

The Viability of the English Major in the Current Economy

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In an April 2012 *Wall Street Journal* article titled “Wealth or Waste? Rethinking the Value of a Business Major,” national reporter Melissa Korn explores an intriguing fact: the business major, the most popular major on college campuses for over 30 years and the discipline believed to be most economically viable by prospective college students and their parents, is in crisis.

Employers and corporate recruiters, Korn reports, increasingly believe that business degrees “focus too much on the nuts and bolts of finance and accounting and don’t develop enough critical thinking and problem-solving skills through long essays, in-class debates, and other hallmarks of liberal-arts courses.” This perceived lack of critical thinking and communication skills among business majors is causing many recruiters to seek “candidates with a broader academic background” who exhibit “flexible think[ing]” and “exposure to multiple disciplines” (Korn). Ironically, however, while business employers and corporate recruiters are seeking broadly-educated graduates trained in critical thinking, analysis, and communication, universities are rapidly expunging many humanities majors from their curricula and are shifting their course offerings towards more vocational and technical tracks. In a *New York Times* article titled “Making College ‘Relevant,’” Kate Zernicke reports that during the recent “Great Recession,”

colleges and universities have struggled to make their liberal arts and humanities majors seem relevant, viable, and attractive to prospective students and to parents who want to see evidence of a clear correspondence between a chosen major and future gainful employment. Some universities have cut their philosophy and classics departments altogether, and most colleges and universities have had to scrutinize intensely their curricula to determine whether they match perceived trends in enrollment and job placement (Zernicke).

In addition, the slowly improving but feeble, mostly “jobless,” recovery over the last few years has only heightened college students’ concerns over choosing the right major and finding full-time employment upon graduation. An April 2012 *Philadelphia Inquirer* article notes that recent college grads and young workers “lost their jobs at about three times the rate of all workers from the recession’s start in 2007” (Von Bergen), and the U.S. Department of Labor’s April 2012 *Jobs Report* revealed that the unemployment rate for those aged 16 to 24 was 16.4%, double the national unemployment rate of 8.2% (Von Bergen). Such dire employment statistics have resulted in even greater national scrutiny of the aims and outcomes of higher education in the United States and have left college students more focused than ever on gaining a measurable benefit from what will be an enormous financial investment in higher education. Since Thomas Friedman famously pronounced that “the world is flat” (7), thousands of customer service and technology jobs have migrated overseas, and the business degree has solidified its standing as the most sought-after degree on American college campuses. New and emerging technologies have transformed the workplace, requiring higher levels of technological competence and skill, and the corporate environment has transformed from a fixed and stable place where one worked for

thirty or forty years to a fluid, transferable, and short-term place to drop one's laptop for a few months or years until one is replaced by someone or something faster, cheaper, and newer.

College students and their parents are understandably apprehensive about these unsettling changes, but they are not alone in their concern. Those who teach in the liberal arts and humanities have also grown increasingly alarmed, pessimistic, and anxious about the fate of the liberal arts in a seemingly "quick-fix" economy that values instant economic gratification over long-term intellectual investment. Some educators have more or less abandoned the liberal arts, disciplines "gutted by," in the words of Camille Paglia, "four decades of pretentious postmodernist theory and insular identity politics," in favor of the practical and applied sciences. In her August 2010 *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, Paglia flatly states that "the idea that college is a contemplative realm of humanistic inquiry, removed from vulgar material needs, is nonsense," and calls for a "revalorization of the trades." Other educators admit that the humanities will probably survive in pop culture but predict that they have no future within academia. Frank Donoghue, Associate Professor of English at Ohio State University and author of *The Last Professors: The Corporate University and the Fate of the Humanities*, asserts that "the humanities simply don't have a place in the emergent curriculum of the 21st century." Still others, such as William M. Chace, former president of both Emory University and Wesleyan College, point to the largely self-inflicted and possibly mortal wounds the liberal arts have suffered in recent decades and wonder if the study of literature, in particular, will quietly disappear without a "share[d] sense of loss."

Supporting these rather pessimistic views of the liberal arts, and the English major in particular, are current statistics on college enrollment within majors. During the 1970s and 1980s

the number of students majoring in English dropped dramatically in one manifestation of what Sarah Turner and William Bowen have identified as a general “flight from the arts and sciences” (517).¹ According to statistics from the U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences, the total number of English majors dropped from 7.61 percent in 1970/71 to 3.52 percent in 2007/08, though the total number of bachelor degrees awarded increased 53.7 percent, with double-digit increases in fields such as health sciences and computer technology (United States Department of Education, “Table 271”). The most popular degree awarded in 2007–2008 was the business degree (United States Department of Education, “Table 282”). Prospective students have increasingly shied away from the English major, perceiving it as enjoyable and possibly valuable, but thoroughly unmarketable in an already strained and highly competitive economy.

Ironically, as college students abandon the humanities, and the English major in particular, for business degrees, employers lament the fact that college graduates lack critical thinking, writing, and communication skills, and study after study reveals that liberal arts majors score highest on almost every measurable area of academic achievement, including reasoning, critical thinking, and oral and written communication. Pessimistic scenarios aside, I will argue that there has never been a more hopeful and exciting time for the English major and for those who teach in the field of English. We are on the verge, and are beginning to see evidence already, of a distinct shift in the culturally perceived value of the major. As Korn’s recent *Wall Street Journal* article affirms, corporate managers, business executives, MBA faculty, and engineering school administrators all know something those of us in the humanities have yet to discover—our methods of teaching critical thinking, reasoning, and oral and written

communication are quietly being sought out and are sorely lacking in many other disciplines, resulting in a glut of job applicants who cannot write coherently, speak persuasively, or reason logically.

While the English major, in particular, often suffers from the perception that it is not relevant to the needs of the current economy, it consistently fosters classroom environments demonstrated to produce a distinct skill set consisting of critical thinking, verbal communication, written communication, and analytical skills that are highly desired in today's economy and that have been demonstrated in numerous research studies to result in job promotion and advancement.² Literary analysis requires students to apply in a consistent and proficient way the Elements of Reasoning and Standards of Critical Thinking, elaborated by critical thinking experts Gerald Nosich, Richard Paul, and Linda Elder.³ The courses required by the English major are aptly suited to produce the habits, practices, dispositions and mental strategies of the engaged, creative, critical thinker. They naturally train students in those areas of reflective intelligence which can be learned through practice, and they confront students with consistently rich content. Furthermore, they require students to master the sophisticated mental practices of synthesis, evaluation, interpretation, argument, and analysis, ultimately producing marketable, valuable, and competent employees for the current and emergent global economies.

Perhaps as a result of three long decades of flight from liberal arts majors, business employers now repeatedly lament the lack of proficient critical thinking and communication skills in job applicants, and frequently appeal to educational institutions to produce more graduates who can successfully analyze and interpret data, think critically, speak and write persuasively and coherently, work well in groups, and lead others efficiently.⁴ In a 2009 survey

of 302 business executives conducted for the Association of American Colleges and Universities, 89 percent of respondents believed that students need “to communicate effectively, orally and in writing,” 81 percent valued “critical thinking and analytical reasoning skills,” and 75 percent of respondents believed that students need the ability to “to analyze and solve complex problems” (Peter D. Hart Research Associates). The survey also found that the complex and fluid economic conditions facing businesses today have caused employers to seek “broader set[s] of skills and . . . higher levels of learning and knowledge than in the past” (Peter D. Hart Research Associates). Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts President Mary K. Grant confers with this finding, stating, “What we’re hearing from employers is that they need a work force that’s broadly prepared, that adapts to changing circumstances, that knows how to work in groups and in teams, that can communicate well, and that has problem-solving ability” (qtd. in Dobrowolski). It turns out that such applicants are difficult to find, even with current high unemployment rates. Frank B. Leibold, in an August 2010 article entitled “Where Have All the Jobs Gone?” contends that much of the perceived lack of jobs in today’s economy rests on a “skills gap” in the current workforce, especially in the so-called soft skills of critical thinking and problem solving. Leibold explains that in today’s shifting, technology-driven job market, “transferable skill-sets, or competencies, have become the new currency for success and future employability.” In the coming years, Leibold predicts, basing his conclusions on a survey conducted by the American Management Association issued in April 2010, “skills defined as critical thinking, creative problem solving, communication and collaboration . . . will become even more important to organizations.”

Faced with this pervasive lack of critical thinking and communication skills in current job applicants, business executives and administrators in graduate programs in engineering have instinctively begun to seek out liberal arts majors. Ray Williams, in the 2010 article “Why a Liberal Arts Education Can Best Prepare Business Leaders,” states that the recent economic recession, replete with “ethical and moral scandals” and instances of decidedly bad judgment, has caused business schools to reevaluate their programs and to turn again to the liberal arts for a sufficiently broad and deep education. Williams reports that more and more business executives are concluding that a “broad, idealistic, liberating education . . . prepare[s] a person to be valuable to a company” in ways that a narrow degree in business or accounting may not. Williams points to the fact that “a number of prominent business schools, notably the Rotman School of Business in Toronto and Stanford Business School, have redesigned their MBA programs, integrating Liberal Arts and a multi-disciplinary approach.”⁵ Indeed, Nancy Adler, a professor of management at McGill University, Canada, predicts that soon the “Master of Fine Arts will become a much sought-after business degree” because of the desperate need for creativity and ingenuity in business school applicants (qtd. in Sen). Even administrators in technical fields like engineering are now seeking liberal arts majors for graduate programs and attempting to integrate more broad liberal arts curricula into their undergraduate programs. Richard K. Miller, president of the Franklin W. Olin College of Engineering, often highlights the need for engineers to possess broad-based skills in critical thinking and communication, and reports in his paper “Beyond Technology: Preparing Engineering Innovators Who Don’t See Boundaries” that the National Academy of Engineering has called for “a much broader

education, well beyond the current deep and narrow technical education in the applied sciences.”⁶

With managers and executives in business and engineering extolling the skills and competencies of liberal arts majors, it may seem puzzling that so many professors in the humanities remain pessimistic about the fate of their disciplines, and at the same time so many college students treat humanities departments as if they are the campus wards for H1N1 victims. Far from being a useless and wasteful degree, the English degree may be one of the only degrees on campus that can practically guarantee high levels of proficiency in the very skills courted by business employers today. Courses in the English major are specifically designed to teach higher order thinking skills, to demand understanding and integration of rich content, to require proficiency in assimilating and evaluating data, and to strengthen those areas of reflective intelligence that can be rapidly improved with practice. As Catherine Milvain states in the article “Thinking Skills Within the Humanities Discipline,” students in “The Information Age” must be able not only to engage in “regurgitation of data, but . . . to control knowledge . . . to access, organize, analyze, evaluate and effectively use information” (6). In the future, Milvain predicts, “knowledge will need to be applied in too many ways for all to be anticipated, so emphasis [must] be moved from lower cognitive skills of recall and retrieval to an ability to use information to construct new understandings” (6–7). This ability to use information to construct new understandings is exactly what is involved in literary analysis and rhetorical argument, the foundational and routine tasks of the English major, as well as higher-order forms of critical thinking.

Evidence that humanities majors, including English majors, gain higher-order thinking skills at measurably greater rates than do students in other majors can be found in the groundbreaking January 2011 study *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*. This carefully controlled research study uses the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), a tool specifically designed to assess “core outcomes espoused by all of higher education—critical thinking, analytical reasoning, problem solving and writing” (Arum and Roksa 21). Overall, the sample of more than 2,300 students reveals that after two years of college “no significant gains [have occurred] in critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing skills for at least 45 percent of the students” (Arum and Roksa 45); even after four years of college, gains in these skills for over a third of students are statistically insignificant, explaining, perhaps, why business managers are finding it so hard to find candidates qualified in these areas (Arum and Roksa 45). However, the study also reveals, significantly, that humanities majors score much higher on the CLA assessment than do majors in other fields (along with the other core liberal arts majors of science and mathematics) (Arum and Roksa 104). Students majoring in business, education, and social work score the lowest on the assessment (Arum and Roksa 104). Interestingly, the 2011 National Governors’ Association’s Center for Best Practices report titled *Degrees for What Jobs?: Raising Expectations for Universities and Colleges in a Global Economy*, asserts that “To participate in the 21st century knowledge-based economy, students must increasingly be comfortable with critical thinking and problem solving, communication, collaboration, and creativity and innovation” (Sparks and Waits 25). In particular, college graduates must understand that the analytical interpretation, evaluation, and synthesis of information will become the “‘must-have’ skill” of the 21st century (Sparks and Waits 25). The

ability to determine, in the words of the Governors' Association report, "what kind of information matters and how it connects and applies to other information" (Sparks and Waits 25) serves as the foundational skill of both higher-order critical thinking and literary analysis. Though the English major is not the only course of academic study which consistently results in the proficient acquisition of skills in interpretation, analysis, and evaluation, results from the Collegiate Learning Assessment demonstrate that higher gains in these skills are correlated to courses which require extensive reading, textual analysis, and writing. Significantly, humanities courses score higher than other disciplines in such rigorous reading and writing requirements (Arum and Roksa "Table A.3.5").

What is it, specifically, about the curricula and requirements of the English major that result in impressive gains in higher-order thinking and communication skills? How does critical thinking essentially characterize both the methods and intellectual practices of the English major? At its core, critical thinking can be defined as metacognitive thinking that is self-conscious, self-reflective, and self-correcting; that relies on standards and criteria of logic; that uses questions to reason things out; and that produces an authentic belief in the validity of the reasoning. Teachers of literature and writing are most concerned with getting students to engage in deeper, "vertical" thinking and analysis of texts and concepts. We require English majors to read, interpret, and analyze difficult, multivalent texts with multiple layers of meaning, and we then require them to construct sophisticated, thoughtful, and nuanced arguments about these texts, in effect cultivating curious, thoughtful, critical thinkers who instinctively question assumptions, consider implications, and evaluate claims. Literary analysis requires students simultaneously to hold in their minds multiple and often competing layers of interpretation,

considering various analytical lenses such as the text's historical and cultural context within literary periods and genres. Literary analysis also requires students to consider the text's role as a reflection of the author's experience or world view, its rhetorical role as a means of persuasion or argument, its internal structure, its ability to reflect or critique cultural constructions of gender or class, and its tendency to make demands of the reader or require reader participation. This type of "deep" analysis, in which multiple, competing analytical lenses are applied to a text or set of texts in order to both understand and to discover meaning characterizes the mental strategies of the critical thinker.⁷

In a course I recently taught on novels of formation in British and American literature, my students expressed surprise at how the literary text, in this case Dickens's *Great Expectations*, would seem to shift before their very eyes, at one time appearing to function as a subversive novel critiquing Victorian notions of class and wealth; at another time commenting with trenchant clarity on domestic relationships; at another time seeming to function as an odd combination of gothic, sentimental, and realistic literary styles. Other students saw in the novel an intricate chain of related symbols that led inexorably to, and required a particular view of, the novel's central topics of individual growth, personal choice, class, and materialism. Still others understood the novel largely as a sophisticated psychological portrayal of coming of age, carefully representing the emotional and psychological steps adolescents take toward gaining intellectual and emotional maturity. In asking students to clarify their interpretations of the text, to reconcile those interpretations with competing views, and to support their claims with concrete evidence from the text, English teachers both model and require that students practice the forms of reflective critical thinking expressed in Richard Paul's circular model of the Elements of

Reasoning, as well as apply the Standards of Critical Thinking and cultivate an increasing awareness of common Impediments to Critical Thinking.⁸

A brief consideration of the eight Elements of Reasoning (purpose, question at issue, assumptions, implications and consequences, information, concepts, conclusions and interpretations, and point of view) reveals that what we have been doing all along in literary analysis is a highly complex form of critical thinking. Though I do not want to minimize the inviolable nature of the literary text as a worthy object of study in itself, I do want to suggest that it also inadvertently functions as what one of my colleagues calls “fodder”—as simply a rich and complex written text with which we and our students may practice increasingly sophisticated patterns of critical analysis and evaluation. Likewise, a quick glance at the Standards of Critical Thinking (clearness, accuracy, importance and relevance, sufficiency, depth and breadth, and precision) reveals that every written text we ask our students to produce must invariably meet these standards, and every conversation we have about the relevance and sufficiency of secondary sources meticulously applies these standards, as well.⁹ The English major’s repeated, deliberate, intensive practice of literary analysis really amounts to the sustained application of the Elements of Reasoning and the Standards of Critical Thinking in the analysis of various texts in multiple contexts (new historicism, feminist theory, formalism, etc.), creating and cultivating a flexible, yet focused intellectual response to texts and problems.

By encouraging my students to consider the Elements of Reasoning in a conscious and deliberate way in their analysis of texts, I can affirm that they have engaged in the sort of complex thought we want students to accomplish when we tell them to “analyze deeply,” words that initially perplex and frighten many students. By asking our students repeatedly to apply the

Elements and Standards of Critical Thinking in their analysis and evaluation of literary texts, we are ultimately creating in our students a *disposition*, a set of mental habits. This claim is supported by the authors of the 2009 MLA *Report to the Teagle Foundation on the Undergraduate Major in Language and Literature*, who note that “sustained, deep engagements with literary works and literary language open perceptions of structure, texture, and the layering of meanings that challenge superficial comprehension, expand understanding, and hone analytic skills” (Charon et al.). By modeling and teaching the close analysis and evaluation of complex prose texts, we are creating lifelong thinkers, questioners, and learners who embrace their own intellectual curiosity, approach evidence with healthy skepticism, and evaluate critically their own assumptions and the claims of others.

In her 1999 report *From Thinking Skills to Thinking Classrooms*, Carol McGuinness, professor of psychology at Queen’s University, Belfast, identifies nine core concepts necessary to develop thinking skills in students. Some of these core concepts include seeing “learners as active creators of their knowledge and frameworks of interpretation,” understanding learning as “searching out meaning and imposing structure,” and encouraging students to “deal systematically yet flexibly with novel problems and situations.” McGuinness also identifies certain pedagogical practices, such as employing varied methods of analysis and interpretation, and designing “learning tasks which . . . have a degree of open-endedness and uncertainty” which require students to “impose meaning,” evaluate, or “produce multiple solutions” as most conducive to cultivating critical thinking in the classroom. The typical college literature classroom, with its discursive format, its open interpretation of texts and concepts, and its student-led discovery, argument, and analysis, consistently reflects and cultivates all of

McGuinness's core concepts. And there is concrete evidence that such discursive classroom environments, common in literature and writing courses, result in higher gains in critical thinking skills in students. Steven Brint and Allison M. Cantwell's 2011 article "Academic Disciplines and the Undergraduate Experience: Rethinking Bok's 'Underachieving Colleges' Thesis" reports that "study time," "academic conscientiousness," and "analytical and critical thinking experiences" are all "strongly related to participation in class and interaction with instructors, and participation [is] more common among humanities and social sciences students than among science and engineering students" (1). No wonder business employers and graduate school administrators have increasingly begun to seek out English majors and other graduates in the humanities, individuals likely to be proficient in "critical thinking, creative problem solving, communication, and collaboration," the four traits most "important to [business] organizations" (Leibold).¹⁰

So the view that the English major has no real economic or practical value turns out to be merely a chimera, a false belief based on faulty and dated assumptions and ignorance of current research. But this perception, though based on wrong information and assumptions, nonetheless persists and is widespread.¹¹ English department faculty and administrators must face the reality of this negative perception and aggressively act to counter it and to modify department curricula and practices in order to best present the department as vital, important, and highly relevant to the current needs of our economy. In light of this task, I will offer some strategies and suggestions for making the English major more attractive in the current economy:

1. *Keep all courses in the English major rigorous and filled with rich content.*

Encourage faculty members consistently to assign forty pages of reading per week and twenty or more pages of formal writing per semester.¹² Students want to see a one-to-one correspondence between the courses they take and the acquisition of skills they will need to succeed professionally, and university administrators need to know that the English major is a rigorous major that consistently produces highly qualified graduates. A 2012 Social Science Research Council report found that high CLA scores, associated with the rigorous reading and writing requirements reported in humanities courses, result in higher rates of employment upon graduation (Arum, Cho, Kim, and Roksa 3).¹³ English faculty and university administrators should understand that literary analysis is a rigorous and demanding discipline aptly suited to produce marketable and flexible analytical skills in the current and emergent global economies.

2. *Consciously and visibly teach critical thinking skills within the major.*

Include at least one required course solely devoted to teaching critical thinking, reading, and writing, and explicitly include critical thinking skills and strategies in every English major course. Mention the acquisition of critical thinking skills in lists of student learning outcomes and required course goals, and encourage faculty members to emphasize metacognition in their courses, making “how we think” visible to students, and focusing on strategies of evaluation, analysis, and argument in the teaching of literature.¹⁴ Also consider assessing and tracking the achievement of critical thinking skills of English majors through the administration of critical thinking assessment tools such as the Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal or the newly-developed Critical Thinking

Assessment Test (CAT). Being able to assess and track gains in critical thinking and reasoning skills is becoming more and more important in today's financially-driven academic market.

- 3. Devote time and any available financial resources to training faculty members in teaching critical thinking and to assuring faculty expertise in this area.*

Consider sending faculty members to workshops and annual conferences provided by the Critical Thinking Foundation or having experts such as Gerald Nosich offer an on-campus workshop for faculty on critical thinking. Though these efforts may require an initial or ongoing investment of department resources, they can provide an avenue for the department to position itself as an important resource for critical thinking training. Just as departments within science and business generate revenue for universities by providing valuable consulting and research, the English Department could begin to provide expert training and consulting in critical thinking strategies for area businesses and local schools, generating increased interest in the major, providing desperately needed funds for the department, and positioning the department as a unique source for training in the very skills that are most needed in today's business environment.

- 4. Commit to teaching a distinct body of knowledge within the major which will result in a measurable and definable area of expertise for graduates.*

Basic strategies of literary interpretation, including what is frequently called new critical or formalist analysis of literature, should be consistently and rigorously taught. English majors should share knowledge of a distinct set of sophisticated, proven literary works, and should be able to interpret, analyze, and evaluate complex written texts in lengthy

and sophisticated papers which require the synthesis of multiple secondary sources. Furthermore, course offerings should represent a clear progression of increasing knowledge and expertise in the field. The authors of the 2009 *MLA Report to Teagle Foundation on the Undergraduate Major in Language and Literature* note that the English major should not only result in improved analytical and writing skills, but should “acquaint students with representative cultural examples through a designated body of works” resulting in an “integrated, progressive course of study with articulated goals for each course” (Charon et al. 5). Resist the urge to fill required courses with technical jargon, obscure critical theory, or arcane cultural or political topics. Use periodicity, historicity, and critical theory as analytical tools to help students better understand and evaluate literary texts and to place those texts within the context of the larger human experience.¹⁵

5. *Actively “market” the major in order to serve students in very practical ways.*¹⁶

Recognize that students are deeply concerned about finding good jobs upon graduation, competing for scholarships to graduate schools, paying off school loans, and gaining skills which are valuable in today’s market. Consider modifying course descriptions and titles of tracks within the major to reflect the department’s commitment to teaching critical thinking and communication skills. Many universities have three tracks for the major: a writing track, a secondary education track, and a literature track. Departments may want to experiment both with course offerings within tracks and with the marketing of these tracks to make them more directly relevant to graduates’ professional needs. English faculty members should be open to including new and emerging technologies,

professional communication, and web-based communication in their writing courses, and should consider changing course and track titles in order to meet the real economic needs of their students. For instance, the literature track could be renamed “Literature and Critical Thinking” in order to convey accurately the skills taught in the major; likewise, the writing track could be renamed “Writing and Technical Communication” in order to help students market themselves as a viable candidates in the business sphere.

6. *Finally, create clear and unobstructed pathways for English majors to jobs or graduate school programs.*

Many students flee to business schools based upon the assumption that this move will assure them a job upon graduation, but we have already seen that a degree in English often prepares students far better than a degree in business for success in the workplace. We must consciously attempt to shift the perception of the English major as isolated, insular, and unconnected to the world of business. One example of such a conscious effort to shift such perceptions of the major can be seen at Winthrop University, a state-funded liberal arts university in Rock Hill, South Carolina. Winthrop has implemented a new “Professionalize Your Passion” initiative which allows students to combine a liberal arts major with a business minor and then obtain an MBA with only one additional year of study. Students who wish to major in English may continue to take their favorite classes in literature and writing while completing the nine undergraduate courses required for a business minor. Upon graduating and meeting enrollment qualifications, students can begin and complete the MBA program within one calendar year. Many students at Winthrop, where I teach in the English department, have responded to this new initiative

with enthusiasm, as it provides a clear pathway to potential lucrative employment while still allowing them to focus on their true passion as an undergraduate. Professors in the English department are equally enthusiastic about the initiative, as they know that our students are gaining analytical and communication skills that will serve them well both in the MBA program and in the workplace, and as this initiative could potentially keep more students from fleeing the major in search of one which seems more marketable. Similar pathways could be constructed for English majors who wish to enter law school or medical school, with suggested minors and electives that will enable them to focus on literary studies while still gaining the requisite knowledge and skills that will allow them to succeed in later professional programs.¹⁷

English Department faculty members and administrators must work determinedly to shift the perception of the English major as antiquated, theoretical, insular, or isolated from the world of business, commerce, or practical, applied technology and must embrace opportunities to market the major as highly likely to provide current employers with employees proficient in skill sets and dispositions they need most in our current uncertain economy. We are simply not doing a good enough job articulating *why* English majors are likely to be competent and proficient at critical thinking, argument, analysis, reasoning, and oral and written communication. Their competency is not a fluke; it is not a coincidence that so many English majors thrive in law schools, graduate schools, and management positions. The curricula of the English major itself requires expert competency in written and oral communication skills in combination with higher order critical thinking skills, and it should be actively and aggressively marketed as more likely to produce such skills to prospective students and their future employers. Faculty members need

to re-conceptualize the major to allow it to match closely the needs of the current workplace, with its emphasis on new technologies, visual media, and applied sciences. Though we may inherently agree with John Henry Cardinal Newman that a liberal arts education is “desirable, though nothing come of it, as being of itself a treasure, and a sufficient remuneration of years of labour” (114), we must work harder to ensure that our students, their parents, and others in the academic and business spheres around us understand the close correspondence between the acquired skills of the English major and the needs of the current global and recessionary economy.

Notes

[1] In addition to Turner and Bowen's findings in their 1990 article "The Flight from the Arts and Sciences: Trends in Degrees Conferred," the 2001-02 report of the ADE Ad Hoc Committee on the English Major, titled *The Undergraduate English Major*, reports that after a 75 percent decrease in the number of English majors during the 1970s and 1980s, the number of majors increased slightly, only to decline again between 1993 and 1997 (Schramm, Mitchell, Stephens, and Laurence 68).

[2] Ann Howard's *Journal of Applied Psychology* article "College Experiences and Managerial Performance" traces the applied managerial skills of graduates in different disciplines, reporting that "humanities and social science majors ha[ve] the best overall performance, with particularly good interpersonal and verbal skills" (530). According to Howard, graduates in the humanities consistently out-perform business school graduates in applied management skills. See also Ray Williams, "Why a Liberal Arts Education Can Best Prepare Business Leaders," *Canwest News Service* (March 17, 2010), in *LexisNexis Academic*; Catherine Milvain, "Thinking Skills Within the Humanities Discipline," *Ethos*, Volume 16, Number 4 (2008); and Richard K. Miller, "Beyond Study Abroad: Preparing Engineers for a New Global Economy," available at http://www.olin.edu/about_olin/docs/pdf/study_abroad.pdf. While recent studies have demonstrated that students within both the "hard" sciences and the humanities score higher on critical thinking assessments, Steven Brint and Allison M. Cantwell's 2011 study "Academic Disciplines and the Undergraduate Experience" reports that "analytical and critical thinking experiences . . . [are] strongly related to participation in class and interaction with instructors,

and participation [is] more common among humanities and social sciences students than among science and engineering students” (1).

[3] For a discussion of the Elements of Reasoning and Standards of Critical Thinking, see *Learning to Think Things Through: A Guide to Critical Thinking Across the Curriculum*, Third Edition, by Gerald Nosich; *Critical Thinking: Tools for Taking Charge of Your Learning and Your Life*, Second Edition, by Richard Paul and Linda Elder; and the *Critical Thinking Foundation* website, www.criticalthinking.org.

[4] See also Richard W. Judy and Carol D’Amico, *Workforce 2020: Work and Workers in the 21st Century*; Tom Peters, “The New Wired World of Work”; “Into the Unknown”; Lillian Bissett, “Bridging the Skills Gap”; Richard Sennett, *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism*; and Thomas L. Friedman, *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-first Century*. For a discussion of the need for future employees to cultivate self-awareness, see Robert B. Reich, *The Future of Success*. For a discussion of the need to cultivate ethical decision-making and analysis in the new workplace, see Malini Sen, “Putting Some Soul into Management.”

[5] Most significantly, Asian universities are eagerly adopting the American liberal arts model for higher education even as American universities reject it. An April 20, 2012 article in the *South China Morning Post* reports that universities in Hong Kong, Singapore, and surrounding regions are rapidly creating broad-based liberal arts programs and curricula in order to “foster creativity” and “produce graduates who can think outside of the box” (Yeung). Chen Weiming, founder of Xing Wei College, the first liberal arts college on mainland China, asserts, “Looking forward you are not likely to have one job most of your life but change careers, industries or

countries you live in. Liberal education more or less prepares you for the rest of your life, instead of preparing you for the first job – which is what most Chinese universities prepare students to do” (qtd. in Yeung).

[6] Some research even indicates that the current recession has been less damaging to liberal arts majors, typically flexible job applicants who can adjust to changing economic situations and apply critical thinking and writing skills in a variety of contexts. In the optimistically titled article “In 2008, Recession Won’t Hurt Job Market for College Grads,” Biko Knox asserts, “Liberal arts majors are . . . in strong demand,” and cites business executives in charge of hiring for large firms, who repeatedly attest that they are looking for candidates with skills “typical to many liberal arts majors.” The 2012 Social Science Research Council report *Documenting Uncertain Times: Post-graduate Transitions of the Academically Adrift Cohort* further suggests a link between the liberal arts and high rates of employment upon graduation. Those cohorts who scored higher on the CLA were three times more likely to be employed than those who scored in the bottom quintile (Arum, Cho, Kim, and Roksa 3).

[7] While additional assessment is needed in order to track specific gains in critical thinking skills across majors, Guihua Li, Shawna Long, and Mary Ellen Simpson, in their article “Self-Perceived Gains in Communication and Critical Thinking Skills: Are There Disciplinary Differences? AIR 1998 Annual Forum Paper,” report that “majoring in humanities, psychology, and other social sciences had a positive influence on students’ self-reported growth in writing and/or listening skills” (7). It is important to note that Arum and Roksa’s 2011 study *Academically Adrift* finds that humanities and “hard” science majors score higher on the CLA assessment for critical thinking skills than social science majors. We may be able to conclude

from these findings that only humanities majors potentially end up with high levels of skill in both communication *and* critical thinking and analysis.

[8] See *Learning to Think Things Through: A Guide to Critical Thinking Across the Curriculum*, by Gerald M. Nosich, and *The Foundation for Critical Thinking* website, www.criticalthinking.org.

[9] See *Learning to Think Things Through: A Guide to Critical Thinking Across the Curriculum*, Third Edition, by Gerald Nosich; *Critical Thinking: Tools for Taking Charge of Your Learning and Your Life*, Second Edition, by Richard Paul and Linda Elder; and the *Critical Thinking Foundation* website, www.criticalthinking.org.

[10] Peter G. Beidler, in his informative and useful article “What English Majors Do Out There, How They Feel About It, and What We Do About It,” reports the findings of a survey of all of the Lehigh University English major alums who graduated between 1980 and 2000. Of those who responded, 74.1 percent felt that majoring in English helped them obtain their current job, and 97.5 percent felt that having majored in English helped them do their current job well (Beidler 32). Working against the assumption that English majors will inevitably end up as either teachers or journalists, Lehigh’s survey found that 43.6 percent of respondents were employed in business or industry, 15.1 percent were employed in public service, and 13.3 percent were employed in law (Beidler 31).

[11] The 2011 National Governors’ Association Center for Best Practices report titled *Degrees for What Jobs?: Raising Expectations for Universities and Colleges in a Global Economy*, for instance, suggests that state governors should encourage college and university administrators, with their traditional “emphasis on broad liberal arts education,” to shift their resources and

attention toward more technical, vocational training. Ironically, the report itself reveals that employers need both technical skills and “soft” critical thinking and communication skills. Indeed, in a survey of “Top Skill Needs of Minnesota Employers,” the top five skills listed were all “soft” skills (“creativity; written communication skills; verbal communication skills; professionalism; self-direction, ability to take initiative”) (Sparks and Waits 27). Though the report acknowledges employers’ needs for such skills, it still does not seem to connect these skills to the traditional liberal arts, instead encouraging the creation of more technical and “vocational training” (Sparks and Waits 17). However, it is important to note that the study concludes that the single most important skills for workers in the 21st century will be “critical thinking and problem solving, communication, collaboration, and creativity and innovation” (Sparks and Waits 25).

[12] In *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*, Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa report that requiring students to “read more than forty pages a week and write more than twenty pages over the course of the semester . . . is associated with improvement in students’ critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing skills” (93).

[13] As noted previously, in a 2012 Social Science Research Council study, researchers assessed the *Academically Adrift* study cohorts to see if critical thinking and communication skills later align with higher employment rates upon graduation. Their study found that “graduates who scored in the bottom quintile of the CLA were three times more likely to be unemployed than those who scored in the top quintile on the CLA (9.6 percent compared to 3.1 percent)” (Arum, Cho, Kim, and Roksa “Executive Summary” 3). This carefully-controlled study reveals that

succeeding in the current economy is inextricably linked to the acquisition of critical thinking and communication skills.

[14] See *Learning to Think Things Through: A Guide to Critical Thinking Across the Curriculum*, by Gerald M. Nosich, and *The Foundation for Critical Thinking* website, www.criticalthinking.org. English instructors can explicitly and deliberately incorporate the Elements of Reasoning and the Standards of Critical Thinking into their curricula by designing study questions which ask students to analyze literary texts using the Elements. For instance, instructors can spend time analyzing the possible *assumptions* made by characters in a literary work, or by the author or her readers. Instructors can ask students to consider the *context* of a literary work, speculating on the possible effects (or *consequences*) the literary work may have had on its contemporary culture. Instructors can also assess written analyses and arguments according to the Standards. (How *clear* is the argument? How *relevant* is the writer's evidence? What is the *significance* of the author's use of this literary device?) Literary analysis employs the Elements and Standards organically, almost automatically, but it is important that instructors consistently use and explain the terminology of critical thinking, making the skills of analysis visible to their students and making literary analysis both a cognitive and a meta-cognitive act.

[15] In his 2009 article "The Decline of the English Department" published online in *The American Scholar*, William M. Chace discusses the falling fortunes of the university English department, and places much of the blame for this state of affairs squarely on faculty members who have quietly agreed that "to teach English today is to do, intellectually, what one pleases." Chace quotes Marjorie Perloff, former president of the Modern Language Association, who, in 2006 stated with considerable alarm, "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 . . . we literary scholars, it is tacitly assumed, have no definable expertise.” This lack of any definable area of expertise, Chace argues, has been largely self-generated, created by decades of drift away from a definable body of knowledge and set of skills into more and more obscure and isolated areas of inquiry.

[16] I do recognize that some English professors and scholars object to using commercial terms such as “market” or “sell” to describe how we talk about the major. Dorothy Z. Baker, for instance, suggests that we “look to the language of our discipline to express our professional aspirations for our students,” and simply remind students that they are “sensitive to the condition of all men and women, understand the forces that complicate human life, and . . . recognize the choices that make us heroic or tragically compromised” (41). While those of us who teach English may thoroughly agree that majoring in English produces such sensitivities and traits, the nature of the current global economy has raised considerably the economic stakes for students, leaving them less willing to trust in the promise of attained sensitivity and more in need of a sense of measurable outcomes for their financial and intellectual investments. It is important to articulate to our students claims such as those of Martha C. Nussbaum, who argues that arts and humanities have a vital role in preparing citizens for meaningful civic participation in democracies and in the larger global community (10); or those of Mark William Roche, who argues that training in the liberal arts educates the whole person, cultivating intellectual and practical virtues and forming character (52; 102); or those of Peter Berkowitz, who argues that the “true aim of the humanities is to prepare citizens for exercising their freedom responsibly.” But in today’s troubled economy, it is often no longer enough to rest a defense of the English

major on such noble and honorable reasons. Students need to understand that the skills obtained by the major are both intrinsically virtuous and economically profitable.

[17] The English Department website should ideally resemble a sort of “menu” where students can select various configurations of the major which match their intended career or professional goals. For each configuration of the major, there should be recommended courses, minors, and electives, as well as reminders about scholarship deadlines, graduate school admission deadlines, conference opportunities, and links to articles and scholarship relevant to specialized areas of study. Students need to be able to see a clear and logical pathway through the English major to their ultimate goal, whether that be secondary education teaching, graduate school, law school, an MBA program, or a job in the private sector. English Departments must carefully craft department tracks and courses to explicitly meet student needs and to help students achieve their professional goals in a similar way to that of the growing for-profit universities.

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