




What's Their Story? To Help Save the Humanities, Let's Listen to English Majors

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Abstract

Amid declining enrollment in humanities programs throughout the United States, the English major has been hit the hardest. This article gives voice to current English majors about why they choose to enroll in a program that often receives criticism pertaining to its value and worth. This study provides a literature review of the history of higher education in the United States, an examination of the humanities backlash that has evolved over the past half-century, and an exploration of the value of a degree in English. In addition, it provides survey results from a small group of English majors currently enrolled at a small public liberal arts college in the northeastern United States concerning the influences on their decision to major in English, their expectations of the program, their level of satisfaction with their decisions, and their definition of post-graduate success. I present recommendations on future research in this area and how leaders at colleges and universities can work with English majors to help share their stories and present a more accurate view of the program to prospective students and the public.

Keywords: *English majors, humanities, enrollment, higher education, literature review*

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Introduction

Attending college 75 years ago was seen as part of the “American Dream” to improve one’s position in life to the benefit of not only oneself but also to the community and society. However, in the years since, tuition and fees to attend college have increased, and attending college today is viewed more commonly through an economic and financial lens (Barshay, 2021; Bunch, 2022; Christensen, 2023; Giroux, 2011; Goldberg, 2022).

Once thought of as a means to expand one’s knowledge to grow personally, contribute to the public good, and help create a more enlightened society, earning a college degree is becoming thought of as a means to obtain a job that will pay enough to get the quickest return on investment as possible. If this is the primary goal of a college education, it is no surprise that the humanities have suffered the most among recent declines in enrollment. In particular, the English major is often the go-to example of a degree that will be worth very little after graduation. Of course, worth in this example is equated with the quickest path to financial gain.

Over the past few decades, enrollment in humanities majors has been in steep decline (Barshay, 2021; Goldberg, 2022; Hayot, 2021; Heller, 2023; Marcus, 2022; Nietzel, 2020). Among these programs, the English major has suffered the most (Barshay, 2021; Heller, 2023; The Humanities Indicators (HI) Project of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences, 2021). The U.S. Department of Education Institute of Educational Sciences now includes, in addition to English languages and literature, area, ethnic, cultural, gender and group studies, visual and performing arts, philosophy, and religious studies as programs in the humanities (Henderson et al., 2022). Other programs such as archaeology, classical studies, communications, folklore, and classical studies can also be grouped with the humanities (HI, 2021). In 2020, less than one in 10 college graduates earned a humanities degree, down 25% from 2012; only 37,000 college graduates in 2020 had majored in English language and literature compared to 55,000 in 2009 (Barshay, 2021).

Although there has been an overall decline in college enrollment over the past several years due to rising tuition and fees, scholars and higher education observers have offered various additional reasons for the specific decline in enrollment among humanities majors. The rise in high school students earning Advanced Placement (AP) credit for humanities courses prior to entering college has affected freshmen and sophomore students experiencing introductory humanities courses in a college classroom setting that may pique their interest in pursuing these fields (Barshay, 2021; Heller, 2023; Marcus, 2022). Economic anxieties and growing doubts over the financial value of a college degree after graduation are also believed to influence **students' choice of majors that have been found to yield lower incomes than STEM, business, and technical majors** (Atkinson, 2021; Barshay, 2021; Edge Research and HCM Strategists, 2022; Heller, 2023; Marcus, 2022; Marken, 2019; Nietzel, 2020; Weissman, 2022). Compounding matters even further has been the push over the past several decades to encourage students to enter STEM and specific career and technical fields as opposed to the humanities (Atkinson, 2021; Barshay, 2021; Bunch, 2022; Cole, 2016; Goldberg, 2022).

However, employers place great value in the skills that humanities majors attain through the successful completion of their programs. Most employers desire graduates with the strong critical thinking, writing, communication, and problem-solving skills that a liberal arts education and a degree in the humanities offer (Beal, 2020; Bunch, 2022; Christensen, 2023). Recent data from HI (2021) shows that humanities graduates make up a wide variety of occupations and report similar satisfaction levels with their salaries than college graduates in general (74% compared to 78%). Beyond financial considerations after graduation, humanities majors must consider that they are desperately needed in a world where anti-intellectualism, conspiracy theorists, and isolationism are on the rise.

The purpose of this study is to examine the history of humanities enrollment in higher education in the United States and the growing backlash it receives today. Additionally, I will explore the value of an English degree not only through a literature review but also through data collected from a group of current English majors enrolled at a small liberal arts college in the northeastern United States who chose to enter a program whose enrollment continues to decline and faces growing criticism of its worth after graduation. Insights from current English majors about their decisions to enroll in the program, what they expect after graduation, and how they define post-graduate success are essential to gaining a greater understanding of the current state of the program than politics and the media currently present.

Literature Review

Commonly held views on higher learning have changed over the past several centuries. Before examining why current students chose to enroll in an English program at an institution of higher learning (IHL) in the United States, I provide a brief overview of the history of colleges and universities, the study of the humanities, and the benefits of a degree in English.

History of Higher Education in the United States

We can trace IHLs in the United States back to the American colonists. Influenced by British universities but not interested in rigidly replicating them, settlers in New England in the early 17th century believed that a college education was a necessary part of their “social, religious, and political vision” (Thelin, 2011, p. 23). Students studied the languages, ancient authors, and mathematics in a mix of classroom recitations and oral arguments. From the outset, colleges received some funding from the government but also depended on tuition and donations to sustain their operations. Thelin estimated that less than 1% of the population attended college. Most individuals in the 17th and 18th centuries could not afford to leave their family farms or businesses and pay to enroll. Those who did attend believed they were being primed to go on to serve as the “effective, responsible elite” (p. 26). Not until the mid-19th century were women allowed to enroll in college; it would be another 100 years after that until the first Black student would attend.

As diversity within higher education grew and expanded throughout the 20th century, so did the original colonists’ vision. Meritocracy, the free exchange of ideas, open communication, academic freedom and inquiry, and, most importantly, the creation of new knowledge have been the predominant values of most IHLs over the past 100 years (Cole, 2016). In the mid-20th century, the American public’s perception of a college degree and the means to attain one was at its height. As Will Bunch (2022) explained in his recent book on the modern-day struggles of higher education, *After the Ivory Tower Falls*, World War II and the creation of the G.I. Bill led to a huge spike in college enrollment and served as the “pivot point as to how Americans viewed a college education” (p. 54). Following World War II, enrollment increased in the humanities as well as the social sciences, reflecting America’s ideals at the time that a more educated population benefits all and creates a stronger country (Bunch, 2022). Between 1940 and 1970, the percentage of Americans earning at least 4 years of post-secondary education nearly tripled (Heller, 2023). In addition to increased college enrollment and financial support for higher education, the country saw high public approval for scientific research and a robust belief that a more educated population would lead to and support a stronger society and country (Bunch, 2022). The environment was ripe for the expansion of access to earning a college degree. A college education was considered a “social investment in the future” (Giroux, 2011, p. 122) that was relatively inexpensive and mostly accessible to all.

Over the past 50 years, enrollment trends have changed dramatically, and diversity among college students continues to increase. In 1970, women accounted for 42% of total college enrollment in the United States compared to 58% in the fall of 2020 (Educational Policy Institute, 2019; National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Even though there have been slight declines in enrollment among Black or African American and American Indian or Alaskan Native college students since 2010, non-white student enrollment overall has increased approximately 185% since 1976 (Hanson, 2022). A diverse student body brings with it diversity of thought and challenges to the status quo. The rise in enrollment in the humanities and the social sciences following World War II reflected the growing youth counterculture that developed out of a diverse student body that became passionate about social justice initiatives and political activism (Bunch, 2022). With this, it becomes clearer as to why government funding for higher education has come under greater scrutiny than prior to World War II.

A conservative backlash towards higher education can be traced back to Ronald Reagan’s political ascension when a concerted effort was made to convince individuals that college should be about the economy as opposed to humanity. The federal government no longer felt the need to fund higher education amidst the rise of the liberal arts (Bunch, 2022). With defunding from the federal government, IHLs were forced to raise tuition and fees to make up for the shortages, while concomitantly conservative radio lightning rods such as Rush Limbaugh continued the degradation of IHLs throughout the 1990s and 2000s.

Presently, an anti-college/anti-intellectualism bias permeates the general public. Public attitudes in recent years have tended to be political, with conservative Republicans much more likely to feel that colleges and

universities have a negative effect on our country (Svrluga, 2023). The 45th president of the United States, Donald Trump, mocked experts, the educated, climate change, played loosely with facts, and found additional ways to fan the flames of “white working-class resentment” (Bunch, 2022, p. 166). Yet, education and expertise are clearly essential for our day-to-day existence and ability to thrive. Cole (2016) explained that most Americans do not realize that inventions such as magnetic resonance imaging, global positioning systems, barcodes, and fetal monitors, to name a few, all originated at American universities. Further, the median annual earnings of full-time workers ages 25–34 who have earned a bachelor’s degree are approximately 60% higher than individuals who have completed high school but never attended college (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). Those who criticize the value of a college degree often do so while the facts tell a different story. Beyond financial value, individuals earning a college degree report higher job satisfaction and healthier overall lifestyles (Oreopoulous & Salvanes, 2011). Still, these qualities are often overshadowed by the finances involved in attending college.

In addition to the conservative backlash against IHLs, higher tuition and fees made students and families consider how a college degree could net the quickest return on investment—if they decided that the investment was worth it at all. Decisions to attend college have become heavily influenced by what majors to pursue to ensure salaries after graduation that would help pay back student loans (Atkinson, 2021; Belmonte, 2020; Bunch, 2022; Christensen, 2023; Cole, 2016; Goldberg, 2022; Hayot, 2021; Weissman, 2022). Moreover, Barshay (2021) pointed out that the impact of COVID-19 has only exacerbated the economic anxieties of attending college and potentially graduating with a high level of debt that would take years to pay off. Thus, many individuals have deemed college degrees in the humanities unworthy of the rising costs of attending college.

The Humanities Backlash

Though a growing backlash towards higher education dating back several decades exists, statistics still show that college graduates not only earn more money over their lifetimes than non-college graduates, but those who graduate from college also express higher levels of happiness and satisfaction compared to those who do not (Bunch, 2022; Oreopoulous & Salvanes, 2011; Svrluga, 2023). The humanities have been at the center of the current anti-intellectual backlash toward higher education. The reasons often used to devalue a humanities degree, such as English, are often steeped in myths and misconceptions. For one, while humanities graduates earn, on average, much less than business, engineering, and physical sciences graduates, 74% of them express satisfaction with the financial aspects of their job, only slightly smaller than college graduates in general (78%) (HI, 2021). Nietzel (2020) reported that evidence shows that while the income of humanities graduates may start out lower than other fields, in the long run, the salaries of humanities graduates often exceed those of other degrees. Secondly, in addition to financial satisfaction, overall personal career satisfaction is high among humanities graduates, with approximately 67% reporting that they were deeply interested in the work that they do after graduation. However, it should be noted that the HI Project (2021) did report that 40% of humanities majors reported that they would not choose their same major again (the survey did not ask them what choice they would have made instead).

Cole (2016) explained that the humanities are “under attack” (p. 3) because of the perception that they lack intrinsic value. Data shows that higher education is the best path towards social and economic mobility. Still, cost, career uncertainty, and elevated stress among traditional-age students have been linked to decreased overall college enrollment (Weissman, 2022). Other various issues have contributed to decreased enrollment and an anti-college backlash as well. Unethical college rankings, equity issues with SAT scores and admissions procedures, high student debt, and concerning unemployment rates among college graduates in the early 2000s are important factors that have contributed to the anti-college movement (Bunch, 2022). Christensen (2023) agreed about the devaluation of the humanities, even citing President Barack Obama’s comments at a gas engine plant in 2014 where he told students they could “make a lot more” (as cited in Israel, 2014) with

skilled manufacturing than with an art history degree. President Obama ultimately praised art history—sending an apology letter for the “glib remark,” as he called it—but the message was clear: Financially, one would be better off pursuing a degree outside of the humanities, even though the statistics show that humanities majors go on to work in various fields with income levels that they are mostly satisfied with.

Yet, in recent years, the humanities have fallen under even stricter scrutiny and have been targeted by high-profile politicians. Some feel that a degree in a humanities major such as English is nothing more than an indoctrination of far-left ideals (Bacon, 2023; Svrluga, 2023). One of the major candidates for the Republican nominee of the 2024 presidential election, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, signed into law a policy that forbids public colleges in Florida from teaching subjects such as identity politics and systemic racism in required courses (Svrluga, 2023). Other conservative politicians in Ohio, Montana, North Dakota, and Texas have also tried to exert more control over what is taught in IHLs in their states in what is viewed as “liberal indoctrination on college campuses” (Svrluga, 2023, p. A16). In March 2024, amid concerns from some Board of Visitor members, parents, and students, Virginia Governor Glenn Youngkin submitted a request to two public universities, George Mason University and Virginia Commonwealth University, to review syllabi of diversity-themed courses that undergraduate students would be required to take at the institutions; plans for the implementation of these courses have been in the works at these institutions for several years, and it should be noted that some Board of Visitor members had been appointed by Youngkin himself (Quinn, 2024).

Where do college administrators stand in all of this? Martin Van Der Werf, Director of Editorial and Educational Policy at the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, explained that schools need to do a better job of communicating to students how what they learn in college will translate to the workforce (as cited in Weissman, 2022). Hayot (2021) believes IHLs have a marketing problem when it comes to the humanities as well as a lack of faith from institutional leaders to allow humanities faculty to experiment with potentially stale **curriculums. As Christensen (2023) stated: “Humanities must accept that their most important responsibility is to demonstrate to students that value is defined in many ways” (p. 39). Nietzel (2020) agreed, urging universities that they must re-emphasize that critical thinking skills and cross-cultural competence are important benefits of humanities majors just as written and oral communication skills are.**

The English Major

The specific goals of earning a college degree may vary among students, parents, and higher education faculty and administrators (Bunch, 2022; Cole, 2016; Giroux, 2011; Marken, 2019; Weissman, 2022), but one universally agreed upon opinion is that students should graduate with a greater skill set of knowledge than when they first began to then apply to their personal and professional lives. The English major is no different. In most traditional IHLs, students must select a major area of study that will serve as their primary focus. Some students choose to select two majors to diversify their areas of expertise. Some students may elect to choose a minor to enhance their learning in an additional area of study. Additionally, some students may have the option to work with their institution to design their own specialized major area of study. Beyond majors and minors, college students are normally required to complete general education requirements in areas such as the natural sciences, social sciences, and the humanities. Remaining credits can be completed via general electives, where students have greater freedom to choose additional courses to satisfy the minimum number of credits required to graduate (approximately 120 for most 4-year IHLs).

English majors, like other liberal arts and humanities majors, focus on developing strong written and oral communication skills as well as strong critical thinking skills (Atkinson, 2021; Beal, 2020; Christensen, 2023; Heller, 2023; Nietzel, 2020). Through the curriculum of most English programs and the varied texts that are read throughout the program, students develop the necessary softer skills such as listening, empathy, and cross-cultural understanding. Listening, communication, and problem-solving skills are needed in all fields of work. Research shows that humanities graduates are widely distributed across occupational categories of college graduates in general (HI, 2021). Career studies show that, due to their communication and analytical

skills, humanities majors often end up in leadership roles (Heller, 2023). The decreased number of humanities and English graduates in recent years may not bode well for the development of these needed leadership skills in our workforce. In an increasingly STEM- and technology-focused world, a lack of critical thought may hinder our progress as a nation. Former president of MacEwan University, David W. Atkinson (2021), noted that many of our current problems come from a lack of understanding of language and the ability to effectively communicate with one another. Further, Christensen (2023) notes that leaders need to champion the liberal arts and the humanities and how they are intrinsically connected to diversity, inclusion, and social awareness.

Colleges and universities must work to support a healthy economy, but they must also support creating socially conscious citizens through the teaching of the humanities (Atkinson, 2021). Many of our society's problems stem from a lack of understanding of language and how we communicate with one another; studying literature and poetry focuses on how we use language in different ways to express and reflect the complexity of the human experience (Atkinson, 2021). Stewart (2022) agreed: **“Reading a variety of literature from different authors, you’re gaining a bigger perspective of the world [and focusing on] a variety of subjects all at once: history and religion, politics and science, art and business, and everything in between” (par. 2).** Tying the value of an English degree into a post-COVID world with rising civil unrest, Beal (2020) stated that **we need people who can “empathize with others and think critically about the social problems that we are facing so that we can bring about necessary change by working together” (p. 8).** Goldberg (2022) agreed, explaining that at a time in our country where civic discourse has become more uncivil, the experience one **gains from studying the humanities is needed most. “The liberal arts matter because how we think matters as much as our acquisition of job skills” (Goldberg, 2022, par. 14).**

Just as the enrollment boom in the humanities and social sciences after World War II was met with governmental resistance due to its focus on social issues, civil rights, and equality and equity, enrollment in the humanities today is still routinely devalued by those who view these programs as a potential threat to the status quo. Experts who realize the importance of humanities degrees such as English seem to agree on what leaders must do to support their future in the higher education landscape, but it is also imperative that we consider the data, opinions, and ideas of current students in the humanities. Their reasons and insight into why they chose a major that is “under attack” may provide the key to figuring out how we can change the myths and misconceptions many individuals have about the humanities.

Survey Design and Limitations

Part of the purpose of this study is to give voice to current undergraduate English majors about their decision to pursue a program that has seen the greatest decline in enrollment among the humanities over the past two decades. A web-based survey was designed to collect quantitative and qualitative data. Four questions guided this study and served as the basis of the survey questions:

- **What influences a student’s decision to become an English major?**
- What are their expectations of the program?
- Are current English majors satisfied with their decision?
- What is their definition of post-graduate success?

At the outset of the spring 2024 semester, I emailed the department chairs of English programs at 16 small, medium-sized, and large public institutions to explain the purpose of the study, provide a link to the survey (See Appendix), and request their assistance in distributing the survey to their current undergraduate English majors. I sent a follow-up email approximately 1 to 2 weeks after the initial email to department chairs who had not responded. Overall, I received two responses expressing interest but with no follow-through to

distribute the survey. I received one response from a department chair after the spring semester had ended, apologizing that they had overlooked the initial email and felt it was too late to ask their students to complete the survey during finals week. Ultimately, I did not receive any responses from 13 of the 16 department chairs. However, 10 individuals completed the survey. These individuals all came from one institution, as identified by their provided email addresses. Apparently, the department chair had sent them the invitation to participate but did not inform me that they would do so. These 10 participants were current undergraduate English majors at a small public liberal arts college located in the northeastern United States. Although two of these individuals agreed to participate in a small, informal interview to collect additional qualitative data, neither followed up with requests to do so.

Although at the outset of study I had hoped to garner much more participation, an extremely challenging spring 2024 semester in higher education may have affected participation. The attack on Israel in October 2023 and the ensuing ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestine brought about many challenges to students, staff, administrators, and faculty during the fall 2023 and spring 2024 semesters. There have been numerous peaceful student protests on college campuses on both sides of the conflict, but there have also been incidents of violence, intimidation, and harassment that escalated throughout the spring 2024 semester and created stressful and divided college campus environments (Contreras, 2024; Hicks, 2023; Wong et al., 2023). Although I cannot confirm that these situations had any impact on the decisions of the department chairs to distribute the survey, I believe it is reasonable that spring 2024 brought with it unique challenges that may have caused faculty and administrators to focus on more urgent tasks. Students are routinely asked by their own institutions to complete surveys about topics ranging from academic programs to campus culture to overall student satisfaction. Among the priorities of department chairs and faculty at college campuses during the spring 2024 semester, asking their students to participate in yet another survey—and one from someone outside of the institution at that—was likely a low one. While greater participation from a larger and more diverse pool of English majors would have provided additional valuable data, the data collected by this small group of English majors will hopefully serve as an impetus for greater research to be conducted in this area in the future.

Data Collection and Findings

I used QuestionPro to design a web-based survey containing questions that addressed the following areas: decision-making processes pertaining to choosing English as a major, expectations of the program, expectations of post-graduate success, and satisfaction with the decision to declare English as a major. The anonymous survey contained 28 closed, open-ended, and Likert-scale questions. Participants had the opportunity to enter a random drawing for a \$25 Visa Gift Card at the end of the survey by providing their email address. Participants also had the opportunity to volunteer to participate in a subsequent online focus group/interview to further discuss the topic of this research study. Participation in this focus group/interview also provided the opportunity to enter an additional random drawing to win a \$25.00 Visa Gift Card once the focus group/interview was completed. As previously stated, two individuals volunteered to participate in subsequent discussions on the topic but did not respond to the invitation to do so.

In total, 10 currently enrolled undergraduate students began and completed the survey. Of these 10 individuals, 80% identified as female, and 20% identified as either transgender or non-binary. All of the participants identified as White, with one participant also identifying as Hispanic/Latinx. Thirty percent of participants identified as seniors (90 or more credits earned), 40% identified as juniors (60–89 credits earned), and 30% identified as freshmen students (less than 30 credits earned).

What Influences a **Student's** Decision to Become an English Major?

One of the primary purposes of this research study was to hear from current English majors about what led them to pursue the degree. Sixty percent of participants indicated that they first decided to declare English as

a major prior to attending college. Of the influences on studying English, the three most common were the enjoyment of writing, the enjoyment of reading, and the overall enjoyment of studying English (literature, poetry, creative writing, etc.). Lesser influences, but still prominent ones, included potential career opportunities that the participants would enjoy after graduation and the potential to become a more socially conscious individual through studying a diverse curriculum, with 40% and 30% of participants, respectively, listing these reasons among their top three influences for studying English. Ninety percent of participants indicated that an outside influence, such as a teacher, instructor, family member, or something in the media, positively influenced their decision to declare English as a major.

The majority (70%) of participants were aware of recent political viewpoints that viewed humanities majors to be an attempt to indoctrinate students with far-left ideology when deciding to pursue English as their major. Sixty percent of participants indicated that an outside influence attempted to deter them from pursuing English as a major; of these individuals, 71% indicated this outside influence did not influence their decision to declare English as a major. One respondent explained how outside influences did affect their decision-making process:

I have always written short stories, poems, novellas and (in recent years) full-length novels. I love **creating characters and stories. However, I've been asked (rather tauntingly, like I'm stupid) "What are you going to do with a creative writing degree?" by multiple relatives and even some teachers at my high school.** Not a single person failed to warn me that writing was an unstable career; those who I shared my plans with encouraged me to have a second major in order to **secure a "real job" after college.** That is exactly what I ended up doing: I am a double major in psychology and creative **writing. I'm not even sure if I want to be a mental health counselor, but I'm too scared to embrace CRW [creative writing] as my sole career.**

Aware of the outside perspectives of those who feel the humanities encourages "leftist ideology," another respondent answered: "I believe humanities are important, and while there are people who are against them, I want to be part of the group that understand[s] their importance and significance to life, culture, and connection." Another individual spoke directly to this outside perspective:

Leftist political ideals align with my personal ideals, and I would not be studying literature if I felt that this was not true. My ultimate goal is to work in a public library because I believe that literature should be accessible to every person in a community, and I recognize this goal as one that is motivated by leftist ideals. I am interested in expanding my awareness of the broad range of human experiences, and the study of literature makes that possible.

Complementing this viewpoint, all participants ranked the opportunity to study a diverse curriculum with works of literature from writers of different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds as either very important or important.

What Are Their Expectations of the Program?

As part of the survey, participants were asked to rate the following expectations of an English major in the level of importance. As illustrated in Table 1, the opportunity to study a diverse curriculum, consider different viewpoints, develop/improve listening and reading comprehension skills, and develop/improve written and oral communication skills were rated highest, while the least important among the expectations included developing and improving leadership skills and obtaining skills required to obtain a high-paying job after graduation. Additionally, 80% of participants indicated "agree" or "strongly agree" with the idea that what they have learned as English majors at their institution has made them more empathetic individuals.

Table 1. *Average Ratings of Responses to Level of Importance of English Major Expectations*

| Expectation | Rating (5.00 = Very important; 1.00 = Not very important) |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|
| Provide opportunity to study a diverse curriculum with works of literature from writers of different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds | 4.60 |
| Provide opportunity to consider different viewpoints than my prior educational experiences or a different major offered | 4.50 |
| Develop/improve listening and reading comprehension skills | 4.40 |
| Develop/improve written and oral communication skills | 4.30 |
| Develop/improve critical thinking and problem-solving skills | 4.10 |
| Provide opportunity through what I learn to become a more socially conscious citizen | 4.10 |
| Offer a management workload to allow me to graduate in a timely fashion | 3.60 |
| Provide necessary skills to obtain a job that I will enjoy after graduation | 3.50 |
| Develop/improve leadership skills | 3.40 |
| Provide necessary skills to obtain a high-paying job after graduation | 2.90 |

Are Current English Majors Satisfied With Their Decision?

Participants were also asked how satisfied they currently were with their decision to declare English as a major, with all 10 noting they planned to remain English majors moving forward. No participant indicated that they regretted their decision to enroll in their program. As Figure 1 shows, nearly all participants indicated they were either satisfied or very satisfied with their decision.

Figure 1. *Responses to the Question “How satisfied are you at this moment in time of your decision to major in English?”*

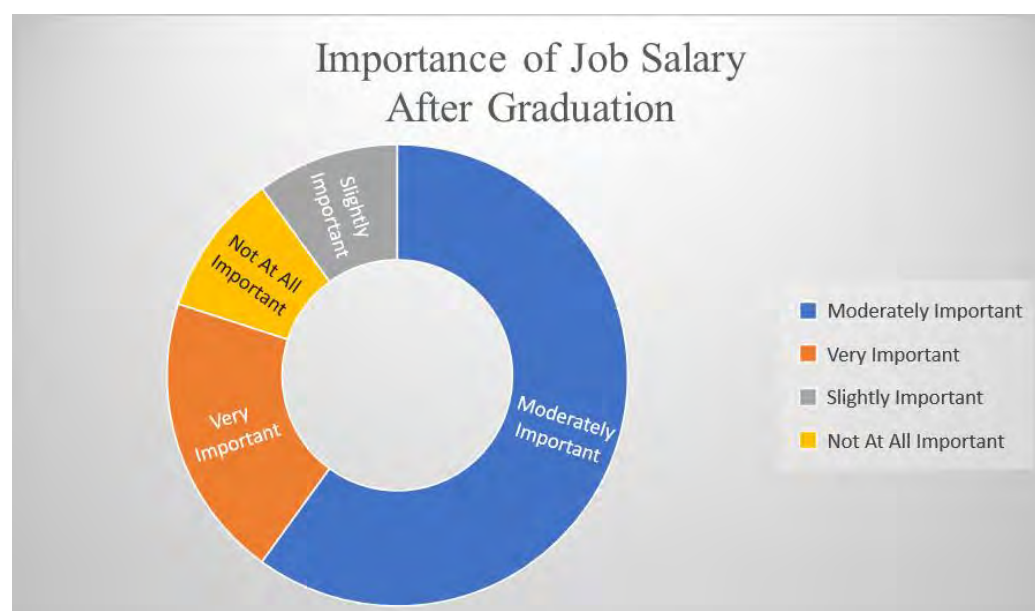


When asked to what extent participants felt their degree in English would help them secure employment after graduation, 70% answered to an above-average extent or to a very high extent, and 10% answered to a very high extent. Only 20% indicated to a below-average extent. When asked how important a factor was job salary after graduation when deciding to declare English as a major, only 30% responded slightly important or very important; 60% answered moderately important, and one individual (10%) answered not at all important.

What is Their Definition of Post-Graduate Success?

When asked to what extent they felt a degree in English would help them secure employment after graduation, 40% of participants indicated to a very high extent or to an above-average extent, 40% indicated to an average extent, and 20% indicated to a below-average extent. As Figure 2 shows, when asked about how important a factor job salary after graduation was when deciding to declare English as a major, most participants indicated it was either moderately important or slightly important. A smaller portion, in comparison, ranked it as very important.

Figure 2. Responses to Question: “How important a factor was job salary after graduation when deciding to declare English as a major?”



Participants were also asked to rank, in order of importance, what they planned to do with their English degree after graduation. As Table 2 illustrates, the highest average ratings focused on obtaining a job that participants would enjoy, using the skills they obtained during their program to give back to their community via either employment or volunteer work, and pursuing a postgraduate degree. Financial stability was noted as being important, but less important was moving into a leadership position within their chosen field, obtaining a high-paying job, and obtaining long-term financial wealth.

Table 2. *Average Ratings of Responses to Plans Post-Graduation*

| Plans | Rating (7.00 = Very important; 1.00 = Not very important) |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|
| Obtain a job that I am truly interested in and will enjoy | 5.80 |
| Use what I've learned from my major to give back to my community via employment/volunteer work | 4.70 |
| Pursue a postgraduate degree (in English or other field) | 4.40 |
| Obtain long-term financial stability (steady employment, ability to pay bills, opportunity for vacations/related leisure activities, etc.) | 4.00 |
| Use what I've learned from my major to go into a position of leadership within my career field | 3.80 |
| Obtain a high-paying job | 3.00 |
| Obtain long-term financial wealth (expensive house, luxury car, deluxe vacations, etc.) | 2.30 |

Participants were also surveyed on what characteristics they felt defined post-graduate success. Table 3 indicates that, overwhelmingly, participants felt that finding personal happiness, obtaining a job that they are truly interested in and will enjoy, maintaining steady employment, serving as a socially conscious contributing member of society, and experiencing continued personal growth were the major characteristics that defined post-graduate success. While no participants ranked obtaining a high-paying job as very important, all participants did indicate it was important or moderately important. Less important benchmarks of post-graduate success, according to participants, were becoming leaders in their chosen fields.

Table 3. *Distribution of Answers to Question: "Please rate the following characteristics of post-graduate success in level of importance."*

| Statement | Very Important | Important | Moderately Important | Slightly Important | Not Important |
|---------------------------------------------------------|----------------|-----------|----------------------|--------------------|---------------|
| To find personal happiness | 80% | 10% | 0% | 10% | 0% |
| To experience continued personal growth | 60% | 30% | 10% | 0% | 0% |
| To obtain a high-paying job | 0% | 40% | 60% | 0% | 0% |
| To obtain a job I am truly interested in and will enjoy | 80% | 20% | 0% | 0% | 0% |
| To experience financial wealth | 0% | 20% | 40% | 30% | 10% |
| To obtain steady employment | 50% | 40% | 0% | 10% | 0% |

| | | | | | |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| To become a leader in my career field | 0% | 40% | 30% | 10% | 20% |
| To serve as a socially conscious contributing member of society | 60% | 20% | 20% | 0% | 0% |
| To pursue a master's (or higher level) degree | 20% | 10% | 40% | 20% | 10% |
| To mentor others wishing to pursue a college degree in the liberal arts | 10% | 10% | 50% | 30% | 0% |

The current English majors that participated in this study's survey provided important information about why they chose to pursue this program of study. Through this data, we have been given insight into their experiences that can not only answer this study's research questions but also help form recommendations about how we should view the English major moving forward.

Discussion

The participants of the survey showed that most English majors plan to pursue this program of study prior to attending college due to an established enjoyment of reading, writing, and studying literature. They chose to enroll in an English major not only to find employment and financial stability after graduation but also to study a diverse curriculum and become more socially conscious individuals. While the majority (70%) were aware of the recent backlash in some quarters against humanities majors, and 60% reported that outside influences attempted to deter them from pursuing English as a major, overall this did not stop any of the participants from doing so. Rather, participants illustrated that even with a strong overall awareness of criticisms of the major, they were determined to enroll in the program because it aligned with their interests, personal ideals, and goals for the future.

While enrolled in the English program at their institution, students' primary expectations were to study a diverse curriculum with different viewpoints, develop and improve their written and oral communication skills, and develop and improve their listening and reading comprehension skills. They placed importance on graduating in a timely fashion and gaining employment after graduation that they would enjoy, but less important to them was obtaining a high-paying job after graduation. Also lower on the list of expectations was developing and improving leadership skills. Whether this was because participants felt they were already well-equipped in this area or because they were uninterested in becoming leaders in their chosen field is unknown. However, this area should be explored in future studies on undergraduate English majors since research has shown that humanities majors often advance to leadership roles (Heller, 2023). Surveying current English majors on their awareness of humanities majors entering leadership roles post-graduation would be helpful in reframing the English major to current and prospective students as well as the general public.

Encouragingly, 90% of participants indicated that they were satisfied with their decision to declare English as a major. All of the participants planned to remain English majors until graduation, notable due to 70% of participants indicating they had earned 89 or fewer credits, a range that would feasibly allow these students to change majors and still graduate in a reasonable timeframe. Considering the myth that English majors will struggle to find employment after graduation compared to majors in a non-humanities field, most

participants (80%) felt that their degree in English would help them find a job after graduation to either an above-average, high, or very high extent. Only 20% felt it would help to a below-average extent.

This leads to the final aspect of this study, which was to determine an English major's definition of post-graduate success. The idea of pursuing a degree program that, in recent years, has been viewed as a questionable choice by many begs the question of how individuals declaring English as a major define post-graduate success. From the results of the survey, obtaining a high-paying job was not among the highest-rated characteristics of post-graduate success, nor was experiencing financial wealth or moving into leadership positions in their fields. Rather, participants rated finding personal happiness, experiencing continued personal growth, and obtaining steady employment in a position that they would truly enjoy among the most important characteristics of post-graduate success. Further, they also rated highly serving as a socially conscious contributing member of society in terms of post-graduate success. This mindset recalls the original idea of higher education in the United States—making that “social investment in the future” (Giroux, 2011, p. 122). This is noteworthy because, as discussed in the review of the literature, through the study of a diverse curriculum offered in the humanities, English majors tend to develop critical-thinking skills but also softer skills such as listening comprehension and empathy (Beal, 2020; Christensen, 2023; Heller, 2023; Nietzel, 2020). When provided in the survey with the definition of empathy from the APA, 80% of participants agreed or strongly agreed with the idea that what they have learned thus far as an English major has made them more empathetic individuals. As we look to a future where leaders will be called on to be more empathetic than ever before (Abril, 2022; Caffrey, 2023; Kock et al., 2019), we need to recognize the value and worth of post-secondary education in English amid declining trends in enrollment and in an environment where it is often maligned by outsiders. As the review of the literature pointed out, the value of a college degree must be defined beyond financial reward (Christensen, 2023; Nietzel, 2020). As a result, higher education leaders need to become greater champions of the value of a liberal arts degree.

Implications and Recommendations

The results of the survey offer a positive glimpse of the passion and commitment current English majors have for their programs, considering their overall awareness of the backlash that the humanities currently face. However, further and more extensive research is needed to provide greater validity to this study's findings. This study shows that though most students are aware of current criticisms of their major and the humanities in general, they remain committed to their programs of study to find personal fulfillment in their careers post-graduation and become more socially conscious individuals. As students enroll in a program that offers a diverse curriculum of different voices, they exemplify the original purpose of pursuing higher education—to grow personally but also to give back to their communities and society once they graduate. The results of the survey presented in this study illustrate some of the main reasons students decide to pursue English as a major, but a more expansive study could provide a larger and more diverse group of participants to share more unique perspectives. A larger study could potentially examine English majors from different socioeconomic backgrounds, located in different geographic regions, and enrolled in public as well as private institutions to compare and contrast the differences that may exist between different groups of English majors.

Yet, we should not hold our collective breath for this type of study. As explained, there have been very few studies that take an in-depth look at the reasons why current English majors choose to pursue a degree in English. As a result, the opinions of everyone but the actual students enrolled in English programs make up most of the public discourse, and this discourse, full of misconceptions, has likely contributed to declining enrollment in humanities programs like the English major. Criticism of the humanities and the English major are seldom counterbalanced with the personal stories of commitment, passion, and expectations these students maintain. It is time to hear these stories as a counterpoint to the anti-intellectualism backlash that has led to declining enrollments in the humanities and a public that is growing more and more indifferent to

the value of a college degree. English majors are excellent examples of why the knowledge and skills developed while pursuing a college degree are for the personal as well as the public good.

Therefore, IHLs must begin to champion their programs in the humanities by addressing the misconceptions of the majors within this field. Instead of remaining silent on the myths and misconceptions that the public may have about the liberal arts, school leaders must begin to discover the stories of those students enrolling in programs that many see as an unworthy “return on investment.” What makes these students thwart the current conventional wisdom of pursuing something business or STEM related? What makes these students enroll in humanities programs when they are aware of growing skepticism and declining enrollment? What expectations do they have of the program? Of post-graduate success? Of themselves? As the literature shows, we need socially conscious, critical thinkers in leadership roles now and moving forward (Atkinson, 2021; Beal, 2020; Christensen, 2023; Goldberg, 2022; Heller, 2023; Nietzel, 2020). IHL leaders and administrators have a group of committed students enrolled in humanities programs such as English who want to tell their stories. The public needs to hear them.

As part of championing the humanities at their institutions, IHL leaders need to consider if they are investing in events and programs that prioritize their smaller liberal arts majors, such as English. One of the first-year respondents of this study who also majors in psychology acknowledged this at their institution:

Aside from some readers from guest speakers who don't live locally, and a single local publication to submit work to, I have not found any events/opportunities to build my resume and increase the chance of writing being my main career. It feels very much like a hobby major, and not as professional-building as my psychology major.

The idea of English being a “hobby major”—even at a liberal arts institution with committed English majors—from one of its own students is concerning. To combat declining enrollment trends and highlight the current social and economic advantages of a degree in English, college administrators should survey their students and seek their assistance about how to create opportunities not only to provide valuable resources and information for current majors but also to attract prospective new students to the major. In lieu of results from an expansive, cross-sectional study on English majors that may never come, individual institutions can survey their own students in the program to determine strengths and detect areas of weakness. Individual course evaluations and wider university surveys often capture this data, but it is not always aggregated. Therefore, individual English departments should create detailed surveys so students can share their backgrounds, experiences, and insights to help administrators determine how to effectively address ways to cast the English major in a more positive light to students, faculty, administrators, and, most importantly, the general public.

Conclusion

It is clear to anyone paying attention that the humanities have been under attack now for many years. The English major has taken the biggest hit, with graduates in English programs steadily decreasing for a quarter of a century. Yet few studies have questioned those who still choose to major in English. Their opinions are likely the most important ones to listen to if there will be any serious attempt to change misconceptions about the program.

Listening to current students who choose to enroll in a program with declining enrollment and that faces growing criticism of its worth post-graduation is a missing component of the present-day discussion on the value of a liberal arts degree. Beyond developing strong writing, reading, and listening skills, perhaps the most relevant skills that English majors develop are deep critical thinking skills through the study of a curriculum that highlights historic, diverse, and current voices from all walks of life and backgrounds. In our current political and socially divided society, this skill is needed most. This study offers a small glimpse into the minds

of current English majors and why, in the face of declining enrolment and doubt about the value of the degree, they are committed to their programs of study. Hopefully, it will encourage other scholars to engage in future research on the subject.

In the meantime, it is up to higher education administrators, faculty, and department chairs in the humanities to rise to the challenge. They must do the work at their institutions that is necessary to give voice to their students in majors that are under attack from outsiders who have shown little interest in hearing them. Extending beyond leaders solely in higher education, leaders of all fields must acknowledge the value of the humanities, not disparage them. Recalling the original intentions of higher education—to serve the “public good”—it would be a detriment to our society and our civil discourse to continue to malign majors in the humanities. The time is now to help the public reconsider their views on the English major. Leaders must remember and acknowledge why the skills that these students develop have proven to be essential in a world that relies more heavily now than ever before on effective communication. At this moment in time, the value of an English degree is immeasurable.

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Appendix

English Major Survey

You are invited to take part in a survey to assist with a study on why college students choose English as a major. This web-based survey should take no longer than 5–10 minutes. While there are no direct benefits in participating in this study, there are also no known risks. Participation is entirely voluntary and you can stop at any time. If you have any questions about this study, please contact Dr. Kevin T. Caffrey at (540) 654-5864 or via email at kcaffrey@umw.edu.

I understand the purpose of this study and agree to complete this voluntary survey.

1. Yes
2. No

Are you an undergraduate student currently enrolled in classes this semester?

1. Yes
2. No

What is your current student classification?

1. Freshmen (less than 30 credits earned)
2. Sophomore (30-59 credits earned)
3. Junior (60-89 credits earned)
4. Senior (90+ credits earned)
5. I am in a graduate program

When did you first decide that you wanted to declare English as your major?

1. Prior to attending college
2. Once enrolled in college

What most influenced your decision to study English? (Please Select Your Top Three Choices)

1. **I've always enjoyed reading**
2. **I've always enjoyed writing**
3. **I've always enjoyed the study of English (literature, poetry, creative writing, etc.)**
4. A specific English class or classes in or prior to high school
5. A specific English class or classes in college
6. Potential to become a more socially conscious individual through a diverse curriculum of study
7. Potential career opportunity that I will enjoy after graduation
8. Potential high-paying career opportunities after graduation
9. I did not know what else to declare as a major
10. A reason not listed here

Did any outside influence (teacher/instructor, family member or friend, media, etc.) POSITIVELY influence your decision to declare English as your major? For example, did a friend encourage you to pursue English or did you read an online article about English as a major that influenced your decision in a positive way?

1. Yes
2. No

Did any outside influence (teacher/instructor, family member or friend, media, etc.) attempt to deter you from declaring English as a major? For example, did a family member or instructor attempt to discourage you from pursuing a liberal arts/humanities degree such as English, or did you read an online article about English as a major that gave you concern about declaring English as a major?

1. Yes
2. No

To what extent do you feel your degree in English will help you secure employment after graduation?

1. To a very high extent
2. To above average extent

3. To average extent
4. To below average extent
5. To a very low extent

How important a factor was job salary after graduation when deciding to declare English as a major after graduation?

1. Extremely important
2. Very important
3. Moderately important
4. Slightly important
5. Not at all important

When making your decision to declare English as a major and pursue a degree in the humanities, were you aware of recent political viewpoints that consider majors in the humanities to be an attempt to indoctrinate students with far-left ideals?

1. Yes
2. No

If Yes, did this influence your decision at all to declare English as a major?

1. Yes
2. No

Please briefly explain how this influenced your decision with regard to declaring English as a major:

| |
|--|
| |
|--|

Please rate the following expectations of an English major in level of importance:

| | Very Important | Important | Moderately Important | Slightly Important | Not Very Important |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Develop/Improve Written and Oral Communication Skills | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Develop/Improve Listening and Reading Comprehension Skills | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Develop/Improve Critical Thinking and Problem Solving Skills | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Provide necessary skills to obtain a job that I will enjoy after graduation | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Provide necessary skills to obtain a high-paying job after graduation | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Develop/Improve Leadership Skills | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Provide opportunity to study a diverse curriculum with works of literature from writers of different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Provide opportunity to consider different viewpoints than my prior educational experiences or a different major offered | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Provide opportunity through what I learn to become a more socially conscious citizen | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Offer a management workload to allow me to graduate in a timely fashion | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Please rank in order of importance (1 being most important, 7 being least important) what you plan to do with your English degree after graduation:

- Obtain a high-paying job ____
- Obtain a job that I am truly interested in and will enjoy ____
- Obtain long-term financial wealth (expensive house, luxury car, deluxe vacations, etc.) ____
- Obtain long-term financial stability (steady employment, ability to pay bills, opportunity for vacations/related leisure activities, etc.) ____
- Use what I've learned from my major to give back to my community via employment/volunteer work ____
- Use what I've learned from my major to go into a position of leadership within my career field ____
- Pursue a postgraduate degree (in English or other field) ____

How satisfied are you at this moment in time of your decision to major in English?

1. Very Satisfied
2. Satisfied
3. Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied
4. Dissatisfied
5. Very Dissatisfied

Do you intend to remain an English major moving forward?

1. Yes
2. No
3. Unsure

What other majors are you considering?

Do you regret your decision to major in English?

1. Yes
2. No
3. Unsure

The American Psychological Association (APA) defines empathy as “understanding a person from [their] frame of reference rather than one’s own, or vicariously experiencing that person’s feelings, perceptions, and thoughts.” How strongly would you agree that what you’ve learned thus far as an English major at your institution has made you a more empathetic individual?

1. Strongly agree
2. Agree
3. Undecided
4. Disagree
5. Strongly agree

Please rate the following characteristics of post-graduate success in level of importance:

| | Not Important | Slightly Important | Moderately Important | Important | Very Important |
|---------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| To find personal happiness | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| To experience continued personal growth | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| To obtain a high-paying job | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| To obtain a job I am truly interested in and will enjoy | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| To experience financial wealth | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| To obtain steady employment | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| To become a leader in my career field | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| To serve as a socially conscious contributing | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

| | | | | | |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| member of society | | | | | |
| To pursue a master's (or higher level) degree | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| To mentor others wishing to pursue a college degree in the liberal arts | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Are there any other comments that you would like to share with us about your experience as an English major?

What is your gender?

1. Male
2. Female
3. Transgender
4. Non-binary
5. Other
6. Prefer Not to Disclose

Select the racial/ethnic group(s) with which you identify (you may select all that apply):

1. Asian or Pacific Islander
2. American Indian/Alaska Native
3. Black/African American
4. Hispanic/Latinx
5. Multiracial or Biracial
6. White
7. A Race/Ethnicity Not Listed
8. Prefer Not to Disclose

What is your age?

1. 17 years or younger
2. 18 - 24 years
3. 25 - 34 years
4. 35 - 44 years
5. 45 - 54 years
6. 55 - 64 years
7. 65 - 74 years
8. 75 years or older

For your participation in this survey, you can be entered into a random drawing to win a \$25.00 Visa Gift Card. If you would like to be entered into this drawing, please provide your email address. Your email address is separate and will not be associated with your survey responses.

1. Provide Email Address
2. I do not wish to be entered into this drawing

Please enter your email address below:

If you would like to be contacted to participate in a short (30-45 minute) online focus group/interview to further discuss the topic of this research survey, please provide your email address. Participation in this focus group/interview will make you eligible to enter an additional random drawing to win a \$25.00 Visa Gift Card once the focus group/interview session has been completed.

1. Provide Email Address
2. I do not wish to be contacted

Please enter your email address below:



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