

THE DECLINE OF THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT

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“The number of young men and women majoring in English has dropped dramatically... Here is how the numbers have changed from 1970/71 to 2003/04... English: from 7.6 percent of the majors to 3.9 percent... In one generation...the numbers of those majoring in the humanities dropped from a total of 30 percent to a total of less than 16 percent...

At the root is the failure of departments of English across the country to champion, with passion, the books they teach and to make a strong case to undergraduates that the knowledge of those books and the tradition in which they exist is a human good in and of itself. What departments have done instead is dismember the curriculum, drift away from the notion that historical chronology is important, and substitute for the books themselves a scattered array of secondary considerations (identity studies, abstruse theory, sexuality, film and popular culture). In so doing, they have distanced themselves from the young people interested in good books....

The humanities, losing the national numbers game, find themselves moving to the periphery of American higher education.... The history of enrollments reveals...that the study of English and American literature enjoyed only a momentary glamour.... By the end of the 1960s, everything was up for grabs and nothing was safe from negative and reductive analysis. Every form of anti-authoritarian energy--concerning sexual mores, race relations, the war in Vietnam, mind-altering drugs--was felt across the nation (I was at Berkeley, the epicenter of all such energies). Against such ferocious intensities, few elements of the cultural patterns of the preceding decades could stand....

These, then, are some of the external causes of the decline of English: the rise of public education, the relative youth and instability...of English as a discipline, the impact of money, and the pressures upon departments within the modern university to attract financial resources rather than simply use them up. On all these scores, English has suffered. But the deeper explanation resides not in something that has happened to it, but in what it has done to itself....

English has become less and less coherent as a discipline and, worse, has come near exhaustion as a scholarly pursuit. English departments have not responded energetically and resourcefully to the situation surrounding them. While aware of their increasing marginality, English professors do not, on the whole, accept it. Reluctant to take a clear view of their circumstances...they react by asserting grandiose claims while pursuing self-centered ends. Amid a chaos of curricular change, requirements dropped and added, new areas of study in competition with older ones, and a variety of critical approaches jostling against each other, many faculty members, instead of reconciling their differences and finding solid ground on which to stand together, have gone their separate ways. As they have departed, they have left behind disorder in their academic discipline. Unable to change history or rewrite economic reality, they might at least have kept their own house in order. But this they have not done.

The result--myriad pursuits, each heading away from any notion of a center--has prompted many thoughtful people to question what, indeed, the profession of literature amounts to... While student enrollment in the humanities peaked around 1970, “it has been downhill” ever since...[Louis Menand quoted]... “Whereas economists or physicists, geologists or climatologists, physicians or lawyers must master a body of knowledge before they can even think of being licensed to practice,” [Marjorie Perloff] said, “we literary scholars, it is tacitly assumed, have no definable expertise.”

Perhaps the most telling sign of the near bankruptcy of the discipline is the silence from within its ranks. In the face of one skeptical and disenchanted critique after another, no one has come forward in years to assert that the study of English (or comparative literature or similar undertakings in other languages) *is coherent, does* have self-limiting boundaries... Such silence strongly suggests a complicity of

understanding, with the practitioners in agreement that to teach English today is to do, intellectually, what one pleases.

No sense of duty remains toward works of English or American literature; amateur sociology or anthropology or philosophy or comic books or...survivors of the Holocaust will do. You need not even believe that literary history is helpful in understanding the books you teach; history itself can be shucked aside as misleading, irrelevant, or even unknowable. In short, there are few, if any, fixed rules or operating principles to which those teaching English and American literature are obliged to conform.... Yet around them a rich literature exists, extraordinary books to be taught to younger minds....

The direction to which Harvard would lead its students...is to suspend literary history, thrusting into the hands of undergraduates the job of cobbling together intellectual coherence for themselves... University administrators are more likely to classify "literary types" as budgetary liabilities than as assets; the disciplines we teach are in free fall, as ideology, ethnicity, theory, gender, sexuality, and old-fashioned "close reading" spin away from any center of professional consensus about joint purposes; and the youngest would-be professionals, shrinking in number, stare at diminished job prospects....

Several of my colleagues around the country have called for a return to the aesthetic wellsprings of literature... They urge the teaching of English...in terms of the intrinsic value of the works themselves, in all their range and multiplicity, as well-crafted and appealing artifacts of human wisdom.... English and American literature constitutes a subject of study that is historically coherent and shaped by the intrinsic design of its own making. The causes giving it that shape can be analyzed, as can the merit and integrity of each of the achievements within it.... The focus...should be on the books, not on the theories they can be made to support. English departments need not refight the Western culture wars. But they need to fight their own book wars. They must agree on which texts to teach and argue out the choices and the principles of making them if they are to claim the respect due a department of study....

If nothing is done to put an end to the process of disintegration, the numbers will continue in a steady downward spiral. More and more of the teaching jobs in the humanities will be occupied by untenured part-timers (in English, it is now one in six)."

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