Public Culture of the English Department

The public rhetoric of the English department within the last 10 years prophesizes the "end", or "fall" of the English major in universities. A New York Times opinion article by Verlyn Klinkenborg entitled "The Decline and Fall of the English Major" from 2013, alongside an article by Nathan Heller published in The New Yorker in 2023 entitled "The End of the English Major", showcases a decade of repeating rhetoric on the English major and the articles' potential influence on public culture. To define the term public culture, we can look to Robert Hariman who states, "the modern media generate a distinctive envelope of meaning that becomes a means for organizing and negotiating collective association". Focusing on the rhetoric and perspectives discussed in these articles will show what collective association the media is making towards the English major.

The English major is the conduit through which these articles raise questions to the public about what the department does. There are many factors that play into the decline of English as a field of study for undergraduates such as financial barriers to entry and cultural expectations of what a valuable major look like. Looking to these instances in public culture will give a sense of the language at work to describe, credit, or discredit the work that the English department and the people in it, do.

Before we turn to these articles, it is important to provide some foundational understandings of the construction of the English department. William Riley Parker takes up the question of the departments' origins in his 1967 article, "Where Do English Departments Come From?". He outlines, "the teaching of English, as a constituent of college or university education, is only about 100 years old, and *departments* of English are younger still" (339). Although the teaching of English in universities takes us back almost 200 years now, "English *studies* – or

serious scholarship or criticism devoted to English language or literature – are much older than any teaching of English. English studies date from Tudor times, and are a fruit of the English Renaissance and Reformation" (340). Parker makes an important distinction between teaching and studying English, where the scholarship of teaching English is relatively recent when considering the centuries that scholarship on English studies date back to. The arrival of English to the university was due to the separation between oratory and linguistic studies (340). Parker provides a timeframe to the consciousness of universities as the "home" of English studies within the past century. Considering the place of the department within history, rather than just within the past 10 years could provide further context as to how the department evolved over time to what the culture of the English department is, outside of the eye of the public culture.

It would be difficult to fully define the specific stakeholders (researchers/ teachers/ students) that would be identified as the "English department" and the work that they do without ostracizing one or the other, leaving someone's important work out in the cold while generally underplaying the power that the English department has in terms of its ability to be amorphous. But, looking to how the public views the department could reveal conceptions or misconceptions about the department's representation.

Verlyn Klinkenborg raises one of the most common questions about an English degree in his opinion piece, "The Decline and Fall of the English Major". He writes, "Parents have always worried when their children become English majors. What is an English major good for?". Verlyn is raising a commonly voiced rhetorical question about the currency of an English degree. Nowadays, being able to see what the measurable, quantifiable value of an English degree is important to its justification as a major, and by proxy the existence of the English department.

Klinkenborg gives a generous reading of the possible answers to this question by stating that "former English majors turn up almost anywhere, in almost any career, and they nearly always bring with them a rich sense of the possibilities of language, literary and otherwise". This description of possibilities is both generous and vague, but the current environments of universities focus on the need to market and sell the precise value of an academic major.

Looking to Nathan Heller's article "The End of the English Major", he provides a more focused example of what can be gained from an English degree; "Career studies have shown that humanities majors, with their communication and analytical skills, often end up in leadership jobs. To that extent, the value of the educated human touch is likely to hold in a storm of technological and cultural change.". The key terms noted in his description are 'communication', 'analytical', and 'leadership'. Would the public, parent, or university be satiated by this description? Is the goal of public culture to actually define English as a major? If we look to how humanities and English are conflated to the same status in the language of these articles, we can see this is a larger issue of how academics and universities as a business mind, view humanities. English and Humanities are used interchangeably, not to say that they cannot be conflated, but the conflation communicates a dialectic to the public culture. These articles are reinforcing a "fall" in English, and the conflation speaks to a larger perspective in the public culture about the "fall" of the humanities.

After reading both articles, we are left with fragmented picture of the work that English, or the humanities, do. Ironically, the two articles echo the same sentiments that the humanities: "do a bad job of explaining why they matter" (Klinkenborg), "this model…that we have tried but basically failed to explain" (Heller). As the writers have a clear vested interest in the humanities, it is ironic that their attempt to explain why the humanities matter are being framed by titles that

allude to its metaphorical death. These two articles, a decade apart, voice and discuss these issues of English by utilizing their writing skills to communicate their perspectives and findings about the major and department. The writers' demonstrated skill is saliently incongruous because it provides a clear example of what one learns in an English course, being applied to create meanings and associations for the collective. The writers do not give the audience a clear definition of the work that English majors do, but through their writing they certainly show it.

If writing needs to occur to justify the English department and the major, then the words not only need to be clear, but must also teach something to its reader. If readers consider argumentative or opinionated writing as a pedagogical practice, then what can be taken away from these articles as something being taught to its reader or audience, and how does that inform our understanding of the value of an English degree/department/major? When we encounter repeating rhetoric in the same decade of the so-called fall of the English major, the argument becomes redundant and loses a certain level of rhetorical appeal.

Both articles imply the intangibleness of the English degree, but at the same time suggest possible answers to what students should or, are gaining, skill wise. Klinkenborg ties the English department to composition studies, and the writing that university students are not doing, but should be; "But as for writing clearly, simply, with attention and openness to their own thoughts and emotions and the world around them — no". Therefore, the English department becomes responsible for the lack of fluency in composition teaching, and that in turn helps the public to define the department and the people in it by what it is not. This may raise implications about primary and secondary education as pedagogically ineffective in preparing university students for composition classes, regardless of whether they plan to major in English.

Klinkenborg reaffirms the practices of writing as the possible value that is currently missing in the English department currently in the final section of the article; “Writing well used to be a fundamental principle of the humanities, as essential as the knowledge of mathematics and statistics in the sciences. But writing well isn’t merely a utilitarian skill. It is about developing a rational grace and energy in your conversation with the world around you”. This is the second instance in which Klinkenborg connects English to writing. Ultimately, his article favors composition as a value through which the public culture can define English. Even though Klinkenborg does not use the term composition, by looking at a general definition of composition, “approaches to writing” that reflect the “relationship between language, knowledge and discourse” (Nystrand 268) it is clear that composition is being invoked in the discussion of writing. This is an instance in the public culture where English has a specific, measurable value, which is writing. However, “The Decline and Fall of the English Major” does not connect to the value of composition directly to the university. “The End of the English Major” also cites that students do not connect a value to writing, “students now recognized less of the long-term value of writing better or thinking more deeply than they previously had”. Composition as a part of English might be an important narrative to bring to the public discourse surrounding English at present.

Considering the repetition of narratives in the rhetoric of the English department, it becomes the job of the department to justify itself to the public through alternative narratives. But when does the department interact with the public? Teachers and students of the English department have reoccurring interactions with a more general body of the public is first year composition classes at universities as Ryan Skinnell notes. He states, “As the most required course in modern American higher education, first-year composition proved critical to the

development of higher education as such, from an unregulated system of disparate institutions serving discrete populations of students in the early nineteenth century to the relatively homogeneous system of institutions serving massive populations of students across the country by the mid-twentieth century." (137). The politics of how composition arrived in the English department varies in terms of individual institutional history, but it is now one of the most visible courses of an English department. Composition classes are a way to appeal to non-English majors about the important skills that one can learn through English. Obviously, this leaves out a larger portion of the public that do not participate in higher education as well as a large number of professors and graduate students who do not work in composition.

"Where did Composition Studies Come From" offers an understanding of the emergence of composition as a field in the late 20th century; "the rise of composition studies was emblematic of a much larger intellectual shift, especially about the nature and locus of meaning in discourse, a shift touching most of the human and social sciences" (313). It is clear to see how interdisciplinary composition has proved to be and how it is valued in its ability to connect with other academic fields of scholarship. Many composition programs are now housed in the English department, and their continuing connection to other departments should not go unnoticed.

Public culture ties a practice to the English department in universities as a way to reaffirm or challenge these ideas, as people in the department. It is usual for the department to be tied to literature and reading of a traditional canon, but by exploring other aspects of the department in a public space, the narratives of the department can be shifted. The English major doesn't need to fall, or at the very least if they fall, it implies that they have to ability to rise again.

The case for the death of the English department is a veiled allusion to the death of the humanities as a whole within the private business models of universities. The misconception of

"end of the english major" comes from the universities and public, not the disciplines need, to define and quantify it in marketable terms. This is the cultural logic of capitalism and misleads the public culture around education and specifically the humanities in general. It is highly imperative to consider how the inflammatory, attention-grabbing headlines could be used as fuel to a fire of misleading the masses in their understanding of education. These articles do highlight a public culture of raising questions about the English department. But they do not make any appropriate attempts to correspond that line of questioning in any strong defense of the department.

How are we supposed to teach if the public thinks we do not know where we came from, what we do, or where we hope to go? The public culture is important because it sets out more ready-made understandings of what the humanities in higher education is or looks like. The visibility of the English department, coupled with the ambiguity of its value allows for these narratives to exist in a catch-all for the humanities. English doesn't function for the sake of the institution; it functions for the sake of itself. The English degrees' strength is that it cannot easily be categorized into one such class or skill, which is why different subfields of English from literature, creative writing, composition, and rhetoric should consider their defense against the university and to inspire new narratives of English in public culture.

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