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## The cultural implications of the myth that English majors end up working permanently at Starbucks (essay)

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The old joke about studying English went, “Would you like fries with that major?” I haven’t heard that joke in years. Barista has replaced fast food worker as the career of choice for warning against the perils of majoring in English.

What are we to make of this new old joke about the English major? Why did barista replace fast food worker? The fact is that English majors are not particularly likely to end up as baristas or as workers in the food service industry in general. Plenty of data is available to disprove this idea, so what does its persistence mean? The English major barista is a myth in the sense of being untrue. It is also a myth in the deeper sense of that word: a story that a culture tells itself to explain wishes or fears. In this case, fears.

### The Data

First things first. Data show that English majors do not tend to end up as baristas. Over each year, the U.S. Census Bureau conducts a detailed survey of about 1 percent of the national population. Called the American Community Survey, this census includes questions about age, educational attainment, field of degree and employment. Respondents to the survey cannot actually choose “barista” when reporting occupation, but they can choose the category “counter attendant, cafeteria, food concession and coffeehouse.” However, the number of people in this category is small when further segmented by field of degree.

A more reliable analysis groups this category along with several related ones, including bartenders, waiters, dishwashers and the like. That larger grouping does not literally count English majors who work as baristas, but it gets at the spirit of the claim, with greater statistical validity. If the destiny of the English major is service behind the coffee bar, then bartending, waiting tables or washing dishes cannot be far behind.

However, none of those food service jobs are the English major’s particular fate. According to the Census Bureau, graduates with an English degree have about a 4.9 percent chance of working in one of these food service occupations for some time between the ages of 22 and 26. By comparison, the average among all degree holders in this age group is about 3.5 percent. So English majors are only about 1.4 percentage points more likely to work in food service than the average for all degree holders.

When we look at mature workers, the data bear out a broader observation: majors in the humanities and social sciences take a little more time to find their career footing, but then they catch up with and sometimes exceed in salary earnings the graduates with more professional degrees. For degree holders ages 27 to 66, the percentage of graduates in English working in food service

professions for some time during this 40-year period is 0.72 percent, or about one in 139 majors. Among all majors ages 27 to 66, the average is 0.48 percent. English remains higher than average, but not by much. The 0.24 point difference translates to an additional one in 417 chance of ending up at working in food service at some point between the ages of 27 and 66.

So where, in fact, do English majors end up working? The top occupations for English-degree holders ages 27 to 66 are elementary and middle school teachers, postsecondary teachers, and lawyers, judges, magistrates and other judicial workers. Indeed, English majors, who go on to a range of careers, are less likely to work in food service than in many highly skilled positions, including as chief executives and legislators (1.4 percent), physicians and surgeons (1.2 percent), or accountants and auditors (1.2 percent). Parents worried that their children will study English and end up as baristas should know that their sons and daughters are statistically more likely to end up as CEOs, doctors or accountants than behind the counter of a Starbucks.

Level of education and age, rather than choice of major, most predict work in food service. Between the ages of 22 and 26, people who do not report a baccalaureate degree have a somewhat higher percentage of food service work than English-degree holders: 5.68 percent vs. 4.88 percent. For mature workers, ages 27 to 66, the corollary numbers are 1.45 percent and 0.72 percent. For full-time mature workers, the difference a baccalaureate degree makes is particularly striking. English-degree holders ages 27 to 66 work full time in food service at a rate of 0.53 percent, those without a baccalaureate degree at 1.92 percent. Starbucks has made help with college degree completion a perk for its workers. If all those baristas had B.A.s in English, or in any degree, there would be no need for this program.

Of course, the English major as barista is also shorthand for a general belief that a degree in English leads to underemployment -- that is, to jobs that really do not require a college degree. A recent study shows that around 12 percent of recent college graduates ages 22 to 27 with a degree in English work in low-skilled service jobs. That is the same percent as for baccalaureate holders in this age group who majored in psychology and earth science, and 3.4 percentage points higher than the average for degree holders in general, which is 8.6 percent. Those percentages may be higher than we would like, but there's nothing distinctive about English majors in them.

Fortunately, too, these percentages are for recent graduates; the same study shows that college graduates tend to mature out of these jobs. As we have seen, the English majors who do work in food service generally do so when they are young and as a first job -- a start, not an end. The coffeehouse is not their career.

To establish themselves in their careers, English majors need to show a bit more resourcefulness than do majors in narrowly preprofessional degrees. And year after year, that is exactly what real English majors do. They do not possess this resourcefulness in spite of their English degree or as a mere coincidence with it. Creative and independent thinkers are attracted to the English degree, and that course of study helps to develop their creativity and their initiative -- the same personal qualities that serve them so well in the working world after graduation.

## The Joke

So why the barista joke? It reflects negative attitudes about the English major itself rather than the realities of an English major's likely employment. Since coffeehouses are places for reading, writing and talking, spending time in a coffeehouse is a lot like spending time in the study of English. Naturally enough, English majors like to hang out in them. STEM majors have their labs; English majors have their Starbucks. The joke about the English major barista implies, however, that unlike the science done in a lab, the study of English, whether pursued in coffeehouse or classroom, is without value. What better punishment for wasting this time than being sentenced to work at a coffeehouse rather than enjoying its pleasures, serving those who presumably chose some more valuable and lucrative major?

In this vengeful fantasy, moreover, the barista with an English B.A. contributes to the coffeehouse's cultural sophistication, the human equivalent of its background jazz or pictures of Seattle circa 1971. The English major's transformation into cultural wallpaper is part of the joke.

The English major makes an academic career out of studying literary culture or (still worse in the eyes of the major's detractors) ordinary culture inflated into an academic subject. Having to work in a coffeehouse is punishment for that study, since students who are ambitious to become cultural elites instead find themselves in a lowly service industry, working in their local strip-mall Starbucks rather than sitting at a coffee bar in Florence. The particular name that Starbucks made famous for its workers -- "barista" -- along with all its pseudo-Italian terms, like "grande" for medium, is the foam on the Frappuccino. The joke implies that the job and its pretentious, pseudo-high culture name perfectly fit the empty pretensions of the major itself.

## The Thin Bar

But this joke about frustrated aspiration is on us all. Consider the coffeehouse's storied place in the history of European and Anglo-American modernity. Jürgen Habermas made famous the idea that the activities with which coffeehouses are still associated -- reading, writing, conversation -- made them nothing less than cradles of modern literature and democracy. The coffeehouse was a republic of letters, where literacy and the purchase of a cup of coffee were the only entry requirements to participation in literary and political worlds that had once been the exclusive province of courtly and hereditary elites. Coffeehouses were sometimes referred to in the 18th century as "penny universities." (One still also had to be a man, although Habermas believes the ideals of the coffeehouse militated even against this restriction).

Your local coffee spot may seem a far cry from a cradle of western democracy or a "penny university." Particularly with regard to Starbucks, the criticism of the coffeehouse today is that it's a place of faux culture and shallow consumption, where the other side of high-priced coffee drinks is the exploitation of coffee farmers in the third world and of the company's own workers behind the counter. From that point of view, Starbucks is just about making money. "Everything else," as one Starbucks critic puts it, is "window dressing." As part of that window dressing, the Starbucks barista both serves and reflects a world narrowed to maximized profit and empty consumption.

"Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers," the poet Wordsworth wrote. Still: Starbucks promises something more than getting and spending. However much our local Starbucks is a place to grab coffee as we rush to work, or an embarrassment of ersatz culture, the success of the Starbucks brand demonstrates a yearning for more fulfilling cultural and communal spaces of the sort described by Habermas. Starbucks doesn't just sell coffee; it sells the coffeehouse ideal. It offers reading and music suggestions, has printed literary quotes on coffee cups, and has asked its baristas to start discussions about race in America. The criticism that greeted the last initiative is telling. Starbucks was seen as too corporate to serve as a place for genuine cultural or political exchange, however much it seems to promise it.

The fast-food joke consigned the English major to a low-paying and unfulfilling job. The barista joke consigns the English major to a low-paying and unfulfilling job that remains tantalizing close to a more fulfilling coffeehouse ideal. To the extent that we also want that ideal, we're that close, too. We, too, are attracted to the coffeehouse image of a richer cultural and communal life, even if that image promises more than harried working lives and corporate marketing can deliver. A thin bar separates the cultural aspirations, and disappointments, of Starbucks workers and consumers.

A similarly thin bar separates worker and consumer in terms of a feared economic decline. There was a time when we might have celebrated the English major's drive to explore self and world in college, or as part of a career trajectory that involved some time for similar self-development and exploration of opportunities, before rushing headlong into a career. There was a time when we laughed at hearing the just-graduated Dustin Hoffman advised in *The Graduate* to stake his future

on plastics. And there was a time when we understood that English majors, like other majors in the liberal arts, end up with far more than a salary -- they develop the sense of ethics, history and culture, and the habits of open and reasoned deliberation, that the coffeehouse ideal represents and that are essential to functioning democracies, not to mention to lives well lived.

Today, however, many people laugh at someone who seems unwilling to turn a college education into job training for the industry du jour in order to secure the highest-paying job straight out of college. English majors achieve successful careers, as the data show. That we consign them, in the myth of the English major barista, to a permanent life in food service says less about them and more about us -- about how afraid we have become of defying the market imperative to maximize profit, the single force, apparently, by which we are now supposed to guide our lives.

This fear is reasonable -- stagnant wages, the erosion of unions, the growing use of contract and part-time labor to replace full-time jobs, the increasing gap between rich and poor, and insufficiently regulated financial markets all contribute to the insecurity of middle-class life. For college students in particular, the withdrawal of states from the public funding of higher education, combined with rising tuition, makes any decisions seem risky if they don't, as the saying goes now, make college an effective return on investment. But the fear is more than that. It is as if any defiance of profit maximization must be met with punishment: the condemnation to a life serving coffee.

We will only really dispel the myth of the English major barista when we confront head-on the structural economic problems and the narrow market ideology that drive the fear behind it. Meanwhile, in their own refusal to succumb to this fear, English majors can be confident they'll do fine spending some time in coffeehouses -- whichever side of the bar they're on.

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