

The Culture of the English Department at Virginia Tech

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, also known as Virginia Tech, is a college in Blacksburg, Virginia that welcomes students from all over the world. Everyone who is affiliated with the university is proclaimed a “Hokie,” which is the name of the college mascot. There are classes for students of all cultures to enroll in, and also plenty of jobs and resources on campus for all students and faculty. There are seven academic departments or colleges that students at Virginia Tech can focus in. They are the Colleges of Agriculture and Life Sciences, Architecture and Urban Studies, Business, Engineering, Liberal Arts and Human Sciences, Natural Resources and Environment, and Science. As a whole, Virginia Tech is most known for its College of Engineering. The school is the state’s largest engineering college, and according to the Virginia Tech website, Virginia Tech “now ranks among the top five suppliers of new B.S. degrees [in Engineering] in the United States.”

From a different vein, within the College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences, is the English major. Compared to the number of undergraduate students within each major of the College of Engineering, the number within the English department is diminutive. This may give aid to English majors being overlooked, but they are also undervalued on the Virginia Tech campus by fellow students despite also being “Hokies.” Part of this devaluing of English students is due to representations of the department from the past and present. The English culture can be represented through individuals, speech, and print. This essay tries to make sense of print media focused on the English Department (or the College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences) that either supports the legitimacy of English majors or further persuades its audience that English majors should be viewed as lesser students. When a body of students is seen as the latter, they are allotted less authority and voice than their peers.

English Club Flyer

Most often, English majors are associated with Shakespeare or essays. On a flyer for the English Club at Virginia Tech, the highlighted events for the semester are “high tea talks, trips to the American Shakespeare Center, and an English Cup: Trivia Night.” This handout validates the connection students make with Shakespeare and the English culture at Virginia Tech since a trip to the American Shakespeare Center is one of three activities for the semester listed on the flyer. However, there is much more to English majors than studying Shakespeare and other literature.

There’s a running joke if English is your native tongue, there is no need for you to major in English (because you already know how to speak and presumably, write in it). I have heard that joke through friends at Virginia Tech. Also, if you do major in English, you are most likely assumed to be pursuing a job in teaching. From this, I gather that people don’t know the depth of English classes or the range of jobs a major in English can offer. The English Club flyer does little to supply insightful information about the English Department to outsiders or those in the department. Granted, its purpose is to simply relay what, when, where. However, including such a short list about activities or interests relative to English majors (since it is a club for these students) is limiting.

Ad for CLAHS in Philologia

There is an ad within the 2012 Volume IV of *Philologia*, The Virginia Tech Undergraduate Research Journal of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences, which advertises the college (CLAHS). The ad promotes the college by saying, “Our alumni are making their marks in the worlds of business, industry, entertainment, education, government, and research.” “Are making” is present progressive, which signifies an ongoing/ uncompleted action. This statement

supports CLAHS students at Virginia Tech by assuring that graduates of this college are successful in the real world at acquiring jobs, and they are acquiring these jobs in wide-ranging areas as well. This statement would appeal to potential CLAHS majors, however it does little to persuade those outside of the CLAHS sphere (other majors). These students would not see the ad since it's inside the CLAHS research journal, and it does nothing to support its claim that alumni are succeeding in multiple areas.

Also, it is unique in its promotion of the college when it says, "hot specialties come and go, but a broad education lasts a lifetime." By branding all the majors in the college with the phrase "broad education[s]," these majors are not insinuated to address "hot specialties" or the skills that one would need to address "IT" trends. Since "broad education[s]" is contrasted against "hot specialties" (or things that are trending and in the now), all things that classify as "broad educations" are labeled as untrendy or outdated. The sentence gives rise to majors (within this college) to be undervalued. If an education is not thought to address progressive job skills, it will be set aside.

The English Department Magazine – Fall 2010, Number 35

The featured story, "The Man Who Loves Stories" is about a Psychology major who wrote a paper for a lit class. Although he was not an English major at the time, he received a high grade on the paper. The T.A.'s words were, "You've blown the lid off my A scale..." One conception that runs rampant across this college campus is that anyone can be an English major. Meaning, even an engineer can receive high grades on assignments unique to the English department. Non-English majors may believe that their writing skills are well honed after completing 6-credit hours in the Area 1: Writing and Discourse CLE requirement, the only requirement that thoroughly deals with the writing process and prose. With this reasoning, a

major in English department may be deemed superfluous. As a result, English majors would be pushed toward the bottom of the totem pole. On the other hand, the T.A. was surprised the nonEnglish major could “write well.” This bias is not surprising. When a person is viewed by his/her major, misconceptions often form.

The turned English major alumni, Ed Weathers, supports the idea that stories are everywhere:

“Behind every exam room door is another story waiting to be heard, interpreted, and re-told...”

Following this train of thought, the skills of an English major include listening, analyzing, and educating since their focus is on words and stories. According to Weathers, stories enable you to “know what is important.” This speaks very highly of English majors. However, it does nothing to combat the idea that “anyone can be an English major.” Following his graduation from

Virginia Tech, Weathers tried his hand at being a technical writer, and then a bookstore owner.

But at 32, he decided to enroll in medical school because “[he] could sense that [his business] wasn’t going to quite get [him] where [he] wanted to go unless we opened more bookstores.”

This is one iteration of a man with an English major and his back up against a wall. He returns to school to be educated in a different field and to become a physician. He is a physician to this day, but he says he is also known within his community as “an artist and a patron of the arts.”

However, since his occupation and focus is medicine, the arts logically take a backseat. Although this story tells the “success... of the student who loves stories,” “one we see often in the English Department,” the story backpedals. Yes, the featured story is a success story, but the alumni’s concentration is no longer English. So, this story seems to paint the English major (at Virginia Tech) simply as a springboard, not a field that you can be fully successful or stable in.

Conclusions

The English Department of Virginia Tech seems to have its ups and downs when it comes to making its students aware of all the courses it has to offer. In the flyer for Virginia Tech's English Club, there is no mentioning of the English Department itself, and students seem to be convinced that it is possible for everyone to be an English major, when writing and language are obviously not everybody's forte. Even the website for the English Department seems to assume that anyone who visits this site is an English major looking for an English career with other fields as minors.

However, in the long run, the English Department appears to be ideal in helping cultures announce their identities to the world. Students from one culture can use their new English skills to tell the public about themselves, which in turn could make the public think differently about what they thought they knew about other cultures, hopefully for the better. If so, countries around the world that represent these cultures can use their own knowledge to make the world better for everyone, even people who never knew these cultures existed.

Students a part of the culture of the Department of English at Virginia Tech may feel ridiculed and underappreciated by their peers (in different Colleges or majors) because of the low regard and value for the English Department. This can result in English students questioning their identity on campus or the power of their voice. It might lead to questions regarding their intellectual capabilities or future. All of the print media concerning or about the Department of English could more carefully represent or brand the culture in a more positive light. However, just as other cultures experience devaluation and rise above it, so too will the students in the English Department at Virginia Tech.