

What it means to be an English major today

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Students and lovers of English literature should not have to answer this tiresome question every time they tell someone their major: "Oh, what are you going to do with that - teach?" The assumption would not bother me half so much if we were in, say, China, where the social perception of teachers is nearly that of doctors, as discussed by Vikas Potas in the Big Think video on "Raising the Status of Teachers." In other words, the role of teachers, those who cultivate the mind, garners the same respect as that of doctors, those who take care of the body. The story is different in America.

Here, the perception is that English majors choose to immerse themselves in a luxurious but useless appreciation of history, as our studies largely consist of analyzing the literature of the past. Thus, we are written off as book nerds who do not "contribute" to society as those in the hard sciences, like engineers and computer scientists, do. Their results are tangible, oftentimes immediately accessible, as well as wildly popular. You need only look to the public's never-ending outcry for faster, better, newer technology for evidence. Peek at their salaries, and you will gain an idea of exactly how much more society values their skills over ours.

But English majors excel at one thing that these hard scientists do not: we marry ambiguous emotion with critical thought; the big picture with the infinitesimally small details; historical context with difficult questions. We examine what materials are available of our history as a species, and we ask: what have we done, and should we have done it? Or worse: What are we doing now, and should we be doing it? English majors act as the checkpoints of society - every single one of the journalists, publishers, teachers and writers are, at bottom, thinkers, and thinking, my friends, is a necessary ingredient for success in any field.

Our "soft" degree in the humanities empowers us with the hard skills of understanding and sympathizing with decisions and thought processes not our own. Many English majors go on to business, as our unique way of thinking and ability to communicate in an efficient way leads to enormous benefits for the

company. I call upon as witnesses Anne Mulcahy, former CEO of Xerox, and English and Journalism major; Michael Eisner, former CEO of Walt Disney for twenty years, and double major in English and theater; Judy McGrath, former CEO of MTV and English major; Andrea Jung, former CEO of Avon Cosmetics, and English major; and surprise – Mitt Romney, former CEO of Bain Capital and 70th governor of Massachusetts, and English major. Those were only the English majors. I neglected to mention any of the successful people with degrees in other humanities. See the article “Successful Liberal Arts Majors” by *Business Insider* for the complete list.

It is natural to crave monetary success and stability, and our skills transfer well to the field of business. But in a consumerist society compelled to breed do-ers and builders who jostle for a spot to earn big bucks in the name of progress, English majors are the feelers. We feel, we react to the present, and then, importantly, we ask why. Then we deconstruct, we research, we write, and we find out why. We learn from the past, the imaginary, and our ever-changing present. We are the living historians of our culture, analyzing and redefining our language, changing viewpoints one single word at a time. Look up Joss Whedon and his speech, “Make Equality Reality,” and Melissa A. Fabello in her “Open Letter to Feminist Trolls,” and you will see what I mean.

We communicate, elucidate and commemorate what it means to be human in any given era. If that is not a skill worth contributing to society, I do not know what else could possibly count.

So next time, dear English major, someone asks you if you are going to teach, say yes. Yes, I will teach the world what it means to be human.

Then tell them that you deserve a raise.