-tenure-track position; 8.0% started in a postdoctoral fellowship; 1.2% had a professional or

*The Career Paths of
Modern Language PhDs:
Findings from the 2017
MLA Survey of Doctoral
Program Graduates*

administrative position in a postsecondary institution; and 3.1% went from graduate school to work outside higher education (fig. 4).

A little under half (46.8%) of the 62 respondents working outside higher education in 2017—and 9.3% of all 311 respondents—took a postsecondary faculty position, whether tenure-track or non-tenure-track, as their first job after completing graduate school. When those who went from graduate school to a postdoctoral fellowship or nonfaculty administrative position in higher education are included, the percentage of graduates working outside higher education in 2017 who started in a job in postsecondary education directly from graduate school increases to 12.2% of all 311 respondents and 61.3% of the 62 employed outside higher education in 2017.

Looking back across the arc of their careers to 2017, 67.8% of the survey's 311 respondents reported that they had held a tenure-track faculty position at some point (fig. 5). Included in that 67.8% are 22.7% of those currently employed as non-tenure-track faculty members and 21.0% of those working outside postsecondary education. (Included also are respondents employed as tenured or tenure-track faculty members in 2017.)

The portion of the survey's 311 respondents employed as tenured faculty members in 2017—and who entered tenure-track faculty positions as their first job after leaving graduate school—varied considerably by cohort. The variations suggest how the economic conditions and employment opportunities prevailing at the time each cohort graduated may have affected each cohort's initial job placement as well as its longer term career paths and possibilities (fig. 6 and fig. 7).

More than a third (35.5%) of survey respondents secured a tenure-track faculty position as their first job after graduate school. But breaking respondents out into chronological cohorts reveals widely disparate experiences, from 31.6% of the 1996–98 cohort, rising to 45.2% of the 2006–08 cohort, then abruptly collapsing to just over a quarter (26.1%) of the post-2008 group (fig. 6). Suggestive as these findings may be, the subgroups are small, forming a weak basis for generalization or conclusions.

The differences in current (2017) employment for each cohort, shown in figure 7, dwarf the variations in the initial job placements shown in figure 6. Only 35.5% of 1996–98 graduates reported holding a tenured faculty position in 2017, compared with 69.1% of the cohort that completed graduate school between 1999 and 2001. The disparity holds even when respondents in senior administrative positions who have faculty status, and presumably hold tenure, are added to the tenured faculty. The economic conditions into which a cohort graduates appear to have significant consequence for graduates' longer-term employment outcomes. The cohorts coincident with the upturn in the number of jobs posted in the *MLA Job Information List (JIL)* after 1998 had a markedly higher percentage of its members in tenured faculty positions in 2017 than did the cohort that graduated in the mid-1990s trough in jobs advertised in the *JIL (Report 7 [fig. 1])*. The impact of the 2008 financial crisis and its aftermath seems evident in the sharply lower percentage of the 2009–15 cohort in tenured faculty positions in 2017, although conclusions must be tentative in the light of the small size of the subgroup. At the same time, taken together, figures 6 and 7 suggest how the tenured faculty is made up of individuals who move from graduate school into tenure-track and non-tenure-track faculty positions,

postdoctoral fellowships, and (to a lesser extent) nonfaculty employment in and even outside higher education.

The movement from various first jobs to a tenured faculty post in 2017 is shown in [figure 8](#), which pulls out the portion of each cohort that held a tenured faculty position in 2017 and breaks it into segments according to graduates' first job placement after receiving their doctorates. The segments within each column show the percentage of all graduates in a cohort that held various types of jobs as their first job; the segment percentages sum to the percentage value shown at the top of each column—that is, the percentage of all graduates in a cohort that held a tenured position in 2017.

The percentage of respondents who had held a tenure-track faculty position at *any* point in their career up to 2017 also varied significantly by cohort, from a high of 81.0% of the graduates who received their doctorates immediately before the recession (2006–08) to a low of 39.1% for those who received their degree after it (2009–15) ([fig. 9](#)).

Job Satisfaction and Earnings

Respondents employed in and outside postsecondary education report nearly equivalent levels of overall job satisfaction—76.3% of 245 respondents employed in postsecondary education said they were either satisfied or very satisfied with their jobs, compared with 76.2% of the 63 employed outside postsecondary education; [fig. 10](#)). A higher percentage of those employed outside than inside postsecondary education were very satisfied with their jobs—44.4% of those working outside postsecondary education compared with 34.7% of those employed inside. However, a slightly higher percentage of those employed outside postsecondary education also said they were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with their positions—11.1% compared with 7.3%. Of respondents very satisfied with their jobs, the highest percentage was working in nonprofit organizations (57.9%, or 19 respondents; 100.0% of respondents working for the federal government were very satisfied with their jobs, but there were only two of them). The highest percentages of respondents very dissatisfied with their positions were those working for state or local government (22.2%, or 9 respondents) and faculty members in tenure-track faculty positions (16.7%, or 12 respondents).

Respondents' job satisfaction also varied by cohort. The group that graduated after 2008 has, so far, a far lower percentage of its members satisfied or very satisfied with the job they held in 2017—52.2%, compared with 79.3% of the aggregate of those in the four other cohorts ([fig. 11](#)). Respondents in the 2009–15 cohort were also more than twice as likely as those in the other cohorts to report dissatisfaction with the job they held in 2017—17.4% compared with 7.0%. Those in the 2002–05 cohort reported the highest level of job satisfaction: 83.8% were satisfied or very satisfied with the job they held in 2017. Overall, job satisfaction was high: across the entire group of 308 that answered this question, more than three-quarters (76.3%) said they were satisfied or very satisfied with the job they held in 2017; less than a tenth (8.1%) said they were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied.

Asked about earnings, 50.5% of the 299 respondents who answered this question reported earning annual individual income between \$65,000 and \$99,999; 25.1%

earned \$64,999 or less, and 24.4% earned \$100,000 or more (fig. 12). Higher percentages of respondents employed outside postsecondary education reported annual incomes at the highest and lowest salary ranges than did respondents employed in postsecondary education—21.7% of respondents working outside postsecondary education compared with 7.5% of respondents working in postsecondary institutions reported annual individual income of \$125,000 or above, and 11.7% of respondents employed outside postsecondary education compared with 4.6% of those employed in postsecondary education reported earning under \$40,000 (fig. 13).

Figure 14 and figure 15 show detailed income-level distributions for respondents employed in and outside postsecondary education, by type of faculty and nonfaculty postsecondary position (fig. 14) or sector of employment outside postsecondary education (fig. 15). The number of cases is small for many categories, and caution should be exercised in reviewing these detailed breakdowns. Despite the limitations of small numbers, it is interesting to note the comparatively high percentage of respondents working in nonprofit organizations and for-profit businesses who report individual incomes above \$100,000. The highest concentration of PhDs working outside academia with earnings below \$40,000 is, no surprise, among the self-employed, and the highest concentration of well-paid academics is senior administrators: 90.9% of respondents in that employment category reported earnings of \$80,000 or more, and 45.5% reported earnings of \$125,000 and above.

Nearly all the tenured faculty members among respondents (95.1%) regard the doctorate as advantageous for their careers (fig. 16), as did most tenure-track faculty members (91.7%). Then there is a distinct drop: only 65.9% of those in non-tenure-track faculty positions say the doctorate has been advantageous or very advantageous for their careers. More unexpected, perhaps, may be how high a percentage of respondents working outside higher education said the doctorate has been advantageous for their careers—69.4%—and that only 9.7% said it has been disadvantageous or very disadvantageous.

Respondents in the most recent cohort take a view of their doctorate that is very different from that of those in previous cohorts (fig. 17). Across the four cohorts from 1996–98 to 2006–08, 86.8% of respondents said their doctorate has been advantageous or very advantageous to their careers and career success; across the aggregate of those four cohorts, only 1.8% said the degree has been disadvantageous or very disadvantageous. Of respondents in the 2009–15 cohort, a sharply lower 60.9% said the doctorate has been advantageous or very advantageous to their careers, and a sharply higher 21.7% said the degree has been disadvantageous or very disadvantageous.

Part-time teaching has been the primary job and chief source of income for 39.0% of all respondents at some point in their careers (fig. 18) and for 34.9% of the subset employed as tenured or tenure-track faculty members in 2017 (fig. 19).

Almost a quarter (23.8%) of survey respondents said they had experienced periods of unemployment since receiving the doctorate—6.8% for twelve months or more, counting time cumulatively (fig. 20).

*The Career Paths of
Modern Language PhDs:
Findings from the 2017
MLA Survey of Doctoral
Program Graduates*

Note

1. From 1977 to 1995, a sample of humanities doctorates were canvassed as part of the SDR, a biennial survey conducted by the National Science Foundation that gathers information about the occupations and career movement of a longitudinal sample of science and engineering doctorates from the year they receive their degrees to age seventy-five. The last profile of humanities doctorate recipients, based on the data collected from the 1995 SDR, was published by the National Research Council in 1997. The MLA has conducted periodic surveys of doctoral student placement since the mid-1970s, but those studies sought information about graduates' employment placements within a year or two of receiving their degrees.

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*The Career Paths of
Modern Language PhDs:
Findings from the 2017
MLA Survey of Doctoral
Program Graduates*

Table 1
Respondents to the 2017 MLA Survey, by Year Doctorate Was Received

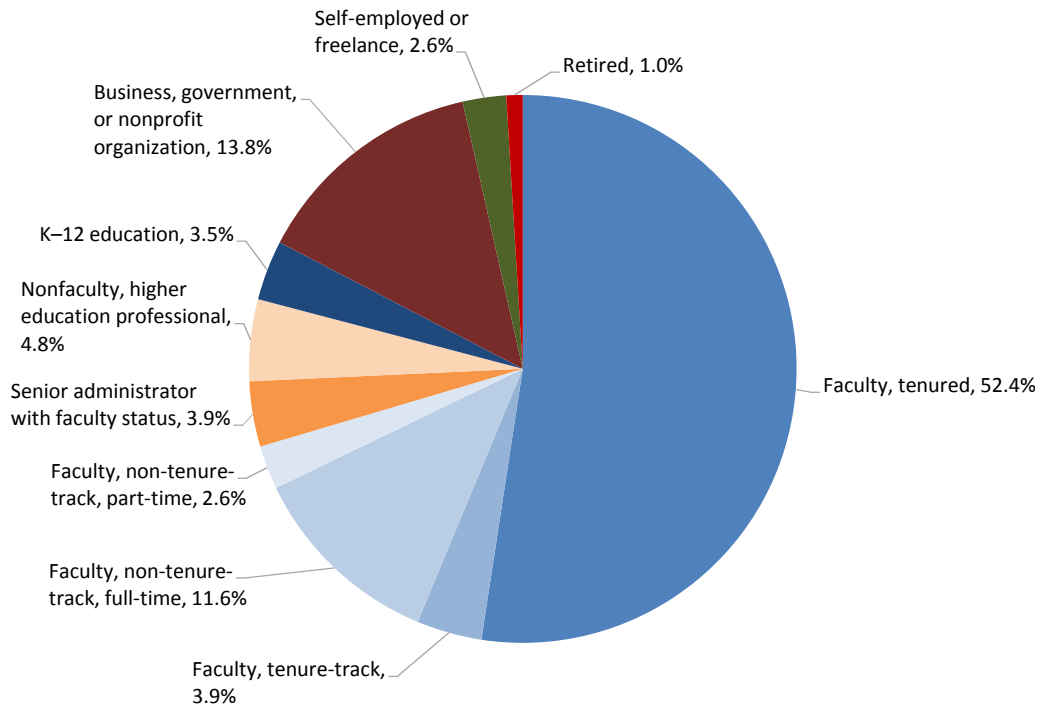
	Number	Percentage
1996–98	76	24.4
2002–05	74	23.8
1999–2001	81	26.0
2006–15		
2006–08	42	13.5
2009–15	23	7.4
Missing (year not given)	15	4.8
Total	311	100.0

Table 2
Respondents' Current (2017) Employment and First Job after Completing the PhD

Current Position (in 2017) First Job after Completing the PhD	Number	Percentage of Category	Percentage of All Responses
Faculty, tenured	163	100.0	52.4
Postsecondary faculty, tenure-track, full-time	84	51.5	27.0
Postsecondary faculty, non-tenure-track, full-time	45	27.6	14.5
Postsecondary faculty, non-tenure-track, part-time	13	8.0	4.2
Postdoctoral fellowship	13	8.0	4.2
Professional or administrative position in a postsecondary institution	2	1.2	0.6
Business, government, or nonprofit organization	3	1.8	1.0
Secondary school teaching	1	0.6	0.3
Self-employed or freelance work	1	0.6	0.3
Missing (did not answer this item)	1	0.6	0.3
Faculty, on the tenure track	12	100.0	3.9
Postsecondary faculty, tenure-track, full-time	5	41.7	1.6
Postsecondary faculty, non-tenure-track, full-time	3	25.0	1.0
Postsecondary faculty, non-tenure-track, part-time	3	25.0	1.0
Secondary school teaching, full-time	1	8.3	0.3
Faculty, not tenured, not on the tenure track	44	100.0	14.1
Postsecondary faculty, tenure-track, full-time	6	13.6	1.9
Postsecondary faculty, non-tenure-track, full-time	19	43.2	6.1
Postsecondary faculty, non-tenure-track, part-time	14	31.8	4.5
Postdoctoral fellowship	1	2.3	0.3
Business, government, or nonprofit organization	1	2.3	0.3
Secondary school teaching, full-time	2	4.5	0.6
Self-employed or freelance work	1	2.3	0.3
Senior administrator (provost, dean) with faculty status	12	100.0	3.9
Postsecondary faculty, tenure-track, full-time	5	41.7	1.6
Postsecondary faculty, non-tenure-track, full-time	4	33.3	1.3
Postsecondary faculty, non-tenure-track, part-time	1	8.3	0.3
Professional or administrative position in a postsecondary institution, full-time	2	16.7	0.6
Administrative or professional staff, not faculty	15	100.0	4.8
Postsecondary faculty, tenure-track, full-time	1	6.7	0.3
Postsecondary faculty, non-tenure-track, full-time	4	26.7	1.3
Postsecondary faculty, non-tenure-track, part-time	6	40.0	1.9
Professional or administrative position in a postsecondary institution, full-time	3	20.0	1.0
Self-employed or freelance work	1	6.7	0.3
Employed outside higher education	62	100.0	19.9
Postsecondary faculty, tenure-track, full-time	8	12.9	2.6
Postsecondary faculty, non-tenure-track, full-time	14	22.6	4.5
Postsecondary faculty, non-tenure-track, part-time	7	11.3	2.3
Postdoctoral fellowship	6	9.7	1.9
Professional or administrative position in a postsecondary institution, full-time	3	4.8	1.0
Business, government, or nonprofit organization	13	21.0	4.2
Secondary school teaching, full-time	7	11.3	2.3
Self-employed or freelance work	3	4.8	1.0
Further schooling	1	1.6	0.3
Retired	3	100.0	1.0
Postsecondary faculty, tenure-track, full-time	1	33.3	0.3
Business, government, or nonprofit organization	1	33.3	0.3
Secondary school teaching, full-time	1	33.3	0.3
Total	311		100.0

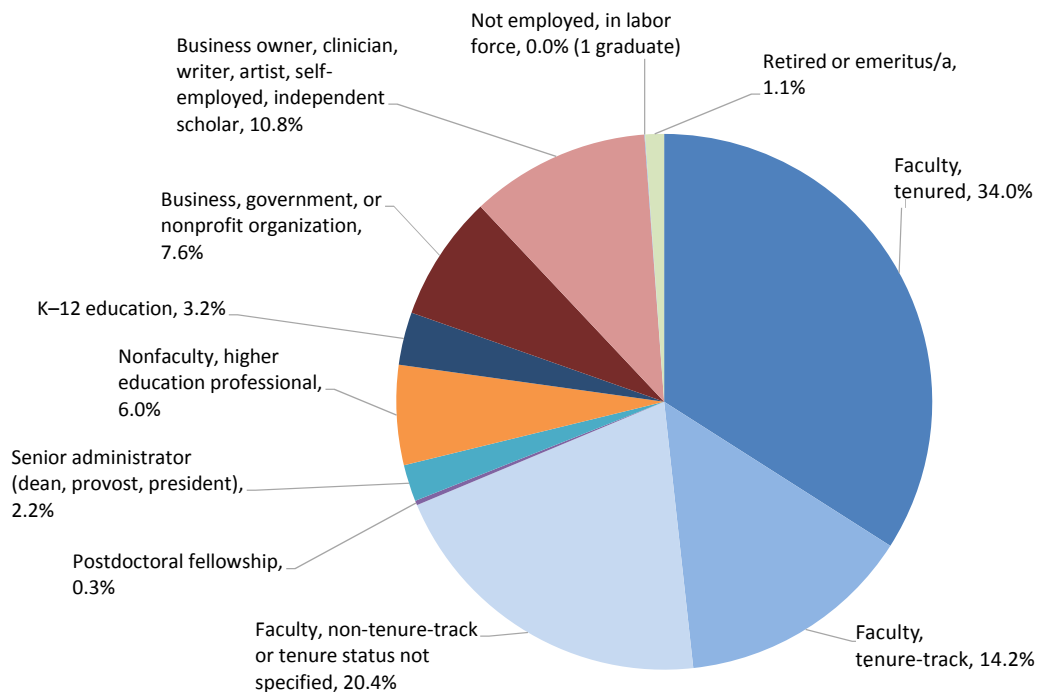
The Career Paths of Modern Language PhDs: Findings from the 2017 MLA Survey of Doctoral Program Graduates

Fig. 1
Occupations of Modern Language PhDs in 2017



Source: 2017 MLA follow-up survey of modern language PhDs (n = 311)

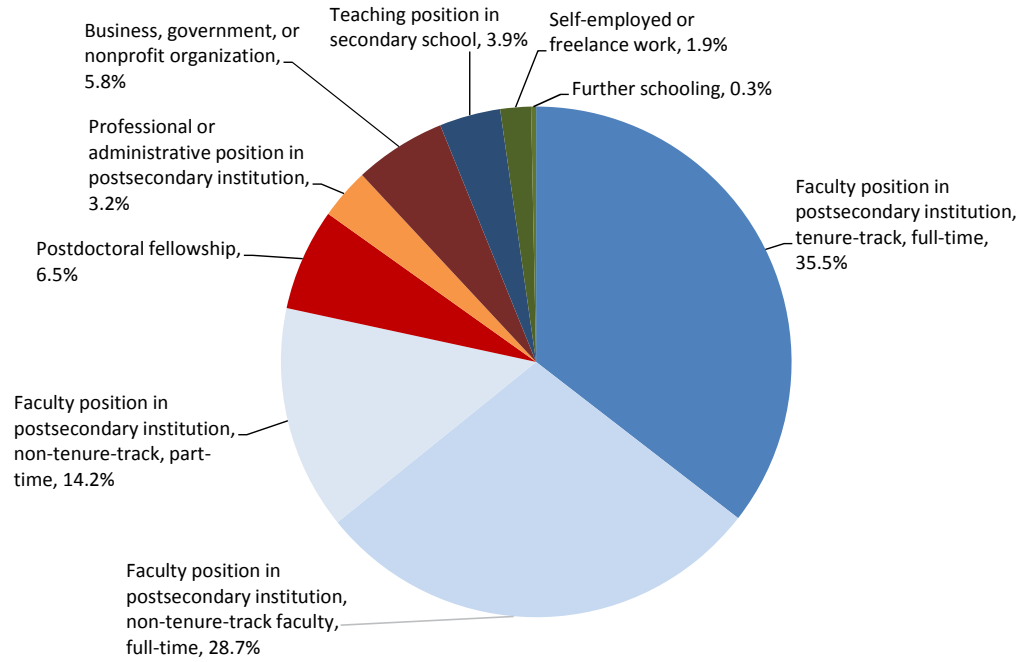
Fig. 2
Occupations of Modern Language PhDs in 2013



Source: 2013 MLA study of modern language PhDs (n = 2,198 graduates)

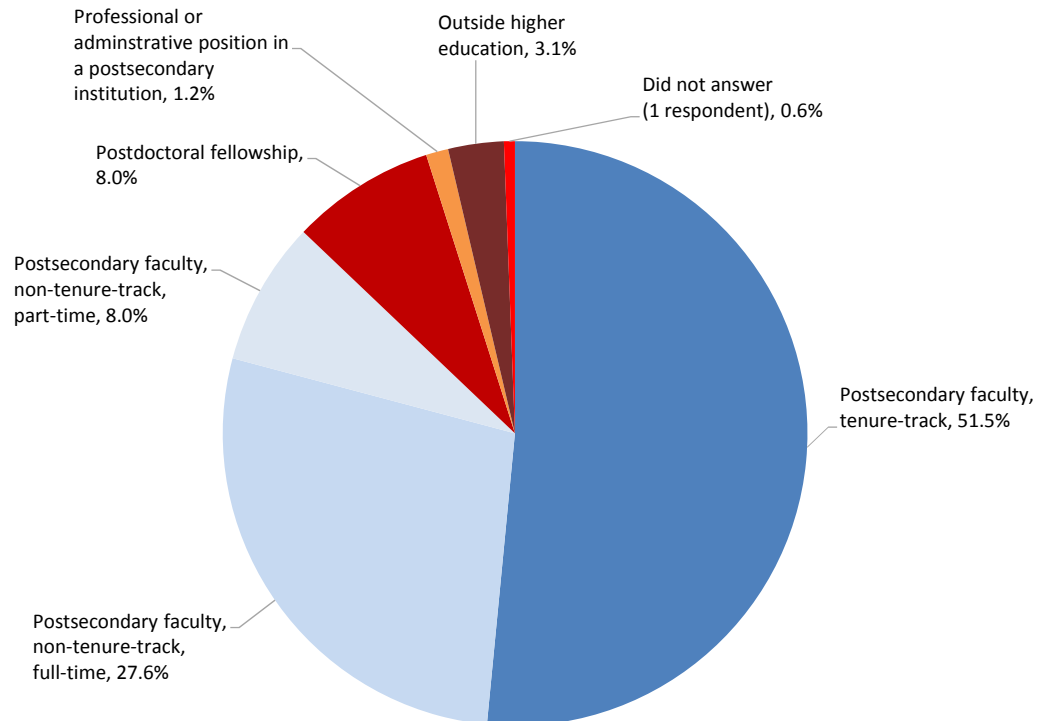
The Career Paths of Modern Language PhDs: Findings from the 2017 MLA Survey of Doctoral Program Graduates

Fig. 3
First Job Placement after Receipt of Doctorate



Source: 2017 MLA follow-up survey of modern language PhDs (n = 310)

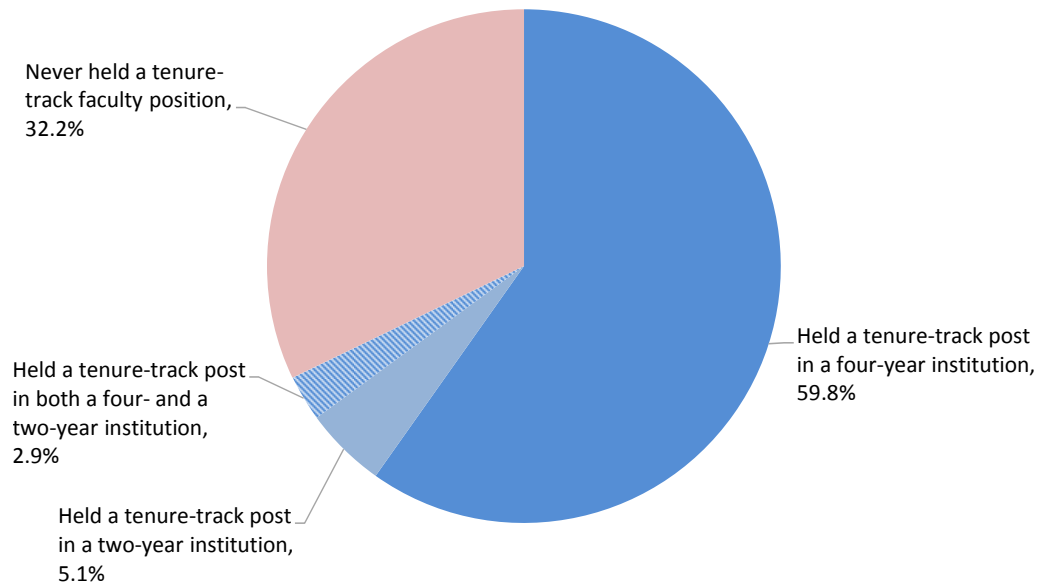
Fig. 4
First Job after Completing the PhD for Those Who Held a Tenured Faculty Position in 2017



Source: 2017 MLA follow-up survey of modern language PhDs (n = 163)

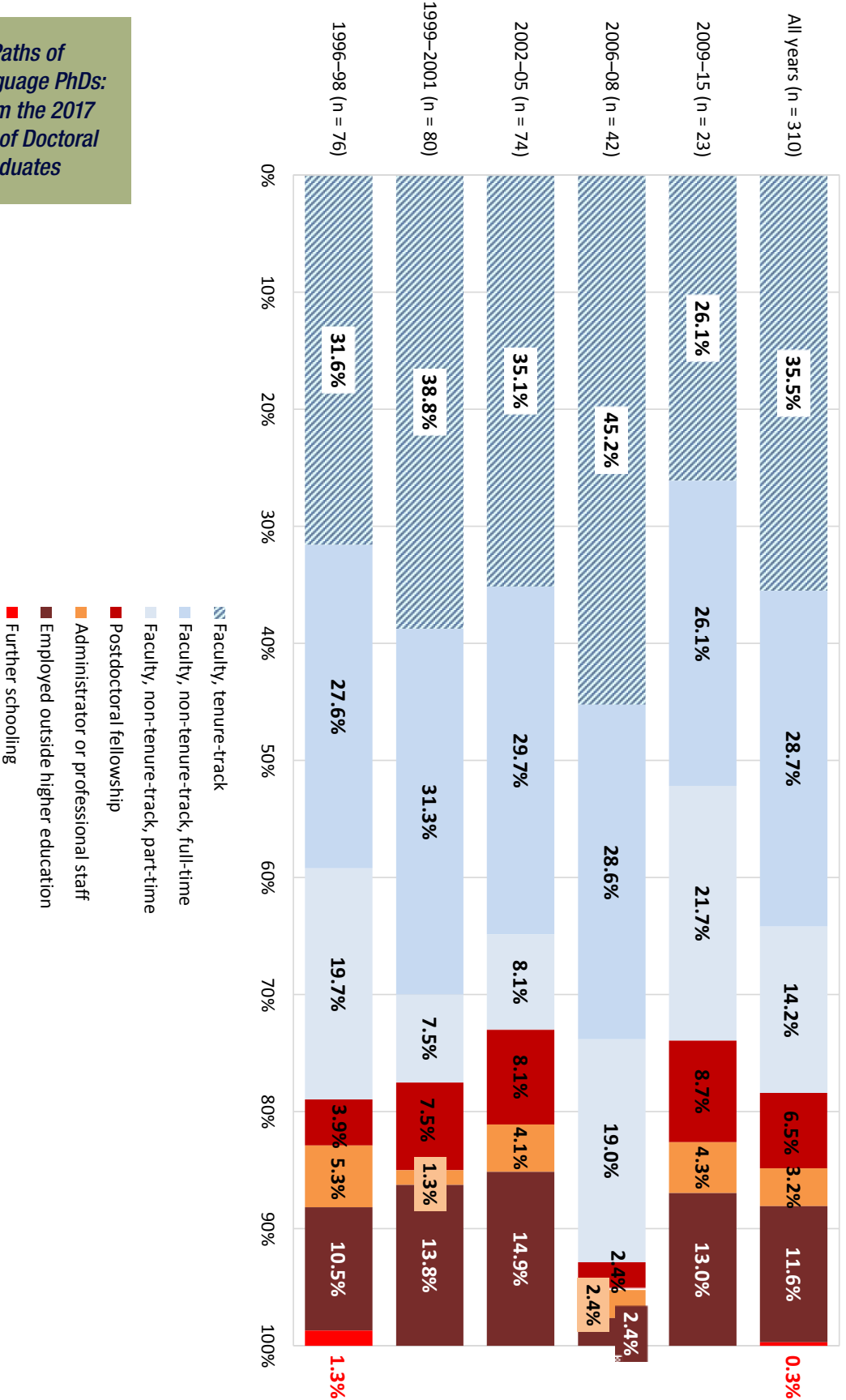
*The Career Paths of
Modern Language PhDs:
Findings from the 2017
MLA Survey of Doctoral
Program Graduates*

Fig. 5
Percentage of Respondents Who Held a Tenure-Track Faculty Position at Any Point since Receipt of the Doctorate



Source: 2017 MLA follow-up survey of modern language PhDs (n = 311)

Fig. 6
First Job after Completing the PhD, by Year PhD Was Received



*The Career Paths of
 Modern Language PhDs:
 Findings from the 2017
 MLA Survey of Doctoral
 Program Graduates*

Fig. 7
Current (2017) Employment, by Year Doctorate Was Received

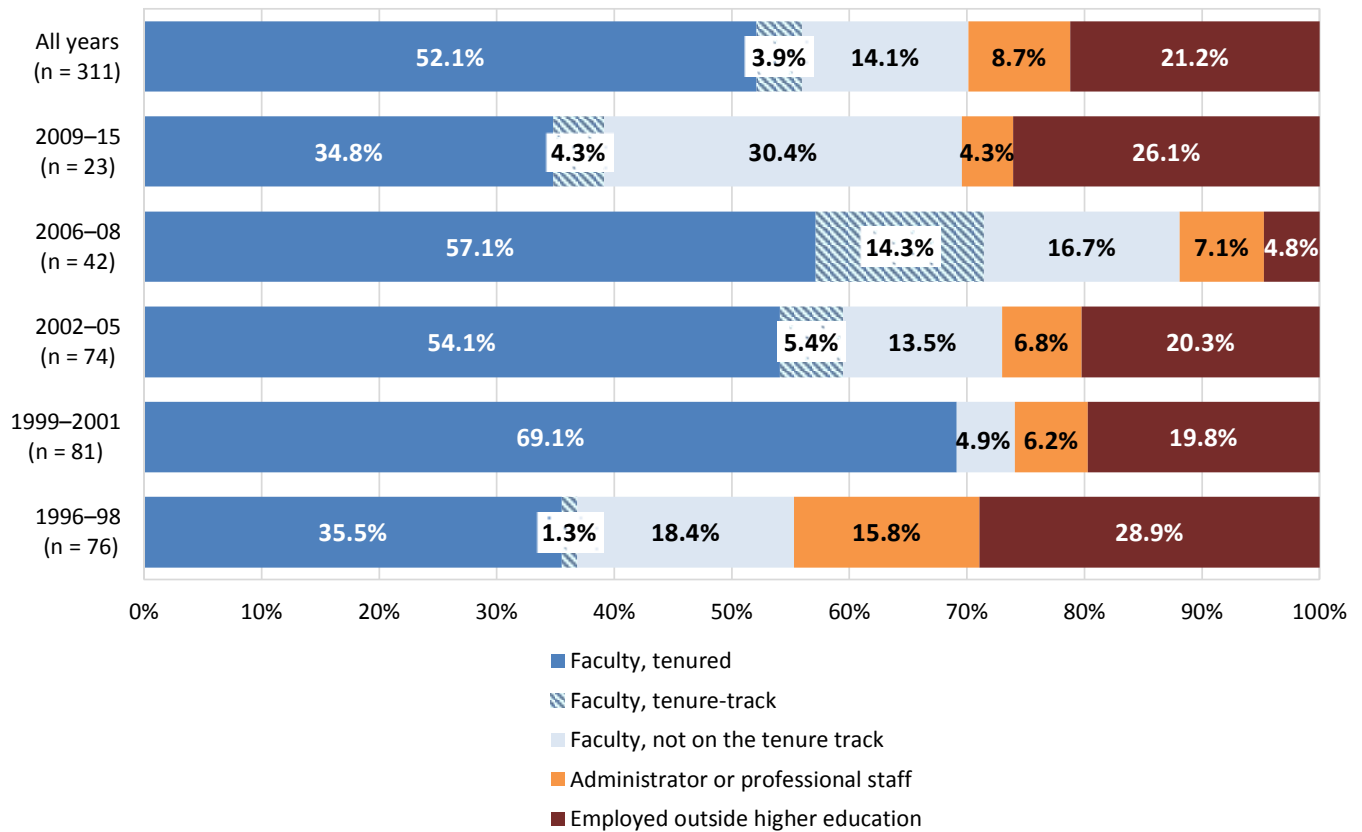
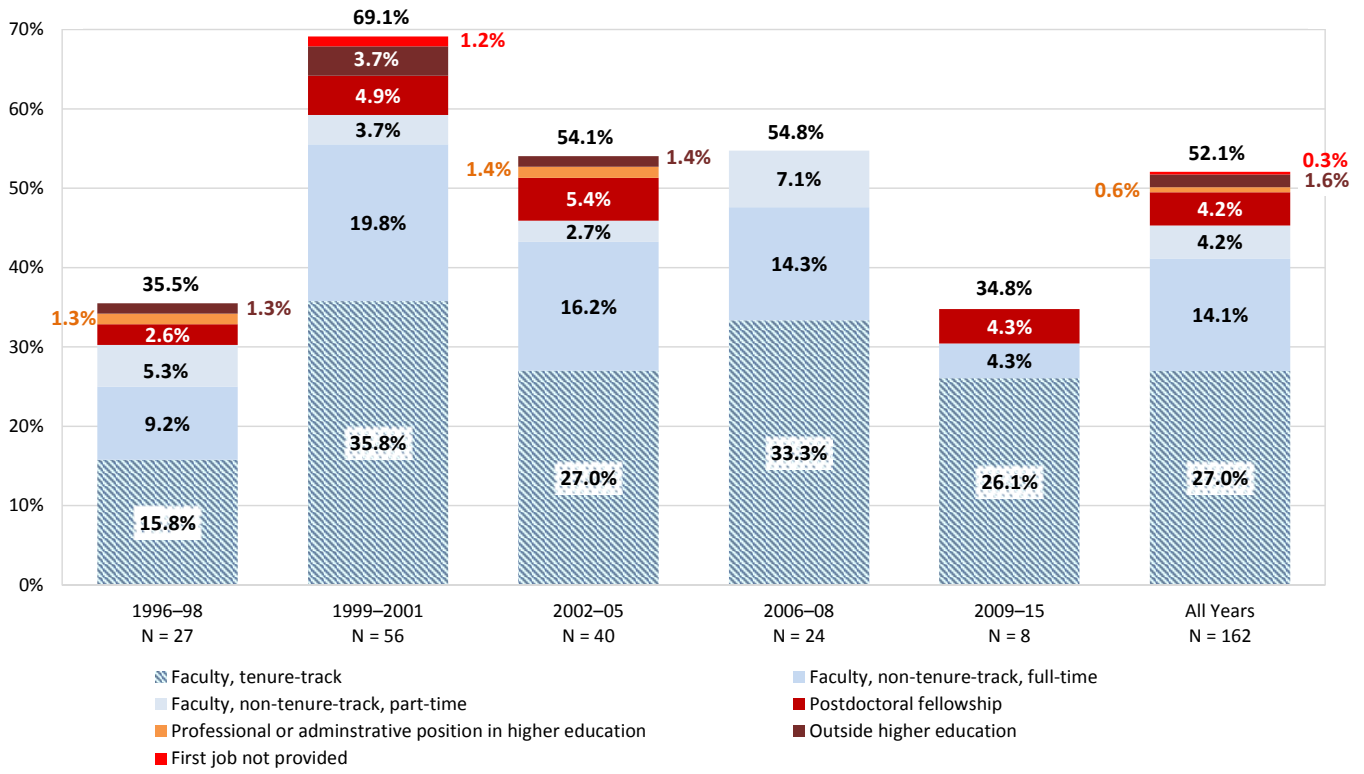


Fig. 8
Distribution of Respondents Who Held a Tenured Faculty Position in 2017, by First Job Placement after Completing the PhD and Year PhD Was Received



Note: Seven respondents who did not give the year they received their degrees are included only in the count for all years.

Fig. 9
Percentage of Respondents Who Held a Tenure-Track Faculty Position at Any Point since Receipt of the PhD, by Year PhD Was Received

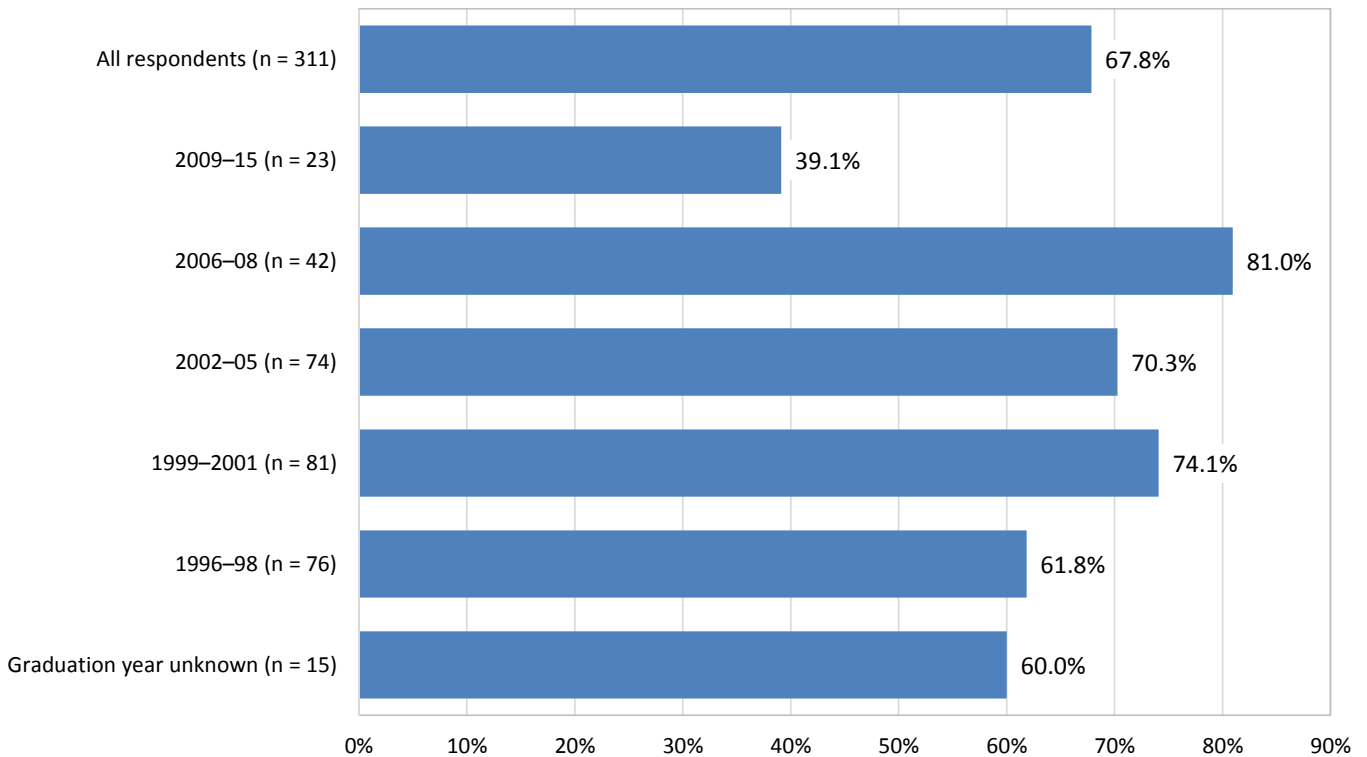
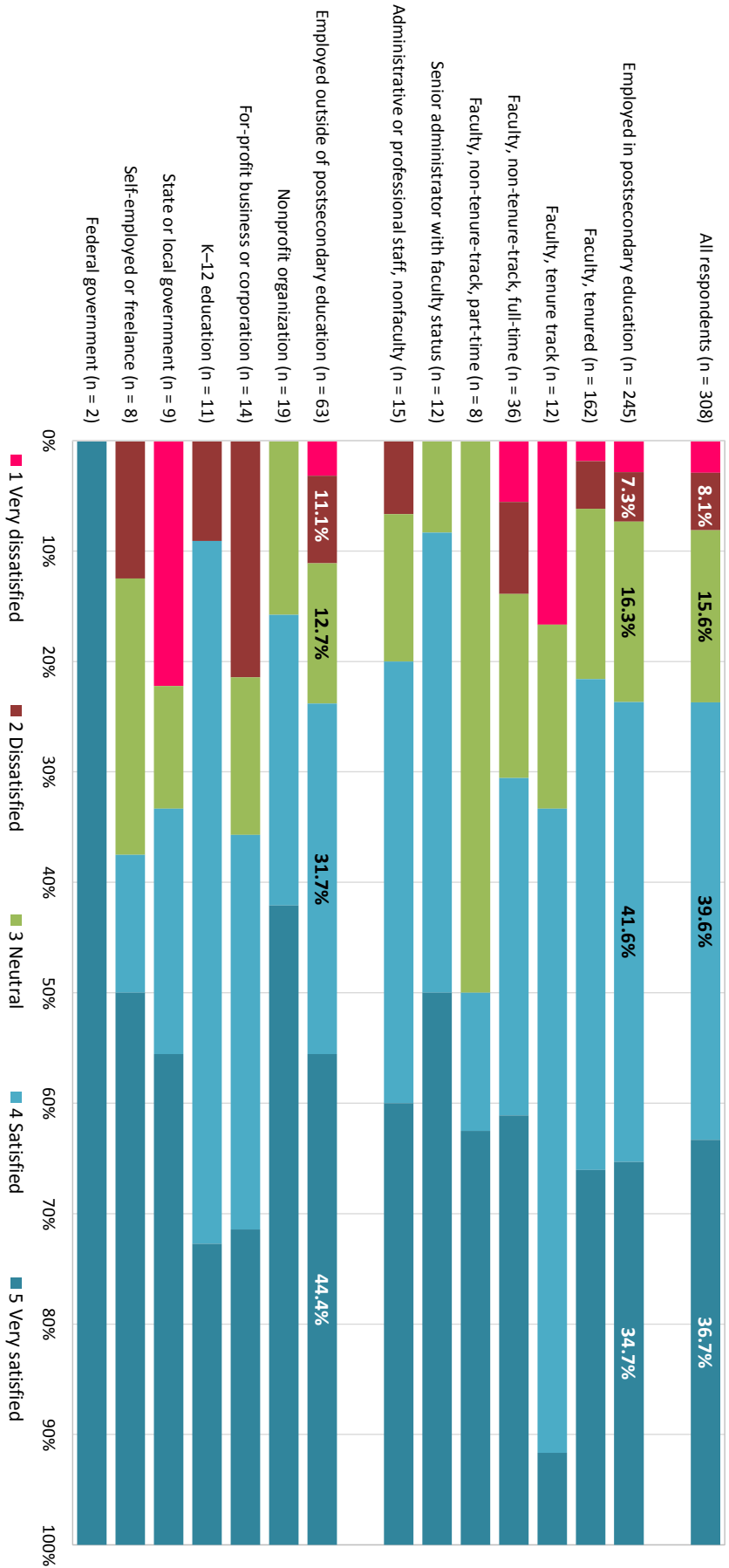


Fig. 10
Respondents' Job Satisfaction, by Sector of Employment in 2017



*The Career Paths of
 Modern Language PhDs:
 Findings from the 2017
 MLA Survey of Doctoral
 Program Graduates*

Fig. 11
Respondents' Job Satisfaction, by Year PhD Was Received



*The Career Paths of
 Modern Language PhDs:
 Findings from the 2017
 MLA Survey of Doctoral
 Program Graduates*

Fig. 12
Percentage of Respondents, by Salary Levels

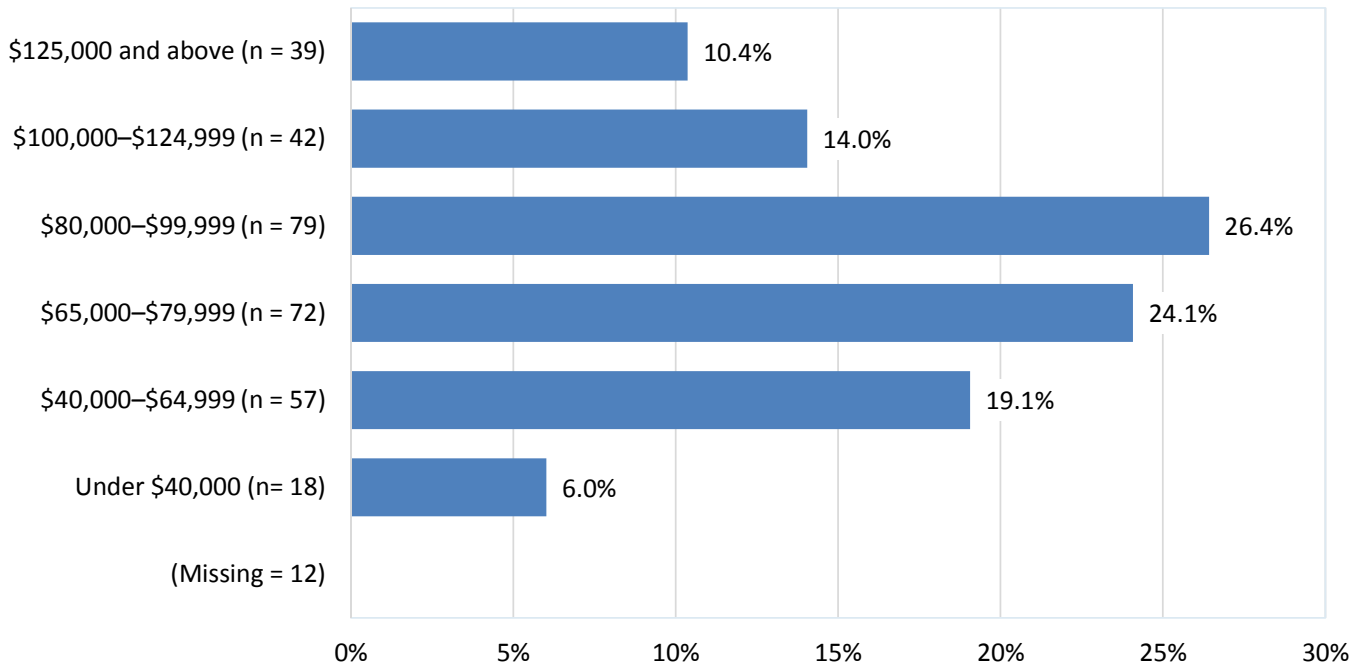
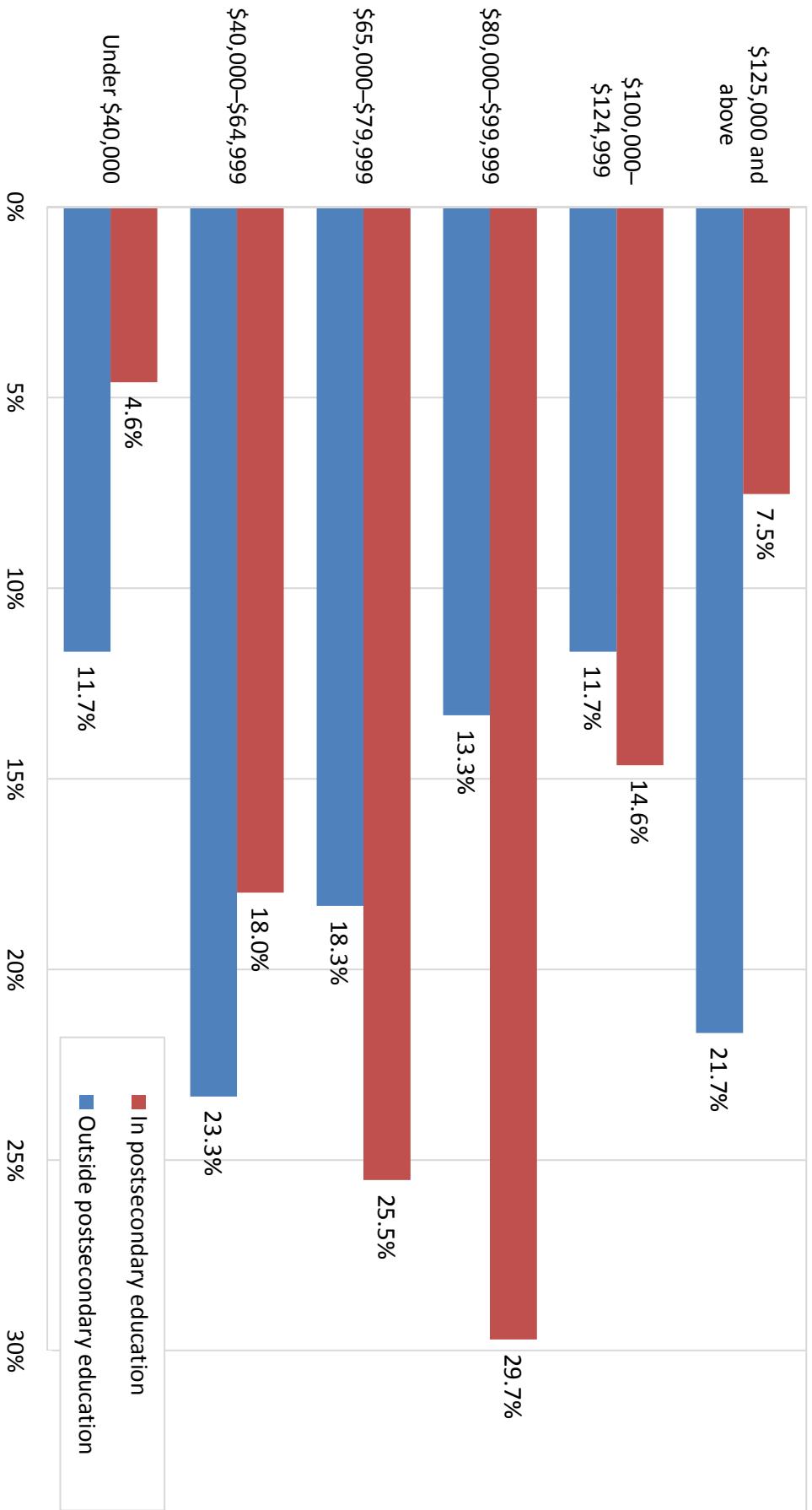
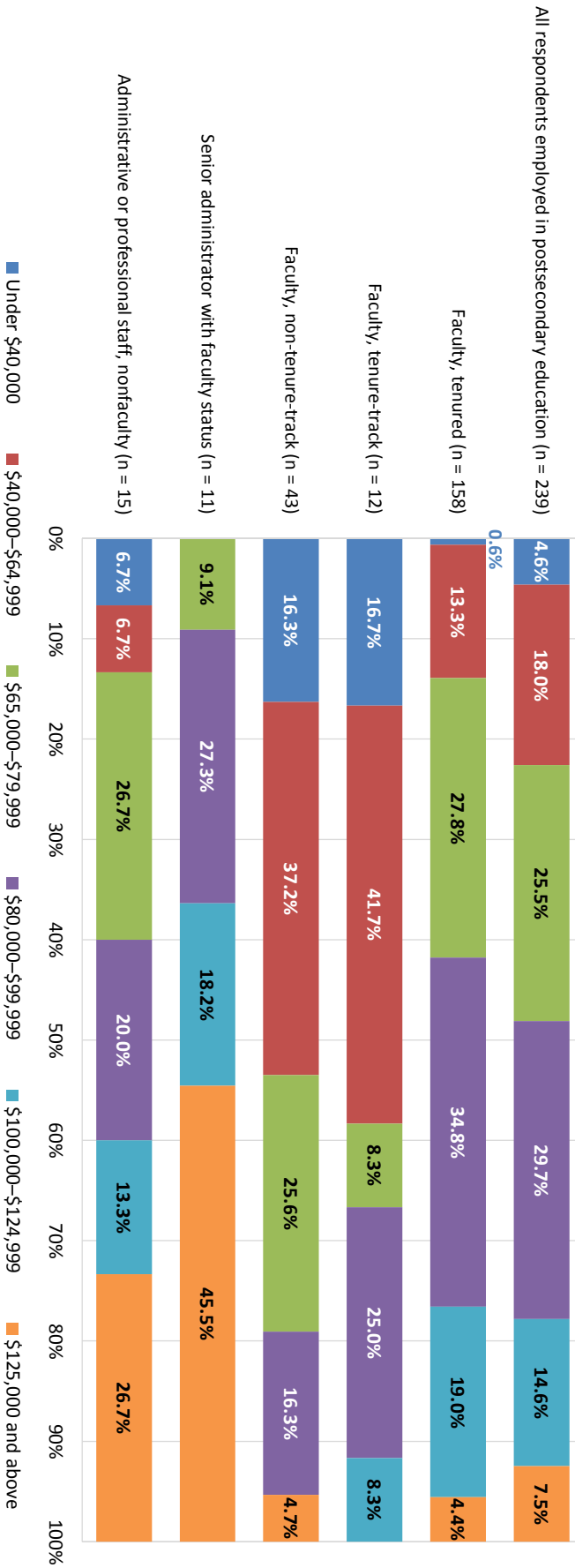


Fig. 13
Salary Levels of Respondents, by Employment in or outside Postsecondary Education



*The Career Paths of
Modern Language PhDs:
Findings from the 2017
MLA Survey of Doctoral
Program Graduates*

Fig. 14
Distribution across Salary Levels of Respondents Employed in Postsecondary Education, by Type of Faculty or Administrative Position



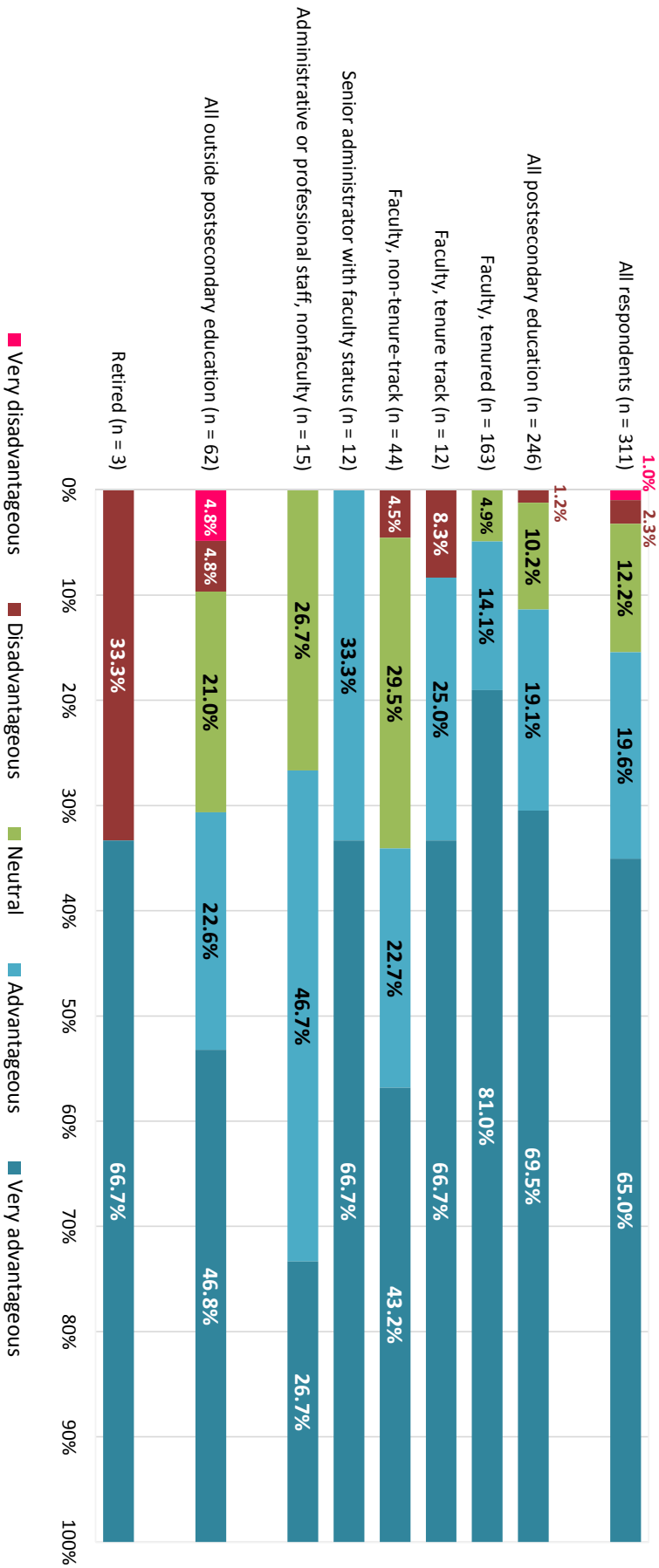
*The Career Paths of
 Modern Language PhDs:
 Findings from the 2017
 MLA Survey of Doctoral
 Program Graduates*

Fig. 15
Distribution across Salary Levels of Respondents Employed outside Postsecondary Education, by Sector of Employment



*The Career Paths of
Modern Language PhDs:
Findings from the 2017
MLA Survey of Doctoral
Program Graduates*

Fig. 16
Reported Advantageousness of PhD to Careers, by Sector of Employment



*The Career Paths of
 Modern Language PhDs:
 Findings from the 2017
 MLA Survey of Doctoral
 Program Graduates*

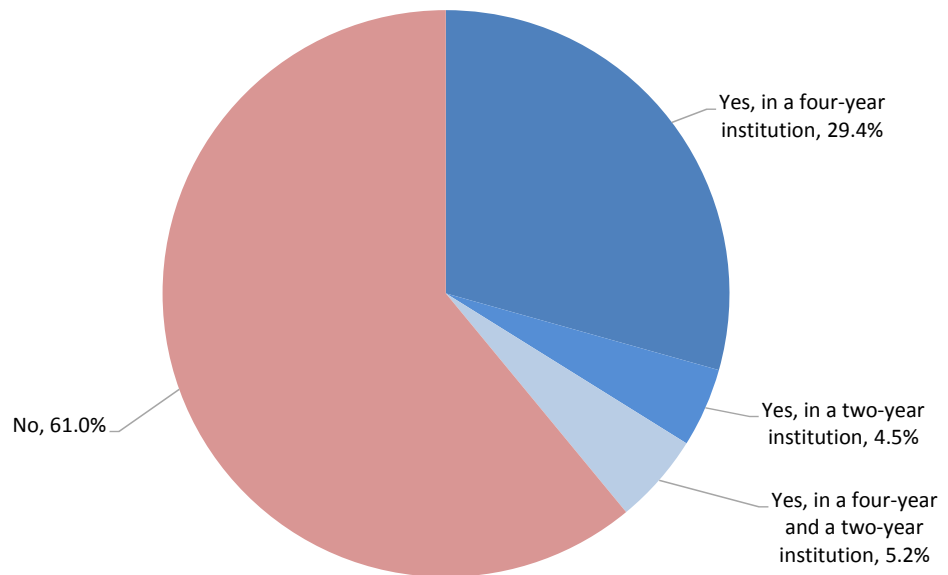
Fig. 17
Reported Advantageousness of PhD to Career, by Year PhD Was Received



*The Career Paths of
 Modern Language PhDs:
 Findings from the 2017
 MLA Survey of Doctoral
 Program Graduates*

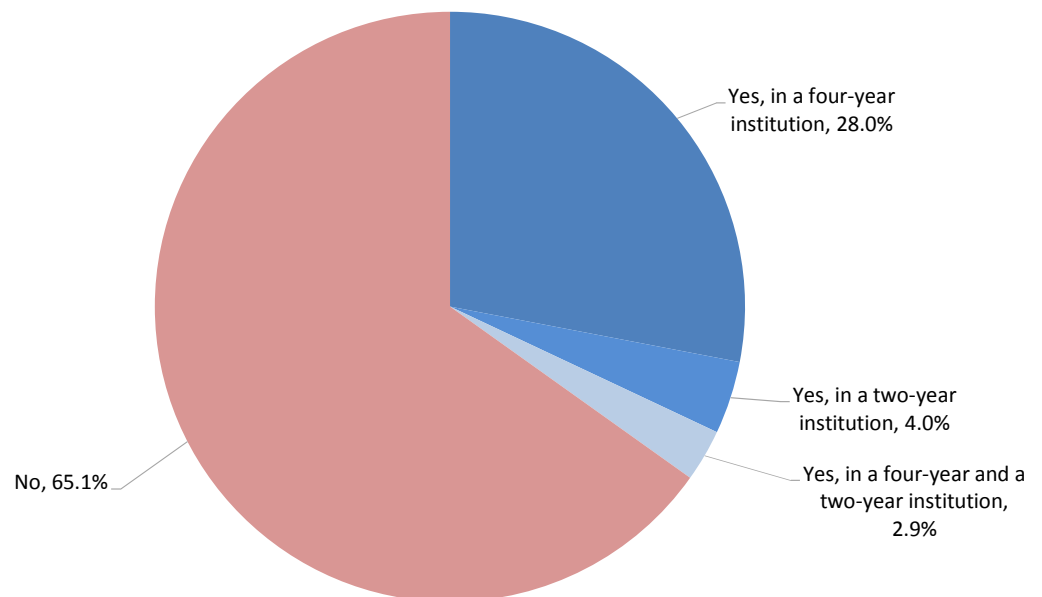
The Career Paths of Modern Language PhDs: Findings from the 2017 MLA Survey of Doctoral Program Graduates

Fig. 18
Has Your Primary Job and Chief Source of Income Ever Been a Part-Time Teaching Position or Positions in Postsecondary Education?



Source: 2017 MLA follow-up survey of modern language PhDs (n = 310)

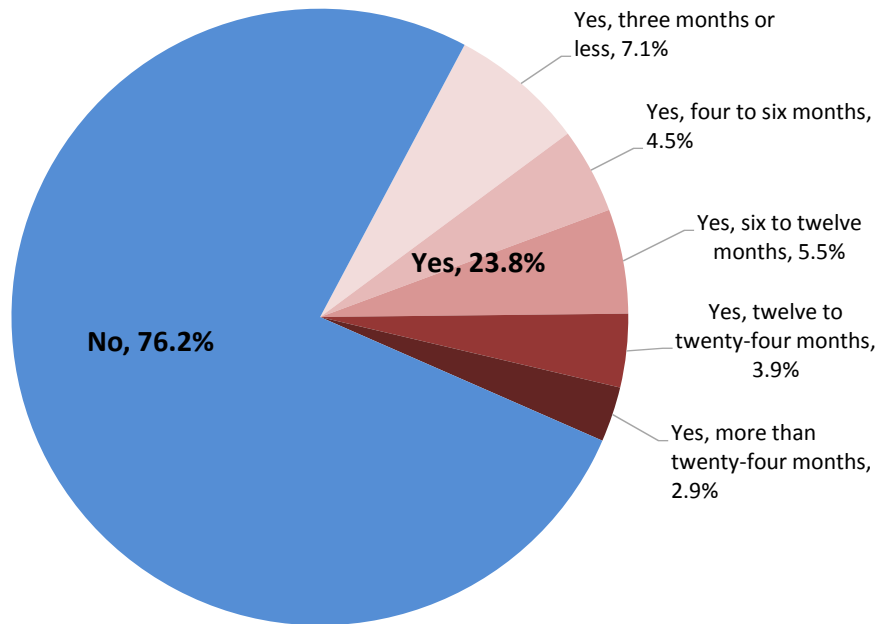
Fig. 19
Has Your Primary Job and Chief Source of Income Ever Been a Part-Time Teaching Position or Positions in Postsecondary Education?



Source: 2017 MLA follow-up survey of modern language PhDs (n = 175 [respondents who held tenured or tenure-track faculty positions in 2017])

*The Career Paths of
Modern Language PhDs:
Findings from the 2017
MLA Survey of Doctoral
Program Graduates*

Fig. 20
Have You Experienced Periods of Unemployment since Receiving Your PhD?



Source: 2017 MLA follow-up survey of modern language PhDs (n = 311)