Trends in the English Major

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How to explain English as an academic discipline and make the case for the benefit a student might expect from taking a degree in the field have been perennial questions on the agenda of the ADE Executive Committee, at the ADE summer seminars, and for English departments and the field at large. The long-standing discussion gained urgency after 2010, as members of the committee brought reports of a new decline—in some departments alarmingly steep—in the number of undergraduates choosing English as a major. The declines committee members were observing had to do with current students still working toward their bachelor’s degrees—a forward-looking indicator. Only two or three years later would those declines show up in the lagging indicator of degree completions, through data that the federal government makes available as part of the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System or IPEDS.

Fig. 1. Bachelor’s Degree Completions in English, 2005–15
The downward trend in majors was not confined to English; history saw a parallel decline.

**Fig. 2. Bachelor’s Degree Completions in English and History, 2005–15**

So, more mutedly, did the other humanities disciplines of languages other than English and philosophy.

**Fig. 3.**
You will notice that figure 3 extends the time scale back from 2005 to 1987. That was the year the U. S. Department of Education introduced a new and more detailed classification system—the Classification of Instructional Programs—to categorize the fields of study in which students earn degrees. As shown in figure 3, the recent decline has eroded about 40% of the increase in bachelor’s degrees that English saw between 1987 and 1993. Looking still further back, to 1966, we see that, measured in absolute numbers, the current decline is—to date—still modest in scale, compared with the exodus of majors that English and history experienced in the 1970s (fig. 4).

Fig. 4. Bachelor’s Degree Completions in English, History, and Languages Other Than English, 1966–2014

In relative terms, however, as a share of all bachelor’s degrees awarded, English has fallen to under 3.00 of every 100 bachelor’s degrees, which is below the prior low point reached in 1983. History has fallen to under 2.00 of every 100, close to its prior low point reached in 1985 (fig. 5).
Looking at the humanities alongside the social sciences and sciences (that is, at the core liberal arts disciplines) reveals an interesting trend. The humanities, biological sciences, and psychology and other social sciences have moved closer to one another, and away from the physical sciences,
in the share of bachelor’s degrees each area of study awards. In 1987 the physical sciences, biological sciences, and psychology all clustered close together, awarding about 4.00 of every 100 bachelor’s degrees. By 2000 the biological sciences and psychology had increased their shares to about 6.00 of every 100 degrees, while the physical sciences saw their share fall to just over 2.00 of every 100 bachelor’s degrees and the humanities grew to just under 12.00 per 100. The quickened flow of students out of the humanities after 2007 meant that by 2014 the humanities were conferring 2.6 fewer bachelor’s degrees per 100 than they had in 2006. As a result, the gap between the humanities and the social sciences narrowed from 2.9 degree awards per 100 in 2006 to 1.3 per 100 in 2014. The gap between the biological sciences and social sciences narrowed from 3.8 degree awards per 100 in 2006 to 1.9 per 100 in 2014. Put another way, in the short span of years from 2006 to 2014, the distance between the humanities and biological sciences in the number of bachelor’s degrees per 100 that each field awarded shrank by over 50%, from 6.7 degrees per 100 in 2006 to 3.3 degrees per 100 in 2014.

But this redistribution of bachelor’s degree awards within the liberal arts and sciences pales in comparison with changes occurring in professional fields that have clearer ties to specific occupations. Most striking is the astonishing growth in bachelor’s degrees conferred in health professions—6.2 of every 100 bachelor’s degrees, on average, over the years 1987 to 2005, but growing to 8.5 of every 100 on average for the years 2006 to 2015 (fig. 7).
Of equal moment is the flow of students out of education, which over the 10 years 1987 to 2006 conferred an average of 9.5 of every 100 bachelor’s degrees; that shrank to only 6.3 of every 100, on average, for the 9 years 2006 to 2014 (fig. 8).
In 2015, education awarded fewer than 5 of every 100 bachelor’s degrees, a year when health professions conferred more than 11 of every 100 bachelor’s degrees.

One other area of study where trends may warrant attention is visual and performing arts. From 1987 to 2006 the visual and performing arts saw their share of bachelor’s degree awards grow steadily. And they have largely sustained their position since (fig. 9). Some degree programs included under visual and performing arts clearly belong to the academic humanities (art history and film studies, for example). Others signal student interest in hands-on creative work that results in tangible products or performances, whether with a professional aspiration or as a personal avocation (acting; dance; music performance; photography and cinematography; and studio arts and painting, sculpture, printmaking, ceramics, metal arts, and weaving). The attraction of the arts must surely be connected with the attraction to creative writing that so many departments say forms the spontaneous interest drawing students to English now.

Fig. 9.
Figure 10 breaks out English and history to facilitate comparison of trends in the share of degree completions for these humanities fields with those for the six other areas of study that are the focus of this report.

It seems plausible to conjecture that the parallel trend lines for English and education may be linked, given the historic ties between the undergraduate English major and student aspirations to careers in secondary school teaching. The conjecture takes us back to where we started and the question of how study in English explains itself and its outcomes—both cognitive and career—to itself and to its several publics.