Where have all the English majors gone?

Humanities advocates sometimes dispute data about declining numbers of majors in their disciplines: they don't always reflect double majors, or overall enrollment in courses, or the diversity of majors now available to students (compared to the past). But data on the number of English majors at the University of Maryland at College Park – down some 40 percent in a little more than three years – are pretty hard to dispute. What happened?

Part everyman tale, as far as English departments go, and part lesson in unintended consequences, Maryland English's story looks something like this. Between 1996 and 2011, the number of majors actually grew, from 641 to 850 students. Then the university rolled out a new, faculty-backed general education program. Unlike the old general education program, which centered on the liberal arts and required a literature course, the new one offers students much more flexibility in how to fulfill their various requirements. So students who aren't interested in the liberal arts can much more easily avoid them. Part of the idea was to take some of the burden off departments, such as English, that fulfilled requirements for many students under the old system. Faculty members generally supported the idea.

But then the numbers got funny. In the spring of 2012, the English department lost 88 majors. The following year, it lost 79 – then 128 more majors 12 months later. Between spring and fall 2014, 66 more majors fell from the rolls. Over all, the department lost 363 majors -- about 40 percent -- and the numbers continue to fall.

Faculty members say that the general education program, coupled with anxieties about studying the humanities in a still-uncertain job market, have hurt liberal arts major numbers across the board. With less mandated exposure to humanities departments under the new system, fewer students are taking that initial course in which they catch the philosophy or history or English "bug," faculty members say, and English appears to be one of the hardest-hit disciplines.

"If our spring 2015 numbers follow the pattern of our recent death spiral, we will have lost in four years twice as many majors as we gained in 15," Kent Cartwright, professor and former English department chair at Maryland, said earlier this month during a panel at the Modern Language Association's annual meeting in Vancouver. "I describe this situation in order to emphasize our surprising vulnerability, especially that of the literature [concentration]."

Cartwright said in a more recent interview that he thinks what's happening at Maryland is emblematic of what's happening in English departments across the country. Curricular changes have just hastened Maryland's troubles, he said.

"I don't want to make it seem like the major is collapsing in some extraordinary fashion, because what's happening here is fairly typical and has been happening at other universities," Cartwright said. "But the speed is a little unusual. Local conditions exacerbated the problems."

William Cohen, professor and current department chair, said it's "difficult to know precisely which factors contribute to these declines." But, he said via email, part of it is "cultural, as reflected in declines among humanities majors nationally. There seems to be a perception (however unfounded) among some students and their families that the employment prospects for humanities majors are not as great as in some other fields."

Bonnie Thornton Dill, dean of the College of Arts and Humanities, said that in the current economic climate, "people are looking at higher education more as a personal good than a social good and therefore don't fully understand the economic value of the arts and humanities. As a result, people are moving in a careerist direction at the undergraduate level." Additionally, she said, Maryland is not competitive among peer institutions in its "ability to provide financial aid which would make study in these areas financially feasible for more families."

Maryland's data roughly mirror national data for English degrees conferred, minus the precipitous drop-off in the last two years. According to data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System compiled by the Modern Language Association, the total number of English undergraduate degrees awarded grew from 48,689 in 1996 to 55,518 in 2009. Then numbers began to drop off – albeit not as dramatically as at Maryland – to about 52,800 in 2011 and 52,489 in 2013, the most recent year for which national data is available.

The English major at George Mason University might be more typical. Some 20 years ago, there were about 800 English majors. That number soon dropped to about 600 when the state of Virginia eliminated the English major as a requirement for teaching secondary English. Majors have continued to drop, to 422 this fall. Faculty members there attribute the downward trend to the usual suspects: the fact that double English majors aren't always counted, cultural doubts about the value of the humanities, a glut of new programs of study and – primarily – concerns about job prospects upon graduation.

"There's a perception of what it means to be an English major today," said Debra Lattanzi Shutika, associate professor and chair of George Mason's English department, noting that it's lost about 10 percent of its majors – about 8 or 10 students per year – over the last seven years. Shutika said colleagues across the humanities report the same kinds of losses, while programs perceived to be more "pre-professional," such as global studies and criminology, have grown.

Even Florida State University's English department, which was actually one of a handful nationwide to add majors through 2013, has seen a 10 percent decline in majors since then (although not in its editing, writing and media concentration, which has remained steady). Eric Walker, chair and professor of English there, attributed the overall drop to "the general crisis in the humanities, since we've seen the same kind of drop in history or classics programs."

"It's nothing that drastic yet, but it's something we're going to keep an eye on. Our enrollments are still healthy, so when they drop that's when we'll ring the alarm."

It's perhaps worth noting that this fall Florida State will roll out a general education program modeled in part after Maryland's.

Rosemary Feal, executive director of the Modern Language Association, attributed the recent decline to the 2008 recession, "which had an influence on majors that students declared."

"With student debt and increasing tuition, many students who would prefer to declare humanities majors might be challenged or advised to declare a 'practical major.'"

But Feal said that reasoning is somewhat flawed, since, "with the exception of vocational majors such as accounting or nursing, most degrees are not translatable to specific job outcomes at the undergraduate level." But majors like, say, "mathematics and English each give you a set of skills that are generally applicable to the job market."

Like Walker, the Florida State chair, and others, Feal said also said there's too much emphasis on numbers of majors versus overall enrollment in English courses. Feal said she understood that majors are an easily comparable metric across departments, but she said programs should be evaluated not just for how many students concentrate in them, but also by how many students benefit and gain important proficiencies. (Course enrollments at Maryland and George Mason have declined, but not at rates comparable to the drops in majors.)

Still, Feal said that while English professors already are working hard to offer quality programs and attract students, it's important for them to ask, "What are students interested in? What's speaking to their curiosity and what is it they're wanting to study? And how are departments responding to the changing needs of students?"

Meeting Students 'Where They Are'

Feal said departments across the country have made headway, responding to student demands and real-world concerns through digital humanities work, integrating the sciences and improving internship programs that "open doors" upon graduation. Stanford University, for example, recently launched a new joint major in English and computer science. [1]

Maryland faculty members are doing the same kind of soul-searching. They are poring through detailed graduating student surveys to see what they like best and want to see changed about the major. Cartwright said the enduring value of the program is evident in comments such as one student's note that the major helps one "grow" as a "thinker, reader and writer."

"What really amazed me what I started reading through the senior surveys is that literary study is profoundly transformative," Cartwright said, adding that seniors report enjoying and learning from the classics as much contemporary fiction. "Its value registers profoundly with students, and that's the basis on which to build, and what I would turn our attention to."

Of course, the surveys also signal room for improvement. The faculty is more highly rated than the program of study, and students say that lower-level courses aren't adequate preparation for the major. Along with aligning the quality of teaching with the quality of

the program, the department's undergraduate studies committee has developed more than a dozen improvement goals. Those include building faculty consensus, including about what the undergraduate program should look like; improving the department's web page – what's Cartwright called its "public face" – to make it less information-based and more of a recruitment tool for the major; and using data to directly dispute claims about the low career value of an English degree.

Cohen, the current department chair, said there are recruiters "on campus consistently looking for the type of skills our students develop through our English courses: critical thinking, analytical reasoning, and clear writing." Data also suggest that the job prospects for humanities majors are at least as good as for other fields in the long term, he added, citing a 2014 study [2] by Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce.

Cartwright said it was "pie in the sky" thinking to suggest that the university might revise its undergraduate general education program, but he suggested that other universities think twice before moving the focus of any required curriculum away from the "historical core" of the liberal arts. "I fear you can really dilute that concept," he said.

One of the more controversial departmental reform topics is how to change the English program itself, including by creating more recruitment-oriented, lower-level courses. Cartwright said there's a demonstrated interest in updated versions of Great Books courses, but also in what he said some have called "zombie courses" – pejoratively, not descriptively. Those include courses on such popular genres as science fiction, fantasy literature, J.R.R. Tolkein, regional literature or children's literature.

Cartwright said there's some feeling among his colleagues that such offerings equate to "dumbing down" the curriculum. But he said others feel there's value in meeting students "where they are." And of course there are professors whose areas of expertise are in those fields and vouch for their importance.[3] Asked about common claims among some critics of the liberal arts that they've lost students' interest with a greater focus on theory than on the canon [4], Cartwright said he was "suspicious" of the idea.

"I'd like to see the evidence of that if there is any," he said. "It seems to me like an ideological critique – I'm not saying it's it's false, and I'm not saying it's true, but we need to be a little more pragmatic about what works, and what we can do and what students care about, and direct our energies there." He added: "Students are interested in identity issues and social issues and gender and race."

The Big Tent

George Mason also has embraced what it calls a "big tent" orientation, offering undergraduate concentrations in folklore and creative writing, among other tracks. Shutika said the department is in the process of revamping its central course for majors, which was formerly a six-credit undertaking, into two separate, three-credit courses that more effectively represent the department's different offerings and the literary studies core.

Like Maryland's faculty, Shutika said, George Mason professors are trying to find better ways "communicate" the value of English. "People think that as English majors you don't

get that kind of [pre-professional] education, but in a lot of ways what we offer them is little bit stronger, in that we emphasize deep thinking and writing," she said.

Shutika added: "I don't think any department on campus offers that depth and sophistication, or the really high standards or what we expect from students."

Sarah Feeney, a senior English major at Maryland, said she took a few classes her first semester because she was good at English in high school, and "fell in love" with the department. She's now working to help redesign the major and make it more "marketable" as part of the small English Undergraduate Association-related committee.

"I think that a large part of why we're seeing fewer English majors, and fewer humanities majors in general, is because students are constantly told that studying a subject in the humanities will only prepare them for jobs in the fast-food or retail industry," Feeney said via email. "We need to work hard to show students that studying a subject like English can help to prepare them exponentially for the future. Studying the humanities helps you to learn to quickly analyze and understand information and to communicate ideas."

She added: "The fact that a student has a degree at all shows that they can learn on the job, and a degree in English shows that they can learn quickly and then communicate positively. In my opinion, an English degree is one of the best degrees a student can get to be a well-rounded, successful worker in the future."