We’ve all read the headlines— [slide 2]

- “Overeducated, Underemployed: How to Fix Humanities Grad School” (William Pannapacker, Slate, July 27, 2011)
- “The Disposable Academic : Why Doing a PhD Is often a Waste of Time” (Dec 16th 2010. The Economist)
- “Graduate School in the Humanities—Just Don’t Go,” (Thomas Benton CHE, Jan. 30, 2009)

And the visualizations aren’t any better—[slide 3]

We also all know the reasons why the prospects for the humanities PhD, including the PhD in English, are so dire:

- The number of PhDs being produced exceeds the number of tenure-track jobs available. [MLA chart, slide 4]
- Grad programs, eager to fill graduate seminars and staff first-year writing courses, are unwilling to reduce admissions [chart showing number of jobs held by graduate assistants has held steady, slide 5]
- Tenure-track positions are being eliminated in favor of contingent employment. As the AAUP reports, today about half the faculty hold a part-time appointment, and only 29.8% hold tenure or are on the tenure track. Adjuncts clearly represent a cost-savings to institutions, especially those who have been more or less defunded by the state. [slide 6]
- Given the scarcity of tenure-track jobs, graduate students are encouraged to hyper-professionalize, lengthening the time to degree (MLA reports a median time to degree of about nine years) and often, increasing student debt. [slide 7]
- Humanities graduate programs—with their emphasis on specialization and the production of a book-length dissertation—are poor preparation for the teaching and service that most academics jobs require. [show job ad, slide 8]

We hear these claims and think to ourselves, smuggly, that all this may be true for graduate programs in literature but not for Rhet/Comp. We insist that Rhet/Comp graduate programs DO train people for the work that needs to be done, and as a result, the job market for Rhet/Comp PhDs is still relatively strong. But how strong? And for how long? And in what ways, specifically?
The truth is, we don’t know. MLA publishes reports on the number of jobs available each year in various specializations, but relies for the number of PhDs produced on the NSF’s Survey of Earned Doctorates, which does not account for specialization. We also know that MLA often ignores Rhetoric and Composition in its studies of the discipline of English. Conversely, English departments offering PhD specializations in Rhet/Comp often report total job placement numbers without differentiating between Rhet/Comp and literary studies.

To MLA’s credit, a 2014 Task Force Report on Doctoral Study has recommended some fairly dramatic changes to graduate programs in English:

First are four broad goals [slide 9]:

**Pursue and maintain academic excellence.**

**Preserve accessibility.** In other words—don’t reduce admissions.

**Broaden career paths.**

**Focus on graduate students’ needs** and not on replication of graduate faculty interests.

These four have led to ten more specific recommendations [slide 10]:

**Redesign the doctoral program.** Consider the learning needs and career goals of students, and include noncourse-based activities essential in today’s career environment.

**Engage more deeply with technology.** Support technology training and encourage the use of new tools and techniques for scholarly purposes

**Reimagine the dissertation.** By expanding the forms it might take

**Reduce time to degree** to five years.

**Strengthen teaching preparation**—‘nuff said.

**Expand professionalization opportunities**—collaboration, project management, grant writing, professional Internships.

**Use the whole university community.** Broaden mentorship to include other professionals on campus.

**Redefine the roles of faculty advisers.** The director of graduate studies should be a leader of change . . . The placement officer needs expertise in a variety of careers

**Validate diverse career outcomes** while also sharing information about the program’s placements, the academic job market, and the exploitation of academic labor.

**Rethink admissions practices** to fit the changing character of doctoral education and the broadened range of career opportunities, while maintaining access for underrepresented groups

Certainly, a number of us already do these things. But a close look at the job market for Rhet/Comp PhDs from the perspective of job seekers can provide some insights into changes we might still need to make. That’s why it’s time for us to collect our own data about our own doctoral programs and the job market our own students face. Today, I’m here to report briefly
on the first year of a three-year survey of the job search experiences of Rhet/Comp PhDs, those who applied for jobs in 2013-2014. (My survey of this year’s job seekers will be distributed the first week of April.)

My preliminary observations about the job market itself are based on an analysis of job ads in the 2013-2014 JIL that is now published as a single pdf at the end of the job cycle in July. I searched for the key word “composition” as well as “rhetoric” and after multiple close readings of the ads themselves, eliminated jobs that wanted a literary specialization. (My numbers, thus, vary slightly from those posted by MLA, which are based on the tags submitted with the ad, which I didn’t have access to.)

To understand job seekers’ experiences, I created an online survey, approved by my IRB, and distributed it to grad directors as well as through the WPA and TechRhet listservs; 94 job seekers completed the survey.

Since I don’t yet have comparative data, I can’t speak to trends, but I can offer a snapshot of the Rhet/Comp job search in 2013-14, and will offer a few observations about the job market at the end of my time.

Here is a numerical picture of the Rhet/Comp jobs, advertised in the 2013-2014 JIL, by rank [slide 11]:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tenure track</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assistant</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant/Associate</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate/Full</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Tenure Track</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[135 at assistant or assistant/associate level]

Renewable term 40
Non renewable term 4

Thus, 150 out of 194, or about 77% of Rhet/Comp job ads were for tenure-track positions. That’s better than the 66.5% of tenure-track positions reported by MLA for the same year [slide 12] and which includes Rhet/Comp, remember.

Next, I highlighted the key words used in the ads to describe specializations or qualities desired in successful candidates. Here’s a visualization of the key words in ads [show wordle, slide 13].

Because my survey asked job seekers to describe their specializations (not their dissertations per se) I was able to visualize those key words as well. Here’s a comparison [slide 14].

In the job ads, you might notice that the word “Administration” appears second only to the word “Writing” and is of the same importance as the word “composition.” In the job seekers’
descriptions of themselves, however, “administration” shows up much smaller than “rhetoric” or “theory,” though “pedagogy” does make a major appearance.

Because preparing graduate students to teach and compose new media is of pressing concern to many of us, I searched the 194 job ads for the word “digital.” It appears in 57 of 194 ads or (about 29%) [slide 15].

Another thing I’m interested in is whether administrative work is an expectation for many or most jobs in Rhetoric and Composition and if so, what that might mean for graduate education. So I analyzed every job ad for references to program administration, explicit or implicit (words like “leadership” or “program design” or “assessment”) And here is what I found [slide 16]:

Assistant 31
Assistant/Associate 17
Associate 2
Associate/Full 4
Open Rank 6
Non-tenure track 7

Put another way, 48 out of the 135 jobs advertised at the Assistant or Assistant/Associate level, that’s about 35%, involve administration potentially before tenure. [slide 17] When asked what surprised job seekers the most, one responded “The extent to which some departments were looking for a problem solver” and another noted being surprised by “The number of administrative jobs for which I was qualified--I was under the impression that most jobs would be research-oriented, and they were not.” More on this point later.

Let me make one more observation about the job ads before moving on to what I learned from the surveys. Graduate programs are often accused of perpetuating the myth that the only job worth aspiring to is one at a research university, with a low teaching load (the word “load” implying burden), primarily in one’s specialization. But how many jobs are research jobs? [slide 18] Here are the Carnegie classifications for the schools with tenure-track job ads listed in the JIL for 2013-14. While there are certainly jobs at research institutions, the largest category by far was the comprehensive university with a masters program where one might be expected to teach 6-8 courses a year of mostly undergraduates and perhaps supervise MA-level instructors.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Assist</th>
<th>Assist/Assoc</th>
<th>Assoc</th>
<th>Assoc/Full</th>
<th>Rank open</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RU/VH</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RU/H</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DRU</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masters L</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masters M</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masters S</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bac</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assoc</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spec</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I also noted the number of administrative jobs at each kind of institution [slide 19].
You might notice that the jobs with the highest research expectation were least likely to require administrative work of assistant professors. That’s a nice change from when I was on the market in the mid-1990s, and it was fairly common for beginning assistant professors to be asked to direct large composition programs at research institutions.

But you might also notice that roughly a third to a half of all positions involved writing program administration, broadly defined. Are at least half of our students being prepared to serve as writing program administrators? Anecdotally, I would say, no, at least not at my institution, but again, this would be a useful thing to actually know.

Now on to the survey.
As I said, I had responses from 94 job seekers, [slide 20] 68 of whom, or 73% were in their first year of job searching and 18.28% were applying for the second year.

[slide 21] 40.43% (38/94) percent had their dissertations completed and another 26.6% (25/94) expected to complete them in the spring.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I have completed my PhD</th>
<th>40.43%</th>
<th>38</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I plan to complete my PhD in Spring 2014</td>
<td>26.60%</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I plan to complete my PhD in Summer 2014</td>
<td>25.53%</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I plan to complete my PhD in Fall 2014</td>
<td>7.45%</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What I did not ask, but will ask in subsequent surveys, is how many years they had been in their graduate program and how many years of funding they had been given. Obviously, funding can be a crucial factor in how long students spend completing their degrees. For example, TCU guarantees only 4 years of funding to PhD students who come in with Masters degrees, and students who work hard can finish in 4 years, but that means they’ll have less teaching and administrative experience and less time to publish before they go on the market.
I was curious how many jobs candidates applied for [slide 22] and found that almost 48 percent applied to “any job for which I was at all qualified” meaning [chart with numbers], thus [slide 23] many students, applied for many jobs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of jobs applied</th>
<th>1-10</th>
<th>21.51%</th>
<th>20</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11-20</td>
<td>7.53%</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-30</td>
<td>5.38%</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-40</td>
<td>9.68%</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41-50</td>
<td>10.75%</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51-60</td>
<td>11.83%</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>61-70</td>
<td>7.53%</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>71-80</td>
<td>3.23%</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 80</td>
<td>22.58%</td>
<td>21</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the comments section, students reported applying for 120, 130, 150, and even 181 jobs

And these many applications resulted, for most students, in many initial interviews.

As most of you probably know, the MLA conference is dying out as the site of preliminary interviews. [slide 24] 75.53% (71/94) of respondents had video conferences or phone interviews; only 11 out of 94 had MLA interviews.

That’s good news for the many survey respondents who complained about the exorbitant cost of the job search, especially Interfolio. But no longer having a set date for preliminary interviews means no shared timeline for offers, exacerbating the problem of job seekers feeling forced to decide about an early offer before knowing whether another offer will be forthcoming.


[slide 26] By the time of the survey, 72 (75.79%) of 94 respondents had accepted a position for full-time employment in a college or university

55 out of the 72 full-time academic positions accepted by respondents were tenure-track,

Thus 55 of 94 respondents, or 59% of job seekers in my survey, landed a tenure-track job from among the 107-135 tenure-track jobs available for assistant professors advertised in the JIL.

[slide 27] So, is the job market for Rhet/Comp students truly better than it is for graduate students in literary studies? The answer is, yes, sort of.

At least for the year in question, we can say that 55 of 94 or 59% of students with PhDs in Rhet/Comp landed a tenure track position. Compare that to MLA’s report showing below 40% placement in tenure-track jobs in 2009-10 (and again, their numbers include Rhet/Comp PhDs.) [slide 28]
MLA recently attempted to identify the career outcomes of those who had earned a PhD between 1996 and 2011 [slide 29], and found that 33.8% were tenured and 14.1% were on the tenure track. That adds up to 47.9% who have tenure-able positions. And again, that number includes many PhDs in Rhet/Comp. So yes, our students are doing better.

At the same time, almost half of the 91 respondents who in my survey said they applied for a tenure-track position failed to attain one.

Let me suggest a few reasons, based on my analysis so far [slide 30].

**Hypothesis 1:** There may not be enough tenure-track jobs for all the PhD students who want them. If we look just at assistant professor positions advertised in the JIL, that number is 107. And 94 job seekers (certainly not everyone) responded to my survey. An additional consideration is that although tenure was the factor that most influenced job seekers when deciding to apply for a job, geography was the second most important factor. Survey comments suggest that some job seekers may opt not to apply for or accept a tenure track position for geographical reasons.

**Hypothesis 2:** There may be a mis-match between the tenure-track jobs available and PhD students’ training or preferences. That’s certainly what many respondents told me in their open-ended comments.

If most students are socialized to prefer a research-oriented job, it’s clear that there are not enough of those jobs to go around.

**Hypothesis 3:** Given that about a third of the positions available for assistant professors involve administrative work at some point before tenure, there may not be enough students prepared or willing to fill those positions, especially if they have been warned away from them by their mentors.

**Hypothesis 4:** Although many graduate students choose a specialization in Rhetoric and Composition because they enjoy teaching writing, they do not relish the idea of teaching many sections of writing. Not all job ads list the teaching load, so I can’t do a meaningful comparison, but respondents’ comments do reveal a perception that a position which requires teaching a lot of required writing courses, is tantamount to exploitation.

On your handout, I’ve provided a sample of responses to two of the open-ended questions. It’s interesting to me how many of these comments align with the MLA Task Force Report. Of course, it’s up to us to decide what we want to do about it.

**Q37 What has been your biggest surprise regarding the job search?** (74 responses)

[slide 31]

**Time, expense, and (il)logistics of application process [16]**

- How different the deadlines are from place to place.
- The amount of time and materials required to apply for jobs
- How expensive it was (Interfolio mostly) and how vastly different the teaching presentation
I applied for almost 125 postings, did about 25 phone/skype interviews, and traveled to 9 different campuses in order to secure a tenure-track position.

Just how much work it is to get work! Tailoring each CV, letter, teaching statement, research statement, teaching portfolio, etc for each job is so time-consuming.

I applied to too many jobs, which was far more stressful than I was prepared for.

It's absurdly expensive

**Disappointment at types of jobs available [15]**

- The lack of variety of kinds of positions available.
- The sudden casualization of Writing Center directorships. Even two years ago, the bulk of them were tenure track. Now, the majority with either term professorships or low-paying admin positions.
- That my professional and technical communication jobs were the most interested in me.
- I was surprised at how much pressure I received from my faculty to secure a tenure-track position at a research-focused institutions regardless of my personal goals.
- The lack of research jobs in rhetoric (not composition)
- The emphasis on teaching rather than research
- I have been surprised at how little preparation I received for the wide array of institutional types that were hiring
- My WPA experience seemed to be the most important component of my CV.
- How important my crossover status (between creative writing and rhet/comp) became.
- The expectation that a writing teacher with a PhD should work full-time with 120+ (or more) students and get paid less than $50,000.

**That it went better than expected/no surprises [12]**

- No surprises
- How fun it was.
- How well I did. I honestly didn’t expect to be as competitive as I was. It was surprising to see that some many different institutions were interested in what I had to offer. It was humbling; I am humbled.
- There were more jobs out there than I expected.
- That I was lucky enough to find a "perfect fit" position.

**Disorganized and discourteous process [11]**

- I remain surprised by how disorganized and discourteous the process can be.
- The academy’s complete lack of consideration for family
- The vast differences among required materials at the preliminary application stage.
- That some programs asked me to cover cost of travel for campus visits (I turned these positions down).
- That I mostly did not get any acknowledgement from the institutions
- The way the institutions I applied to responded/did not respond to my materials.
- How little communication goes on once materials have been submitted
- How incredibly unprofessional some search committees are. It sucks to discover you didn't get a job through Facebook, before the committee has actually contacted you.

**Selection seems illogical [6]**

- How seemingly random the decisions have become when choosing candidates.
- How many jobs (5 or so) that I felt completely prepared for but did not even get an initial interview for
- Some job descriptions were obtuse.
- Its arbitrariness.
- How unpredictable it is.
- How ridiculously inconsistent, random, and weird it is. I also had A LOT of phone/MLA/Skype interviews that went no further.

**The process was not what I expected [5]**
• I was surprised that I found my job after MLA. . . on the hiring university’s HR site in February
• How long it took for me to feel comfortable interviewing.
• The amount of decisions you have to make. There are a lot of choices during the applications, preliminary interviews and campus visits. They felt loaded with potential pitfalls.
• That we are expected to have some publications on our CV in addition to teaching and conferencing.
• The phone interviews. . . I received strange questions that had nothing to do with the job.

**The competitiveness of the job market [4]**
How over-saturated we are—too many graduate students and recent grads for too few jobs. how you can have a stellar dossier and still get rejected by second- and third-rate schools. There are so many applicants that it is unbelievable!
I didn't think about how my “competition” would include not only folks like me (about to finish our PhDs) but also those with doctorates and two or more years of experience (advanced assistant professors).
How extremely competitive it was, with more than 100 applicants for each position.

**Timeline for decisions [4]**
That there are two cycles. All but one of my interviews were for post-MLA jobs.
The multiple timelines of the schools I applied to and the difficulty when they did not line-up.
Varied timelines. Pressure to decide on a position without time to hear back from other institutions.
I never thought I would be someone who took a job before MLA.

**Mentally/psychologically draining [4]**
How depressing it was. exhausting. draining. I knew it would be tough but I was surprised by how much it utterly depleted me.
It was emotionally harrowing and mentally very difficult. Everyone told me this in advance, but it was much harder than I expected.
How personally I took the whole process.

**Q40 If you could offer one piece of advice to your graduate program for improving preparation for the jobs available for Rhetoric and Composition PhDs, what would it be? [80 responses]**

**Provide more info/job search prep [26]**
• More information about “typical” or average salary and course loads for different kinds of schools . . . My expectations were definitely different from the reality.
• Emphasize . . . professional development beyond teaching.

• It would be helpful if students were prepared to deliver teaching demonstrations and job talks.
• Let people know that 200 or more applicants apply for each position. The competition is fierce.
• Understand the current state of the job market
• Start discussing the job market the moment the student enters the program.
• Be realistic with students. The job market is very different for women than it is for men
• Offer workshop -- not lectures...actual workshops -- on writing cover letters tailored specifically to individual job ads.
• Don’t tell students there is such a thing as “good debt.” Be honest about the ratio of positions to qualified applicants. Warn us that some of us will not secure TT jobs. Prepare us for work in outside of academics or for work inside in administration. Revise the entire application process. . . . I could have written a book or two in the time it takes to complete applications for jobs I never hear from.
• More discussion on negotiating offers.
• Encourage the PhD cohort on the market to...share experiences and to offer emotional and intellectual support.
• What I’d like to see is more attention to the emotional/mental health side of things. Of my current cohort (graduating in 2014), only 4 in 11 have found jobs.
• My current graduate program aims all their job preparation for all phd students, not just those in rhet/comp, and so much of the advice they give is not relevant.
• Why encourage students to apply for 40+ jobs?

Prepare us for jobs other than R1 [17]
• A bit less emphasis on research, and more on teaching/administration
• Provide MORE pedagogy classes outside of the MA-level comp/pedagogy class
• Spend more time providing materials for alternative job opportunities, and do not make these opportunities seem ‘lesser’ than a tenure track, R1 position. The presentation of post-ac and alt-ac job paths is often that they are for ‘failures’... people who can’t ‘make it’.
• Stop pretending that we’ll all get tenure-track jobs!
• Provide more emphasis on professional, non-tenured, non-teaching positions.
• Give administrative opportunities and be realistic about the kinds of jobs students graduating from your institution can get and prepare them for that kind of job.
• Provide candidates with a range of career options, not just the path you chose to take. Listen to your graduate students’ goals, priorities, and approach to work/life balance and try to prepare them for different opportunities
• Do not put so much emphasis on securing a job at an R1. I was never given any information about how to prepare for teaching focused jobs. They were solely focused on the research institution, and from what I know of other people in the department, very few actually wanted to get those research-heavy jobs.

Change the program, provide more useful preparation [13]
• Communicate with graduate students about finding good mentors, publishing, and conferencing, as early as possible in their graduate career.
• Offer a broader range of rhet/comp courses
• Encourage students to participate in community service/leadership outside the department.
• Teach the grad students the benefits of and opportunities in tech/prof comm--particularly regarding writing with new media technology.
• More prep in WPA studies, and more fluency in technology to make multimodal savvy grads
• Incorporate more assigned readings that relate i.e. The Academic Job Search Handbook, The Professor Is In, The Chronicle of Higher Education, Inside Higher Ed. (I have loads of other suggestions, but that would be the #1 advice that I have.)
• Remove any institutional hurdles that impede student progress toward finishing their dissertations as early as possible.
• Stop emphasizing lofty philosophical ideas in an attempt to seem more intellectually rigorous. Offer graduate courses in pedagogy, WPA, multimodal composing and digital media.
• Offer more courses on WAC/WID and multimodal composition.

Encourage and support publication [7]
• Provide more support for getting published.
• Emphasize PUBLISHING more.
• Help graduate students get published by scaffolding the process.
• Provide more support for Ph.D. student publishing and teach us more about the differences between institutions!
• Push the importance of publication, early and often. Of the multiple people in my program on the market this year, those with at least three publications in journals/edited collections have jobs. Those with one or zero are still searching as of late April.

My program does an excellent job [4]
• My grad program did an exemplary job. There is a placement director for the English Dept. who gets at least one course release and runs a variety of activities--mock interviews with peers, mock interviews with professors, etc. But perhaps most valuable was that you could send her your job materials as many times as you wanted, and she responded promptly. She also responded promptly to any random question I emailed about Interfolio, analyzing the language of a job ad, etc.

• My graduate program prepared me very well. This is evidenced by their excellent placement rate in TT positions.

• My department does an excellent job.

• I have none; I truly think my program did/does well in addressing the important aspects of preparation.

Reduce admissions [3]

• My graduate program does an excellent job of prepping us for the market. . . but they’ve lately been letting in giant cohorts (my cohort was 7 students, whereas more recent cohorts have been 13 or 14 students). That’s too many to manage. The job market WILL NOT improve in the foreseeable future, and so Rhet Comp programs should admit fewer PhD students.

• Fewer students and more support for the ones who are there.

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