

**English Majors Rule!**  
by Charles B. Wendel

What do Lloyd Blankfien(Goldman), Howard Schultz (Starbucks), Andrea Yung(Avon) John Mackey (Whole Foods), Peter Thiel (Paypal), J.P.Morgan (J.P. Morgan), James Gorman (Morgan Stanley), and the somewhat less successful like me and many others in business have in common. We majored in English while in college.

Some recent trends suggest that English as a major and the Humanities overall has fallen into disfavor. That's bad for some who are focusing on majors that they may simply consider more marketable, that is, leading to higher incomes. It is also bad for business and banking as Liberal Arts majors can bring a quality of mind and creativity that the income-focused may lack.

Last week, *The New Yorker* published an article titled, "The End of the English Major," discussing the decline in Liberal Arts majors:

"During the past decade, the study of English and history at the collegiate level has fallen by a full third. Humanities enrollment in the United States has declined over all by seventeen per cent... The trend mirrors a global one; four-fifths of countries in the Organization for Economic Coöperation reported falling humanities enrollments in the past decade... When the economy has looked up, humanities enrollments have continued falling.

When the markets have wobbled, enrollments have tumbled even more. Today, the roller coaster is in free fall. Meanwhile, in the U.S., the percentage of college degrees awarded in health sciences, medical sciences, natural sciences, and engineering has shot up. At Columbia University—one of a diminishing number of schools with a humanities-heavy core requirement—English majors fell from ten per cent to five per cent of graduates between 2002 and 2020, while the ranks of computer-science majors strengthened."

The reasons for this change are multiple, some good and some bad, all understandable. As one English Professor noted, assigning long Victorian novels in the age of decreased attention spans has become problematic. One Harvard Professor even expressed concern that today's students cannot read novels from 150-200 years ago: "The last time I taught 'The Scarlet Letter,' I discovered that my students were really struggling to understand the sentences as sentences—like, having trouble identifying the subject and the verb." Yikes!

In recent years STEM emphasis has increased dramatically with significant funding coming from all levels of government. Fortunately, some schools have transformed STEM to STEAM, acknowledging the value of the Arts.

English and similar majors have long been looked at with skepticism by those who might view these studies as impractical for today's world. I remember the look of disappointment on the face of a family friend from decades ago when I told him that he had heard wrong. I was an English major not an Engineering major. But good news, *The New Yorker* article goes on to state "Career studies have shown that humanities majors, with their communication and analytical skills, often end up in leadership jobs."

A 2020 article in *Humanities* magazine titled “The Value of the English Major today” describes the English major as “perennially valuable.” What makes these graduates valuable to business? The attributes that allowed me to enter business included:

- Organizational skills to present arguments and issues with clarity
- Overall communication skills, written and verbal
- Sophisticated brainpower based upon the English major’s deep reading of novels and poetry
- Ability to describe a situation, problem, or person with nuance, based upon that reading
- Intellectual curiosity and energy

I never would have gotten the chance without the MBA I received, but that degree served as more of a license to get a job rather than providing me with essential capabilities.

When I asked Chat GPT (last week’s topic) to provide a list of successful English majors, its writeup began with the following comment: “While it’s more common for successful businesspeople to have a background in business, finance, or economics, there are also many who have excelled in the business world despite having studied English as their major.” Despite? Maybe because of English studies they succeeded. Chat GPT’s choice of word is unfortunate and incorrect. It also underscores one problem with Chat GPT. It can offer biased judgments as fact.

Current economic pressure certainly pushes young people to critically important subjects such as computer science, mathematics, and similar areas that lead to hefty salaries. And businesspeople may naturally head to those graduates with job offers. Nonetheless, English, and similar Liberal Arts majors who possess the ability to communicate effectively, to think through problems, and determine critical issues for resolution will always succeed whether as bankers, consultants, or in other business areas.

Plus, English, History, Theatre, and similar graduates are often more interesting and fun to talk with than most others.

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