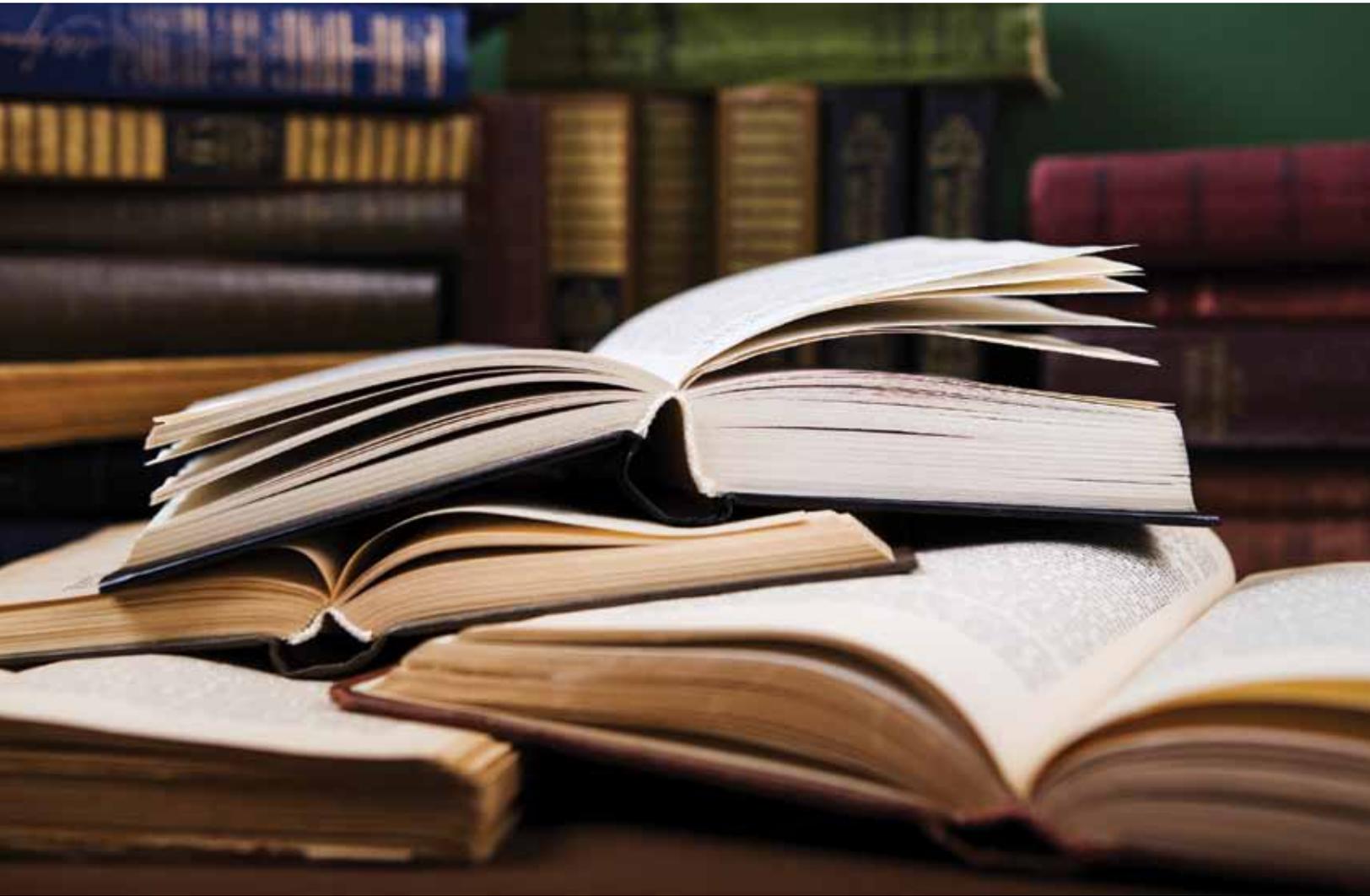


The Decline of the English Department

Jay Schalin



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About the Author

Jay Schalin joined the Pope Center in August 2007. As the Center's director of Policy Analysis, he writes on higher education issues, conducts research projects, and assigns and edits articles written by the Center's writers. Schalin has a B.S. in computer science from Richard Stockton College in New Jersey and an M.A. in economics from the University of Delaware.

His articles have appeared in *Forbes*, *the Washington Times*, *Fox News Online*, *U.S. News and World Report*, *Investor's Business Daily*, *Human Events*, and *American Thinker*. His op-eds have been published by the McClatchy News Service and the *News & Observer*. He has been interviewed on ESPN, National Public Radio, and UNC-TV, and his work has been featured on ABC News and Fox News' *The O'Reilly Factor*. He also writes regularly for Phi Beta Cons, the National Review's higher education blog.



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Jay Schalin

The John William
POPE CENTER
FOR HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY

353 E. Six Forks Road

Suite 200

Raleigh, NC 27609

919.828.1400

Fax: 919.828.7455

popecenter.org

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Executive Summary

The Decline of the English Department

Throughout much of the 20th century, English departments were the crown jewels of the humanities. Exposure to great literature was often considered essential for students expected to assume lead roles in business, law, government, and society.

Today, English departments have lost their position at the center of the American university. Enrollments have diminished or remained stagnant during a period of tremendous growth for universities in general.

The modern English department has also lost its sense of purpose. Superficial and trendy topics have replaced great works from the Western literary canon. Traditional scholarship has given way to postmodern critiques, in which great literature is viewed as a source of oppression and social control instead of revealing truth and exploring universal ideals.

This report discusses the decline of English departments and investigates the changes in the discipline over time, employing both empirical and qualitative methods. It also examines today's pressures on English departments—from student demand for vocational and pop-culture offerings to politicization of the faculty.

The report documents changes in English degree requirements, course offerings, faculty research, and enrollment. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's highly regarded English department receives special attention, although other North Carolina universities are included in most sections.

Furthermore, the same problems unearthed in North Carolina exist throughout the nation in both public and private universities. Much of the evidence suggests that the discipline itself may be the source of the decline.

The Decline of the English Department

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INTRODUCTION

The study of English was once the crown jewel of higher education. After strict devotion to the study of classical Greek and Roman texts ended in the late 19th century, and before the need for intense specialization appeared in the second half of the 20th century, the study of literature formed the center of many secular college curricula. To be liberally educated was to know the literary canon of the European Renaissance, Great Britain, and the United States.

English departments contain much of the Western canon that is not just meaningful, but beautiful, emotional, and accessible as well. Because it reaches the heart as well as the mind, literature can provide enlightenment even in minds that are closed to more straightforward paths to knowledge.

Literature helped define Americans as a unified people, as inheritors of a noble culture that began with Chaucer, grew in a myriad of ways through the great works of the Renaissance and Enlightenment, through the Romantics and the American Transcendentalists, into the near-modern era, and continues to this day.

Furthermore, the study of literature has long been shown to provide reasoning and communication skills that transcend mere technicality. Great literature is composed not just of stories, but of great ideas that changed the course of history. And it is filled

with fascinating characters with whom readers identify, helping them to develop empathy for the rest of humanity.

Yet powerful internal and external forces are causing major changes in the study of English literature. In one light, the English discipline can be viewed as in a steep decline, pulled down by a focus on superficial and trendy topics and perspectives instead of on great and meaningful ones.

Some will observe this scenario and conclude that the field is merely undergoing a set of natural evolutions in sync with a transitioning America. But stagnating enrollments and low demand for English degree-holders (reflected by low average salaries) indeed point to a decline.

The following report explores the various trends that are occurring within American English departments. It does so through qualitative discussion and statistical analysis. Much of the information comes from various types of self-description by both universities and professors, including course descriptions, faculty biographies, and faculty publications.

THE NEW ENGLISH DEPARTMENT

A look at the inner workings of English departments shows a discipline in turmoil, despite a seeming sea of calm. While making adjustments to fend off the effects

of long-term trends may keep enrollments up for a time, there is a great loss in purpose, and a loss of the depth and beauty and universality that gave the field of English its claim to the crown.

As *New York Times* columnist David Brooks put it, the humanities “are committing suicide because they have lost faith in their own enterprise.” And English may be leading the pack over the cliff.

A major pressure on English departments comes from the increasing focus on higher education as a preparation for a career. As a result, English has not been able to capture much of the increase in enrollments in college generally over the last four or five decades.

In the past, college students came from an elite stratum of society or they were the most intensely academic members of the middle and working classes, with intrinsic interests in acquiring knowledge. Increasingly, students come from all levels of society and all interest levels; they are more often motivated by the need to prepare for a career than they are driven by the desire to become educated gentlemen and gentlewomen or out of a love for learning.

More and more, students are poorly prepared for college-level work or disengaged from the actual learning process. Poring over intricately woven passages filled with complex ideas written by long-dead members of an elite society is an agony for such students; there are fields more amenable to their interests. The struggle for enrollment has led English departments to provide courses more to their liking: film studies, popular literature, horror and romance genre, rock and hip-hop music, and creative writing.

At the same time, the rapidly advancing state of technology is eroding the distinctiveness of literary study, particularly in smaller schools where there is no formal separation between English and communications departments. As new modes of communication arise, many students seek training in the intersections between writing and technology, in hope of securing

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employment. This is forcing some departments to blur the lines between English and communications by inventing new quasi-disciplines as the “digital humanities” and media studies.

The internal pressures are largely political: each new wave of faculty entering academia seems to be more entrenched in such left-wing philosophies as multiculturalism, feminism, postmodernism, post-colonialism, and so on. Professors often see themselves not as preserving and passing on a culture, but as transforming it. It is not difficult to find faculty members who scorn the old British-American canon.

But the canon is the reason why literature departments exist. Without the solid body of great works from the past as a foundation, all of the other functions of the modern English department can be transferred to other departments, such as communications, ethnic studies, or gender studies.

And even a curriculum that adheres somewhat to the traditional canon may mask changes in the perspective from which courses are taught. Whereas once the study of literature focused on the writer’s words and era, today many faculty members subscribe to theories that place the reader’s thoughts and contemporary world issues ahead of the authors’ actual works.

FROM THEN TO NOW

Literary criticism increasingly borrowed from psychoanalysis and Marxism throughout the 20th century. But traditional scholarship continued until English departments were rocked intellectually by

two periods of upheaval, commonly referred to as the “culture wars.” These upheavals re-centered the discipline philosophically, politically, and pedagogically. The first occurred in the 1960s and 1970s when all manner of tradition was cast aside. The second was an “echo” of the first and happened in the 1980s and early 1990s, when graduate students and newly minted Ph.D.s who challenged more senior scholars in the first culture war moved into senior positions themselves. (Another view expressed by some faculty was that the second upheaval was indistinguishable from the first, that change was constant throughout the 1970s and 1980s.)

Before the upheavals, the emphasis since the study of English literature rose to prominence in the 19th century had been on a specific canon of literature in the English language—the great writers of England and the United States, and, to a lesser extent, of Western Europe (in translation). Indeed, the works of Renaissance writers—including Shakespeare, Milton, and others—were more important to most English departments than those written by current authors.

According to a retired professor of British literature whose career spanned 50 years, who preferred to remain anonymous, pedagogy was previously focused on two techniques known as “textual” and “historical.” The textual pedagogy focused on close readings of important passages and deriving meaning from the words as they appeared on the page. The historical attempted to understand literature in terms of the culture that existed during the period in which it was written. These methods aided understanding of literary works as their authors intended.

But a new breed of professors ushered in new forms of scholarship, based on major intellectual movements that emerged before and after World War I. One was linguistic, initiated by the “structuralist” theories of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, in which language was no longer conceived of as a passive means of exchanging meaning but could be examined as a way to both create and describe reality. Reactions to structuralism led to alternative theories such as

deconstruction, introduced by French philosopher Jaques Derrida, and post-structuralism, dominated by another French philosopher, Michel Foucault, that question whether reality can be described or defined.

Another was a shift in the study of history from a focus on the “great men,” as well as the great events and great ideas, to a social history that sought understanding more in the seemingly insignificant details of ordinary lives. This change in focus from high to low, ushered in by the French Annales School of Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, is known as “inversion.”

Also influential was awareness of the concept of “hegemony,” popularized in the early 20th century by Italian Communist Antonio Gramsci. Hegemony describes how culture and language can be used as a form of social control. It can be used in a descriptive sense, as a way of understanding a society, or in a prescriptive sense, as a way to subversively gain political power by influencing the culture.

The struggle for enrollment has led English departments to provide courses more to their liking: film studies, popular literature, horror and romance genre, rock and hip-hop music, and creative writing.

There was also a great deal of exchange between literature and the social sciences in the early 20th century, particularly the fields of cultural anthropology and psychology.

These intellectual strains (and too many others to mention here) were synthesized in the mid-20th century into what came to be known as postmodernism: a philosophy defined by its intention to tear down the hopeful modernism that came before. It was heavily influenced by the neo-Marxist Frankfurt School that migrated from Germany to the United States in the 1930s and 1940s.

In literature, this new synthesis is often called critical theory. In it, everything becomes an act of politics; even our traditional language is suspect for being thoroughly embedded with tools the ruling class ostensibly uses to remain in power, such as racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, and more. Rather than seeking to understand the intentions of the author, scholars attempt to uncover codes of hegemonic control in the literature. The reader's ideas, not the author's, come first in this inverted world.

"The point of writing and teaching was now less to illuminate literary works than to mount a performance in which the critic, not the instigating work, was the main player," wrote Columbia University professor Andrew Delbanco in the *New York Times Review of Books* in 1999.

Once the opinions of critics took precedence over the actual writing, it was just a short step to making the canon irrelevant. "Nor could literature any longer be understood ... as a body of writings with discernible meanings," wrote Delbanco.

By unmooring meaning from text, all writing becomes open to political manipulation. With literature now "deconstructed" for its hidden instruments of social control, with the authors' meaning sucked out, and a focus on the ordinary, the low, and banal, the study of literature is indeed in crisis. The humanistic impulse that has driven the writing and study of literature for millennia has nearly been chased from many faculty lounges.

What remains is an amalgam of incongruent parts that offend the spirit of free inquiry or can be handled by other departments: left-wing politics, freshman composition, popular cultural studies, and ethnic or regional literature. The English curriculum today is awash in a sea of trendy pedagogical techniques and perspectives that fall under the critical theory umbrella. One of them, "new historicism," examines older writings from a perspective of the contemporary world—and a left-wing contemporary world at that. This generally translates to exploring classic literature to ferret out

authors' attitudes on such contemporary issues as racism, the treatment of women, and so on.

For example, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill offers a dozen or so courses that explicitly declare their new-historicism intentions to "investigate themes or issues" in a modern light, with titles such as ENGL 424: "Middle English Literature," and ENGL 430: "Renaissance Literature: Contemporary Issues."

Especially important in the new scholarship and pedagogy is "identity politics," which assumes the perspective of a particular demographic or ethnic group. This has resulted in the explosion of courses, concentrations, and even degree programs in such subjects as African-American literature, women's literature, and so on. Another example of this move toward liberal issues is the emergence of an environmental perspective called "eco-criticism."

Some even look far afield for new paths to explore in place of postmodernism, such as deterministic neuroscience, in which mental processes that produce literature become the central object of study rather than the written word. This attempt to emulate the empirical sciences is fraught with peril, according to critic Arthur Krystal, who says "[B]y placing too much faith in the human brain, we may be relinquishing the idea that the mind may one day fathom the human condition."

CHANGES IN UNC- CHAPEL HILL ENGLISH DEGREE REQUIREMENTS, 1988-89 TO 2014-15

The trends described in previous sections are plainly visible when one eyes the UNC-Chapel Hill curriculum from a historical perspective. A reasonable starting point for illustrating the change in focus of English departments is by contrasting the degree requirements at UNC-Chapel Hill from 1988-89—before changes brought by the second "culture war"—to 2014-15.

In the 1980s, every student who graduated with a degree in English from Chapel Hill received a thorough grounding in the most esteemed literature of the English-speaking world. One student might have opted for

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Chaucer while another chose Milton, another might have preferred drama over poetry, but all English students had to take a total of nine literature courses from the most central topics of English and American literature. (Two composition courses were, and still are, also required).

Four specific literature courses were mandatory in 1988-89: ENGL 20: “British Literature, Chaucer to Pope,” ENGL 21: “British Literature, Wordsworth to Eliot,” ENGL 22: “American Literature, Beginning to 1950,” and ENGL 58: “Shakespeare.” The other five were to be chosen from a selection of only 16 courses—all “heavyweights” taken from the traditional canon of Renaissance, British, or American literature.

Today, only two of the ten literature courses needed to complete a degree are mandatory: ENGL 120: “English Literature from Chaucer to Pope” and ENGL 225: “Shakespeare.” For a third requirement, students can now choose between the very traditional ENGL 121: “English Literature from Wordsworth to Eliot” and a course called ENGL 150: “Introductory Seminar in Literary Studies.”

The goal of the latter seminar is to “introduce students to methods of literary study.” Both sections of the course during the fall semester of the 2014 school year focused on the “literature of the American South.” Rather than reading major British writers such as the Romantic poets, Charles Dickens, and Virginia Woolf, students read from a list of relatively minor—in some cases

obscure—writers from the American South, such as Paul Green, Charles Chestnutt, Dorothy Allison, Natasha Tretheway, Jill McCorkle, Ron Rash, and more. Only three names in the list strike one as generally known among a large number of Americans: William Faulkner, Flannery O’Connor, and Richard Wright.

It got even worse for the spring semester of 2015. The “Introductory Seminar in Literary Studies,” taught by Maria DeGuzman, is a mishmash of pop culture and identity politics, as this description in the catalog showed:

Seminar in literary studies considering literature in relation to film and film’s visual and aural (sight and sound) components. Mexicans and Mexican Americans have figured prominently as types of criminality, victim victimizer, and evil in Anglo-American film noir culture even though some of those films complicate and question this characterization of Mexicans and Mexican Americans. One need only think of films such as Edwin L. Marin’s *Nocturne* (1946), Fritz Lang’s *The Secret Beyond the Door* (1948), John Farrow’s *Where Danger Lives* (1950), Phil Karlson’s *Kansas City Confidential* (1952), Orson Welles’s *A Touch of Evil* (1958), Alfred Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* (1958), or neo-noirs such as Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner* (1982), Curtis Hanson’s *L.A. Confidential* (1997) based on a James Ellroy novel, and David Lynch’s *Mulholland Drive* (2001). This course examines the way in which Chicana/o literature intervenes in and against U.S. film noir classic stereotypes of Mexican Americans and repurposes the conventions of U.S. film noir to its own ends. Required reading: María DeGuzmán’s *Buenas Noches, American Culture: Latina/o Aesthetics of Night*, Américo Paredes’s *The Shadow* (1950s/1998), Oscar “Zeta” Acosta’s *Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* (1972), Margarita Cota-Cárdenas’s *Puppet* (1985, 2000), Cecile Pineda’s *Face* (1985, republished in 2003), Lucha Corpi’s *Eulogy for a Brown Angel* (1992), Michael Nava’s *The Burning Plain* (2000), Carla Trujillo’s *What Night Brings*.

(According to a UNC-CH spokesperson, the English department may end ENGL 150 as a requirement option, as “we have reduced the number of sections of 150 and will likely discontinue the course altogether, not for pedagogical reasons, but because we cannot fund an adequate number of sections.”)

Today’s UNC-Chapel Hill English majors are also required to take courses from three time periods. They can choose one course from among 18 courses before 1660, two from among 23 courses in the period between 1660 and 1900, and one from among 28 courses after 1900.

In the first period, a student can still satisfy the requirement with Milton or Chaucer. But he or she can also choose courses that push the boundaries of the 1988-89 curriculum, such as ENGL 321: “Medieval and Modern Arthurian Romance” or ENGL 229: “Renaissance Women Writers.”

The disintegration of the English and American canon accelerates as one progresses through the other two time periods. In the 1660-1900 period, students can choose such courses as ENGL 367: “African American Literature to 1930,” ENGL 374: “Southern Women Writers,” and five courses that focus on “Contemporary Issues.”

In the more recent period starting in 1900, the floodgates of multiculturalism and narrowness are cast wide open. Students can satisfy this one-course requirement with such non-essential fare as ENGL 287: “Another Country: Homoeroticism in British Literature,” ENGL 268H: “Medicine, Literature, and Culture,” ENGL 364: Introduction to Latina/o Studies, and more.

The final three courses of the required ten for a current degree are electives (in the major), chosen from among all English courses above the 200 level. This opens a Pandora’s box of choices, 263 in all, including “ENGL 252: “Popular Culture in Southeast Asia,” ENGL 291: “Children’s Picture Books,” ENGL 359: “Latina Feminisms, ENGL 370, “Race, Health, and Narrative,”

and ENGL 664: “The Challenge of Queer Theory to Literary Studies.”

However, there is one additional constraint: at least two of the ten courses meeting the above requirements must be focused primarily on American literature. While most of the permitted courses could be considered part of the traditional canon, English majors can also choose from ENGL 360: “Contemporary Asian-American Literature and Theory” and three courses in African-American literature to satisfy this requirement.

Some will argue that the new curriculum is an improvement as it exposes students to today’s issues (the department’s faculty obviously feels this way, since they are the ones who created the requirements). But it suffers in major ways. For one, by opening up the curriculum to give students lots of choices, it no longer demands mastery in a specific and important body of knowledge that is central to a lasting competence. And UNC-Chapel Hill is already elective-happy: a student majoring in English only needs to take 12 courses to fulfill his or her degree requirements. Students at private schools or public schools in other states may have to take as many as 16 courses in their major.

And the new curriculum need not give a student as strong a sense of the historical unfolding of ideas, of how the concepts of one literary movement paved the way for the next. While a student must take courses from different time periods, he or she can choose to take

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them in such disparate topics as ENGL 423: “Old English Literature,” ENGL 374: “Southern Women Writers,” and ENGL 262: “Literature and Cultural Differences” (focusing on racial, class, and gender diversity). Such broadly defined requirements turn a well-intentioned goal of showing the development of literary history into just another smorgasbord to be sampled according to whim instead of a progression from one intellectual movement to another.

And by most reasonable measures, an English degree in which a student can avoid the Romantic poets and the American Transcendentalists is flawed. English departments are gradually substituting second- and third-tier writings, along with helpings of pop culture, for the greatest literature in the English language.

REQUIREMENTS IN OTHER UNC INSTITUTIONS

Requirements vary greatly throughout the University of North Carolina system. The following chart shows how many courses from the traditional Western canon are required at each university. This number is a minimum—it does not mean students are prevented from taking more. At UNC-Chapel Hill, it is possible for a student to earn an English degree taking only three canon courses, but it is extremely improbable that they would do so. Most likely, Chapel Hill English majors take four or more traditional literature courses.

The chart also shows which schools require Shakespeare—another sign of adherence to tradition.

As this chart reveals, some schools have moved far away from the highly structured programs of the past. Six have no requirement on the writings of Shakespeare, certainly something unimaginable in an English program before the culture wars. At Appalachian State University, an English major, if he or she so chooses, could manage to craft a program that included only one purely traditional course.

In contrast, the system’s historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) have highly structured programs. All require at least one Shakespeare course and from

Table 1. Requirements for Traditional Courses at UNC Schools

	Required Canon Courses	Shakespeare Required
ASU	1	N
ECU	2	Y
ECSU	7	Y
FSU	3	Y
NC A&T	6	Y
NCCU	7	Y
NCSU	2*	N
UNCA	3	N
UNCCH	3	Y
UNCC	3	N
UNCG	2	N
UNCP	4	Y
UNCW	3	Y
WCU	2	N
WSSU	5	Y

Source: UNC English Departments

* Six canon courses are required for the Literature track.

three to seven traditional courses. According to Michelle Ware, the English department head at North Carolina Central University, many HBCUs adopted the curriculum “of the top white schools” in the past, such as UNC-Chapel Hill.

But that traditional bent is open to change with an evolving faculty, which shall be discussed later. Furthermore, the elite departments that HBCU English departments modeled themselves on have drastically shifted away from the traditional canon. According to a recent report by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni:

[O]nly one Ivy League university, Harvard, requires its English majors to take a course in Shakespeare. Only four of the top 25 national universities ranked by *U.S. News & World Report* have a Shakespeare requirement: Berkeley, Cal Tech, Harvard, and Stanford. The top 25 liberal arts colleges fare even

worse, with only three—Middlebury, Smith, and Wellesley—requiring their English majors to study Shakespeare.

That’s only seven of the 50 most prestigious schools in the country with Shakespeare requirements. And since those schools produce many leading faculty members, other schools’ programs are likely to follow the same path.

CHANGES IN COURSE OFFERINGS AT UNC-CHAPEL HILL

A different way to perceive the transition underway in English departments is to look at the change in courses offered over a period of five decades. To do so in meaningful fashion, rather than merely list the more than one thousand courses offered at the fifteen UNC campuses, the Pope Center focused on UNC-Chapel Hill and created classifications based on catalog descriptions. We then assigned every course offered in the school years 1963-4, 1988-9, and 2014-5 to one of those classifications.

The classifications are largely self-explanatory. *Traditional* courses are ones that teach the traditional canon of British and American literature in a straightforward manner. *Political* courses are those that can clearly be seen to be political, those that can also fit under the heading of identity politics, or those that appear to approach traditional course material from the “new historicism” or “critical theory” approaches. To keep things consistent and to reflect changes from the earlier traditional curriculum, any course with the name of an ethnic group and with “women” or another gender-based term was classified as political.

Process courses are defined as those focused on the technique of literary criticism and study, rather than a particular intellectual movement, geographic area, or time period. They also cannot be categorized as political.

Some course descriptions were too vague to permit classification, so they were declared as *Unknown*. A few

other miscellaneous categories were included, such as *Folklore*, *Contemporary*, and so on.

Public speaking courses that were part of the English department in 1963-64 were moved over to communications.

Obviously, such classification attempts using only brief catalog descriptions will not provide exacting results. Classification is frequently subjective and gray, rather than objective or black or white. But the results are so stark that precision is unnecessary: over time, English department courses have clearly become less traditional, more politicized, and more focused on pop culture and non-literary topics.

The general increase in writing courses and the total number of courses offered reflects an increase in

Table 2. Changes in Course Offerings at UNC-Chapel Hill from 1963-4 to 2014-5

CLASSIFICATION	1963-64	1988-89	2014-15
Traditional	42	82	105
Political		17	87
Writing	11	24	43
Process	2	8	5
Contemporary	1	1	4
Popular Culture		1	15
Film/Visual Culture		2	33
Technical			8
Folklore	1	1	4
Speech	5		
Medicine/Science			7
Celtic/Canadian		8	4
Unknown	2	8	16
Totals	64	155	331

But the results are so stark that precision is unnecessary: over time, English department courses have clearly become less traditional, more politicized, and more focused on pop culture and non-literary topics.

enrollment over the 51-year period. However, higher enrollment does not account for all of that increase, for undergraduate enrollment only increased 100 percent over the 51-year period, while there was a 300 percent increase in writing courses and a 400 percent increase in total courses.

Changes in the Chapel Hill Curriculum from 1963-64 to 1988-89

The curriculum was much simpler in 1963-64. The UNC-Chapel Hill college bulletin listed 64 undergraduate courses offered in English (ENGL prefix) and Comparative Literature (CMPL prefix). Of these courses, 42 were in the traditional category. Another 11 were writing courses, from the basic composition courses to the advanced study of grammar to creative writing. There were a smattering of others, but the main thrust was obvious: an English degree at Chapel Hill meant a focus on the Western canon.

By 1988-1989, the course catalog had changed dramatically, clearly affected by the upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s. Increased college enrollment was one major factor. The number of total courses offered in English and comparative literature was up to 155. The number of traditional courses and writing courses each approximately doubled, to 82 and 24 respectively. Process courses—which often include traditional readings—rose from two to eight.

But the real changes were not merely quantitative. There was a new spirit of politicization that was nowhere to be seen in the 1963-64 bulletin 25 years before. The titles and catalog descriptions of 17 classes revealed emphases on race, class, gender, and other political issues favored by the left.

Some new courses in 1988-89 seemed to be explicitly political, such as ENGL 94I “American Literature of Resistance and Protest.” But the real winner was “identity” politics. There were numerous courses centered on women and women writers, including ENGL 90B: “Feminist Theory and Literary Criticism,” ENGL 50: “Topics in Gender and Literature,” and CMPL 92: “Women and Work, 1850-1900.” The latter seemed to be more social science than English, and, in fact, fulfilled a social science requirement for the general education program. There also were multiple courses on African-American literature and folklore, including a course entitled ENGL 94E: “Blacks in the Literature of the Western World.”

And just because a course was about the traditional British or American canon did not mean it was a traditional course. As one retired professor who wished to remain anonymous told the Pope Center, a lot depends on who is teaching the course or in charge of the department. He said that the 1960s and 1970s brought a huge wave of politicized new professors into the profession who were beginning to gain positions of departmental power by the late 1980s. While such professors may teach a course on a traditional subject, they often teach from one of the critical theory perspectives.

Another very important trend showed up in the 1988-89 catalog: film courses. While the presence of a mere two film courses in the English department may not have seemed to matter much at the time, they foreshadowed a major transformation that would occur in the next couple of decades.

Changes in the Chapel Hill Curriculum from 1988-89 to 2014-15

The changes from 1963-4 to 1988-9 now seem a mere trickle in light of the torrent of politicization, coarsening, and lowering of standards that occurred between 1988-9 and 2014-15. From just two film courses in 1988-9, the number of courses on film or popular culture topics exploded to 41. One is CMPL 55: “First Year Seminar: Comics as Literature,” which appears to be politicized by focusing on “graphic literature’s unique ability to be a medium for the marginal and oppressed in the 21st century.” Another is CMPL 379: “Cowboys, Samurai, and Rebels in Film and Fiction.”

The number of politicized courses and courses focusing on various identity groups increased more than six-fold, from 17 to 107. And the titles and topics also grew more aggressively political, with titles such as ENGL 464: “Queer Texts, Queer Cultures,” ENGL 359: “Latina Feminisms,” ENGL 88, First Year Seminar: “Internment from WWII to 9/11,” ENGL 271: “Mixed-Race America: Race in Contemporary American Literature and Culture.”

The emphasis on identity politics even produced a course entitled “The Place of Asian Americans in Southern Literature,” which seems amazingly narrow—trivial even—given that Americans of Asian ancestry have only had a miniscule presence in the South until the last decade or two. It may be an example of a course that fills no major intellectual need but rather is a pet project of a particular professor.

There was an increase in traditional courses from 1988-89 to the current year, from 80 to 105. However, this hardly kept pace with the growth in the overall number of courses, which more than doubled from 155 to 331. And the “new historicism” perspective that views the past according to contemporary leftist beliefs and issues was clearly gaining. One blatant example of this school of pedagogy is ENGL 330: “Perspectives on the Renaissance,” described in the undergraduate bulletin as:

Students will study Renaissance literature

while assessing the usefulness and status of a theoretical approach, such as feminist theory, queer theory, cultural materialism, new historicism, or psychoanalytic theory.

The new pedagogical styles seem to create bizarre, self-indulgent, and puzzling courses, such as the macabre “CMPL 558: The Lives and Times of Medieval Corpses,” an “investigation into the social, political, and literary uses of corpses in the Middle Ages.”

The idea of “interdisciplinarity” looms large in the modern English curriculum as well. However, rather than blending disciplines within reasonable limits, such as combining the literature, history, and philosophy of a particular era into one course, interdisciplinarity at Chapel Hill has produced some odd results. One course that seems out of place in a literature department (and is also highly politicized) is ENGL 370: “Race, Health, and Narrative,” described as:

This interdisciplinary course explores how issues of health, medicine, and illness are impacted by questions of race in 20th century American literature and popular culture. Specific areas include pain, death, the family and society, reproduction, mental illness, aging, human subject experimentation, the doctor-patient relationship, pesticides, and bioethics.

Another disconcerting trend is the proliferation of “First-year Seminars” suggested for incoming students as “an introduction to the intellectual life of the university and focus on how scholars pose problems, discover truths, resolve controversies, and evaluate knowledge.”

Many of them seem heavily politicized, with no balance in sight. One is ENGL 68: “First Year Seminar: “Radical American Writers, 1930-1960” and is described as “the evolution of leftist American literature from the Depression through the early Cold War.” There is no equivalent course called “Conservative American Writers.”

Also emerging as a trend are the 11 courses focused on technology. It may seem only sensible for a department

to stay abreast of technical changes within its scope. However, there is already an entire department dedicated to the study of communications—studying technical changes in a literature department seems to be redundant. One course is ENGL 149: “Networked and Multimodal Composition,” described as:

This class studies contemporary, networked writing spaces. This class will investigate electronic networks, linking them with literacy, creativity, and collaboration. This course also explores multi-modal composing. Students will develop projects using images, audio, video, and words. Topics include the rhetoric of the Internet, online communities, and digital composition.

ENGL 149 clearly belongs more in communications than in a literature department. The inclusion of such courses in the English curriculum is illustrative of how English departments are under pressure to appear practical in order to stave off the dreaded decline in enrollments—even if it means providing redundant services, rather than focusing on literature and writing, in order to compete for students.

The department chair of the English Department at nearby UNC-Greensboro, Scott Romine, told the Pope Center that the practical focus is necessary to “appeal to a new demographic.” He said that even though students prefer contemporary and practical courses to traditional ones, they must take traditional courses to complete a degree—“that’s why we have requirements.” He added that once students actually take a traditional class, they tend to find them “less objectionable” than they expected.

Very likely, the above analysis understates changes in the curriculum, for the Pope Center cannot get inside classrooms to see how traditional courses are being taught. A shift to less traditional methods and perspectives is almost guaranteed as older professors retire and are replaced by young professors who have been trained in the increasingly politicized and popularized environment.

A POLITICIZED FACULTY

The political left rules the English discipline. The chart below shows an overwhelming uniformity of political affiliation: of the 261 tenured or tenure-track professors identified by the Pope Center as literature teachers in the UNC system, only 10 are registered Republicans, while 196 are Democrats and 55 are “unaffiliated.” In percentages, that is 75 percent Democratic, 4 percent Republican, and 21 percent unaffiliated. This contrasts greatly with North Carolina’s general population, which in 2012, according to registrations, was 43 percent Democratic, 31 percent Republican, and 26 percent unaffiliated.

One minor anomaly in this ocean of conformity is the presence of four Republicans and 17 unaffiliated among the youngest cohort, assistant professors. Because the sample size is relatively small, however, one should be hesitant to draw a firm conclusion that younger professors are growing more conservative (especially since that is contradicted by information mentioned below).

Voter registration does not give the entire picture when it comes to the teaching of English. For one thing, Democrats’ beliefs are not monolithic. Some professors, particularly older ones, may be more closely aligned politically with the strong defense, low tax, civil libertarian policies of John F. Kennedy than they are with the redistributive views of today’s Democratic leadership.

Furthermore, there are trends and tendencies specific to the discipline of English that can cross or blur political boundaries. Many professors, particularly those

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who came of age in an earlier time, are quite liberal personally but are very traditional in their classroom lectures and research. At the same time, some younger professors who are perhaps apolitical (or are even registered as Republicans) have been educated in an era in which these new trends are omnipresent in education and therefore accept them unquestioningly.

In order to capture these trends, the Pope Center conducted a review of public information about English professors in the entire UNC system, focusing on self-descriptions on university or personal websites and on their publications in order to classify literature professors as either traditional or “new wave.”

Only professors who regularly teach literature courses were included, leaving out faculty who are primarily focused on composition and rhetoric, digital humanities, linguistics, creative writing, and film studies.

The chart below reveals the shift over time of the percentages of professors who show at least some tendencies to view their subject matter through a prism of race, class, gender, environmentalism or other forms of multiculturalism and postmodern thought. Literature professors who focused heavily on pop culture in their research were counted as part of the “race, class, gender” contingent as well.

Of course, such classifications are more art than science. Determining the emphasis of and influences on a professor’s research and background is a complicated process. Most professors either have a substantial track record of publications that is readily available on the Internet or openly state their perspectives on departmental or personal web pages. Sometimes it is easy, as with North Carolina A&T professor Harold Meyerson, who openly states in his brief department biography that he “has written peer-reviewed Marxist

Table 3. Voter Registrations of UNC System Literature Professors

SCHOOL	PROF DEM	PROF REP	PROF IND	ASSC DEM	ASSC REP	ASSC IND	ASST DEM	ASST REP	ASST IND	TOTAL DEM	TOTAL REP	TOTAL IND
ASU	16	0	4	7	0	1	0	0	0	23	0	5
ECU	4	0	0	13	1	3	6	1	2	23	2	5
ECSU	3	1	1	1	0	0	0	1	1	4	2	2
FSU	2	0	0	7	0	2	1	0	1	10	0	3
NC A&T	3	0	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	4	0	2
NCCU	4	0	1	2	0	2	3	0	2	9	0	5
NCSU	8	1	3	7	0	2	6	0	1	21	1	6
UNCA	3	1	0	3	0	0	2	0	1	8	1	1
UNC-CH	15	0	3	10	0	3	3	1	3	28	1	9
UNCC	5	0	1	5	1	2	2	0	1	12	1	4
UNCG	6	1	2	5	0	1	0	0	0	11	1	3
UNCP	5	0	1	4	0	1	4	1	1	13	1	3
UNCW	4	0	1	7	0	1	1	0	3	12	0	5
WCU	3	0	0	4	0	1	2	0	1	9	0	2
WSSU	3	0	0	5	0	0	1	0	0	9	0	0
	84	4	18	80	2	20	32	4	17	196	10	55

analyses of post structuralism, critical race theory, and the current economic/energy/environmental crisis.”

Others can be difficult to determine even though they make their curriculum vitae available to the public. One such example is assistant professor Shayne Legassie of Chapel Hill. Legassie specializes in Medieval literature, but some of the titles of his conference presentations raise eyebrows, such as “Necroerotic City: Death, Lesbian Desire, and Urban Economies in La Celestina” and “Margey Kempe and the Discovery of the Americas: Gender, Genre, and the Historiography of Travel Writing.” However, his major publications appear to be less oriented toward gender, so he was classified as a traditionalist.

But others have small public paper trails, with little more than an email address. Still others appear careful to keep their real interests unclear. Yet, in almost all cases,

through the use of Google Scholar, university websites, and general Internet searches, it was possible to glean at least some insight into almost all professors’ teaching and research inclinations.

A particularly egregious example of an attempt to conceal a professor’s writing is at UNC-Wilmington, where Alessandro Porco’s departmental profile has been scrubbed clean of his early controversial writing, and only two publications are currently listed, one an article on hip-hop and one a review of the writing of Canadian pop culture poet David McGimpsey. But his earlier work was alternately pornographic and profane to the extreme. (Dr. Porco’s work will be discussed more fully in a later section of the paper).

In the few cases where there was not enough information to make a reasonable guess about a professor’s tendencies, he or she was simply left out. And we

Table 4. Politicization in Professors’ Research

School	Full Prof	Non-Trad	% Non-Trad	Assoc Prof	Assoc Non-Trad	% Assoc Non-Trad	Asst Prof	Asst Non-Trad	% Asst Non-Trad	Total Prof	Total Non-Trad	% Total Non-Trad
ASU	18	15	83%	8	6	75%	2	1	50%	28	22	79%
ECU	8	5	63%	14	10	71%	6	5	83%	28	20	71%
ECSU	2	0	0%	1	1	100%	3	3	100%	6	4	67%
FSU	2	1	50%	10	7	70%	1	1	100%	13	9	69%
NCA&T	4	2	50%	2	2	100%	2	2	100%	8	6	75%
NCCU	5	4	80%	3	2	67%	3	2	67%	11	8	73%
NCSU	12	6	50%	13	8	62%	6	2	33%	31	16	52%
UNCA	7	3	43%	4	3	75%	2	2	100%	13	8	62%
UNCCH	23	11	48%	13	7	54%	6	5	83%	42	23	55%
UNCC	10	7	70%	7	6	86%	5	5	100%	22	18	82%
UNCG	14	9	64%	8	8	100%	2	2	100%	24	19	79%
UNCP	6	3	50%	7	7	100%	5	3	60%	18	13	72%
UNCW	7	4	57%	8	8	100%	5	5	100%	20	17	85%
WCU	3	1	33%	5	2	40%	2	2	100%	10	5	50%
WSSU	2	2	100%	3	3	100%	2	2	100%	7	7	100%
Totals	123	73	59%	106	80	75%	52	42	81%	281	195	69%

Primary Sources: UNC Websites, Google Scholar, Professors’ CVs

made no attempt to determine whether, for example, a professor who writes about race does so from a conservative or liberal perspective, merely that race is a focus of his or her research.

While this method should not be used for any sort of precise measurement of political inclinations, it can offer broad insights into university faculties by keeping the classification process as consistent as possible. And doing so revealed a very important relative trend not found by looking at voter registrations alone.

As Table 4 indicates, there has been a very large generational shift in the tendencies of faculty. Today's full professors, who are usually at least in their late forties and more often in their fifties or sixties, on average tend to be more traditionally oriented than professors lower in the hierarchy. Those are associate professors, who range from their late thirties to their fifties (although some are older), and who generally earned their Ph.D.s more recently than the full professors, and assistant professors, who are generally the youngest in a department. Whereas three-quarters of associates (75 percent, as indicated by the 7th column) and four-fifths of the assistants (81 percent, as indicated by the 10th column) demonstrate some inclination to use the non-traditional techniques and perspectives of new historicism, critical theory, identity politics, or environmentalism, only 59 percent (in column 4) of the more senior full professors do so.

All but three schools show an increase in the emphasis on identity politics and postmodern criticism over time. The three schools that did not show an increase, ASU, NCCU, and WSSU, were also the schools whose full professors most strongly showed such inclinations, making the lack of increase irrelevant.

Another pattern revealed by the chart is that the two flagship universities, UNC-Chapel Hill and NC State, have the most traditional departments. Only 55 and 52 percent of all tenure-track literature professors were placed in the "race, class, gender, etc." classification at

those schools, respectively, as opposed to the system-wide average of 69 percent.

However, while UNC-Chapel Hill, which is North Carolina's most prestigious program, producing many Ph.D.s who now teach at other UNC system schools, is still relatively traditional, it shows a clear pattern of increasing "race, class, gender, etc." emphasis over time. While 48 percent of full professors teach non-traditional classes, 54 percent of associates and 83 percent of assistants do so. (NC State remained relatively the same. However, it showed a tremendous shift in favor of non-literature classes, such as creative writing and technically oriented classes.)

The UNC system's five HBCUs exhibit a much more rapid transition from a traditional faculty to one that is focused on race, class, and gender. They were at one time fairly traditional, as indicated by the fact that only 60 percent of full professors are in the "race, class, gender, etc." classification. But in the two younger categories, 25 of 30 faculty members were classified as such. It seems that, for many years, Elizabeth City, NC A&T, and Winston-Salem State have hired only literature professors who are focused on "race, class, gender, etc." Such uniformity bodes ill for future intellectual diversity, since the principle of collegiality in hiring suggests that existing members will favor the like-minded for future job openings.

Given the tendencies of the younger professors at HBCUs, the schools' highly traditional graduation requirements for a degree in English literature may mask a less-than-traditional education, for it is likely that many of the traditional classes are taught in non-traditional ways.

Additionally, it may be that the chart understates the lack of intellectual diversity throughout the system. Many professors who teach the traditional British and American canon from multicultural or postmodern perspectives may not have published articles with titles that reveal that perspective.

ENROLLMENT

There has been much discussion about enrollment declines in the humanities in general and in the study of literature in particular. Nationally, between 1971 and 2011, the percentage of all bachelor's degrees conferred that were in English fell from 7.6 percent to 3.1 percent, according to the federal government's National Digest for Education Statistics.

But that decline may not be as dire as some may think—much depends on the time period one chooses or whether one wishes to measure using raw numbers or percentages.

Nationally, between 1971 and 2011, the percentage of all bachelor's degrees conferred that were in English fell from 7.6 percent to 3.1 percent, according to the federal government's National Digest for Education Statistics.

For one thing, as explained by Nate Silver, the former *New York Times* (and now ESPN) statistical guru, a large share of the decline happened in the 1970s rather than more recently.

In 1970-71, according to the federal Digest of Education Statistics, 63,914 degrees in English and literature were conferred nationally. That figure fell all the way to 31,922 by 1980-81—almost exactly in half. But by 2008-9, the national total had climbed back up to 55,462.

It dropped slightly over the next two years, down to 52,744 in 2010-11. Whether that is significant or merely “statistical noise” remains to be seen. A large decrease in demand for English degrees has not happened in North Carolina since 2011, but it is happening elsewhere. For example, a January of 2015 *Inside Higher Ed* article cited a 40 percent loss from 2012 to 2014

at the University of Maryland. One professor called it a “death spiral.” Other schools across the country noted similar drops.

Even before the recent sharp drop in demand, the long-term decline was more serious when viewed as a percentage of all degrees earned rather than as raw numbers. The college-age population increased by 25 percent between 1971 and 2011 and a higher percentage of that population now goes to college. Because of those two factors, the percentage of the population graduating from college increased by 60 percent in that time period.

As a result, since 1981, the actual number of English degrees conferred nationally has risen. But that gain has been slower than the general growth in college enrollment. In 1980-81, they were 3.4 percent of all bachelor's degrees conferred; in 2010-11, 3.1 percent.

Of course, it is not just English that has failed to keep pace. Other subject areas have fared as bad or worse over that same time period. Mathematics degree-holders fell from 3.0 percent of all degrees in 1971 to 1.0 percent in 2011, and social sciences graduates fell from 18.5 percent in 1971 to 10.3 percent in 2011.

That is because there has been a dramatic increase in vocational-oriented degrees, according to Silver's numbers. Business degrees rose from 13.7 percent of all degrees conferred in 1971 to 21.3 percent in 2011; bachelor's degrees in health care professions nearly tripled, from 3.0 percent in 1971 to 8.4 percent in 2011.

English departments in the last four or five decades also faced a homegrown vocational threat, as communications departments splintered off, taking with them the many students who prefer vocational training to scholarship.

Within the UNC system, Silver's claims that English departments are relatively stable but falling behind the general growth in higher education are corroborated in the chart on the following page.

Table 5. Changes in Enrollment and Degrees Conferred in the UNC System

	Total Undergrad Enrollment	English Degrees Conferred	Communications Degrees Conferred
1989-90	118,328	707	661
2010-11	168,311	846	2,206
Growth	49,983	139	1,545
% Growth	42.2%	19.7%	233.7%

Source: University of North Carolina Institutional Research

The chart especially shows the explosion of more vocationally oriented programs represented by the rise in communications degrees. But even the different rates of growth of English and communications programs don't tell the entire story.

While English departments are surviving and maintaining their enrollment and employment of faculty, they are not conferring the same degrees they once did. English departments are still attempting to battle enrollment losses by chasing "relevance" in both the job market and intellectual trends. Within English departments there is a continual shift toward more vocational courses that should in fact be housed in communications departments. Furthermore, rigor is often cast aside for popularity, as can be seen in the increase in popular culture and film courses.

R.V. Young, an emeritus professor of English at North Carolina State, said that in the 1980s he predicted that English departments would become small niche programs, such as classics departments: "small, rare,

and available only to a privileged few at elite universities and colleges." But he now says he got it "backwards," that English departments are maintaining enrollment and employment for professors "by expanding into shapeless masses of whatever students want at the moment, as long as it is easy, popular, and brings in grant money."

These qualitative changes are redefining the study of English—and may be undermining the real value of the discipline. As discussed above, even traditional programs are not truly traditional. And shifts that have already occurred in the make-ups of faculties likely signify even greater changes in the near future.

TODAY'S PRESSURES

The discipline of English—the study and analysis of literature—has undergone dramatic changes over the last 50 years. The transformation has touched every facet of the discipline: its curriculum, its philosophical bent, its pedagogy, and its purpose. It has even lost its place at the center of the academy.

With the faculties becoming universally postmodern, and with no end in sight for the intense competition for good-paying jobs, the rate of change is likely to accelerate in the next decade.

VOCATIONAL SHORTCOMINGS

Higher education serves two masters. One of them is obvious: it prepares students for careers. The other is more esoteric: to help students develop greater intellectual and moral understanding and cultural awareness.

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Throughout much of U.S. history, the humanistic pursuit—turning callow youths likely to assume leadership roles in society into thoughtful, educated gentlemen—dominated higher education. Even the most common vocational pursuit for which young men were trained in college before the Civil War—the ministry—is aligned more with the humanist tradition than with strictly practical endeavors.

Until the later decades of the 19th century, the main vehicle for the inculcation of humanistic values was the study of the classics. “According to Brown University professor Robert Scholes’s 1998 book, *The Rise and Fall of English: Reconstructing English as a Discipline*” in 1876, Yale offered two terms in “English and Disputation,” but 16 courses each in Latin and Greek.

The shift to English as the main source of high culture was swift. “By 1889, Yale offered more courses in English than in Latin and twice as many as in Greek. A revolution had taken place,” wrote Scholes. The triumph of English was so complete that today the classics are often studied within the English department.

For the next 80 years, the study of literature grew and flourished, and a high percentage of the nation’s lawyers, top government officials, and business leaders were educated in the literary tradition that replaced, and was derived from, the study of theology and the classics.

But emerging salary premiums on technical and financial knowledge have changed that. No longer is success largely predicated upon fitting in with a cultivated elite but on possession of tangible practical skills. And while the abilities to communicate well and understand complex writing can be invaluable for high-level careers, the study of classic literary texts is increasingly chosen only by those who are ardently interested in a life of letters.

“Students who want to major in English love reading and literature,” North Carolina Central University’s Michelle Ware told the Pope Center. “Those who major in writing don’t love writing, but they know it’s important for their futures.”

Today, English degrees are among the lowest in terms of salaries earned by degree holders. The chart below shows how much they financially lag behind communication majors, who in turn lag behind most other majors.

Furthermore, at most larger schools, the more vocationally oriented pursuits in the English departments have split off into communication or journalism departments. This is true for all but one of the campuses in the UNC system, tiny Elizabeth City State University.

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Average Salaries of UNC System Graduates for 2013

Year of Graduation	English Literature	Communications	All Majors
2007-8	\$25,511	\$33,214	\$37,318
2002-3	\$40,243	\$48,100	\$52,019

Source: NCTower.com

The lesser employment prospects for English majors has led to stagnating enrollments while higher education in general has boomed. This has caused English departments nationwide to get creative.

At NCCU, Ware said enrollment declines caused the English department to join with the also-struggling foreign language departments, creating a new English Literature and Languages Department. Furthermore, even after the vocational-centered programs and students left the English department for Mass Communications, the department has added its own

writing concentration to help stave off additional declines. That concentration, says Ware, has become “enormously popular.”

Many English departments attempt to maintain control of a school’s writing program—a major source of enrollment. At UNC-Greensboro, for example, all students are required to take two writing courses. The first course is still housed within the English department. The second is taught by the communications department, but students can instead opt to take an alternative course provided by the English department, according to chair Scott Romine.

While English departments are surviving, they are forced into numerous changes. “How do we appeal to a new demographic?” mused Romine. He said that the traditional emphases on the Western canon, philosophy, and classical studies “in order to produce the well-rounded man” has little appeal to the new student demographic group which includes many “first-generation students.”

“The important question to them is ‘what am I going to do with this job,’” he explained. “They want skills that translate into a job.”

The attempt to provide students with marketable skills is forcing departments to go down a precarious path that could lead to reorganization, as happened when communications departments became separate entities.

At UNC-Chapel Hill, there are more than a few English courses that would seem more at home in a communications department: ENGL 137: “Literature in a Digital Age: Books, E-books, and the Literary Marketplace”; ENGL 149: “Networked and Multimodal Composition”; ENGL 481: “Media Theory”; ENGL 676: “Digital Editing and Curation”; among others.

At North Carolina State, a degree in English can be in one of five concentrations: Creative Writing; Film; Language, Writing and Rhetoric; Literature; and Teacher Education. It would not be difficult to see three of them migrating to the much larger Communications

The result is that increasingly extreme and radical views go unquestioned and, in time, become the center of a new consensus. Activism, rather than objective scholarship, becomes the rule.

Department and to see teacher education moving to the School of Education, with only literature remaining in the English department.

WHEN POLITICIZATION REACHES CRITICAL MASS

As described above, English departments have shifted to the left philosophically and pedagogically. In some departments, advocates of multiculturalism and postmodernism have gained considerable influence or are in such a majority that they have full control.

Once a critical mass of politicization is reached, opposing opinions and economic diversity tend to get crowded out. Actual discussion can come to an end once ideas that are quite controversial outside of academia become so universally accepted there is nobody left to challenge them. According to former Emory University English professor Mark Bauerlein, who is now the senior editor of *First Things*, multiculturalism, postmodernism, etc., have become so engrained in English departments that they have become “bureaucratized.” In other words, dispassionately and unquestioningly “banal” rather than vital, not a good place for a discipline of ideas to be.

Such a bureaucratized consensus does not mean that all ideas become fixed in time. Without some sort of correction, the tendency is to continue moving in the same intellectual direction. The result is that increasingly extreme and radical views go unquestioned and, in time, become the center of a new consensus. Activism, rather than objective scholarship, becomes the rule.

UNC-Wilmington's English department appears to be radicalized in such a fashion. Its recent hires provide ample reason to believe that the department is entrenched in ideology and activism. In 2012, the department chose Alessandro Porco for a tenure-track position over 100 other applicants, according to then-acting chair Don Bushman. This was done with the full knowledge that Porco's scholarly output to that point consisted of two books filled with obscene poetry and a Ph.D. dissertation entitled "Sound Off: Rhythm, Rhyme, and Voice in Hip-Hop."

One of the two books was entitled *The Jill Kelley Poems*, which he described as his book-length ode to the adult-film star affectionately referred to as the 'anal queen.'" The other was called *Augustine in Carthage and Other Poems*. While he described it as a "trans-historical re-imagining of Book III of St. Augustine's *Confessions* in present-day Montreal," it is an X-rated, generally incomprehensible stream-of-consciousness rant about his drunken experiences and thoughts in strip clubs. Rather than heralding St. Augustine's emotional climb above his youthful excesses, Porco said that he hoped his readers would accept his message of "the hypocrisy of spiritual conversion."

Despite considerable criticism after it was exposed that UNCW had hired somebody with his background, Porco remains at the school.

Assistant professor Marlon Moore arrived at Wilmington in 2009. According to her university profile, her interests "include 20th-Century African American literature, gay/lesbian studies and southern culture. Her current research projects include an anthology about black southern queerness and a study of homoerotic spirituality in African American literary culture."

Moore wrote a book chapter entitled "God is (a) Pussy: The Pleasure Principle and Homo-Spirituality in Shug's Blueswoman Theology." The novel *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker, in which Shug is the main character, may be a proper topic for literary analysis, but Moore's chapter is not analytical. The problem is not that Moore

discusses the book's attempt to equate spirituality with sexual abandon (hence the chapter's title), but that she does so in laudatory terms rather than critically. Her conclusion ends:

Shug's Blueswoman theology liberates black female sexuality as it reconciles the body to the soul, and it expands the spiritual possibilities for all who seek God within themselves.

Such sentiments are both radical and shallow; as with Porco, surely there were other applicants whose views were deeper and less extreme.

Victor Malo is another assistant professor at UNCW, arriving there in 2012. His university profile says he:

... typically teaches courses that are required for English majors in the Teacher Licensure Option. His current research interests include examining the effects of literary instruction on adolescent readers' attitudes, such as rape myth acceptance and homophobia, examining the effects of culturally relevant language arts pedagogy on student performance, and examining preservice teachers' attitudes toward using LGBTQ literature.

He also has a video on YouTube in which he uses rap music to teach vocabulary to eighth-graders.

Even though Wilmington seems to have moved especially far from the center in its radicalism and contempt for convention, such perspectives may be the rule in English departments in the UNC system.

At UNC-Chapel Hill, there is cause for concern that activists and ideologues are taking over one of the most prominent English departments in the South. It still has a core of outstanding professors teaching in traditional areas, such as distinguished professor Philip Gura, a former finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award in non-fiction and an early American literature expert. But it is increasingly the home of activist-oriented faculty such as assistant professor Neel Ahuja.

The interests listed by Ahuja on the UNC website very nearly run the entire postmodern-multicultural gamut: “Postcolonial Theory, Multiethnic Literature, Transnational Literary Studies, Disability Studies, Caribbean, South Asia, Gender And Sexuality, Ecocriticism, Animal Studies, Visual Culture.”

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But he narrows down to his main interests in his list of publications:

Abu Zubaydah and the Caterpillar,
Species in a Planetary Frame: Eco-Cosmopolitanism, Nationalism, and The Cove,
Macaques and Biomedicine: Notes on Decolonization, Polio, and Changing Representations of Indian Rhesus in the United States, 1930-1960,
Chimpanzee Sanctuary: Surplus Life and the Politics of Transspecies Care,
Notes on Medicine, Culture, and the History of Imported Monkeys in Puerto Rico
Postcolonial Critique in a Multispecies World,
Unmodeling Minorities: The Sikh Temple Massacre and the Question of Security,
The Contradictions of Colonial Dependency: Jack London, Leprosy, and Hawaiian Annexation,
Rhetorics of Endangerment: Cultural Difference and Development in International Ape Conservation,
Book review of Animacies by Mel Chen.

Three publications belong to the realm of anti-Western identity politics, including an attack on the U.S. government for its interrogation techniques in the war on terror and a critique of Western colonial attitudes in regard to public health.

The other eight are largely concerned with animal rights activism, with five focused on primates. It is difficult to

see what all of these articles on government policies and various primates have to do with the study of literature. One of the justifications for professors having low teaching loads (two classes per semester at Chapel Hill) in order to perform research is that it enables them to keep abreast of new scholarship in their fields. There appears to be no such connection with Ahuja’s research—he is clearly writing as a postcolonial and animal rights activist, not as an educator or literary scholar.

And when it comes to writing, Ahuja is a classic example of the modern “scholar” who writes with such complexity that his work is essentially incomprehensible to all but a tiny group of academics who write on similar topics. Consider the following representative sentence from his article *Species in a Planetary Frame: Eco-Cosmopolitanism, Nationalism, and The Cove*:

The idea of cosmopolitanism, which has occasioned a return in critical theory to a number of humanist tropes (totality, universality, democracy, empathy), suggests an inter-play of difference and universality that fissures the sphere of politics, requiring an agentive ethical engagement across lines of difference in order that particularity not devolve into a relativism that bars judgment and justice.

In contrast is the following passage from Gura’s award-winning *American Transcendentalism*:

James termed it Pragmatism. Emerson called it “Experience.” With its ascension, the other half of the Transcendentalists’ dream, of a common humanity committed to social justice, fell by the wayside. If truth is what an individual finds congruent with his experience rather than a deeply shared

social ideal, individualism triumphs, as it did in the Golden Age and beyond. This is the lasting legacy of Transcendentalism, for better or worse. They were, if nothing else, great optimists.

Gura's writing is direct, rhythmic, and brisk—it dances across the page, leading the reader in a straight, forward direction. It speaks about complex matters of great importance in simple terms. It is written without ego to confer meaning and to make difficult concepts accessible even to the layman. It is the sort of writing one desires from a professor of English in the year 2015.

Ahuja's writing, on the other hand, adds layer upon layer of complexity; it is written to impress, intimidate, and obfuscate. Meaning is hidden, except to a select, equally enlightened few. To derive even vague understanding, one must read over and over, going back to the beginning, to the end, to the middle, then back to the beginning once more. Reading such an excruciating sentence is no longer a linear act but chaotic. And there is a steady stream of them, one after another, to traverse in Ahuja's articles.

His colleague at Chapel Hill, Tyler Curtain, reveals both activist inclinations and an interest in topics outside the ordinary boundaries of literature. He has little track record of published research since getting his Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins in 1999, other than the following:

- In a chapter for a 2001 book entitled *The Symbolics of Presidentialism: Sex and Democratic Identification*, he participated in a written “conversation” called “Our Monica, Ourselves: The Clinton Affair and the National Interest.” Just as Bill Clinton was called the “the first black president” by African-American author Toni Morrison, Curtain admiringly called him “the first queer president.”
- In 2003, Curtain wrote a brief (perhaps 500-word) book review of *Out on a Stage: Lesbian and Gay Theatre in the Twentieth Century* for the journal *American Literature*.
- In 2011, he wrote a three-page book review entitled “Toward a Cultural Critical Field Book” of the book

Gossip, Letters, Phones: The Scandal of Female Networks in Film and Literature.

- In 2013, he was listed as the second author on two op-ed length articles on economics by noted Duke University philosopher of social science Alex Rosenberg, one in the *New York Times* and the other on a blog site called 3AM:Magazine (which has a motto of “Whatever it is, we’re against it”).
- He also has written rambling, unedited blog entries, though mainly on now-defunct websites. On one of them, “BentKid.com,” which is no longer available on the web, he expressed contempt for colleagues who conducted traditional scholarship and said it was his intent to promote “gender activism.”

And that's about it in 15 years since earning his Ph.D. In that time, his edited output seems to be less than 20,000 words, some of it co-written. Most English professors would have completed at least one book, if not two or three, in that time. Yet he has received tenure at UNC-Chapel, a university that places a high premium on faculty research, and he has been named to a large number of prestigious positions, including:

- The 2013 Robert Frost Chair of Literature at a prestigious summer program, the Bread Loaf School of English at Middlebury College.
- The co-directorship of the Center for Philosophy of Biology at Duke University.
- A seat on “the executive committee of the Discussion Group on Science Fiction and Utopian

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and Fantastic Literature for the Modern Language Association.” According to his UNC web profile, “he will be Secretary of the MLA SF/UF Group in 2016, becoming President for the 2017 academic year.”

- An appointment to the “MLA Executive Council to the Publication of the Modern Language Association (PMLA) Advisory Committee for a three-year term, from 1 July 2014 to 30 June 2017. Members of the committee advise the Editorial Board and the editor on articles submitted to PMLA. Professor Curtain replaces renowned Stanford linguistic anthropologist Shirley Brice Heath.”

Curtain stands as an example of how radical opinions and the absence of published writing are not barriers to career advancement in present-day English departments. Furthermore, he is an example of how today’s English professors are moving into subjects far beyond the study of literature into such subjects as “the philosophy of biology.”

Other young professors in the UNC system include the following:

Amanda Wray, who mostly teaches writing courses at UNC-Asheville, states on her LinkedIn page that:

In all the courses I teach, students can expect to talk and think critically about intersecting structures of oppression including racism, homophobia, sexism, and classism.

Also at UNC-Asheville is Anne Jansen. Her list of publications includes “Literary Activism: An Aesthetic Political Strategy for the Twenty-First Century,” which is

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“under consideration with *American Literature*.” Some of her “Scholarly Presentations” include:

- “‘I didn’t even notice you weren’t white’: Queering Colorblindness in the ‘Post-Racial’ Classroom,” National Women’s Studies Association (NWSA) Conference (San Juan, Puerto Rico) 2014.
- “Lesbian Cowboys: Queering the Wild West Through Blood Memory and Literary Activism,” accepted for Multi-Ethnic Literatures of the United States (MELUS) Panel, Modern Language Association (MLA) Conference (Chicago, IL) 2013.
- Invited: “Politics in the Classroom: What It Means to Teach US Ethnic Literatures,” Diversity and Identity Studies Collective at OSU (DISCO) Event “Academics and Activism.”

Michelle Fazio, an assistant professor at UNC-Pembroke, recently published “Remembering Rosie: Gender and Family Dynamics in Woody Guthrie’s Ballads of Sacco and Vanzetti.”

William Boone is an associate professor at Winston-Salem State University. He is described on the website of Wake Forest University, where he was a guest speaker, as teaching:

... courses on hip-hop, gender, popular culture, and African American culture. His research interests include cultural and music criticism, cultural history, popular culture, and African American masculinity. Dr. Boone’s most recent research examines the interface between Major League Baseball iconography, hip hop aesthetics and the decline of African American involvement in the sport of baseball.

Boone's dissertation at Temple University was "The Beautiful Struggle: An Analysis of Hip-Hop Icons."

Gura is age 64; Ahuja, Curtain, Moore, Porco and the others mentioned are in their thirties and forties. They, not Gura, are the future of English departments.

NEW HIRES ARE THE FUTURE

A glance at descriptions for open English positions advertised on the Modern Language Association's online Job Information List for the Fall of 2013 corroborates many of the previously mentioned observations about trends in university English departments.

There were ten open positions listed for UNC schools and another eleven listed for private schools in North Carolina. Looking at the UNC schools first, six of the ten jobs were for composition and rhetoric teachers. Another was for a film studies specialist. That listing specified that the job entails teaching "social, historical, aesthetic aspects of cinema in a global moving image context."

Of the three standard literary positions listed, one was for an "American cultural studies" specialist. This job description nearly guarantees that a successful applicant will teach from a left-wing perspective, as cultural studies in literature departments are heavily influenced by the critical theory approach.

Additionally, Western Carolina University was seeking a specialist in Global Literatures. The applicant's emphasis could be in Asian, African, Latin-American, or European Literature, but the listing specifically asked for his or her "theoretical perspective," naming as examples "transnational, diaspora, cultural, etc." Again, such a pointed request almost guarantees that the successful applicant will adhere to the multicultural and postmodern viewpoints.

The final literature position, at Appalachian State University, "especially" welcomed "candidates with auxiliary interests in one or more of the following areas: film, theory, digital humanities, disability studies, eco-criticism, and animal studies." Once again, there is little

room for somebody who holds views contrary to the prevailing intellectual winds.

The listings for private North Carolina schools followed a similar trend. Four of the eleven job listings were for communications experts, with one of them for a creative writer. One of the other seven was for a drama professor, albeit one with some expertise in "multicultural literature" and a perspective of "contemporary theatre approaches to drama."

Of the six literature job listings, four asked for some combination of buzzwords indicating a perspective of race, class, gender, or environmentalism.

- For a professor who specializes in "Post-Civil War American Literature," Gardner-Webb College suggested that "preference will be given to qualified candidates who can also teach African American and other multi-ethnic literatures."
- Duke University sought candidates with "primary expertise in African American literature and cultural theory."
- Davidson College advertised for a professor with a puzzling combination of specialties: "Medieval/Early Modern & Queer Theory."
- Elon University advertised for a visiting professor to run "The Global Experience, a writing-intensive, interdisciplinary seminar required of all first-year students."

There were two advertisements for professors in traditional areas of emphasis as well, both in British literature. Elon was looking for a specialist in "pre-1800 non-dramatic British Literature," while Wingate University preferred somebody with "a concentration in Medieval British Literature."

Yet those are only the advertisements for the job—the first step in a long process. While the departments may accept applications from any specialist in the two periods of British literature, there is a good chance that only those who belong to the various theoretical

schools on the left will actually get the job. Consider that Alessandro Porco at Wilmington—he of the obscene, profane, and infantile books of poetry—was hired primarily as a teacher of British literature (although he also teaches ENG 580: “Studies in Literature – ‘And It Don’t Stop’: The Theory and Practice of Hip-Hop”).

MINOR DEGREES AT UNC-CHAPEL HILL

Another snapshot, one that shows how far UNC-Chapel Hill’s English department has moved in the direction of the political, the trendy, and the trivial, can be seen in the minor degrees the department offers. Minors are encouraged by the English department at Chapel Hill, since earning a major degree there generally does not require many courses.

Some minors are as expected—one in English for students with other majors, one in creative writing, one in comparative literature, and one in English education for prospective teachers. Another has one foot each in the traditional and trendy: “Composition, Rhetoric, and Digital Literacy.”

But there are also minors in “Global Cinema,” “Latina/o Studies,” and “Medicine, Literature, and Culture.” They follow current trends by promoting identity politics and attracting students through popular culture. (“Medicine, Literature, and Culture seems an especially narrow and puzzling topic to be elevated to English degree status.)

Minor degrees are not insignificant; they drive enrollment. Furthermore, they are—or ought to be—desirable credentials to put on a resume or curriculum vitae. By declaring a minor in a field such as “Latina/o Studies,” the department is attempting to push students

in that direction rather than in the direction of courses for which there is no minor—at Chapel Hill, the traditional canon.

WHITHER THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT?

The college or university English department of today is in a state of great flux. It is no longer a coherent, unified program focused on the study of a clearly bounded canon of literature; rather, it now consists of a range of loosely connected activities, such as the study of the traditional canon of literature, modern literature, freshman composition, vocationally oriented communications, digital humanities, and cultural, ethnic, and gender studies. And it continues to expand beyond its natural boundaries.

Much of this incoherence is the result of fending off falling enrollment in the digital age. Demographic and employment statistics are not promising for the English Department’s future.

The rest is due to English departments entering a relatively advanced state of politicization. While there are still many excellent scholars trained to teach the traditional canon using traditional methods in the UNC system, with a few exceptions they are from a previous era. So overwhelming was the postmodern victory that there is no longer any sort of culture war or overt hostility—those who object to the emphases on race, class, gender, and environmentalism must do so in silence or risk general collegial disapproval. And given hiring tendencies and the anticipated turnover of the more traditional faculty, there is no reason to expect anything other than more movement in the same ideological direction.

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The question is, then, what will become of English departments?

There are two ways to assess their future. One is concerned with the health of the department according to enrollment and faculty employment. While the discipline of English is far from thriving, collapse is not imminent in this regard. But the pipeline feeding into English departments is growing narrower: the college-age population is starting to diminish, according to U.S. Census statistics. Not only is the upcoming generation smaller than the current Millennial Generation, but a higher proportion come from minority demographic groups that do not attend college at the same rates as the current majority.

Additionally, the interest in vocational pursuits rather than intellectual ones is likely to grow, leading students away from English into other programs.

Without some drastic shift in the wind—free college for everybody, perhaps—English departments will struggle to maintain even their current enrollments. And the concept of diminishing marginal returns from attempts to bolster enrollment may kick in: a difficult long-term job market suggests that more pop culture and entertaining classes will add few students.

The great hope may be to become even more vocationally oriented—but the communications department already exists.

Increased politicization—which seems inevitable—will likely drive as many or more students away than it will attract. And those students who will look elsewhere for intellectual stimulation will be among the best and brightest: they know whether they are being fed thin gruel or a bountiful intellectual feast.

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Which leads to the second way of looking at the health of English departments, as a humanistic academic discipline, a means of transmitting the important aspects of culture to a new generation and leading them to deeper understanding of the human existence. As was shown in previous sections, the primacy once unquestioningly granted to the great literature of the Renaissance, Britain, and America is ebbing.

Employment trends and the control that faculty have over the curriculum and future academic hiring suggest that the postmodern thrust—in all its variations—will intensify. Many schools will no longer be able to present a façade to the outside world that English is studied as it once was.

Proponents of the changes that have occurred may argue that this is a healthy evolution, but once the postmodern perspective has accomplished its aim—to tear down the culture that came before—the English department will have little reason to exist. Vocational, digital, and media courses more appropriately belong in the communications department. Courses on popular culture and social trends belong to the social sciences. Many openly politicized courses—or traditional courses taught from politicized perspectives—could just as easily be housed in gender studies or ethnic studies departments or, perhaps, don't belong on campus at all. Modern literature could be part of creative writing departments. Much of world literature could be

addressed in foreign language departments. What will be left is freshman composition, which could just as easily be taught in communications.

In departments that still have a powerful group of traditional scholars, there is the possibility that they will accept the need to pull back and pare themselves down to a core of the study of the greatest works of Renaissance, British, and American literature with some world and current literature added. The tradition of teaching literature may very well wind up, as R.V. Young once predicted and as Mark Bauerlein recently told the Pope Center, as “small niche programs at elite universities,” as classics departments have become. Literature programs may even be reduced to sub-departmental status, existing as independent centers or institutes within larger curricular units.

Such reduction may not be entirely for the worse. For by reducing English departments, which have expanded far beyond their natural boundaries, back to the most important works, the most serious scholars, and most intrinsically engaged students, they may find renewal and new energy. In such an atmosphere, the power and brilliance of the great works could influence the faculty to shed the postmodern antithesis.

Only time will tell what happens to English departments. Even if the study of great literature exists within traditional “niche” programs, its importance on campus will be greatly diminished and fewer students will be exposed to the great books of the past (except as negative examples of cultural hegemony).

A lot may depend on the individual institution; those with the most highly politicized faculty will be concerned primarily with politics and with faculty employment. Continued promotion of radical politics as scholarship, the banal as important and meaningful, and entertainment as equivalent to serious study, will certainly lead to repercussions in both enrollment and purpose.

But even if the great literature of the past, our cultural inheritance, is devalued, deconstructed, and debased into irrelevance in the Ivory Tower, it will survive somewhere. Perhaps alternative institutions will even develop for those people who wish to know the words of great writers as they were intended and not according to the impulses and biases of today’s faculty. Why? Because there is value in knowing such things.

ABOUT THE POPE CENTER

The John William Pope Center for Higher Education Policy is a nonprofit institute dedicated to improving higher education in North Carolina and the nation. Located in Raleigh, North Carolina, it is named for the late John William Pope, who served on the Board of Trustees of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

The center aims to increase the diversity of ideas discussed on campus, encourage respect for freedom, improve student learning, and lower the cost of education to both students and taxpayers.

To accomplish these goals, we inform parents, students, trustees, alumni, and administrators about actual learning on campus and how it can be improved. We inform taxpayers and policymakers about the use and impact of government funds, and we seek ways to help students become acquainted with ideas that are dismissed or marginalized on campuses today.

Jenna A. Robinson is the president of the Pope Center. She can be reached at jarobinson@popecenter.org. More information about the Pope Center, as well as most of our studies and articles, can be found on our website at popecenter.org. Donations to the center, a 501(c)(3) organization, are tax-deductible.

The Decline of the English Department

Jay Schalin

This paper discusses the evolution—and perhaps devolution—of the university English department through the 20th and 21st centuries.

Throughout much of the 20th century, English departments were the crown jewels of the humanities. Exposure to great literature was often considered essential for students expected to assume lead roles in business, law, government, and society.

Today, English departments have lost their position at the center of the American university. Enrollments have diminished or remained stagnant during a period of tremendous growth for universities in general.

This report discusses the factors that led to the decline of English departments and documents the changes in course requirements, professors' research interests, and student enrollments over time. It also examines today's pressures on English departments—from student demand for vocational and pop-culture offerings to politicization of the faculty.

The author of this study is Jay Schalin, director of policy analysis for the John W. Pope Center for Higher Education Policy. Research and publication were funded by an anonymous donor.

The John W. Pope Center for Higher Education Policy is a nonprofit institute located in Raleigh, North Carolina. It is dedicated to excellence in higher education, both nationally and in the state. This report is available online at popecenter.org and additional copies may be requested by contacting the center at info@popecenter.org.

