ENGLISH professors are culturally, if not essentially, addicted to self-scrutiny. The problem is that our lens seldom takes in what goes on beyond the borders of the discipline. In the last ten years there have been a dozen or more books and hundreds of articles about what’s wrong with English, and some three or four of these had thoughtful suggestions about what we might do about what’s wrong with English. Many such books have words like “failure” and “ruin” in the title, and mainly they argue that we have ourselves to blame. Clearly, we are our own worst enemy, if only because we are our most interested and enthusiastic enemy. Distinguished scholars such as Robert Scholes and David Damrosch have said that the trouble is we’ve lost confidence that the study of literature means anything; that the pursuit of theory has displaced the pleasures of just reading good books; that we’ve even abandoned the reading of books for the watching of films and television; that we’ve given up the pursuit of truth because we know there isn’t any; that we don’t care about any research except our own, since research without a belief in progress toward truth is merely play, and professors don’t manage play very well, since we are a self-selecting personality type that failed sandbox. We are “wedded to the model of individual scholarly work” (Damrosch 7) and thus cannot create a community of scholars, and yet paradoxically we sink into a kind of collective uniformity in our pursuit of specialization and self-aggrandizement (42). These are the criticisms within the profession, from those who are sympathetic and concerned to help us find our way to a more secure disciplinary footing. To our unsympathetic critics, we are left-wing scoundrels who have dismantled the entire Western tradition.

The one comforting thing in this debate about English was that both sides assumed that the discipline was important and that whatever we were doing was influential. My concern is that the future of English is a matter of dwindling importance except among ourselves. Rather than the high moral and political drama of the wreck, ruin, or corruption of English, we must confront the growing irrelevance of English to the major developments in many of our institutions. The public and our students place a waning value on a liberal arts education, and the research agendas of our institutions are increasingly set by the pursuit of funding sources and reputational ratings. Yes, freshman composition is securely at the center of the liberal arts core curriculum, but few of us would want our departments either reduced to little more than a core composition curriculum or split so that writing becomes a separate area from its connections to literary study. Disconnected from the study of literature, composition will face more pressure to serve vocational interests as just a literacy tool for business and information technology. English as I use the term describes a loosely organized discipline that attempts to integrate and theorize the study of literature and writing. Many departments of English also include creative writing, film studies, and ESL. Each of these subdivisions of English may be loosely contained in the definition I pose, and each also has its own audience and curricular imperatives that seem less dependent on the general fate of English as a discipline. The future of English may depend in part on what we define, and defend, as the value of its study, but that future will also be profoundly influenced by developments over which we are likely to have little or no control.

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One of the most important developments in higher education taking place is the influence of renewed research investment in science and technology by federal grant agencies and industry. Between 1980 and the end of the 1990s, the percent of change in appropriations of state tax funds for operating expenses of higher education per $1,000 of personal income (indicating a state's comparative ability to support education) went down in every state (Frances 16–18). The weakening of state funding for higher education has thrown institutions into aggressively developing other funding avenues, and program priorities have followed the money into business and scientific research. This trend is not likely to reverse; in fact, federal funding for science is growing rapidly. Research universities are shaping many of their priorities around the kinds of science and technology that attract large federal grants and the kind of curriculum that serves the “stakeholders,” a faddish term that ties the external community's interest in the university to its investment in it. Those stakeholders with the most to invest are parents and business, particularly the health and technology industries. The National Institutes of Health, the major funding agency for basic research in life sciences and medicine, received a 17% increase in 2002 for a budget of $23.695 billion (Burd and Southwick). The budget for research in the Department of Defense increased more than was originally expected for a total in 2002 of $47.4 billion (“Dept. of Defense”). The National Science Foundation received an 8.2% increase to $4.779 billion (Burd and Southwick). These federal agencies and the USDA are investing in a wide variety of university-based research programs, ranging from genetics and viruses to nanoscale technology, bioinformatics, and food safety. Such federal grants in the sciences typically pay about 44% of the total award in overhead to the institution (its indirect costs for housing the grant in campus facilities and supplying the expert faculty), and industry is increasingly meeting institutional demands for recovering indirect costs.

Indirect costs are typically not earmarked and can be used to pay for almost anything, including extra sections of freshman English or stipends for journal editors. Most IDC, however, are reinvested in science research and facilities. Typically, large grants may also fund new faculty positions for one to five years initially, with the institution picking up the salaries when the grant expires. This arrangement means that the faculty in these fields will grow along with the institution's program priorities. New research funds also usually mean new space needs, and so the cycle of increasing investment in scientific research, faculty, and facilities will likely dominate most research universities for the foreseeable future. Some universities are also realizing huge profits from the commercial application of faculty research through the control of intellectual property rights and technology transfer. Large legal staffs in university patent offices and the development of university technology parks are indicative of the growing relation between industry and academia. In short, there is so much external money for research in some fields that institutions are reorganizing themselves to get it.

There is little way for English or the humanities in general to play a significant role when external research grants begin to reshape the university. The dollars available in federal funding for work in the humanities are simply negligible in such an accounting, and few humanities awards provide for the recovery of indirect costs, which means that institutions cannot improve their revenue stream through the humanities. According to the late John D’Arms of the American Council of Learned Societies, the funding patterns of the NEH and the large foundations have also shifted away from supporting fellowships for individual scholars in the university to other priorities such as preservation or community arts programs. His analysis is both complex and carefully limited to a few foundations, but the patterns seem clear: external fellowship support for the humanities has declined, and maintaining academic research in the humanities increasingly falls on the universities themselves. The bad news for universities is that endowments for the humanities among alumni and patrons are hard to raise (48). In the competitive rankings game, to be in the top ten or twenty research universities, humanities exercise little influence, since most rankings are based on those measures least fitted to our discipline, such as external research dollars, national academy memberships, major prizes, and publications rated by status from an established list of ranked journals. The quality of programs is not, of course, wholly a matter of funding and rankings, but such measures are increasingly important to universities that must compete for funding and ratings to sustain the size and diversity of public higher education in the light of the proportional decline of state funding.

English and the other humanities hold their place in the curriculum because of the traditional value
assigned to the liberal arts degree. Our colleges and universities still largely honor the idea of a liberal education, but it is not clear that the public does. A recent national survey of public attitudes toward liberal arts education asked parents if they viewed the liberal arts positively, neutrally, or negatively (Hersh). Only 34% of parents viewed liberal arts education positively; only 25% of high school students did. When given a list of reasons for students to attend college, only 17% of parents listed “to get an education” as important. Seventy-five percent of parents and 85% of students said that the most important reason for a student to go to college was to qualify for better jobs and increase earning potential. Perhaps even more alarming is that the majority of respondents believed that most of the goals of higher education “can be achieved in any curriculum, especially writing and oral skills, professional school preparation, exposure to the business world, critical thinking, problem-solving, computer literacy, strong work habits, and time management” (19).

These people see nothing uniquely valuable in a liberal arts education; they dismiss the special value of English courses to teach skills such as reading, writing, and critical thinking. Faculty members and graduates from small liberal arts colleges generally have positive feelings about liberal arts degrees, but only 7% of college students today attend small liberal arts colleges (Berger, Kirshstein, and Rowe iv, table A).

Given what Scholes calls “the cultural shifts” that are beyond our power to change and the shifts in English that have left us confused about who we are and what we represent, he says that “what happened to Greek and Latin is now happening to English” (19). The size of the MLA suggests that we could slide—or fall, to use Scholes’s term—quite a distance before we wind up like the departments of classics. Still, his sense of a widening gap between the values of the humanities and those of business and public life is reflected in a lessening of English’s centrality to a liberal arts education that is itself fading in importance. The survey of attitudes about liberal education cited above also supports his argument that what society wants from graduates in the humanities is different from what we define as the value of studying the humanities. He writes:

What this society wants of those who graduate from its schools and colleges with degrees in the humanities—as opposed to [what] those who claim to speak for it say it wants—are, at worst, docility and grammatical competence, at best reliability and a high level of textual skills. What this society does not want from our educational institutions is a group of people imbued with critical skills and values that are frankly antagonistic to those that prevail in our marketplaces, courts, and legislative bodies. (19)

Scholes may interpret too narrowly what society wants from students in the humanities, but it is clear that just those things we often pride ourselves in teaching—namely, a critical analysis of cultural values—run against the grain of what the public increasingly wants education to do: prepare students to enter successfully the capitalist world of business, technology, and power. Note, too, that although composition is atop every college’s list of requirements, what the public and our colleagues in other disciplines want from such courses is grammatical competence and computer literacy, not the self-reflexive writer who is conscious of rhetorical strategies and how language reveals values. Any unchecked fall of English eventually will bring down composition as the English faculty defines it. Indeed, in many institutions, business and engineering colleges have already set up their own alternative composition courses tailored to teach the kind of writing that supports the skills of students they aim to produce.

While the discipline’s attention has been focused on the overproduction of PhDs and most university faculty members in English have been preoccupied with our research and graduate programs, growth of undergraduate English majors has stalled. In fall 2000 the MLA Newsletter published a survey of recent trends in undergraduate majors. In 1996–97 only 4.21 out of every 100 bachelor’s degree recipients graduated in English, down from the perhaps artificially inflated high of 7.59 during the peak humanities enrollments of the Vietnam War years of 1967–68 (Franklin, fig. 2). After 1972 the number of undergraduate degrees in English went into free fall, dropping as low as 3.37 of every 100 in 1983–84 for a total of 32,834 majors (figs. 2 and 1). The numbers slowly went up through 1991–92 to 4.83, but they have been falling gradually for the last few years. The total decline in numbers from 1971–72 to 1996–97 was from 63,976 to 49,345. Patterns similar to those in English were recorded in foreign languages, history, and philosophy (figs. 2–4). While English was not expanding, the total number of students graduating in all areas was booming, in part due to an influx of more female enrollments and the expanding career opportunities for women who had once seen themselves limited mainly to fields in the humanities or to the teachers colleges. Significant increases in majors were recorded in biological and life sciences, the health professions, agriculture, psychology, sociology,
and public administration. The number of undergraduate degrees granted in the humanities between 1974–75 and 1984–85, the nadir of humanities enrollment, fell by 13.3%, while the number granted in business rose by 75.4% and in computer science by 672.5% (table 1). Though there was a rise in humanities enrollments in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the trend since then has been down. Bachelor’s degrees granted in 1996–97 in English (4.21) and foreign languages (1.05) per 100 graduating students has fallen almost to the level of the late 1940s (3.99 and 1.04, resp.) before the rise of interest in our subjects in the 1950s and 1960s almost doubled the figure in English and more than doubled it in foreign languages (fig. 2). In history and philosophy, the numbers are roughly a third below 1949–50 levels (fig. 4). Some of the decline in percentage of degrees in the humanities can be attributed to women’s moving into science, social science, and business and management, but the decline has been among both women and men.

The combination of student preferences, public attitudes, and institutional funding agendas is a powerful triumvirate that will unquestionably rule our universities. As Damrosch notes, “Taken together, research funding and student interest largely shape the market within which professors now work” (52). The growth in the total number of people getting degrees in the last forty years masks the decline that has been occurring in English. We teach more and more students in English because there are more and more students in our colleges and universities, but we do not attract a growing percentage of them. Given that English as a discipline has diversified considerably in the last forty years to include students who focus on composition; creative writing; and such related areas as film studies, ethnic studies, and women’s studies, one might have expected that a significant increase in majors would have occurred as the paths through the major widened to include many new ways to be an English major.

These enrollment trends in our institutions are reflected in the staffing patterns of our departments and the budget priorities in the dean’s office. Many English departments, especially in PhD-granting institutions, have experienced a decline in the number of tenure-track faculty members and an increase in teaching assistants and part-time faculty members. In the bottom-line wisdom of budget decisions, English, alongside the other demands on the dean’s budget, has a weakening argument for tenure-track positions given the rapid growth of other majors. Teaching assistants and part-time faculty members mainly cover freshman composition and are funded by temporary budget commitments. The attractiveness of English as a major is one important factor we must try to influence, but those of us in PhD-granting institutions are going to have to engage ourselves much more deeply in undergraduate education if we are to do so effectively.

What is happening to English and the humanities because of pressure from outside the discipline is cause for great concern, but we have the responsibility to make our own disciplinary characteristics and reputation. English professors often enjoy disciplinary debates and the wonders of the MLA Annual Convention program, but others are less impressed, and their disdain has in turn contributed to a crisis of confidence in the field. While we may individually know what we are about as scholars, we don’t know what we are about as a discipline, or even if we are a discipline in the sense that other academics understand that word. We are not even certain that disciplinarity is something we should value. Some of our confusion is part of a larger insecurity about the social value of scholarly work in the humanities as a whole (for a comment on this issue in the humanities and social sciences, see Damrosch 1). Scholes remembers the time when literature was seen as a “quasi-sacred text that could be expounded by a licensed teacher/preacher to reveal the entrance to the kingdom of light” (15). To study literature was to promote a sensitive understanding of human nature and to believe “that a richer, fuller humanity would be an asset in business, law, or politics [. . .]” (18). Once literature—which no longer meant “simply good books”—was politicized and the text positioned as a cultural production, we had to get off that high road to the kingdom of light. If literature was mainly important as a political and cultural sign, wasn’t it more sensible just to go study history or sociology or psychology or anthropology? Apparently our students thought so, as they continued to drift away to other disciplines.

Scholes argues that one of the reasons faculty members in English feel bad about themselves is that the theoretical revolution in the field has resulted in “our estrangement from the possibility of truth” (48). Instead of scholarship that “will lead progressively toward true knowledge,” “what we have is a conversation in which the rewards go to the best conversationalists” (47, 48). Scholes, of course, is completely familiar with the philosophical arguments about truth and takes up at some length his quarrel with Richard
Rorty. His point is that we need “to believe that our beliefs are grounded in something firmer than belief itself [. . .]. That is, we need the sense of a shared enterprise, to which we may contribute something. As educators, we need the sense that we are presenting to students and colleagues ideas, methods, and information that are neither false nor useless” (53–54). One consequence of having “largely given up on research as a progress toward truth” (47) is that the results of our research are rarely important to anyone, not even to many of the scholars who work in the field of specialization of that research. Another is that we are slaves to the latest scholarly fashions in thought and the star system in hiring, since marketability of one’s name is the most convincing measure of quality.

We think of English as very interdisciplinary these days, but research in the humanities remains “particularly wedded to the model of individual scholarly work” (Damrosch 7). Rather than doing genuinely collaborative work with colleagues in other disciplines, as is increasingly the practice in the sciences, we are interdisciplinary all by ourselves, incorporating fragments of other disciplines such as history, sociology, ethnography, and psychology to provide contexts for a broad definition of texts. Interdisciplinary work is, I believe, the cure for extremes of specialization and the bridge by which outmoded fields cross to new areas of study. If interdisciplinary work is to solve anything for English, however, we must learn to do it with others. Not only will the interchange create new ways of thinking, it will also give us a forum in which to relate to others what we contribute to knowledge and the social good.

The culture of English studies ill prepares us for the kinds of adjustments we will need to make if we are to hold our own in the environment I have been describing. Many of us label what we do as cultural studies, but the vagueness inherent in the label is indicative of both our broadening search for research whose social value we can defend and the lack of a disciplinary standard or methodology by which to measure the scholarly value of that work. Those outside English are even more skeptical of the topics and methods of English professors who do cultural studies. Being all over the map is a dangerous position when you are not in control of how the map will be drawn or used. Paradoxically, as our confidence in the study of literature fades, creative writing is increasingly the public showpiece for English departments, since it does not have to justify itself beyond being compelling to read. We, and others, grant the power of a good short story or poem to entertain and move us when read effectively by a contemporary author, but we are not sure that studying the same kinds of experience reading Henry James or Alfred Tennyson is equally valuable.

Left unaddressed, what current trends are doing to the humanities and what we as English professors are doing to ourselves may force us in time into the half-light where what’s left of classics departments resides. Many of our colleagues have written earnestly of what we can or must do to restore our confidence in ourselves and our relevance in an age of information technology (see Pratt). Scholes ends his thoughtful book The Rise and Fall of English with the recommendation that we restore English to the status of a discipline instead of a field by teaching methods with theory as the center of the discipline. Both Scholes and Don Bialostosky urge a return to the classical trivium of grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic as a way to refocus in theory our literary heritage in a more disciplined study (99). Andrea Lunsford and Janice Lauer argue that rhetoric and composition can productively broaden the base of textuality in English studies (109). Michael Bérubé suggests we foreground literary study in cultural studies for pragmatic curricular reasons. He sees cultural studies potentially as “the means by which literary study can intervene in the social world of power, hegemony, and human affairs” (4) but worries that it will wash out the literary and then be doomed by the degree to which it duplicates other disciplines. And Lynn Hunt warns of the convenience cultural studies provides deans looking for ways to amalgamate humanities departments and reduce the size of the faculty (28).

The most influential solution to the problems of English studies has been Gerald Graff’s notion of teaching the conflicts. Placing our debates at the center of the English curriculum allowed the faculty to manage the disciplinary clashes of English with more civility, but it could not address the problems with English from outside the family. The limits of teaching the conflicts as a strategy for strengthening English are evident in David Richter’s preface to his textbook Falling into Theory. An advocate of Graff’s ideas, Richter writes of discovering the “great gap” the students felt between themselves and their professors. “There was,” he believes, “an enormously interesting conversation swirling around them, of which they were able to catch brief words and phrases. The students felt like children in unhappy marriages who
have to be protected against hearing the bickering of their parents” but who really want to be “engaged in our conversation” (ix). As Louis Menand dryly observes, teaching the conflicts “represents a kind of perverse consumption of professionalism, the last refinement on the isolation and self-referentiality of academic studies: it makes what professors do the subject of what professors do” (215).

Our conversation about the future of English must look beyond our boundaries, at how liberal arts education is changing and what role in the contemporary university we can fulfill. In his essay “The Demise of Disciplinary Authority,” Menand traces the history of the modern research university as a response to professionalism. The function of our graduate schools was to protect credentialing by ensuring that “future scholars [would] be trained only by established scholars” and that unqualified persons would be kept out (203). Scientific methods were the measure of professionalization of academic work, and “the history of the English department is the history of efforts to fit a series of new paradigms into this self-consciously science-based structure” (206). From philology to the New Criticism of the cold war era, we justified the professionalization of English on some version of objectivity in method and progress in knowledge as the end product. According to Menand, however, deconstruction turned out to be the end of the line, since “once its implications were accepted, no grounds for disciplinarity remained” (210).

If Menand is correct about the past, and I think in general he is, then we are in a most ironic situation. Our graduate programs are under fire for pushing students to excessive preprofessionalism just when the narrow content of their program of studies and the job market for PhDs undermine our rationale that mainly we are training the generation of professors who will replace us. In our best institutions, teaching assistants are increasingly responding to their place on the margins of the profession by unionizing, the traditional refuge of the nonprofessional worker. The graduate students and the institutions that hire them increasingly tell us that we are not training them for the kinds of jobs they will get, and a new survey of twenty-seven doctoral granting institutions indicates that slightly less than 43% of our students believe that a faculty career is a realistic possibility. Although PhD programs primarily train students to do research, this survey indicates that 71.3% of doctoral students in English have a preference for teaching in a liberal arts college instead of a research university (Golde and Dore 10). This preference is further borne out by the ranking of factors that influenced their decision to pursue a faculty career. First was “enjoyment of teaching,” followed by “working on college campus” and then “enjoyment of research” (9). Given this situation, are we as senior professors willing to rethink the nature of graduate programs that we personally enjoy so much and to look more pragmatically at what the future of English will be for our graduate students?

Thinking harder about what our students will do instead of what we do is just one of several ways we need to move beyond our “isolation and self-referentiality.” Despite the risk that interdisciplinary work may make us vulnerable to consolidation, we have to reach in this direction by engaging in collaborative work with colleagues in other areas. Fields such as media studies, area studies such as Victorian or Renaissance studies, religious studies, as well as cultural studies are potential avenues for such research. We need to test our interdisciplinary perspectives in the waters of those other disciplines so that the contexts we find critical to understanding are neither eccentric nor parochial to English.

If we want the study of literature to be important to others, we need to reorder our priorities so that our commitment to undergraduates is not third on our list. We need to remember why almost all of us became English majors and why people who don’t do so for a living still read good books. In many ways, the historic appeal of literature seems socially more important than ever before. Knowing about the other in an increasingly multicultural and global community is the first ingredient of tolerance. Cultivating what Martha Nussbaum calls the “compassionate imagination” is the first ingredient of peace (93). Fortunately, literature has no single, universal truth; it has many, enough for a pluralistic world, and the truths are as diverse and different as all the peoples of the globe who have used writing to record their experience.

John Henry Newman, John Stuart Mill, Matthew Arnold, and others translated the classical ideal of the life of the mind to fit a Victorian world in the belief that the universities were educating a homogeneous ruling class for whom calmness, moderation, independence, and wisdom were the characteristics of men at the center of imperial dominion. Liberal arts education today serves a different social purpose. Its scope is more global than national, more democratic than imperialistic, infinitely more diverse than our universities were even thirty years ago. Our purpose is...
the imperative not of Arnold or Newman but of Rodney King and the millions of other nameless citizens of the world who will lead miserable, frightened lives if we don’t do better at just getting along. As Nussbaum says, “We do not fully respect the humanity of our fellow citizens—or cultivate our own—if we do not wish to learn about them, to understand their history, to appreciate the differences between their lives and ours” (295). Preparing citizens to live together in civil acknowledgment of lives they will not enter or necessarily like, preparing citizens to make decisions about how best to construct that complicated society of conflicting customs and competitive interests, is not a small or mean purpose for our work. If we can think less about explaining to others how English ought to be important to them and more about how English might contribute to the important things happening to others, we won’t have to worry so much about what the future holds for us.

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