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Making the Case for What Matters: The Future of the English Department

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Almost a year ago, I was standing in the hallway outside the office of Congressman Glenn Thompson, representative for the Fifth Congressional District of Pennsylvania (the one that includes Penn State). I'd never been in the Cannon Building — I'd never been in any legislative building of any kind — and I had an odd sense of gratitude. I felt grateful that I could walk into that building as an informed, concerned citizen, and make an argument for — advocate for — something I know is important.

I was there as part of Humanities Advocacy Day, an annual event devoted to lobbying members of Congress for increased (or at least maintained) support for the humanities: the National Endowment for the Humanities, local humanities councils, and fellowship programs such as the Fulbright. The National Humanities Alliance gathers representatives from organizations devoted to the humanities, from universities, museums and libraries, for its yearly meeting. It offers panels and roundtables on current issues and research in the humanities, and then trains participants to lobby using portfolios of data, up-to-the-minute status of legislation before Congress, and budget priorities. I traveled to this meeting as an individual, a faculty member, and as chair of the English department at a small-to-mid-sized regional comprehensive metropolitan university that tries to integrate the liberal arts with work in professional fields like nursing. I did so because I believe the future of the English department rests in the hands of those willing to advocate for its work and values, those ready to make the argument for its necessity, those equipped to be vocal both on campus and beyond.

The writers participating in this roundtable all come from fairly traditional academic backgrounds and training, but all are intensely cognizant of the ways the field is changing. All are paying close attention — at conferences, in conversations facilitated by social media, on the tenure track and off — and all are thinking about how to expand and redefine the role of the English department and their own place in it (or outside of it). Academics who identify as members of the discipline of English are active in the open access movement, the alternative academic (or alt-ac) movement, the digital humanities movement. All of these are transforming how we think about doing English, and these currents can be felt in the rarefied air of the Modern Language Association as well as in community colleges, four-year schools, research libraries, centers and institutes and councils devoted to the study and proliferation of the humanities.

This brief capsule actually makes it sound as though the field of English studies is dynamic, exciting, innovative. We are, and have always been, in a sense, the original disruptors. The ideas to be gleaned from the texts we study and teach still have the power to transform. In the 1920s and 30s we made the radical case that students should have the opportunity to study poetry published in their lifetime, and that the study thereof was even worth doing in college. In the 1970s and 80s we cracked open the edifice of the ivory tower to let in new ideas about race, class, gender, and ideology. Even today, as higher education professionals appropriate language from the *Harvard Business Review* blog and talk about "innovative disruption," "flipping" their classrooms by having students actually prepare material outside of class (i.e., do homework) and come in ready to discuss and problem-solve, we scratch our heads and say: well, we've *been* doing that. We create a space for the enthusiastic exchange of ideas, and we bring students into it.

So, then why all the talk about decline? Why all the concern about relevance? A number of factors have been cited as causing the "decline" of the humanities, and of English in particular. Commentators have suggested the corporatization of the university is to blame; Frank Donoghue in *The Last Professors: The Corporate University and the Fate of the Humanities* (2008) describes the current academic workplace as exploitative and competitive, not the hothouse of ideas scholars in the humanities had been somehow led to believe they would find upon completing a Ph.D. Faculty are preoccupied with chasing publications and grants, administrators are obsessed with outcomes and productivity, and everyone is serving on too many committees. Donoghue also notes a fundamental tension between teaching and research that pulls at humanities scholars; more so than other fields, the humanities, especially English, is defined in large part by labor-intensive teaching, usually in writing. While many teacher-scholars of English imagined themselves reading and discussing the texts they love, writing and doing research, what a large number of English faculty wind up doing is teaching, and teaching writing — often in a perilous state of contingency, and often with great commitment to excellence. Those numbers are growing, and are being held increasingly accountable, even with no power and few resources, for data that shows students cannot read, write, or think (as demonstrated in Arum and Roksa's recent *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* (2011)).

Calls for data, for evidence-based assessment, stem from a need, whether perceived or actual, to make claims for the value of higher education, particularly in the face of ever-rising tuition. This leads directly into asking explicitly whether a degree in English is "worth" what a student might pay in tuition, and whether such a degree might lead to gainful employment that will offset student loan debt sufficiently to allow a graduate to survive. Media outlets ranging from NPR to the *Wall Street Journal* to the *New York Daily News* interrogate the worth of a liberal arts degree on an almost weekly basis, and members of English departments everywhere have wrung their hands in desperation at having to answer for it as they watch the numbers of majors and the size of enrollments

dwindle. In an article for *The American Scholar*, William M. Chace outlines the issues raised above, and then turns on the discipline itself with a withering critique: we have destroyed ourselves by neglecting the tradition we have been charged with sustaining. He writes:

> I have long wanted to believe that I am a member of a profession, a discipline to which I could, if fortunate, add my knowledge and skill. I have wanted to believe that this discipline had certain borders and limitations and that there were essential things to know, to preserve, and to pass on. But it turns out that everything now is porous, hazy, and open to never-ending improvisation, cancellation, and rupture.

While it is true that the discipline has been fractured — the culture wars are a favorite scapegoat for this, but Louis Menand in *The Marketplace of Ideas* (2010) has a more reasoned exploration of the role of the move towards interdisciplinarity as well — it does not necessarily follow that the preserving of tradition is all an English department in the twenty-first century is good for.

I read much of what I've outlined here as a resistance to making a case for our own relevance and for what we can and should do in the twenty-first century. Much of the discourse around "the crisis in the humanities" hearkens back to a time when the relevance, even necessity, of the English department was taken for granted as foundational to the liberal arts education. We must be in decline, these voices say, if we have to convince people we matter, especially as the numbers of majors appear to be falling and English courses are being cut from general education curricula. I do not consider having to make a case for the importance of what I do a "crisis"; I consider it an opportunity to share what I do and the value it brings to my students, my school, and my society. When I attend the annual meeting of the National Humanities Alliance and hear what is being done in archives, in digital humanities, in public history, I cannot fathom why anyone would say the humanities are moribund. Some of the most exciting work — and some of the best investments in public monies — are happening in the humanities. When I walk into the office of an elected representative and am given the opportunity to speak on behalf of my discipline, and on behalf of my students who are investing time and money in the study of that discipline, I am doing my job as a member of that discipline. And when I present data to my colleagues and administrators that show our students have made gains in writing and critical thinking as a result of their study of literature, I am doing my job as a faculty member and a department chair. I may believe that the study of literature provides, as Kenneth Burke wrote, "equipment for living," and I communicate that position to my students in my teaching, but as an advocate for my students, my faculty, and my discipline, I work to provide hard evidence for that idea as well.

The future of the English department does not have to involve online courses and for-profit universities; such things may very well lead to the "death of the humanities," as was suggested by Aurelien Mondon and Gerhard Hoffstaedter in a recent piece for the *Guardian*. But we should not be considering this gloomy prediction from a position of fear for our own status. Rather we should be mindful of how trends in higher education compromise the very things we believe the humanities, and study of English should do: engage the mind, demand the asking of big questions, foster the ability to craft an argument with nuance and complexity, sharpen the eye for details and their significance. And if we believe in these things, then they are worth our attempts to argue for them, and we should. The nimbleness of mind we seek in our own interpretive work, and that we encourage in our students, might be brought to bear on these shifts in our professional lives. In order to convince students to join our departments, colleagues to save a place (preferably the cornerstone) for us in general education curricula, and administrators to see that we bring value to our campus, we must model that nimbleness, and cultivate an investment so deep in what we do that we are willing to take to the hustings to defend it — in a way that makes sense to multiple constituencies and takes into account their multiple perspectives. Because it matters.

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