

Sarah Gutierrez

ENC2135

3/17/23

Value of an English Degree: Dispelling Stereotypes and Highlighting Career Opportunities

The pursuit of an English degree is often associated with the fear of financial insecurity, a perceived lack of prestige, and regarded as a futile choice with limited job prospects. This stigma perpetuates a stereotype that hinders its true value and potential. This research paper aims to dispel these myths by breaking down stereotypes and exploring the job opportunities and career trajectories of English majors. English majors are trained to think critically, analyze complex information, and communicate effectively through various mediums, such as writing, public speaking, and digital media, all of which can be applied to a diverse range of industries that require adaptability and creativity. Ultimately, this paper seeks to challenge the notion that a degree in English is impractical and instead highlight its potential as a solid foundation for success in the constantly evolving job market.

The study of the subject of English is a vital part of any education, as it provides students with useful insight into the human experience as well as a better sense of the world around them. The inclusion of literature in the modern curriculum is particularly justifiable due to its “contributions to the cultivation of imagination and of empathy” (Gillespie, 1). This understanding can foster creativity and innovation; it can encourage individuals to approach problems from unique perspectives and develop creative solutions to complex issues, while also promoting understanding and cooperation among different communities. These critical thinking skills are easily transferable to other areas of study, as well as real-world situations- making English majors versatile and valuable contributors to the workforce. The study of English is not

only a collegiate pursuit but also a reflection of the values, beliefs, and experiences of different societies or eras that serves as a platform for discourse on issues that affect us all. Through the study of literature, we can learn from the ways in which people have lived throughout history. Society and culture today are the results of “the slow growth of attitudes toward life—social, political, religious, economic—affected by geography, climate, and man-made crises—” all of which are preserved within literature and available for our reference (Alberson, 4). This information can be used as a tool to advocate for social justice and cultural progress. Literature has the power to transcend time and place, providing a universal language for human experience that can connect people across cultures and generations. Whether it is through classic works by Shakespeare and Dickens or contemporary voices like Atwood and Murakami, English literature will continue to shape and enrich our cultural landscape. However, despite the deep significance of the arts and humanities in school curriculums, English departments around the world are still being undervalued.

In the past, people with English degrees were often viewed as intellectuals and held in a much higher esteem than they are today. This had to do with their association with a classical education and a deep understanding of literature, philosophy, and history. The study of English was considered an essential part of a well-rounded education, and those who pursued it were seen as highly educated and cultured individuals. The perception of the value of different academic disciplines can change greatly over time, and can be influenced by a wide variety of factors such as economic and cultural shifts. English as a degree may not be as respected as it once was due to economic and cultural factors as well as changes in academia. As the job market becomes increasingly competitive and specialized, degrees that are seen as a direct route to high paying jobs, like engineering or computer science, may be seen as more valuable than humanities

degrees like English. This is strengthened by the rising cost of higher education, which can lead students and their families to prioritize degrees that are more likely to provide more money and a financial return on their investments in school. As the cultural landscape changes, subjects that are seen as prestigious or valuable may also change. In the mid-twentieth century, for example, literary figures like C.S. Lewis were widely celebrated and seen as important cultural icons (Edwards, 13). Today, however, popular culture places greater value on technology, entrepreneurship, and innovation, which can make English degrees seem less impressive or relevant. Over the past few decades, the emphasis on academia on research and specialization has grown, making humanities degrees seem less rigorous or valuable compared to STEM fields. The rise of interdisciplinary programs and this increasing importance of STEM fields in government funding and research can also lead to the devaluation of other academic disciplines. These changes and developments in our society may foster misunderstandings, stereotypes, and stigmas regarding the pursuit of an English degree.

Stigmas that surround English majors are harmful because they reinforce outdated and untrue assumptions about the discipline and those who study it. Students within the realm of English literature and other areas of liberal arts are forced to constantly justify and defend their choice of study. The most common stereotype is the belief that English majors are unemployable- an idea that not only overlooks the knowledge and skills that they possess, but also discourages students from pursuing their passions and careers in the field. These kinds of stereotypes undermine the value of humanities and the arts, contributing to a broader cultural devaluation of these areas of study. According to *The New Yorker's* Nathan Heller, from 2012 to early 2020, the number of graduated language and literature majors had decreased roughly by half. Similarly, women's studies lost over eighty percent of its graduates. So, why has there been

such a significant drop in English majors? One of the most prominent causes is the constant push for students to engage in STEM related majors. As the number of history, philosophy, and religion majors shrink in recent years, academic fields such as computer science and engineering have exploded. We are living in an increasingly STEM-dominated, tech-focused world that is beginning to reflect on education across the globe. Some schools are even going as far as getting rid of specific majors entirely. Marymount University, a Catholic school in Northern Virginia, plans to eliminate majors such as art, English, history, philosophy, education, sociology, and religious studies all together. The university is also cutting a master's program in English and the humanities, stating that they intend to reflect "not only our students' needs, but our responsibility to prepare them for the fulfilling, in-demand careers of the future" (Anderson). People fail to consider the countless students going into STEM fields under the notion that simply having a STEM degree will guarantee their success in the job market. Many of these students have a passion for majors such as English or visual arts but are barred from studying what they really enjoy because of societal expectations.

On the topic of societal expectations, another common misconception is the idea that English and humanities fields are easier to study than STEM fields. There is one explanation for this idea that is especially compelling. The stereotype that English is easier than STEM may be a result of the ratio of men to women in each field. Historically, women were encouraged to pursue literature and music as a means of entering into high society. This has contributed to the perception of the humanities as "softer" studies, while fields such as engineering or research are regarded as more important or powerful, and therefore masculine. In 2016, Microsoft reported that the amount of STEM graduates was 67% male and only 37% female. (Stockwell) This standard is another way in which the patriarchy limits women's access to fields that hold more

‘power’ - and the disregard of English departments and humanities studies in universities inadvertently reinforces it. Not only can gendered stereotypes deter women from studying English, it can even deter women from pursuing STEM fields. This perpetuates the detrimental patriarchal belief that certain fields are inherently masculine or inherently feminine, furthering gender inequality in the workplace. It is essential to challenge these stereotypes and encourage more women to pursue careers in all fields, regardless of gender norms. Universities can work to promote diversity and inclusivity in all fields, including English and humanities to provide these opportunities equally to all students. Only by breaking down stereotypes such as these and promoting equality can we subvert the stigmas around English majors.

To further dispel the stigmas around English majors, it is important to explore the diverse career trajectories that are available to graduates in the field. Contrary to popular belief, they are not limited to careers in academia, writing, or editing. While these may be traditional paths for English majors, the skills they possess can be applied to a much wider range of professions. For instance, English majors are well-suited for careers in marketing, public relations, and advertising because they have excellent communication skills, can craft persuasive arguments, and are able to analyze and understand the needs of many different audiences. (Jacobs)

Additionally, English majors are well prepared for careers in law, as they are able to read and interpret complex texts, think critically, and communicate effectively. Many successful politicians and public figures actually have degrees in English, as training in public speaking and writing is helpful in their respective careers. The rise of digital media and content creation in the twenty first century has created a demand for individuals to engage in careers in social media management, content creation, and digital marketing- all of which require skills present with the pursuit of an English degree. The list of career opportunities for English majors is diverse and

constantly evolving, proving that the degree is far from impractical, despite the portrayal of English in mainstream media and popular culture. As society continues to value and prioritize effective communication and critical thinking, the demand for individuals with English degrees will continue to rise. The unemployment rate between most STEM and English majors only differ by 2-3% (Cagnassola).

In summary, the pursuit of an English degree is often associated with a lack of prestige, limited job prospects, and financial security. These misconceptions undermine the true merit and significance of English and humanities to our lives. An English degree is a valuable and versatile degree that prepares graduates for a wide range of career opportunities. Despite common stereotypes that English majors are limited to careers in writing or teaching, the skills and knowledge gained from an English degree are highly sought after by employers across many industries. These skills include critical thinking, communication, analysis, research, and creativity, which are crucial in today's fast-paced and complex job market. English graduates can pursue careers in fields such as marketing, advertising, law, and many others. By dispelling stereotypes and highlighting the career opportunities available to graduates with an English degree, we can encourage more students who are passionate about the subject to consider pursuing this degree.

Works Cited

- Alberson, Hazel Stewart. "The Significance of World Literature Today." *College English*, vol. 7, no. 6, 1946, pp. 323–326. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/370549>. Accessed 17 Mar. 2023.
- Anderson, Nick. "Marymount University Cuts English, Several Other Majors." *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 24 Feb. 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2023/02/24/marymount-university-humanities-majors-eliminated/>.
- Brazier, P.H., and Bruce L. Edwards. "Lewis' Life and Works, Legacy and Context— a Comprehensive, Discursive Account." *Journal of Inklings Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2012, pp. 81–94. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48616098>. Accessed 17 Mar. 2023.
- Gillespie, Tim. "Why Literature Matters." *The English Journal*, vol. 83, no. 8, 1994, pp. 16–21. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/820324>. Accessed 17 Mar. 2023.
- Goldberg, Nicholas. "Column: Where Have All the English Majors Gone?" *Los Angeles Times*, Los Angeles Times, 24 Oct. 2022, <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2022-10-24/college-humanities-decline>.
- Heller, Nathan. "The End of the English Major." *The New Yorker*, 27 Feb. 2023, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/03/06/the-end-of-the-english-major>.
- Jacobs, Richard. *12 Reasons to Study English Literature as an Undergraduate*, <https://www.routledge.com/blog/article/12-reasons-to-study-english-literature-as-an-undergraduate#>.
- Cagnassola, Mary. "The 10 College Majors with the Highest (and Lowest) Post-Grad Unemployment Rates." *Money*, <https://money.com/college-majors-recent-grads-unemployment-rates/>.
- Stockwell, Carly. "Women vs. Men in STEM Degrees: Do We Have a Problem?" *Inside College Factual*, Inside College Factual, 2 Nov. 2017, <https://inside.collegefactual.com/stories/women-vs-men-in-stem-degrees>.

