Once again, enrollment declines have surfaced as a focus of collective concern for English. In a paper presented at the MLA convention in Vancouver and published in this issue of the ADE Bulletin, 2015 ADE President Kent Cartwright reports that over the short span of the three academic years 2011–12 to 2013–14, his University of Maryland, College Park, English department lost 363 students, or over 40% of its majors. The sudden, dramatic decline Cartwright enumerates attracted considerable notice at the time he presented his paper, including a 26 January 2015 piece in Inside Higher Ed by Colleen Flaherty under the title “Major Exodus” and posted to Slate on 30 January, where it soon received well over 850 comments.

Discussions during the ADE Executive Committee’s meeting in March 2015 and among the chairs and other departmental representatives at the ADE Summer Seminars in June make it clear that Cartwright’s concern about attracting students to major in English is broadly shared. At the joint ADE-ADFL Seminar in Arlington, Virginia, what had been planned as a small discussion group on Recruiting Majors ended up an energetic and productive brainstorming session in a room packed with upward of seventy people. Skillfully led by Lina Insana for ADFL and Emily Todd for ADE, the large group outlined ten strategies for recruiting new majors in English and world languages; the report from the discussion group is available online (Insana and Todd).

I hope department chairs and others in the ADE community will use the Bulletin and the ADE chairs discussion list to continue the cross-departmental and cross-institutional discussion of trends affecting the English major, ways departments can respond effectively, and steps the MLA and ADE can take to be helpful. What observations do any of us have about how institutional attitudes and student behavior are being influenced by current emphasis on education as workforce development, earnings postgraduation, and public perceptions of the economic value of degrees in different areas of study? How do we counter negative narratives and the casual ridicule that public officials and members of the press sometimes direct toward study in the humanities? Can we formulate a positive case for study in English and other humanities fields? How far should advocacy accommodate or resist instrumentalist discourses oriented to education as the acquisition of skill sets clearly applicable to prespecified occupational niches directly on receipt of the degree?

Informing such discussions are aggregate and institution-level data from the degree completions component of the United States Department of Education’s Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). A review of completions data for English reported to the IPEDS from the University of Maryland makes apparent that in a report like Cartwright’s the term majors means something quite different from what it refers to in commentary discussing the IPEDS data—and that we do well to be clear about which sense or use of the term is active at any given
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moment. Figure 1 presents IPEDS data for bachelor’s degree completions in English and in all fields reported from the University of Maryland, College Park, over the ten years 2003–04 to 2012–13 (the latest year for which at the time of this writing completions data were available). As reported to the IPEDS, English at Maryland saw more bachelor’s degree completions in English in 2012–13 (260) than in any of the previous nine years. And the 3.6 per 100 share of all University of Maryland bachelor’s degrees those 260 bachelor’s degrees represented maintained the level of the two prior years and even increased it over the share English claimed in 2008 (3.3), 2009 (3.3), and 2010 (3.5). One may be forgiven a moment of cognitive dissonance when considering this report from the IPEDS against Cartwright’s dire account—until one realizes that what Cartwright describes is an abrupt decline in the number of currently enrolled undergraduates who are declaring English as a major. Cartwright is counting majors who are still working toward their degrees—a forward-looking indicator—where the IPEDS counts degrees already completed and awarded, by definition a backward-looking indicator.

A review of the historical data on degree completions affords some illuminating perspective on current trends. This discussion updates the analysis of IPEDS degree completions data first prepared for the 2001–02 ADE Ad Hoc Committee on the English Major. Figure 2 shows aggregate IPEDS bachelor’s degree completions for English across the forty-eight-year period from 1966 to 2013, as compiled from WebCASPAR. The truly dramatic episode of expansion and contraction occurs over the eighteen roller-coaster years from 1966 to 1983. Then comes a second expansion, from 1984 to 1993, when the number of bachelor’s degrees the field awarded grew by over 24,000 (76.8%). Since 1993, the number of bachelor’s degree completions in English has held steady for two decades, fluctuating in a range that is modest—from 48,000 to just over 55,000—compared with the ebb and flows departments had to contend with in the years between 1966 and 1993.

The heady expansion the English major saw during the 1960s and the abrupt contraction that marked the 1970s surely loom large as elements formative for the narrative of golden age and declension that continues to dominate the popular and even the professional imagination about English as a field of study. As important for understanding the trends affecting English, however, is that other quantitative dimension, traced in the dotted red line in figure 2: the number of degrees in English per 100 bachelor’s degrees. The persistent downward slope of that curve after 1993 and the gradual, two-decades-long loss of market share it represents were bound to sound alarms eventually. And over the two decades since 1993, institution-level IPEDS data do point to a notable change in the position of the English major in a group of highly visible institutions that are home to nationally prominent English departments. Figure 3 shows the five-year moving average, from 1987–91 to 2009–13, for bachelor’s degrees in English per 100 bachelor’s degrees for five United States institutions that are members of the Association of American Universities (AAU): Harvard; Yale; the University of California, Berkeley; the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor; and the University of Virginia. All five are institutions where, historically, degree completions in English ranged far above the national average—in the early 1990s from 8 to as many as 14 degrees per 100 bachelor’s degrees. Over the two decades since, the share
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of degrees in English these institutions award has steadily declined. In 2013, it stood at between 4.0 and 6.5 degrees per 100, half the level of twenty years before.

Given the prominence of this group of institutions, these declines are understandably attention-getting. But looking further into the institution-level data may also suggest the danger of generalizing too hastily from them or from trends in any confined set of institutions. In other AAU-member institutions, the share of degrees in English held steady or even grew through the 1990s and early 2000s. Figure 4 shows the five-year moving average for bachelor’s degrees in English per 100 bachelor’s degrees for the University of Illinois, Urbana; the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities; the University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh; and Texas A&M University, College Station. In these institutions, rather than a marked change in the institutional position of the English major, the trend has been for English to sustain a position of between 4.0 and 7.0 or 8.0 degrees per 100, at least up until the financial crisis of 2008. Even in the University of Illinois, Urbana, and Texas A&M University—the two institutions in this sample where the downturn for English post-2008 is most pronounced—the drop has not, or not yet, pushed the level significantly beyond the low end of the range over which it has fluctuated for two decades. And—something of an outlier here—although the University of Pittsburgh has followed the national pattern of gradual decline since the early 1990s in the share of bachelor’s degree completions in English, its share remains notably higher than that of the other three institutions.

To be seen and interpreted accurately, trends in the historical degree completions data for different fields of study need to be conceptualized and modeled dynamically, as units of social action in motion inside a larger whole that is itself constantly changing. Figure 5, charting aggregate bachelor’s degree completions in all fields from 1966 to 2013 against degree completions in English, shows how ebbs and flows experienced as huge inside English flatten when considered relative to bachelor’s degree awards overall. Behind the expansion in bachelor’s degree completions is the massive expansion of the student population that democratized American higher education after World War II and transformed it from an elite to a mass system. To what extent might the several challenges humanistic study and the liberal arts have faced be predictable consequences of the demography, what I have come to think of as the travails of massification—the difficulties it imposes, the work it calls us to undertake, and the journey the difficulties and work take us on? Figure 6 shows the long history of student enrollments from 1869 to 2009. The accelerated growth in enrollments post-1960 came first as a result of the sharp increase in the number of high school graduates in the 1960s (the baby boom), but enrollments continued to grow even as the number of high school graduates declined from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s (the baby bust), in great part because after 1980 the percentage of recent high school graduates going on to college rose—from around 50% (a level that remained constant from 1965 to 1980) to just under 70% (the level reached in 2005; fig. 7 and fig. 8). Enrollment increases have been especially steep since 1999, mirroring the legendary expansion of the 1960s baby boom, as the number of high school graduates has once again been increasing while at the same time the percentage of those graduates going on to postsecondary education is far higher than was the case in the 1960s.
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The dynamics of gender provide a clear illustration of why taking account of developments in the student population as a whole matters for modeling developments in English. Across almost five decades, with modest variation, about two-thirds of English bachelor’s degrees have been awarded to women (fig. 9). But the apparently unchanging gender distribution of degrees in English cannot be adequately understood until it is seen in relation to the dramatic change those decades saw in the number and percentage of all bachelor’s degree awards to women (fig. 10). In 1966, the 222,971 bachelor’s degrees awarded to women represented 42.6% of the 524,008 bachelor’s degrees awarded that year. Fifteen years later, in 1980, 462,501 bachelor’s degrees were awarded to women—49.2% of all 940,251 bachelor’s degrees awarded in 1980. Another fifteen years further on, in 1995, the number of bachelor’s degrees awarded to women had grown to 643,290—or 54.8% of the 1,174,436 bachelor’s degrees awarded in 1995. In 2013, 1,066,182 bachelor’s degrees went to women, representing 57.3% of all 1,861,034 bachelor’s degree completions. Viewed superficially and in isolation, the data for English suggest little has changed; considering the data for English along with the parallel data for all fields makes apparent the significant change that has taken place: as the percentage of women taking bachelor’s degrees has moved much closer to the percentage of women taking bachelor’s degrees in English, the gender distribution of bachelor’s degree completers in English has become much more aligned with the gender distribution in the population of bachelor’s degree completers overall.

The significance of these dynamic relations becomes vividly apparent when they are modeled as a chart showing trends over time in the number of bachelor’s degrees awarded to women and men in English per 100 bachelor’s degrees awarded to women and men (fig. 11). The high percentage of the far smaller pool of women who took bachelor’s degrees in English in 1966 had by the mid-1980s become a far smaller percentage of the much enlarged and growing pool of women. The disparity between the percentage of men and the percentage of women majoring in English shrank markedly, as is shown in the narrowing of the gap between the trend lines for men and women in the figure. That is, in the choice to major in English, women’s academic decisions came to resemble men’s more closely during the 1980s. Meanwhile, between the early 1970s and the mid-1980s, when the number of all women bachelor’s degree recipients earning bachelor’s degrees in English fell from just under 12 per 100 to about 4, the number earning bachelor’s degrees in business rose from less than 5 per 100 to almost 20 (fig. 12). In 1966, men earned over 90% of all bachelor’s degrees in business. By 1985, women had come to earn 45.0% of all degrees in business; in 2013, the figure was 48.1%. In other words, during the 1970s, as women entered occupations that had largely been closed to them, they entered academic majors that had likewise been closed to them, and English lost women as a semicaptive audience for the major.

The gender redistributions of the 1970s and early 1980s must be counted as one of the signal successes of the feminist movement—a success to which literary studies across the modern languages actively contributed, if to their own loss in terms of students’ completing majors. But as figures 11 and 12 also make apparent, the migration of women from English to other fields was largely complete by the mid-
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1980s. Since then, women’s share of the total population of students receiving bachelor’s degrees has continued to grow, but the gap between the number of degrees to women in English per 100 degrees to women and the number to men per 100 degrees to men has remained unchanging. How, then, do we understand the growth of degree completions in English between 1987 and 1993, in both absolute and relative terms, and the long decline relative to overall bachelor’s degree completions since?

Comparing the trend for English in bachelor’s degrees per 100 with the trends for other fields, figure 13 suggests how the areas of study students select indeed reflect the ongoing collective cultural conversation about what’s of moment and where good employment opportunities and career prospects lie. Between 2003 and 2013, degree completions in health professions have almost doubled, from 5.30 per 100 to 9.94 per 100. Over the same period, bachelor’s degree completions in homeland security, law enforcement, and firefighting grew from 1.98 per 100 to 3.30. Meanwhile, since the early 1990s, English and education have seen their shares drop from over 4 per 100 and 10 per 100, respectively, to under 3 per 100 and 6 per 100 by 2012. Business, too, which far and away is the leader in number of degrees per 100 degrees, saw a notable downward trend in its share of bachelor’s degrees, from over 24 of every 100 in the late 1980s to under 20 in 1997; by 2002 bachelor’s degrees in business had rebounded to over 22 per 100 but fell from 21.74 per 100 in 2009 to 19.62 per 100 in 2013. The similarity of the curve for English and the curve for education points to a clear link between these fields as areas of study where K–12 teaching is the intended goal and employment destination for a large fraction of their undergraduate student populations. Most surprising, given the emphasis conventional wisdom puts on employment prospects and earnings as drivers of student interest, may be the strength of the visual and performing arts, which increased their share of bachelor’s degree completions from 3.65 per 100 in 1987 to 5.58 by 2005 and holding well over 5.00 per 100 ever since (their share was 5.27 in 2013). The attraction of the arts must surely be connected with the attraction to creative writing that so many members of the ADE community report as the spontaneous interest drawing students to their departments now. Figure 14 expands the selection from figure 13 to show trends for the largest arts and sciences fields—adding social sciences, biological and physical sciences, communications, history, and foreign languages and literatures (business has been dropped so that the scale can be adjusted to keep the trend lines for the different disciplines as separated as possible).

WebCASPAR time series data on degree completions have 1966 as their initial year. But data back to 1950 can be pieced together from two documents: the 1985–86 Digest of Education Statistics and a 1993 publication from the National Center for Education Statistics entitled 120 Years of American Education: A Statistical Portrait (Snyder). Figure 15 extends the modeling of degrees in English to men and to women per 100 degrees to men and to women in all fields back to 1950. The figure may serve to correct the tendency to assume more or less unconsciously that the level for 1966—7.47 bachelor’s degrees in English per 100 bachelor’s degrees in all fields—must approximate the level prevailing or normal before 1966. Extended back to 1950, this modeling of the data suggests instead that the sharp decline of the 1970s can more plausibly be understood as representing a return to normal conditions after an anomalous and
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comparatively short-lived influx of students in English during the 1960s. Certainly, a level of around 3 bachelor’s degrees in English per 100 bachelor’s degrees, which is typical for recent years, looks remarkably close to the level for the 1950s, especially if the 8 degrees to women per 100 degrees to women characteristic of the 1950s is discounted as artificially elevated by women’s confinement within a restricted set of disciplines, English among them. By the same token, it is important to recognize how dramatically different in scale and character today’s higher education system is from higher education as it was in the 1950s. Figure 16 tracks the number of bachelor’s degree completions for men and women in all fields compared with the number in English from 1950 to 2013. To make the curve for English visible, it is scaled to the secondary y-axis (0 to 200,000 on the right), while the curve for bachelor’s degrees in all fields is scaled to the primary y-axis (0 to 2,000,000 on the left). Through the 1950s and 1960s the two curves track one another in close parallel, the number of degrees in English rising in tandem with the number of degrees overall. Through the 1970s, the curve for English falls away from a relatively flat curve for all fields; after 2000, the curve for all fields soars away from a relatively flat curve for English.

These considerations should expose the speciousness of popular accounts that abuse these quantitative changes by immediately moralizing them, as if simply juxtaposing the more than 7 degrees per 100 that English claimed fifty years ago with the fewer than 3 degrees per 100 the field claims now makes it obvious that something lamentable has occurred in either the students, the professors, the discipline, the culture, or all four together. These considerations may also serve to remind us that it is more difficult than might be imagined to look at such quantitative changes and not rush to moralize them. A numerical decline is not prima facie evidence sufficient to allege a blameworthy fall or demise. The level of degree completions in English at its historic high point between 1966 and 1972 should not be elevated into a tacit norm from which everything that follows is understood, and mourned, as failure. The travails of massification are real, as are the challenges the wider economic and cultural context create for explaining how language and literature and the liberal arts more broadly remain compelling intellectual and educational adventures that well serve those who earn degrees in these areas as platforms for productive employment and thoughtful citizenship, not to mention a continuing source of personal renewal. If we create and sustain undergraduate programs that students find intellectually interesting places to be today and that they know point them toward interesting places to work tomorrow, majors in sufficient numbers will follow.

David Laurence

Notes

1. For data on graduates’ earnings by undergraduate major, see Carnevale, Cheah, and Hanson.
2. Historical, institution-level reports of this kind can be developed using WebCASPAR (https://ncesdata.nih.gov/webcaspar/), an online database system maintained by the National Science Foundation. Available time series date to 1987 for the Classification of Instructional Programs (CIP) and the system of CIP codes the IPEDS uses to assign degree completions to different fields of study and to 1966 for the older set of disciplinary categories. The MLA office of research is happy to assist chairs of ADE-member departments who want to develop such reports.
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3. Originally published in *ADE Bulletin* 134 (2003), the committee’s report remains relevant and is freely available in the Reports and Resources section of the ADE Web site.

4. I adopt the term *massification* from Guillory (1155), who refers to Alain Touraine, *The Academic System in American Society*.

5. These percentages are drawn from the IPEDS data on business degrees as compiled on WebCAS-PAR: men received 59,757 of the 65,264 bachelor’s degrees in business in 1966; women received 107,968 of 240,062 degrees in 1985 and 178,601 of 371,371 degrees in 2013.

Works Cited


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