

History PhDs in US finding jobs... sort of. What about in Canada?

By Robert Talbot

A new study that was commissioned by the American Historical Association has just been released, and it should be of great interest to historians on both sides of the border. “The Many Careers of History PhDs: A Study of Job Outcomes,” by L. Maren Wood and Robert B. Townsend, looks at career outcomes for a sample of 2,500 History PhDs who graduated in the US between 1998 and 2009. (You can read the full report here: http://www.historians.org/Documents/Many_Careers_of_History_PhDs_Final.pdf.)

The two lead researchers were well suited to their work. Maren Wood is originally from Southern Alberta, having earned a BA from the University of Lethbridge. She completed her MA in British History at Carleton University and earned a PhD in American History from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. In 2012, Wood started Lilli Research Group to work with organizations and graduate programs to track career outcomes and understand employment patterns of PhDs, and to provide professional development services for PhDs looking to transition to careers beyond the professoriate. Wood had long sought to better understand where PhDs found work when they left academia. When she decided to explore career paths for herself beyond the professoriate, she found that there was very little information available to help guide her. As Wood explains, “providing accurate placement data is critical in helping PhDs understand (a) the likelihood of landing a tenure track job (b) helping faculty and students understanding the changing nature of the academic job market, and (c) allowing PhDs to make informed career choices and to see that there are meaningful ways to use their education and training beyond academia.”

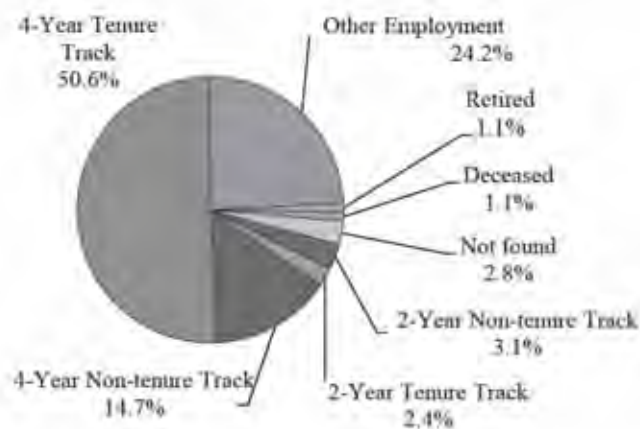
For his part, Rob Townsend was the Deputy Director of the AHA until this past summer, when he moved to the American Academy of Arts and Science. While working at the AHA, he completed his PhD in American History at George Mason University. He recently published his book, *History's Babel: Scholarship, Professionalization, and the Historical Enterprise in the United States* (University of Chicago, 2013). Over the course of twenty-four years at the AHA, Townsend spent a great deal of time tracking historians who wound up in academia, but was deeply frustrated by the lack of rigorous data on history PhDs who entered other occupations. He leapt at the opportunity to assist with this initiative to help fill the gap.

On balance, the results of Wood and Townsend’s study can be interpreted as either a “glass half-full” or a “glass-half empty.” The good news: the employment rate of the 2,500 American PhDs studied was exceptionally high (see Figure 1). Only two people in

the study appeared to be unemployed, and about 5% were either retired, deceased, or their employment situation was undetermined. At least 95%, then, had jobs. Moreover, the vast majority of American History PhDs in the study appeared to have been employed in a position related to their field. Just over half were in tenure-track positions at post-secondary institutions – 50.6% at universities and 2.4% at colleges. One in six were employed in non-tenure-track positions – 14.7% at universities and 3.1% at colleges. Another 24.2% were employed in other areas, including 4.4% who were self-employed or independent scholars, 4% in government, 3.3% in academic administration, 3.3% with non-profit organizations, 3% in business, 2.9% in K-12 education, and 1.4% with libraries, museums or archives.

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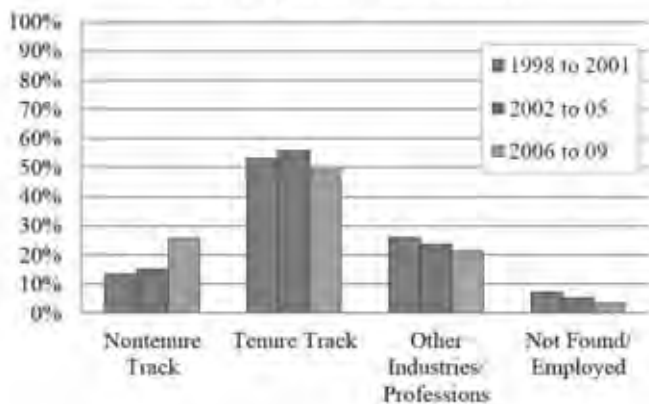
Figure 1: Employment Sector or Status of Sample History PhDs, 1998 to 2009



In many ways, this overall picture is encouraging, and provides some fodder for defending the merits of doing a PhD in History against popular skepticism about the utility of the degree. As other studies have pointed out, roughly seven out of ten American PhD students hope to become professors, and 70.8% of the 1998-2009 History PhD grads studied by Wood and Townsend had gone on to do just that, with another 24.2% in other jobs that would not fit the “punch lines for jokes about humanities PhDs – as baristas or short order cooks.” In looking more closely at these results, Wood and Townsend also found that, “regardless of the employment sector or status, ... 75 percent of PhDs in the sample had worked in some capacity as historians – either as teachers or authors of history articles and books – during the past five years.”

The not-so-good news: the results of the study also reveal some cause for concern, namely, less stability in the job market for those seeking a professorship. Of the PhDs who graduated between 1998 and 2001, 13.5% were in non-tenure-track positions (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Employment of History PhDs, by Degree Cohort



For those who had graduated between 2006 and 2009, the rate almost doubled, to 25.6%. (One wonders what the results for the post-Great Recession cohort might be. In order to ensure the reliability of the sample, however, Wood and Townsend had limited their study to History PhD graduates who had had at least a few years to establish their careers, hence the 2009 end date of the study.) Instead of creating more stable tenure-track positions to meet the demands of a growing student body in History, then, the data suggests that American universities and colleges have been relying more and more on sessional professors who receive significantly less pay, have few benefits, and must live contract-to-contract. Anecdotally, at least, the same might be said of Canadian post-secondary institutions. CBC Radio’s “The Current” recently examined the disturbing income and quality-

of-life gap between tenured faculty and contract professors. Some sessional profs struggle just to make a living wage, and even then, their employment is seldom guaranteed beyond a semester or two. (You can listen to the exposé here: <http://fw.to/mthUcOl>.)

Perhaps one of the most significant results of Wood and Townsend’s study is that it was relatively cheap and easy to conduct. The researchers did not have to conduct a single interview – all of the data was drawn from the AHA directory and publicly available information on the Web, from university, company, or organization websites and directories, and even from Facebook, newspaper stories, and personal blogs. This raises a very interesting possibility: given the low cost and relative ease with which the research can be completed, it could be feasible for individual History departments to conduct their own studies to find out what kind of employment their recent PhD graduates are obtaining. Department-level studies might not be welcomed by everyone. Hopefully, a desire to better understand outcomes for students – and to adapt PhD programmes accordingly – will outweigh any hand-wringing over what such studies might reveal. Besides, shouldn’t prospective PhD students be given an idea as to what awaits them after 4 to 6 years of study before they make the life-altering decision of where to do their PhD, and whether to do it at all?

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All of this begs the question: Why not conduct a similar study of PhD History graduates in Canada? The CHA and Maren Wood would like to do just that, perhaps with the financial support of SSHRC. Hopefully, such a proposal would get accepted. I, for one, would be very interested in reading the report.

Figures 1 and 2 by permission of the American Historical Association.