

The Future of the English Department

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My views on the future of the English department have shifted in a few significant ways since completing my Ph.D. and becoming a full-time faculty member, first in a temporary position as a lecturer at my alma mater (UCLA), then on to the tenure track at a small women's liberal arts college, and finally, as a recently tenured and promoted faculty member.

I earned my degrees from two large public universities: Penn State, University Park and the previously mentioned University of California, Los Angeles. Both institutions house massive English departments with well over sixty tenure-line faculty members, several dozen non-tenure-track instructors, and armies of graduate students, most of whom teach and/or grade while earning their degrees. As a graduate student in both departments, I was fortunate to have extensive and varied pedagogical opportunities so that by the time I graduated, I felt fully prepared to leave the nest, so to speak, and walk into a classroom thousands of miles away. I was also very familiar with the demands of maintaining a research agenda. As a graduate student at these two research-intensive institutions, I witnessed the intense pressure to publish that faculty faced. I also witnessed both the accolades that rained down when a piece was placed and the consequences that followed when things didn't work out.

What I didn't know, or really ever stop to consider, was how very different an English department looks at other kinds of schools. Like many English faculty, I currently belong to a department that bears little resemblance to the one that trained me. Unlike the formidable rosters of sixty-plus tenure-line professors, my department consists of seven full-time faculty members, six of whom are tenured and one who is a long-term full-time instructor. We also have four or five contingent faculty members who teach courses for us from time to time. Four of the full-time professors, myself included, primarily teach literature while three teach creative or professional writing. Most of us also teach composition. The faculty who trained me typically taught two classes per semester (or the quarter-system equivalent). By contrast, I teach three classes during our fall and spring semesters and one class during our intensive four-week January intercession. My colleagues who do not teach in January teach four classes each in the fall and spring. In addition to carrying a heavier teaching load, being one of four literature professors in the department has forced me to diversify. While I get to teach a course in my research area (transatlantic modern poetry) from time to time, over six years, I have developed more than twenty different syllabi that span the whole of American literature as well as several different Anglophone traditions. The wide-ranging subject matter of my courses has

given me the opportunity to team-teach with colleagues in economics, musicology, and philosophy, and it has taken me, literally, to Ireland and Costa Rica.

In addition to the very different pedagogical demands of my position, I was not prepared for the heavy emphasis on service that is a reality of life at a small college. Committee assignments, ad hoc work-groups, task-forces, advisement, recruitment activities, assessment: these are all divvied up across the tenure-line faculty. Because there are fewer people to share the workload, we must all contribute. A lot. It is not unusual for tenure-line faculty at my college to spend equal time on service and in the classroom. Whereas research-intensive institutions typically weigh publication records most heavily in their evaluation of faculty productivity, pedagogy and service activities are essential components in faculty evaluation at teaching-intensive colleges and universities. In addition, my department does not have the support staff that keep larger departments functioning smoothly. When it comes to administrative tasks, we have two choices: a part-time undergraduate student-worker or DIY.

What does any of this have to do with the future of the English Department?

First, the bad news: in short, due to budget cuts, furloughs, and an increased reliance on adjunct and contingent labor, the distance is shrinking between the departments like those research-intensive, doctoral-granting institutions which trained the majority of us and those teaching- and service-intensive departments which house the majority of faculty-members in English today. The trend towards fewer tenure-line hires and more part-time faculty does a great disservice not only to students and those faculty who aspire to the tenure-track, but it also is detrimental to those faculty with or working towards tenure. Fewer full-time faculty means even more service (and less time to devote to either teaching or research): more advising, more committee work, more administrative work. To clarify, I don't mind service, but there is a point where it overwhelms our ability to perform our other responsibilities of teaching and research. Many of us are rapidly approaching that point if we haven't reached it already.

Second, the good news: if you can find your way into an English department as a full-time faculty member, there are increased opportunities at many institutions for exciting interdisciplinary work, service-learning, and other varied pedagogical experiences. Web-based technology has made collaborative work, whether research or pedagogy, as fast and easy as opening a computer file (assuming, of course, that faculty have access to the necessary technology). The academy more generally seems to be moving towards openness: open-access journals, academic blogging and discussion forums, and the ever-growing numbers of faculty on various social networks such as Twitter and Facebook.

English departments have long participated in challenging conventional assumptions, whether about representations of gender, race, or canonicity. Curricula at institutions large and small have become more diverse as the canon has expanded to include writers

of different ethnicities and experiences. Embodiedness and its different manifestations, from sexuality studies and disability studies to experiential learning, has found its way into research agendas and course catalogues. Moreover, scholars have also begun to explore more than just the printed word: film and media studies and digital humanities courses are just a few ways that contemporary departments have begun to examine the ubiquitous interfaces of technology and textuality.

I find it hard to believe that the demand for the skills that English departments teach – critical thinking, reading comprehension, and of course, writing – will decrease. These are as important as ever as we move from a print to a digital age. We may well have to adapt our methodologies to accommodate the increasing presence and changing role of technology in our students' lives and in our classrooms, and there is no question that technology is changing the ways that our students read and write. But their ability to do so is just as important today as it was twenty or forty or fifty years ago.