

**Philosophy Majors  
1970-71 to 2008-09  
in Comparison to Other Select Majors**

**Based on NCES\* data on Degrees Conferred**

by  
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\* NCES Table 282. [http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d10/tables/dt10\\_282.asp?referrer=list](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d10/tables/dt10_282.asp?referrer=list)

In a recent opinion piece in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, "Making Philosophy Matter -- or Else" (*The Chronicle Review*, December 10, 2011, <http://chronicle.com/article/Making-Philosophy-Matter-or/130029/>), Lee McIntyre claimed that that philosophy and religious studies majors have dropped 20% from 1970 through 2009, "adjusted for enrollment." This is a very miselading assertion. Let us take a closer look at the statistics on which this claim was based.

According to NCES data on undergraduate degrees conferred 1970-71 to 2008-09, the total number of degrees conferred has increased by nearly 191%. Degrees conferred in specific majors have changed during this time, some majors increasing/decreasing dramatically. The graphs following p. 6 show these changes. Here, Table 1 lists the absolute number and percent change from 1970-71 to 2008-09 for selected majors.

Table 1.

from NCES Table 282. NCES <a href="http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d10/tables/dt10_282.asp?referrer=list">http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d10/tables/dt10_282.asp?referrer=list</a>	1970-71	2008-09	Percent change in degrees conferred
Total Degrees Conferred	839,730	1,601,368	190.70%
Area,ethnic,cult, & gender stud	2579	8772	340.13%
Biological/Biomedical Sciences	35,683	80,756	226.32%
Business	115,396	347,985	301.56%
Comm/Journalism	10,324	78,009	755.61%
Computer & Info Sciences	2,388	37,994	1591.04%
Education	176,307	101,708	57.69%
Engineering	45,034	69,133	153.51%
English Lang & Literature/Letters	63,914	55,462	86.78%
Foreign Lang, Lit and Linguistics	20,988	21,158	100.81%
Health Professions and Related Clinical	25,223	120,488	477.69%
Lib Arts & Sci, gen. stud., humanities	6,346	47,096	629.54%
Math & Statistics	7,481	15,496	62.48%
Multi/interdisc. Stud	24,801	37,444	590.04%
Philosophy & Religious Studies	8,149	12,444	152.71%
Psychology	38,187	94,271	246.87%
Social Sciences and History	155,324	168,500	108.48%
Visual & Performing Arts	30,394	89,140	293.28%

Among *traditional* humanities and social science majors, only philosophy and religious studies and psychology show a significant increase in the total number of majors, philosophy/religious studies increasing by nearly 153%, psychology by nearly 247% from 1970-71 to 2008-09. In terms of absolute numbers, philosophy and religious studies majors constitute a very small percentage of the

total number of degrees conferred, but they are increasing. (The NCES data does not do a finer breakdown between philosophy and religious studies, or between specific majors in other general areas.)

As the graphs show (see following p. 6), by 1985-86 there had been a significant drop in the number of majors in *traditional* humanities and social science disciplines. By 2008-09 some of those majors recovered to their 1970-71 levels, but among such majors only philosophy and religious studies, and psychology majors recovered *and significantly exceeded* their 1970-71 levels, and continue to show an upward trend both in terms of absolute numbers and as a percentage of total degrees conferred. What is also noteworthy is the *substantial increase* in liberal arts and science majors and the growth in interdisciplinary majors ("area, ethnic, cultural and gender studies" and "multi/interdisciplinary studies"), nearly all of which represent growth in new majors in the liberal arts and sciences. Philosophy and religious studies are both contributors to such majors.

Moreover, from 1998-99 to 2008-09, the *rate of increase* in philosophy and religious studies majors was greater than the rate of increase in the total number of degrees conferred. Among the majors compared, only Comm/Journalism and Visual/Performing Arts majors had a greater rate of increase over the same period. (see Table 2)

Table 2.

from NCES Table 282. NCES <a href="http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d10/tables/dt10_282.asp?referrer=list">http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d10/tables/dt10_282.asp?referrer=list</a>	1998-99	2008-09	%change from 1998-99 to 2008-09
Visual & Performing Arts	54,404	89,140	163.85%
Comm/Journalism	51,384	78,009	151.82%
Philosophy & Religious Studies	8,506	12,444	146.30%
Area,ethnic,cult, & gender stud	6009	8772	145.98%
Business	240,947	347,985	144.42%
Health Professions and Related Clinical	85,214	120,488	141.39%
Multi/interdisc. Stud	27,545	37,444	135.94%
Lib Arts & Sci, gen. stud., humanities	34,772	47,096	135.44%
Social Sciences and History	124,658	168,500	135.17%
Foreign Lang, Lit and Linguistics	15,821	21,158	133.73%
Total Degrees Conferred	1,200,303	1,601,368	133.41%
Math & Statistics	11,966	15,496	129.50%
Psychology	73,636	94,271	128.02%
Biological/Biomedical Sciences	64,608	80,756	124.99%
Computer & Info Sciences	30,574	37,994	124.27%
Engineering	58,260	69,133	118.66%
English Lang & Literature/Letters	49,800	55,462	111.37%
Education	107,086	101,708	94.98%

So, what is the basis for McIntyre's claim that philosophy and religion majors have dropped 20% from 1970 through 2009, "adjusted for enrollment." The assertion is based on the following statistic: in 1970-71, philosophy and religious studies majors comprised .97% of degrees conferred, in 2008-09 .78% of degrees conferred. This might be worrisome if it represented a downward trend. But, it doesn't. In fact, the data shows just the opposite. The trend in both the absolute number of philosophy and religious studies majors *and* in philosophy and religious studies majors as a percentage of degrees conferred is upward from 1985-86 to 2008-09. (See graphs.)

This might also be worrisome if the number of degrees conferred remained the same. But it hasn't; it has increased and so has the number of philosophy and religious studies majors. As has been pointed out the number of philosophy majors increased 153% from 1970-71 to 2008-09. McIntyre's alleged "decline" derives from the fact that the increase in philosophy and religious studies is less than the increase in the total number of degrees conferred -- 191% -- over the same period. But now consider another data point, using McIntyre's criterion of major as a percentage of degrees conferred: 1985-86 showed a widespread drop in many humanities and social sciences majors compared to 1970-71. So, in 1985-86 philosophy and religious studies majors fell to 6,396 and .65% of total degrees conferred. However, from 1985-86 to 2008-09 philosophy and religious studies majors nearly doubled, increasing by 194%, while the total number of degrees conferred increased 162% over the same period. Therefore, compared to 1985-86, philosophy and religious studies majors as a percentage of degrees conferred *increased* by 20% (or 13 percentage points from .65% to .78%; .78% is 120% of .65%).

It is probably true that the absolute number of philosophy and religious studies majors and philosophy and religious studies majors as a percentage of degrees conferred will always be small compared to other popular majors. And I don't mean to quibble over small numbers. However, McIntyre made a rather large claim about what was happening in philosophy (the target of his analysis) and what the philosophical profession needed to do to save itself from an alleged decline in student interest in it. But, the premise of the argument is faulty. That's not to say that philosophers couldn't do more to make philosophy an attractive field of study to students. But that is an entirely separate matter from the misleading use of statistics.

Finally, there are other issues that should be noted.

1. First, the NCES statistics do not separate out philosophy and religious studies, so there is no way to tell from this data whether there are different trends for each of those disciplines. They are very different disciplines.
2. Second, if experience at my own institution is any indication, students who major in philosophy may be double-majors. It would be helpful to know how double-majors are counted in the NCES statistics (it appears that only one major per degree is counted). If only a single major is recorded for each degree conferred, then it could be that some majors, including philosophy, have been under-counted as far as indicating the level of student engagement with and interest in a discipline (this could be the case for any double-major, not just those in philosophy).
3. Third, looking at a major as a percentage of degrees conferred when the latter number is changing dramatically is a dubious measure without considering what is going on in other majors, changing demographics and a host of other considerations. Looking at the number of degrees in a major is also but one measure of what is going on in a field and doesn't necessarily tell us anything

about whether the field needs to be reformed. Math and statistics majors declined from 24,801 in 1970-71 to 15,496 in 2008-09 (which, however, represents an increase from 11,966 in 1998-99). However, no one would dispute the importance of math and statistics in the education of undergraduates. Even if it were true that mathematicians and statisticians could do a better job of making such a major attractive to undergraduates, the fact that there has been a decline in the number of majors by itself does not show (a) that the discipline needs to be reformed or made "less abstract" or (b) that it is any less important educationally just because fewer students choose to major in it. Whatever value the statistical analyses have, one should be cautious to not overgeneralize or make claims that are not supported by the data.

I would like to conclude with some references to other articles about the relative health of the philosophy major and an anecdotal report, that at my own institution, Hofstra University, the increase in philosophy majors is much more dramatic than what has happened nationally. In 1985, there were 5 philosophy majors. There are now approximately 50 majors and again as many minors.

#### Other Articles:

A 2008 NY Times article states "Rutgers, which has long had a top-ranked philosophy department, is one of a number of universities where the number of undergraduate philosophy majors is ballooning; there are 100 in this year's graduating class, up from 50 in 2002, even as overall enrollment on the main campus has declined by 4 percent....At the City University of New York, where enrollment is up 18 percent over the past six years, there are 322 philosophy majors, a 51 percent increase since 2002....Nationwide, there are more colleges offering undergraduate philosophy programs today than a decade ago (817, up from 765), according to the College Board. Some schools with established programs like Texas A&M, Notre Dame, the University of Pittsburgh and the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, now have twice as many philosophy majors as they did in the 1990s."

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/06/education/06philosophy.html?em&ex=1207627200&en=cf25c58a650590d5&ei=5087%0A>

#### Other articles include:

"Philosophy is Back in Business, by Dov Seidman, *Bloomberg Business Week*, January 12, 2010  
[http://www.businessweek.com/managing/content/jan2010/ca20100110\\_896657.htm](http://www.businessweek.com/managing/content/jan2010/ca20100110_896657.htm),

"I think, therefore I earn," by Jessica Shepherd, *The Guardian*, November 20, 2007  
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2007/nov/20/choosingadegree.highereducation>

"The Management Myth," by Matthew Stewart, *The Atlantic*, June 2006  
<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2006/06/the-management-myth/4883/1/>

"On average nationally, business students enter the work force with higher starting salaries than those of humanities and social-science majors. By midcareer, however, some of those liberal-arts majors, including in political science and **philosophy**, have closed the gap."

"Business Educators Struggle to Put Students to Work," by David Glenn *The Chronicle of Higher Education* in collaboration with *The New York Times*, April 14, 2011  
<http://chronicle.com/article/Business-Education-Not-Always/127108/>

"Study of Philosophy Makes Gains Despite Economy," by Jeff Gammage *Philly.com*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer* [http://articles.philly.com/2011-10-15/news/30283702\\_1\\_philosophy-number-of-four-year-graduates-college-students](http://articles.philly.com/2011-10-15/news/30283702_1_philosophy-number-of-four-year-graduates-college-students)

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## Notes on Interpreting the following Graphs and NCES Data:

1. NCES Table 282 ([http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d10/tables/dt10\\_282.asp?referrer=list](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d10/tables/dt10_282.asp?referrer=list)) includes more majors and more years than I have included in my tables, spreadsheets and graphs. I selected the majors that I did because they are the most relevant to me at my institution for the purposes of comparison.\* I selected years in 10-15 year intervals in part for ease of data entry; the NCES data is in 5 year intervals from 1970-71 to 2008-09.
2. I have indicated which columns in the spreadsheets come from NCES Table 282. The other columns are calculations that I did based on the NCES data.
3. There are three spreadsheets --
  - I. The first is labeled "Overall NCES Data on Degrees Conferred in Select Majors 1970-71, 1985-86, 1998-99, 2008-09" and includes NCES data and my calculations.
  - II. The second spreadsheet is labeled "Number of Majors and Degrees Conferred 1970-71, 1985-86, 1998-99, 2008-09" and is followed by graphs of the data in that spreadsheet -- these are the absolute number of majors in each major field for the years identified (this is data extracted from the first spreadsheet).
  - III. The third spreadsheet is labeled "Majors as a Percentage of Degrees Conferred" and is followed by graphs of the percentages in that spreadsheet -- these are the percentage of degrees conferred that are a major in that field and the graphs show the relative change in the percentage for the same years identified, 1970-71, 1985-86, 1998-99, 2008-09 (this is data extracted from the first spreadsheet).
4. The data in the yellow highlighted columns in the second and third spreadsheet are the data used for the graphs that follow each of those spreadsheets.
5. The numbers 1, 2, 3, 4 at the bottom of each graph stand for the years as follows:
  - 1 = 1970-71
  - 2 = 1985-86
  - 3 = 1998-99
  - 4 = 2008-09

\*The majors I omitted are: Agric. & Nat'l Resources; Architecture & Related Services; Family & Consumer Services; Legal professions & studies; Library Science; Military Technologies; Parks, Recreation, leisure & fitness studies; Physical Sciences & Science Technologies; Precise Production; Public Admin. & Social Services; Theology and Religious Vocations; Transportation & materials moving.



Overall NCES Data on Degrees Conferred in Select Majors, 1970-71, 1985-86, 1998-99, 2008-09

Data Columns b, d, f, h from NCES Table 282. Bachelor's degrees conferred by degree-granting institutions, by selected field of study (NCES data includes some additional fields of study not included here.) Selected years, 1970-71 through 2008-09, NCES <a href="http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d10/tables/dt10_282.asp?referrer=list">http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d10/tables/dt10_282.asp?referrer=list</a>							





Overall NCES Data on Degrees Conferred in Select Majors, 1970-71, 1985-86, 1998-99, 2008-09

	As the graphs also show, the majors from among this data set that have not recovered to their 1970-71 number of degrees are Education, English and Math & Statistics. See Column K.						

Overall NCES Data on Degrees Conferred in Select Majors, 1970-71, 1985-86, 1998-99, 2008-09

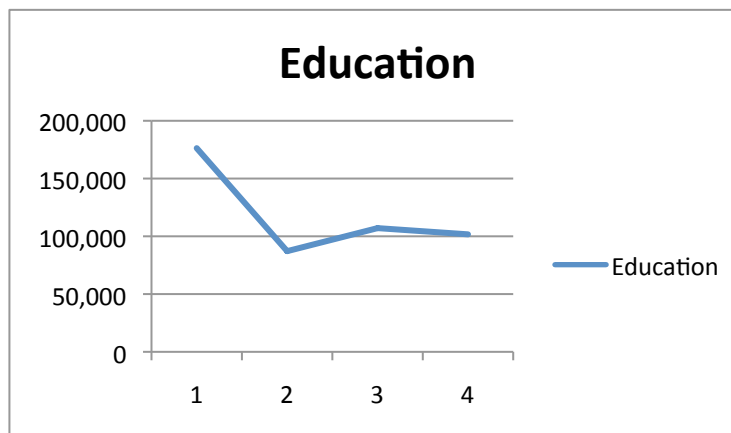
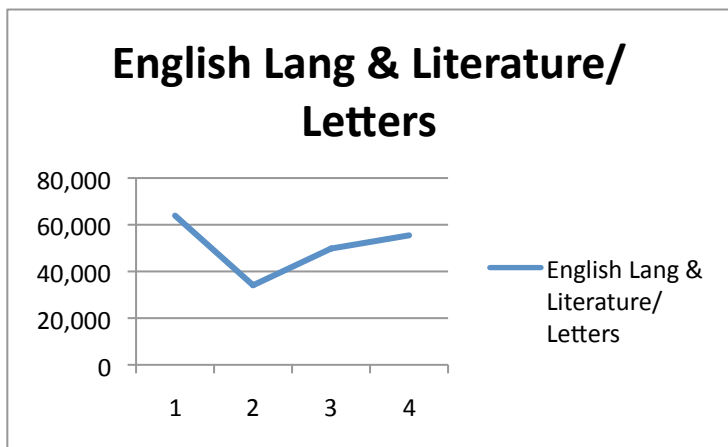
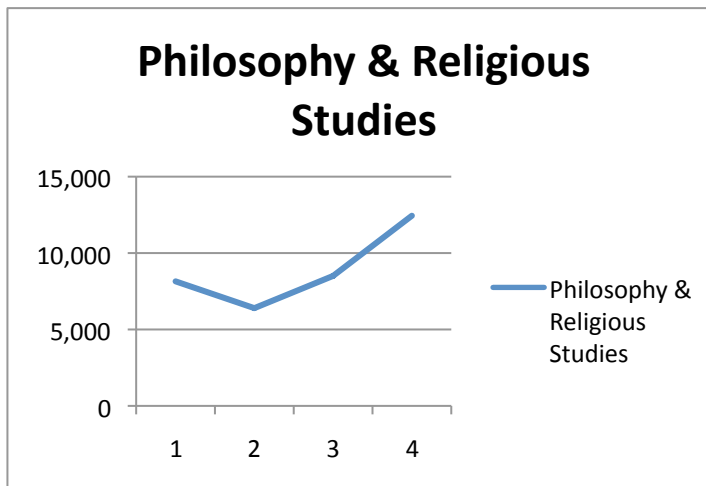
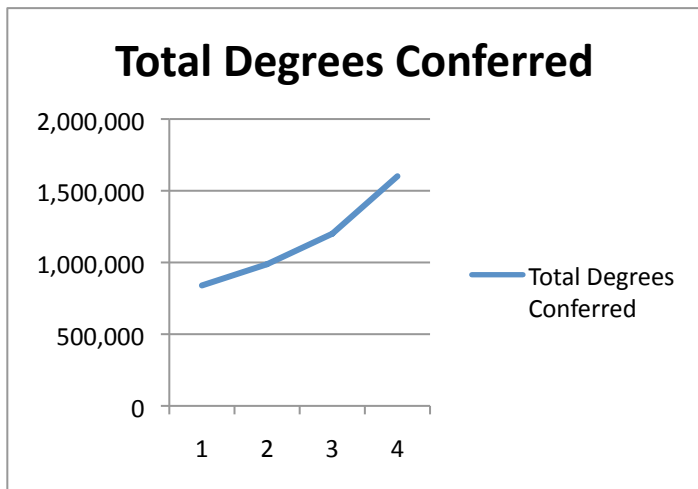
Col. Q	Col. R	Col. S
190.70%	133.41%	Total Degrees Conferred
Change in degrees conferred in major from 1970-71 to 2008-09	Change in degrees conferred in major from 1998-99 to 2008-09	
340.13%	141.21%	Area, ethnic, cult, gender stud
226.32%	124.99%	Bio/Biomed Sciences
301.56%	144.42%	Business
755.61%	151.82%	Comm/Journalism
1591.04%	124.27%	Computer & Info Sciences
57.69%	94.98%	Education
153.51%	118.66%	Engineering
86.78%	111.37%	English Lang & Literature/Letters
100.81%	133.73%	Foreign Lang, Lit and Linguistics
477.69%	141.39%	Health Professions and Related Clinical
590.04%	135.94%	Multi/interdisc Stud
629.54%	135.44%	Lib Arts & Sci, gen. stud., humanities
62.48%	129.50%	Math & Statistics
152.71%	146.30%	Phil & Rel Studies
246.87%	128.02%	Psychology
108.48%	135.17%	Soc Sci and History
293.28%	163.85%	Visual & Performing Arts

Number of Majors and of Degrees Conferred 1970-71, 1985-86, 1998-99, 2008-09

Columns b, c, d, e = columns b, d, f, h from first spreadsheet based on NCES Table 282, Bachelor's degrees conferred by degree- granting institutions, by field of study: Selected years, 1970-71 through 2008-09, <a href="http://nces.ed.gov/program_s/digest/d10/tables/dt10_28">http://nces.ed.gov/program_s/digest/d10/tables/dt10_28</a>	Col. B 1970-71 Graph x-axis #1	Col. C 1985-86 Graph x-axis #2	Col. D 1998-99 Graph x-axis #3	Col. E 2008-09 Graph x-axis, #4	Col. F %change from 1970-71 to 2008-09	Col. G %change from 1985-86 to 2008-09	Col. H %change from 1998-99 to 2008-09
Total Degrees Conferred	839,730	987,823	1,200,303	1,601,368	190.70%	162.11%	133.41%
Area,ethnic,cult, & gender stud	2579	3021	6009	8772	340.13%	290.37%	145.98%
Biological/Biomedical Sciences	35,683	38,320	64,608	80,756	226.32%	210.74%	124.99%
Business	115,396	236,700	240,947	347,985	301.56%	147.02%	144.42%
Comm/Journalism	10,324	41,666	51,384	78,009	755.61%	187.22%	151.82%
Computer & Info Sciences	2,388	42,337	30,574	37,994	1591.04%	89.74%	124.27%
Education	176,307	87,147	107,086	101,708	57.69%	116.71%	94.98%
Engineering	45,034	77,391	58,260	69,133	153.51%	89.33%	118.66%
English Lang & Literature/Letters	63,914	34,083	49,800	55,462	86.78%	162.73%	111.37%
Foreign Lang, Lit and Linguistics	20,988	11,550	15,821	21,158	100.81%	183.19%	133.73%
Health Professions and Related Clinical	25,223	63,309	85,214	120,488	477.69%	190.32%	141.39%
Lib Arts & Sci, gen. stud., humanities	7,481	21,336	34,772	47,096	629.54%	220.73%	135.44%
Math & Statistics	24,801	16,122	11,966	15,496	62.48%	96.12%	129.50%
Multi/interdisc. Stud	6,346	13,829	27,545	37,444	590.04%	270.76%	135.94%
Philosophy & Religious Studies	8,149	6,396	8,506	12,444	152.71%	194.56%	146.30%
Psychology	38,187	40,628	73,636	94,271	246.87%	232.03%	128.02%
Social Sciences and History	155,324	93,840	124,658	168,500	108.48%	179.56%	135.17%
Visual & Performing Arts	30,394	37,241	54,404	89,140	293.28%	239.36%	163.85%

NOTE: in Graphs, 1 = 1970-71; 2 = 1985-86; 3 = 1998-99; 4 = 2008-09

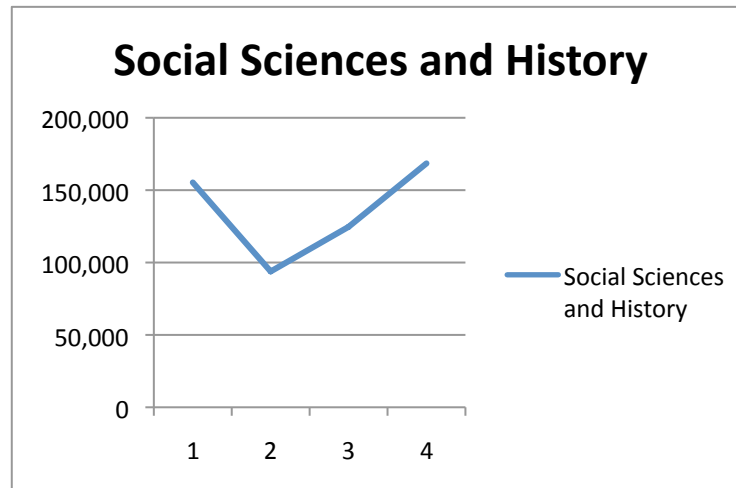
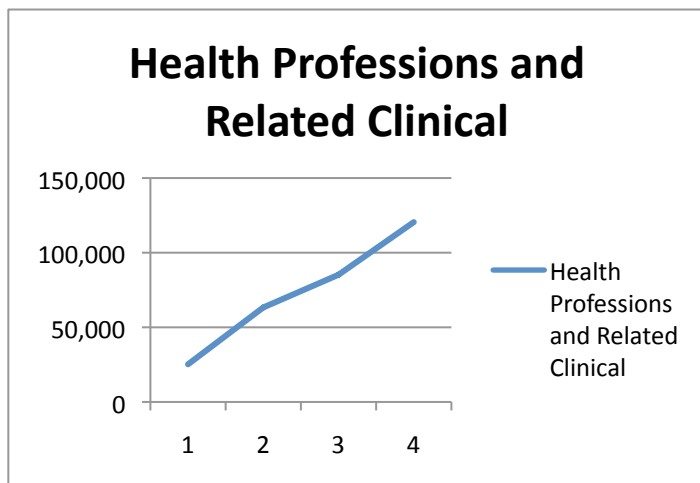
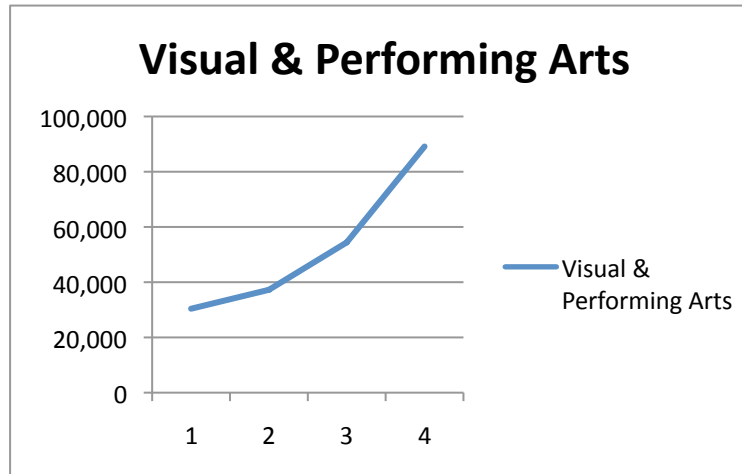
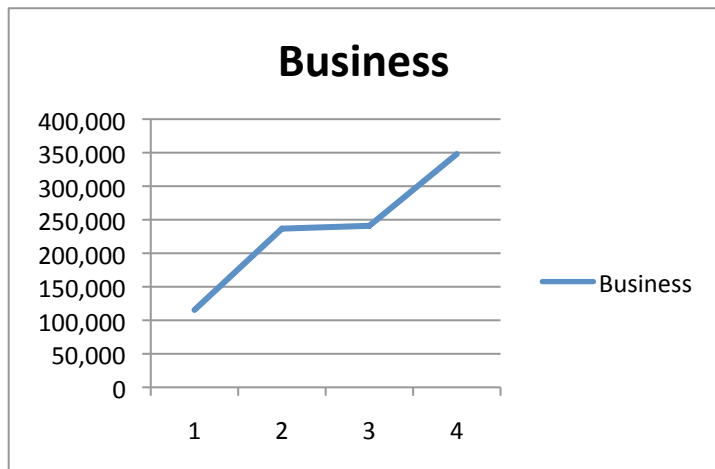
Number of Majors and of Degrees Conferred 1970-71, 1985-86, 1998-99, 2008-09



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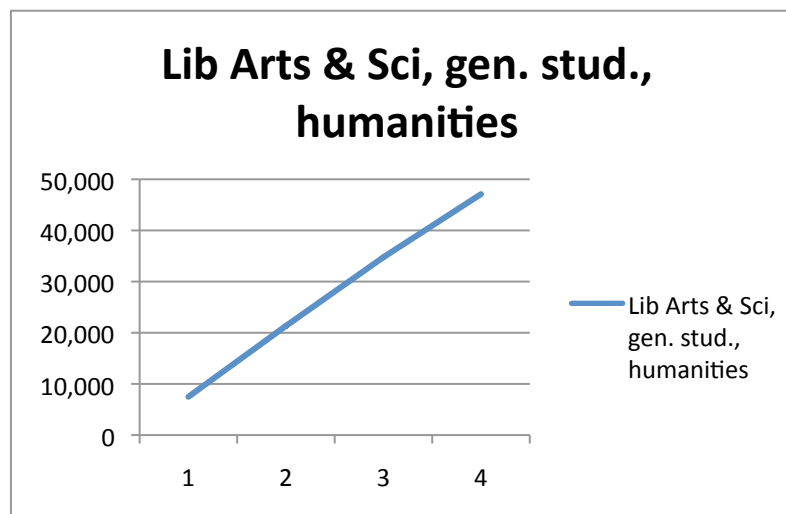
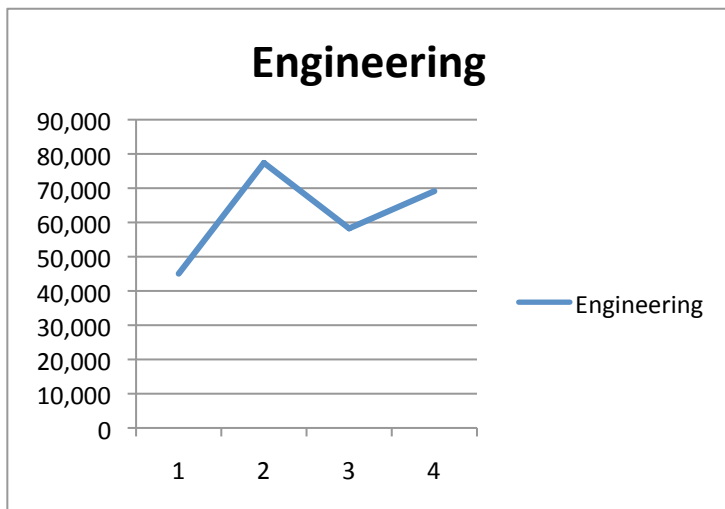
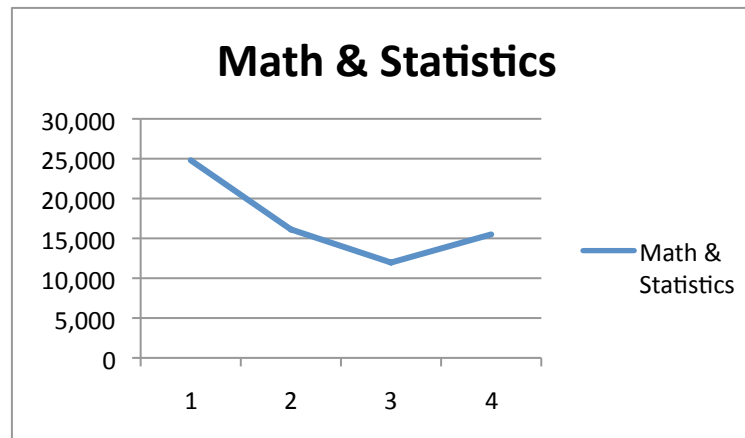
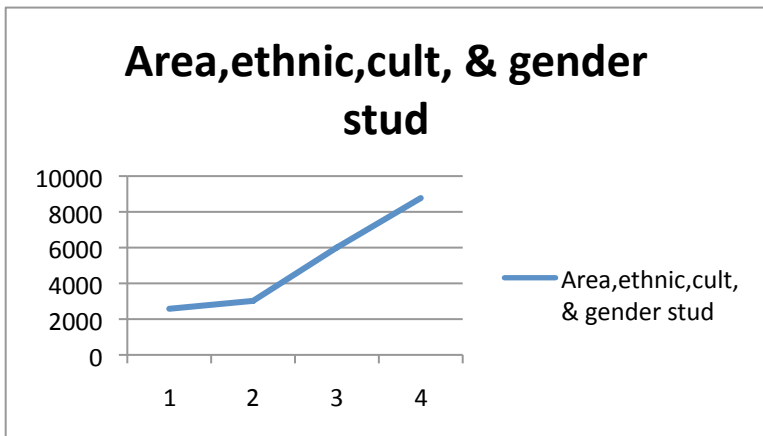
NOTE: in Graphs, 1 = 1970-71; 2 = 1985-86; 3 = 1998-99; 4 = 2008-09

Number of Majors and of Degrees Conferred 1970-71, 1985-86, 1998-99, 2008-09



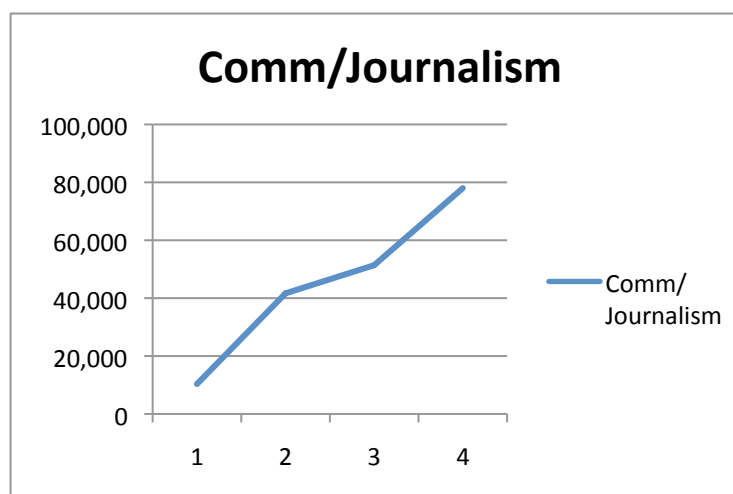
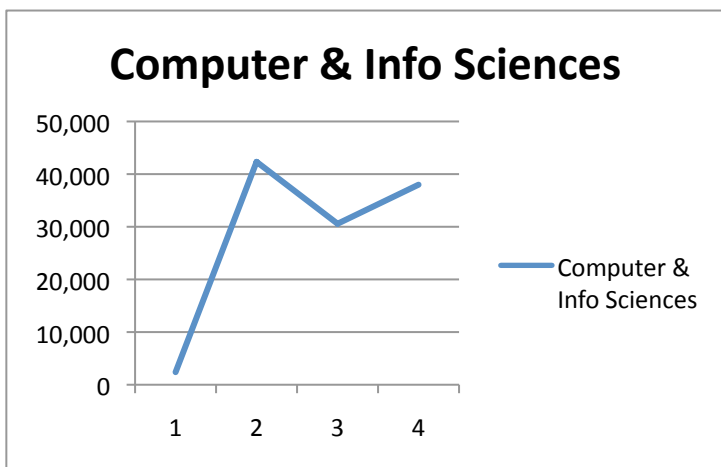
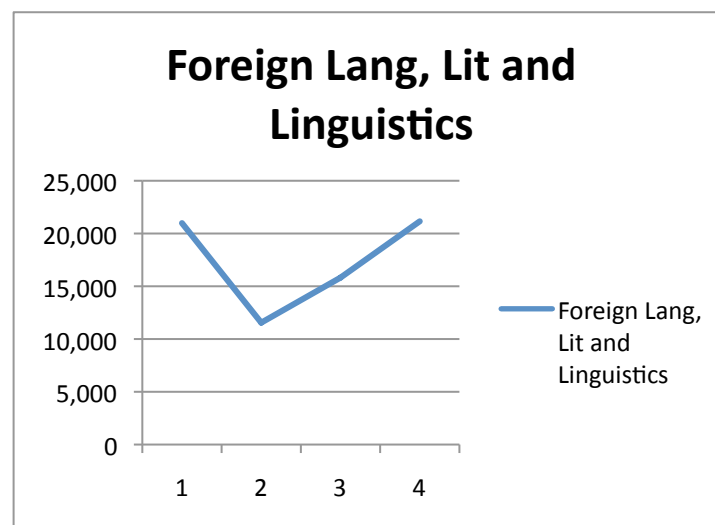
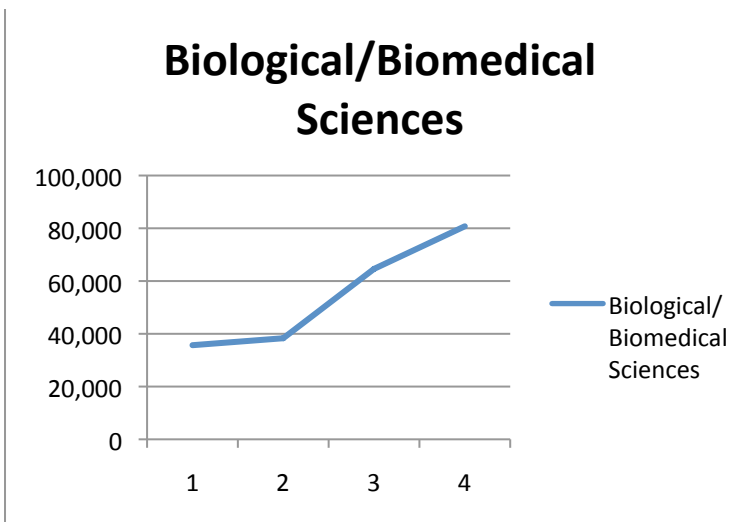
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Number of Majors and of Degrees Conferred 1970-71, 1985-86, 1998-99, 2008-09



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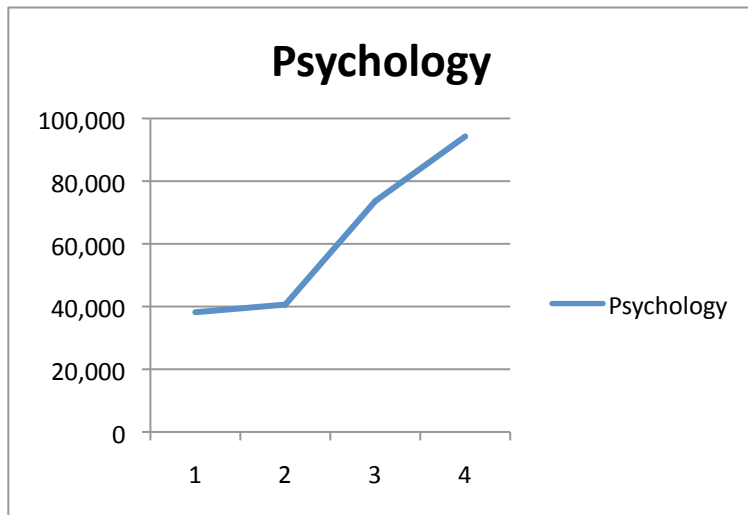
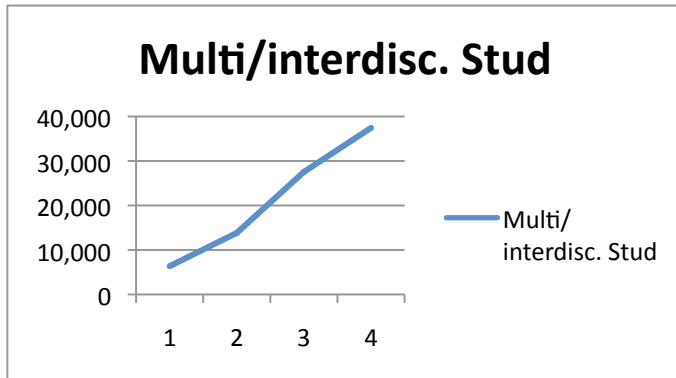
Number of Majors and of Degrees Conferred 1970-71, 1985-86, 1998-99, 2008-09



NOTE: in Graphs, 1 = 1970-71; 2 = 1985-86; 3 = 1998-99; 4 = 2008-09



Number of Majors and of Degrees Conferred 1970-71, 1985-86, 1998-99, 2008-09



NOTE: in Graphs, 1 = 1970-71; 2 = 1985-86; 3 = 1998-99; 4 = 2008-09

Majors as a percentage of total degrees conferred

Col. A	Col. B	Col. C	Col. D	Col. E	Col. F	Col. G	Col. H	Col. I
	1970-71	1970-71 Graph x-axis #1	1985-86	1985-86 Graph x-axis #2	1998-99	1998-99 Graph x-axis #3	2008-09	2008-09 Graph x-axis #4
	No. degrees conferred	% of degrees conferred	No. degrees conferred	% of degrees conferred	No. degrees conferred	% of degrees conferred	No. degrees conferred	% of degrees conferred
Total Degrees Conferred	839,730		987,823		1,200,303		1,601,368	
Area, ethnic, cult, gender stud	2579	0.31%	3021	0.31%	6212	0.52%	8772	0.55%
Biological/Bio medical Sci	35,683	4.25%	38,320	3.88%	64,608	5.38%	80,756	5.04%
Business	115,396	13.74%	236,700	23.96%	240,947	20.07%	347,985	21.73%
Comm/Journa lism	10,324	1.23%	41,666	4.22%	51,384	4.28%	78,009	4.87%
Computer & Info Sciences	2,388	0.28%	42,337	4.29%	30,574	2.55%	37,994	2.37%
Education	176,307	21.00%	87,147	8.82%	107,086	8.92%	101,708	6.35%
Engineering	45,034	5.36%	77,391	7.83%	58,260	4.85%	69,133	4.32%
English Lang & Lit/Letters	63,914	7.61%	34,083	3.45%	49,800	4.15%	55,462	3.46%
Foreign Lang, Lit & Ling	20,988	2.50%	11,550	1.17%	15,821	1.32%	21,158	1.32%
Health Professions and Related Clinical	25,223	3.00%	63,309	6.41%	85,214	7.10%	120,488	7.52%
Lib Arts & Sci, gen. stud., humanities	7,481	0.89%	21,336	2.16%	34,772	2.90%	47,096	2.94%
Math & Statistics	24,801	2.95%	16,122	1.63%	11,966	1.00%	15,496	0.97%

NOTE: in Graphs, #1 = 1970-71, #2 = 1985-86, #3 = 1998-99, #4 = 2008-09

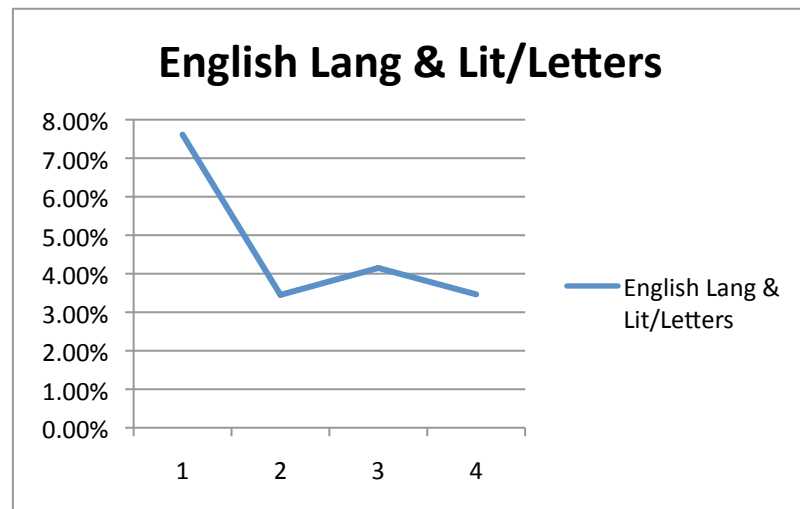
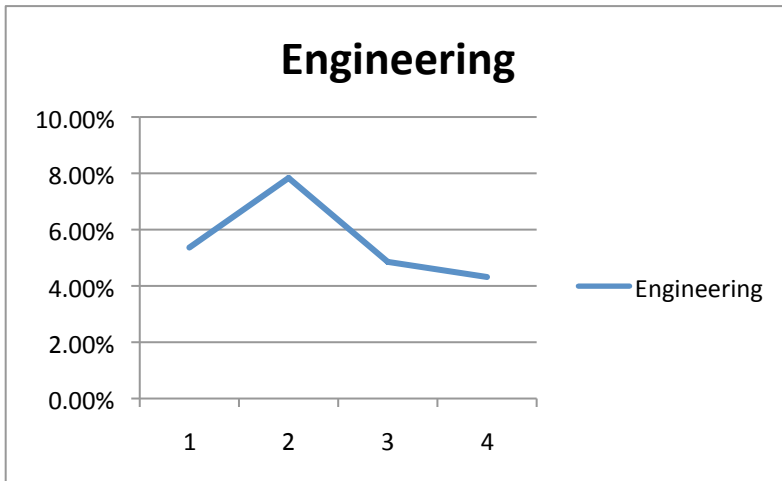
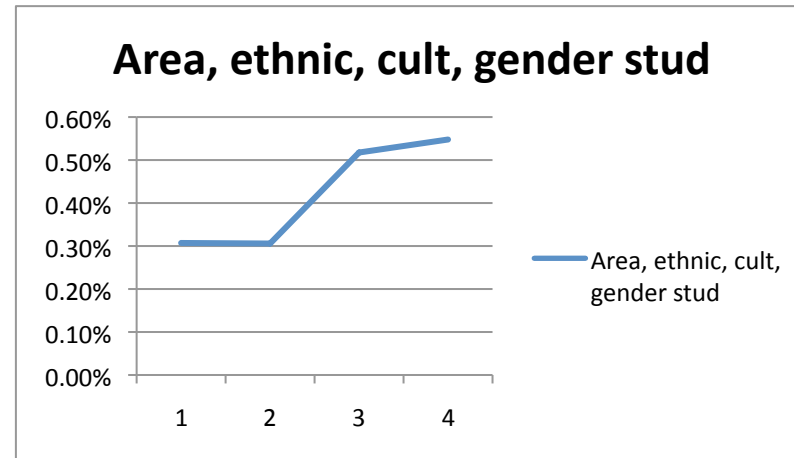
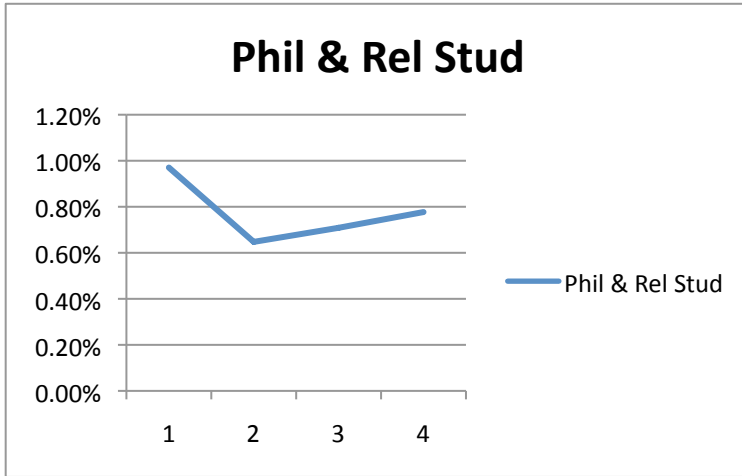
Majors as a percentage of total degrees conferred

Multi/interdis c Stud	6,346	0.76%	13,829	1.40%	27,545	2.29%	37,444	2.34%
Phil & Rel Stud	8,149	0.97%	6,396	0.65%	8,506	0.71%	12,444	0.78%
Psychology	38,187	4.55%	40,628	4.11%	73,636	6.13%	94,271	5.89%
Soc Sci & History	155,324	18.50%	93,840	9.50%	124,658	10.39%	168,500	10.52%
Visual & Perf. Arts	30,394	3.62%	37,241	3.77%	54,404	4.53%	89,140	5.57%

Columns B-I = Columns B-I from first spreadsheet based on NCES Table 282, Bachelor's degrees conferred by degree-granting institutions, by field of study: Selected years, 1970-71 through 2008-09, [http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d10/tables/dt10\\_282.asp?referrer=lis](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d10/tables/dt10_282.asp?referrer=lis)

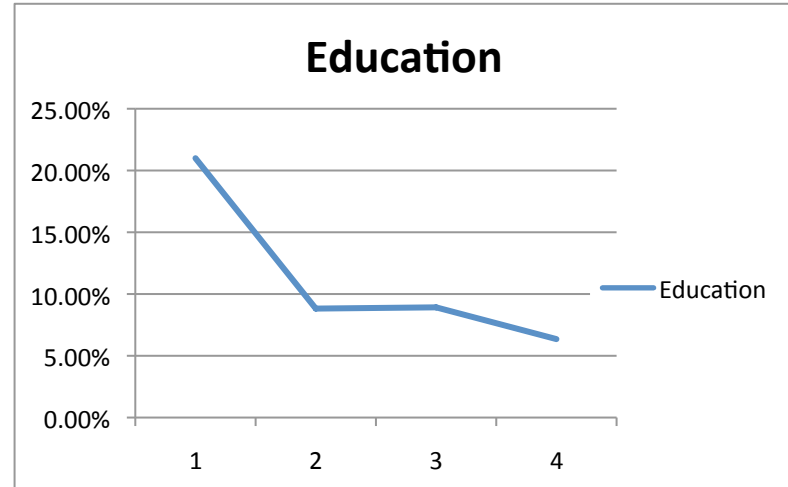
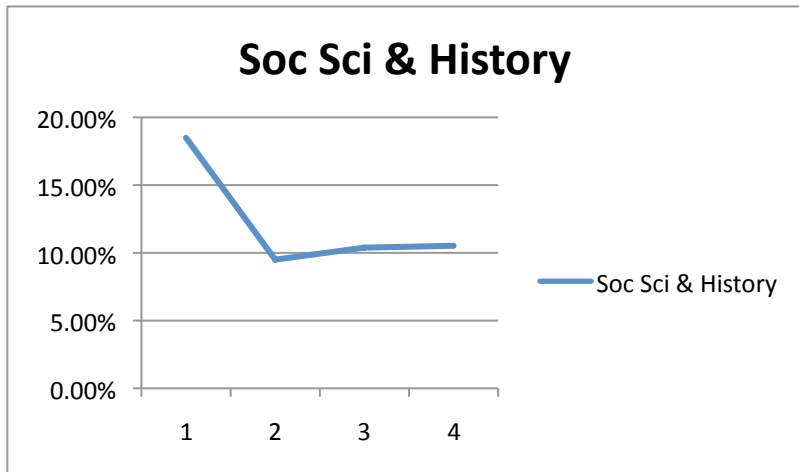
NOTE: in Graphs, #1 = 1970-71, #2 = 1985-86, #3 = 1998-99, #4 = 2008-09

Majors as a percentage of total degrees conferred



NOTE: in Graphs, #1 = 1970-71, #2 = 1985-86, #3 = 1998-99, #4 = 2008-09

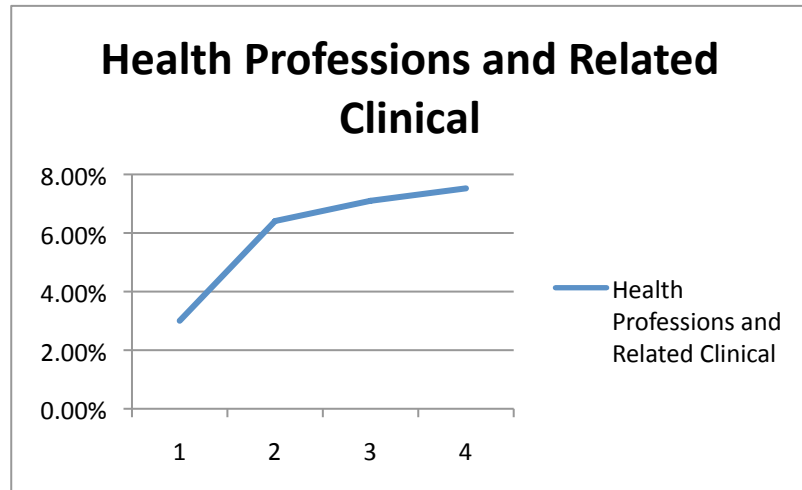
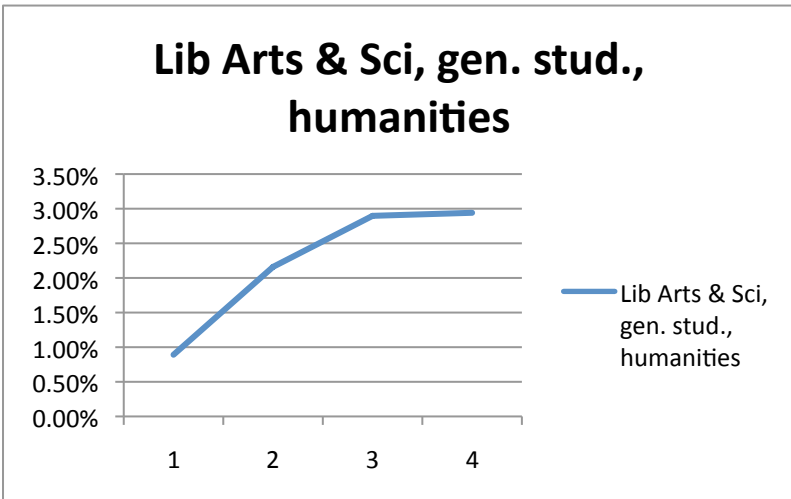
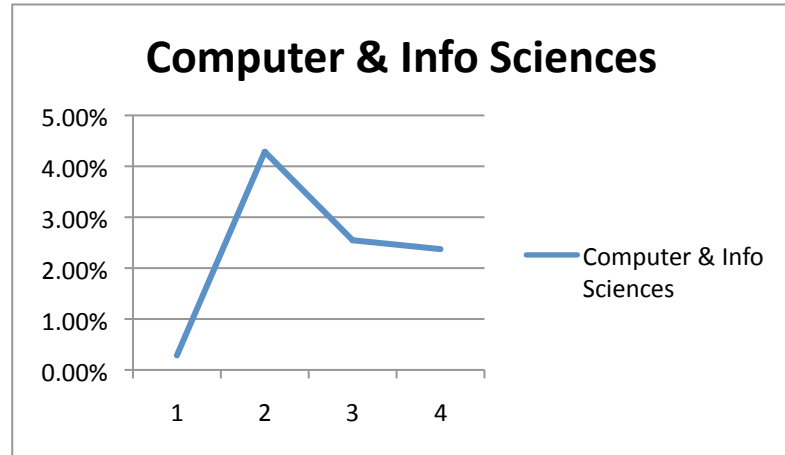
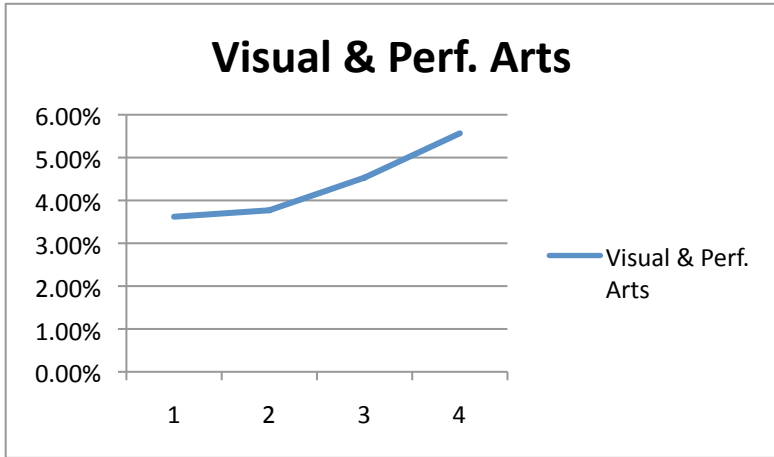
Majors as a percentage of total degrees conferred



NOTE: in Graphs, #1 = 1970-71, #2 = 1985-86, #3 = 1998-99, #4 = 2008-09

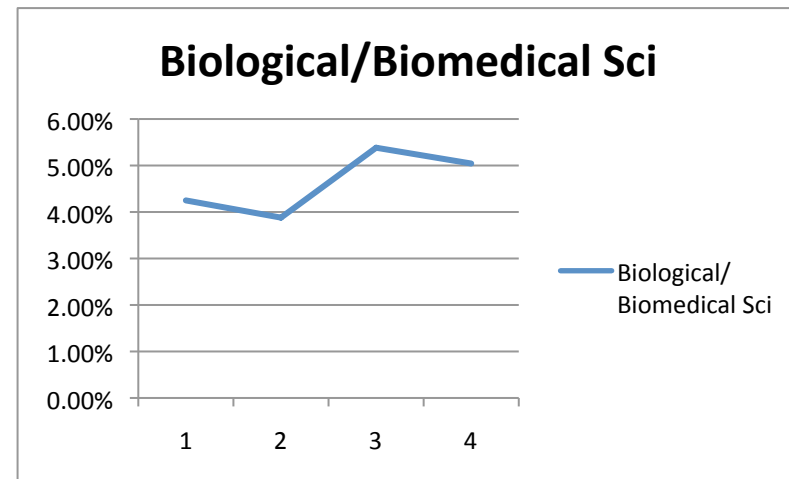
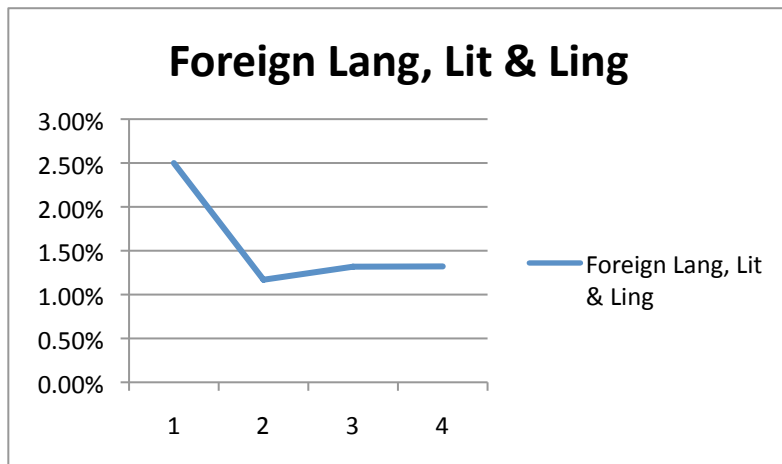
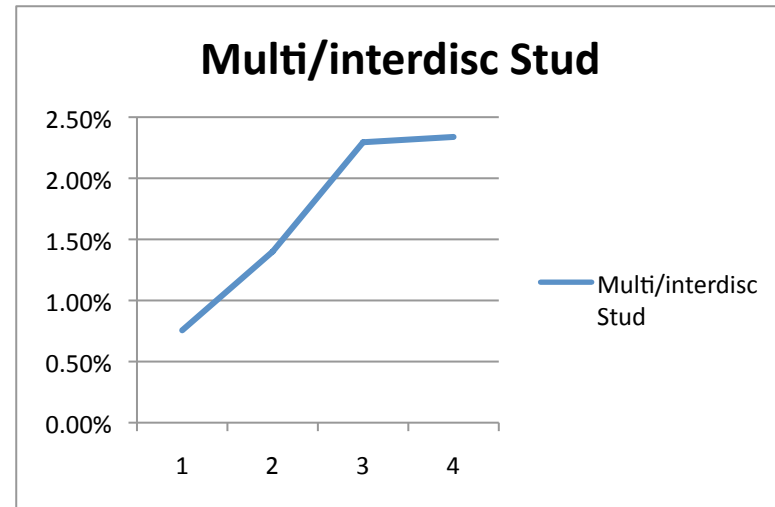
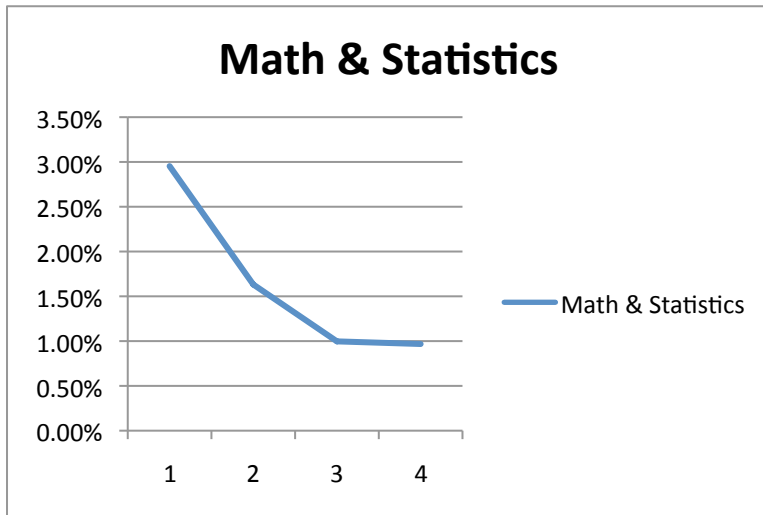
Majors as a percentage of total degrees conferred

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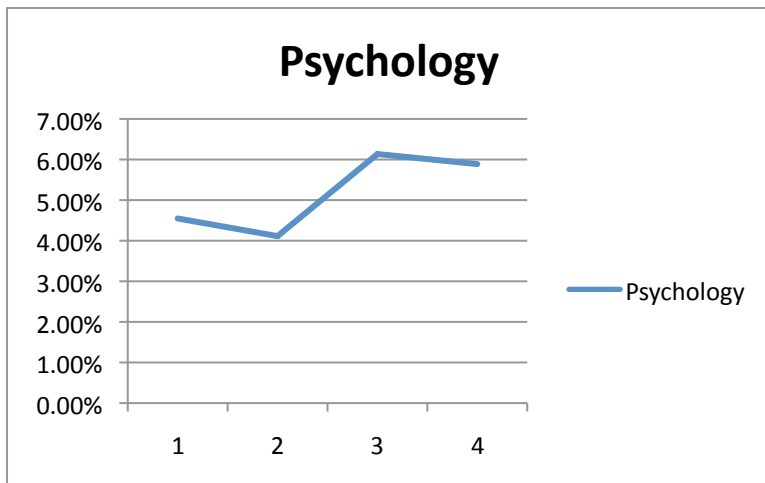
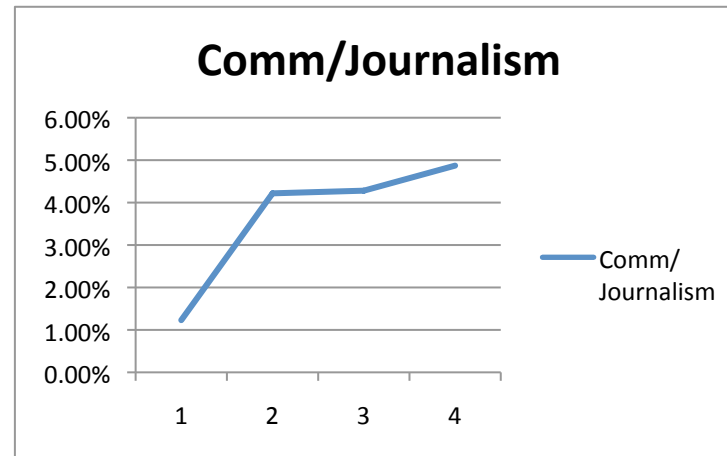
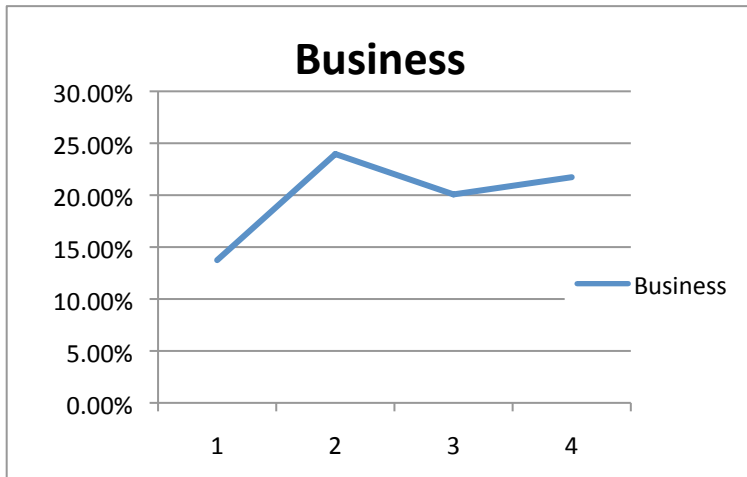
NOTE: in Graphs, #1 = 1970-71, #2 = 1985-86, #3 = 1998-99, #4 = 2008-09

Majors as a percentage of total degrees conferred



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Majors as a percentage of total degrees conferred



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