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Next: Everything Changes and Nothing Changes: Life after Tenure

WHAT CAN THEY DO WITH AN ENGLISH MAJOR?:

SHOWING STUDENTS THE BREADTH OF THE DISCIPLINE

THROUGH THE INTRODUCTORY COURSE TO THE DISCIPLINE AND ADVISING

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To say that English undergraduates struggle with their post-graduate identities is to understate the obvious. Almost every article or book that discusses career paths or the job market for graduates with a degree in English relates that students do not know what to do with an undergraduate degree, save for teaching or graduate studies in English. In fact, this approach to the subject has not changed in decades, as the following examples differ only in style, not substance [1]:

> 2005: Inside and outside the academy, the English professor and the English pupil run into a common problem: the rest of the world thinks what we do and what we study is fake. English ranges anywhere from “entertainment” to “therapy,” but it seldom enters the realm of the real—the “real,” I suppose, meaning a productive contribution to society yielding tangible, green results. (Van Engen 6)
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> 1956: This report on the activities of the English major as a business man began with a question frequently asked by undergraduates at Wayne University: “What can I do with an English major besides teach?” (McCormick 486)
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> 1998: The young woman with dark hair and large brown eyes sitting in the front row of my poetry writing class regarded me with an urgent and plaintive expression. She had discovered a totally unexpected gift for writing and yearned to take up an English major with a concentration in creative writing. “But what should I tell my mother?” Andria burst out. “My mother is opposed. She said you can't earn a living with a concentration in creative writing.” (Tassi 56)
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> 1981: Today's image of graduating English majors sadly resembles Milton's Adam and Eve at the end of Book XII. Having forfeited paradise with one perverse choice, they stand forlorn outside the gates of academe and in this dismal plight take little comfort in knowing that the world lies all before them, where to choose. The world itself, we gather, is precisely what our majors have not chosen—unlike vocational students, who train deliberately for the fall from grace. Nor has the taste of forbidden fruit done anything to enhance our graduates' self-confidence in their ability to choose. Small wonder, then, that the question “Is there life beyond the English major?” arises predictably in our departments. (Eberwein 604)

Plaintive cry after plaintive cry goes up from students asking what can they do now that they have ignored the practical routes and pursued a degree in English. We answer these questions from parents who tour the campus with their sons and daughters; we address them when we tell a student in a lower-division course that he or she has real talent in analysis and writing; we assuage fears when our advisees or students in our classes stop by our offices in moments of fear, especially as graduation draws near; and we face the fury of graduates who have returned after a year or two after they have left, only to end up working in a job they could have gotten without the degree at all.

Unfortunately, professors do not do a good job of preparing students for life after graduation. We believe that they will either follow in our paths and pursue graduate work or that they will teach high school. If we are pushed by students who do not wish to take one of those routes, we mumble something about the wide variety of opportunities that English majors enjoy, occasionally mentioning publishing or public relations work for businesses, but we usually deflect their question and get back to that class preparation or research that demands our time.

The problem is that most professors do not know what their graduates do after they leave their institution, save for random emails and visits from a few students. Thus, they continue to teach, as if all of their students will pursue graduate work or teach, often using that fact as a defense of why they teach a particular literary theory or author or method of instruction. This ignorance leads to a curriculum and advising that does our students a disservice. Instead of guessing what students do, we need to examine our graduates to see where they actually work, then we should adjust our courses and interactions with students to better help them to see all of their true possibilities. At our best, we should go beyond even this and help them set up internships or find minors or other majors that will help them to find meaningful work after they graduate.

If one were to ask most professors what their students do after graduation, they would respond that their students teach or go to graduate school. Carlyn R. Horton illustrates this limited thinking when she describes “English majors who

have no prospects of employment after commencement":

> These students, instead of writing papers, scanning articles, and sleeping through class as their wont is, are forced to spend all their time writing letters of application to superintendents, who have no vacancies or, who seek All-Around Jonathan, to teach one class of typing, coach the basketball team to the state tournament, and instruct five classes of English 7, 9, 10, 11, and 12 on the side. Since even such unappealing openings as these are few, English majors have no other recourse than to remain in school, thus further glutting the market with Ph.Ds. (85)

Donald C. Stewart at least admits that English graduates "go into a variety of careers: teaching, editing, publishing, writing, and related vocations," but he also argues that "a good number go to graduate school where, to sustain themselves, they teach freshman composition" (188). When a reader of *College Composition and Communication* questioned this assumption, claiming that "only ten percent of the English majors become teachers," Stewart responds, "I would have to see some very convincing statistics before I believed that only ten percent of the English majors graduating from the nation's colleges of arts and sciences *and* education went into teaching. Until I see those numbers, I will continue to assume that a significant percentage do choose a career in teaching" (128). Unfortunately, Stewart did not take the time to examine any statistics on the issue, or he might have seen that his "good number" is not as high as he imagines it to be (as we'll see later in this article).

Of course, just because one sees the statistics does not mean that he or she will recognize the poor advice that professors give graduating English majors. In "Selling the Truth: What English Majors Need to Hear," J. Rocky Colavito, Lisa Abney, and Suzanne Disheroon Green argue that professors should encourage students to pursue graduate work in English, partly because the job market is not as dismal as it seems. After admitting that "only 33.7% of PhDs who graduated in 1996-97 received full-time, tenure-track appointments, a decline of 26% from figures for 1993-94," they then include a variety of full- and part-time appointments to raise the "total placement rate" to 75%, which is "significantly more encouraging than an initial review of the figures suggests" (26-27). Given the continued trend toward the use of adjuncts in higher education, especially in English, their optimism seems misguided. [2]

Unfortunately, professors are too interested in creating imitations of themselves to be bothered with looking at the statistics of what English majors actually do once they graduate. As Linwood Orange comments when speaking of the supposed limited options for English majors, "[Specialization in higher education] has inevitably led to the formation of certain academic fallacies, one being that the English major is predestined to pedagogy and another, correspondingly, that the primary, perhaps sole, function of the college English professor is to perpetuate his own species" (2).

If we look at the statistics (at least the few that have been collected and published), we can see that few English majors pursue either of these routes. Instead, they work in a variety of fields and use their degrees in ways that most professors cannot have imagined. Such information should compel us to change parts of our curriculum, especially our introductory course to the major, and the way we advise students, both formally and informally.

The first piece of information one must acknowledge when it comes to examining what English majors do after they graduate is that it can vary widely from school to school and even over time within the same institution. However, there are some general trends. First, there is still a significant number of graduates who end up teaching at the elementary or secondary level, while very few ultimately teach at the college level, neither of which has changed greatly over the years, despite the perception that English used to be a degree designed for teaching on one level or the other.

As early as 1929, Earl W. Anderson wrote an article called "A Study in Supply and Demand," in which he examined the number of English teachers in Ohio to see if an oversupply of English teachers existed in the state. In his survey, he discovered that 35% of English majors were teaching English, 7% were not teaching English, and 58% were not teaching at all (399). Thus, even early on, surveys revealed that most English majors did not pursue a career in teaching. Given the limited scope of his research, though, we are unable to see what careers they did choose, and it would be without merit to argue that English majors were primarily not going into teaching, as data just do not exist to prove that point.

As more and more people began doing research on the subject, though, the picture of what English graduates were doing became clearer. In 1956, James P. McCormick argued that the English degree was primarily a feeder into business and industry rather than other subjects. He points out that "Forty-one percent of the replies came from graduates who have been employed as teachers, and 59% came from those in the fields of business, civil service, and the professions" (McCormick 486). Elizabeth Berry shows this trend continuing in her 1967 study "The Careers of English Majors," where "of the men who responded, 26% are in the business field; 25% in the professions of medicine, law, ministry, clinical psychology, library science, and pharmacy; 16% in journalism and writing; 15% in public school teaching; 11% in college teaching, and 7% in government service" (Berry 46). Note the significant drop in teaching, now down to 26% when any level of teaching is combined, which is equal to business alone. Those who neither teach nor pursue graduate work in English make up three quarters of her sample, a significant increase from earlier studies.

What is even more interesting is that many of the women who sought further degrees did so not out of interest, but out of an attempt to find a way to use their undergraduate degrees. While Berry points out that more than 70% of the men did advanced work, 50% of the women did so, but "about half of those who did were reluctant to do so. The reluctant ones pursued additional study only after discovering that they could not secure a good job with the A.B. in English alone" (Berry 46). And in her breakdown of female respondents into three major categories, she makes no mention of teaching at all (Berry 46).

The 1960s stand out as an exception to this trend, largely due to the political and social changes going on at the time. More and more students wanted to find careers where they could make some sort of difference in people's lives, so the statistics shifted more toward English majors pursuing graduate school so that they could teach on the college level or moving straight into secondary teaching positions after graduation. Evans points out, in fact that most of the 1960s saw "more than seventy percent" taking teaching positions (202). However, that focus was short-lived, as he also points out that, "by 1970, English majors were graduating into a declining demand for teachers; in that year, only 56.3 per cent of those who had prepared to teach English entered the classroom" (Evans 202). While the majority of students were still pursuing teaching careers, a 15-20% drop is significant.

In the past forty years, that trend has continued with few exceptions. Lisa Dorner, a senior English major at Northeastern Missouri State University, sought to explore career options for herself and other soon-to-be-graduates by examining the options for English graduates. She reports that, "according to the Career Placement Center at NMSU, about half of the English majors continue their studies in graduate programs and professional schools or go into teaching" (Dorner 117). However, there is no distinction made between any graduate programs and professional schools that she lists here, so there is no way to tell how many of those advanced degrees are in English. Still, at most,

only half of the majors attempt to teach English at some level. Her work is the exception, as well, as every other study shows the number of students pursuing teaching careers in English, no matter the level to be decreasing.

No work illustrates this better than the studies carried out by Peter Beidler from Lehigh University. He surveyed English majors and reported the results in both 1985 and 2003, which helps one to see the change in careers for graduates with English degrees. In 1985, he concludes, "For starters, only 15% of our former English majors were involved in teaching" (Beidler, "What Can" 40), while in 2003, he reports, "Lehigh English, it turns out, is far more a feeder major for law school than for graduate school in English or education" (Beidler, "What English" 30).

Two more recent studies drive this point home. In Kathryn Rentz's 2003 article "A Flare from the Margins: The Place of Professional Writing in English Departments," she comments, "Last year, when we revised the requirements for the English major at the University of Cincinnati, we took seriously a significant finding from a survey of our graduates: that well over 90 percent of our majors do not go on to academic jobs in English" (Rentz 185). Even more recently, the February 2009 Report to the Teagle Foundation on the Undergraduate Major in Language and Literature produced by the Modern Language Association reports that only 3.8% of English graduates teach on the college level and 15.2% teach anywhere from elementary to secondary school (31).

To determine how my institution, Lee University, compared, I also did a survey in the summer of 2009 to see where our graduates found jobs. I based my approach on Peter Beidler's work and used some of his questions for inspiration and for comparison purposes. Our results are similar, but strikingly different in a few clear ways. First, while teaching high school English is second to other professions, when those other professions are broken down high school English is the area with the highest response at 19.7%. When middle school teaching is added in, it rises to 28.2%, and college teaching can cause it to end up at 40.9%, much higher than the other more recent studies. Part of this change can be accounted for in the fact that I work at a church-affiliated institution; thus, our students seek out jobs where they feel they can have an impact on others' lives, much like the students in the 1960s. However, while 33.8% of our students thought they would teach high school English, only 19.7% did. Similarly, only 12.7% thought they would end up doing something that qualified as "other," but 39.4% actually did. Thus, even though we have a higher percentage of students who ended up teaching, many who had planned on pursuing that route did not do so.

We are similar to Beidler's study in that we have 13.2% of our students who work in what Beidler refers to as the "words-delivery" professions, which he defines as including "professions like publishing, radio, theater, writing, and librarianship" (Beidler, "What Can" 40). The major difference I see in our school is the lower number of students who pursue work in any type of business. While Beidler reported that 33% of his graduates worked in that field, we only had 7.4% of our students in that area. Part of that discrepancy may be caused by our having a large business department, and students who have any interest in that career path simply major in it, but part of the difference can also be ascribed to the mission of our institution.

This deviation from the norm is especially interesting, as the second general observation is that students pursue a wide variety of careers, but businesses hire more English majors than any other area. McCormick and Berry earlier pointed out the large numbers of English majors who worked in business and industry in the middle part of this century, and William H. Evans points out that "Daniel Marder, who surveyed the Southwest in the *ADE Bulletin* [in 1974]... noted that the proportion of English majors employed by businesses and industry was greater than anticipated" (203). In fact, it is that expression of surprise that is so surprising, given the history of this subject. Almost every survey finds large numbers of English graduates working in business and industry, and almost every survey expresses surprise at that result, as if the previous information did not exist.

Beidler here makes the same type of comment in both of his studies. In his 1985 work, he comments:

> My biggest surprise came when I saw that fully 33% of our English majors were in my "business and industry" category. In this category I counted people who reported that they worked in finance, banking, insurance, management, public relations, engineering, computer, and the like. I found that if I grouped the "business and industry" category with "service professions" and "law," 55% of our graduates in the past twenty years were engaged in occupations for which a degree in English—that is, a degree in literature—might seem at best an oblique form of preparation. On the other hand, the professions for which we were most directly preparing students—teaching and words delivery—together accounted for only 29% of our English majors. (Beidler, "What Can" 40)

Then, in 2003, he focuses on law, as well as business, but still conveys that Lehigh has been working on the premise that their graduates pursue graduate degrees in English or teach:

> At Lehigh we have tended over the years to build our English major on the assumption that our best students will someday want to go to graduate school, probably in English or secondary education. In fact, . . . few graduates do continue in English. Less than 6% obtain the MA in English--only a few more than go on to get an MBA—while 10% study education. Only 5 of the 218 respondees got a PhD in English, in sharp contrast to the 39 who became doctors of jurisprudence—that is, lawyers. Lehigh English, it turns out, is far more a feeder major for law school than for graduate school in English or education. (Beidler, "What English" 30)

He then reminds us that "our English department, then, for the past four decades has prepared students for more jobs in business and industry than in any other profession" (Beidler, "What English" 31).

If we admit that most of our colleges and universities produce English majors who do not continue in English, either through teaching at the middle or high school level or through graduate work that will prepare them to teach at the college or university level, we must change our approach to our discipline. We must first admit that our discipline is broader than we think and that our students are not behaving as we thought.

Instead, for some reason, we continue to define our discipline narrowly, focusing on literature and the analysis of it, though sometimes we expand that to include the creation of literature, as well. While it's true that we offer a wide variety of courses that include sub-areas, such as film and linguistics, those of us who do not teach those courses still speak of English as if the discipline had not changed in fifty years. For example, the 2002 work *English Studies*, which was clearly compiled as a textbook for beginning English majors, completely ignores teaching and linguistics, while only three of the seventeen chapters focus on film and creative writing. Though Toby Fulwiler and William A. Stephany argue that this work contains the subjects that they "consider basic to study in contemporary Departments of English" and that "students taking their first college course in English will find this book worthwhile [,and e]nglish majors will find it essential" (xiii), ignoring swaths of the discipline makes one wonder what impression students will be left with as far

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as the breadth of our discipline goes. Along the same lines as , in “The English Coalition and the English Major,” the English Coalition makes five recommendations to provide coherence to English studies.[3] Four of the five focus on reading literature and literary criticism, while the one on writing only tangentially touches on creative writing. Teaching is ignored, as are all other sub-areas of the discipline. Providing coherence by ignoring the breadth of the subject matter will only limit our students' views of what they are majoring in.

This type of omission runs throughout discussions of our discipline over the past thirty years, precisely the time period in which we have been expanding what we think of as "English." In Orange's 1979 work *English as a Pre-Professional Major*, he quotes a junior in college who asks, “Why do not high school and college counselors make these facts known? Why did I have to wait until my third year of college to find out that English majors can do something besides teach or work on a newspaper staff? It seems to me that in this age of growing unemployment, people in the world of education should try harder to communicate to students all the possibilities of their major” (18-19). The mention of high levels of unemployment still connects to our graduating students today, whom we continue to train for graduate school at a time when the job market for English PhDs is near historic lows, or we leave them to fall back on teaching, ignoring the other options. [4]

In fact, I have not even mentioned the absence of composition and rhetoric in my previous examples, and neither have the authors I've referenced. Donald Stewart points out this omission when he says simply, “I am prepared to argue that point on the grounds that English majors should be given a full perception of work now going on in the field, and that they will not get a full perception of composition history and theory are omitted” ("What Should It Be," 194). Composition and rhetoric is one of the fastest-growing areas of interest in our discipline, yet, as Stewart comments, “too many people in this country, majoring in English, do not know that composition is much more than superficial paper grading” ("Some Afterthoughts," 130). [5] Students see us do this work, but, beyond some education majors, they never understand that there is a theory and praxis behind the work of composition professors.

With such omissions, rather than broadening our students' perceptions of the field, we are limiting them, and thus their options after they graduate, leaving them on their own to find ways to use a degree that we encouraged them to pursue. The question then becomes how we communicate the breadth of the discipline to students without creating a major that overwhelms them with requirements, limiting their ability to pursue any interest to any degree.

There are usually two approaches to this problem. One solution is to make the degree more practical, to include courses that are clearly geared toward helping students find employment after they graduate, almost always through writing courses or encouraging a second major in a more practical subject. An extreme example comes from the ADE Ad Hoc Committee on the English Major in 2004, as they commented:

> A number of chairs associated a resurgence in majors with curricular changes that addressed students' employment concerns. In a typical response to the survey, a chair said that growth in majors was generated by a new curriculum designed "to prepare for the professional and economic decisions they will confront upon graduation." Some departments have found responsible ways to satisfy the pragmatic impulses of parents and students without radically reconfiguring the English major. . . . Other respondents to our survey attested to the popularity of new writing courses directly related to careers for English majors, courses with titles like Editing or Careers in Writing. One member of our committee says that his department's professional writing certificate, which students earn by completing a cluster of writing courses, gives graduates a competitive edge in the job market by convincing prospective employers of their writing proficiency. One chair wrote that students elected to major in English after the creation of a public relations major in the English curriculum. Another pointed to a multimedia focus as generating majors. (203)

Though the chairs mentioned in the report did not radically alter their respective departments, they did add more practical options to the degree, such as professional writing, multimedia, and public relations (a field usually not thought of under the English discipline at all).

Not surprisingly, many English professors view this approach as some form of selling out to the crass demands of the marketplace. The idea of the professor in the ivory tower, away from the common concerns of Mammon, is one that they continue to embrace and propagate. Jane Donahue Eberwein, for example, argues that, in order to encourage our students to remain in English, we frequently

> give them the arguments we honed for philistine outsiders—emphasizing the most narrowly vocational aspects of our curriculum: journalism, technical writing courses, business internships, and courses about the doctor in literature. We urge them, often against their wills, into management or computer science minors. We exhort our students to prepare for business only to find that a surprising number define themselves as aspiring poets. Ironically, we capitulate to the deterministic idea of education as training for specific job slots in the economy out of concern for their welfare. But, just because "Things are in the saddle and ride mankind," must we adjust the stirrups? (605)

Her approach, instead, is to “subordinate critical theory and historical coverage to the humanistic ideas at the heart of the literary masterworks,” as we “no longer assume that most majors will move directly into graduate school or even that an advanced degree in English necessarily signals a teaching career” (606). The assumption here is that the “humanistic ideas” are worthwhile in and of themselves, and she seems to give no thought to the idea that students might need to find a job after they graduate. [6]

Other scholars take a similar approach, as they argue that the English degree need not be altered to be practical, but they do not focus on the humanities, as Eberwein does. Instead, they argue that the English degree is already practical; students simply do not know it yet. Orange comments that “training in English and literature, particularly at the college level, far from being a waste of time, is invaluable preparation for futures in four outstanding professional areas: law, medicine, business, and federal service” (2), while Clayton points out that “we don't need to *make* the major in English useful groundwork for a career; it already *is*” (Clayton 127-28). However, this approach still ignores the idea of how we communicate the breadth of opportunities to our students. The assumption is that they will have the skills necessary to find employment after they leave our colleges and universities; thus, they will somehow also have the knowledge that those jobs exist. This problem goes beyond the practical aspects of their finding a job, though, as by not informing them of the true breadth of the discipline, we limit their enjoyment of it. Some students who only moderately enjoy analyzing literature or teaching may be enamored with film or language or how one teaches writing or how one crafts an argument within a business setting or a variety of other areas of our discipline that they simply do not know exist.

However, those who argue that a major overhaul of our curriculum is not necessary, that the major is already well-designed for those who are interested in the broader range of our discipline are correct. Reading and analyzing literature has been preparing students for this range of interests for decades, as the previous survey information communicates. Thus, our job is not to revise our degrees to make them more practical; instead, we must reshape the way we communicate our discipline to our students. There are two areas where we can give them this message in ways that do not disrupt our departments but that will still serve our students well: the introductory course to the English major and advising.

My interest in the introductory course to the discipline comes from my having taught our newly-revised course two years ago and from preparing to teach a slightly revised version of it this fall. Like many schools, we had a course titled Writing About Literature; however, when we revised our major to include a writing track in our major, we expanded the course to include all three tracks (literature, teaching, and writing) and renamed it Introduction to English Studies. However, as many other schools have done, we did not significantly change the content of the course, and many students, especially those in the writing track, pointed out that the class did not engage their interests; instead, it was taught mainly as a literature course, as it always had been.

Thus, in an attempt to explore ideas about how to truly broaden the course and include all aspects of our major, I began looking at syllabi from other schools for ideas and points of comparison and contrast. What I found was the same divide we were struggling with, as almost all of the thirteen syllabi I looked at focused on literature and theory, overlooking creative writing, film, and linguistics and, oddly, almost completely ignoring teaching, even though their course descriptions argued that English was a broad discipline. For example, a syllabi from Western Kentucky University states that they will consider “the relationships among the various subjects and activities that constitute English studies,” as well as “the various resources and opportunities available to scholars/teachers/writers” (Schneider 1). However, there are no assignments that relate to teaching or creative writing (though there is an intellectual autobiography, but seemingly little instruction on how to write one).

Some courses go even further and mimic a literature course with an introduction to critical theory attached to it and more writing about that literature and theory. The description for such a course at Valdosta State University begins by stating that it is “an introduction to the field of English studies,” but also states that it will focus “on the skills in writing, critical reading, interpretation, research, and bibliography as well as on the major critical approaches to language and literature essential to work in the discipline” (Thompson 1). Thus, the course does not actually introduce students to English studies, but to the analysis of literature. Also, while the major critical theories are “essential” to work in the field, there are a wide variety of other aspects of the discipline that could be considered “essential,” but they are ignored in such courses.

What often happens in such courses is that they become one more place where professors focus on their areas of interest rather than structuring the course for the benefit of the students. Michael Bérubé comments in passing, “Titled ‘Writing about Literature,' it can accommodate any topic or focus (mine have been autobiography, twice, and African American literature, once) so long as it assigns thirty to forty pages of writing multiple assignments” (3-4). In other words, as long as we make students write a good deal, it does not matter how limited their view of the discipline is.

By ignoring this course as an ideal place to showcase the breadth of the discipline, professors are causing students to begin their major with an already skewed view of English studies. Instead, this class is a perfect place to put into action several of Evans' suggestions for English departments that he crafted in 1978, as we obviously have been ignoring them for over thirty years:

> 3. Keep interest in, and gather information about, alternative careers at all times, even when teaching jobs are plentiful. 4. Do whatever seems necessary to break the myth that college teaching and literary scholarship are the highest aspirations for promising English majors. English should not seek to nourish itself at the expense of preparing students for other fields. 5. Do whatever seems necessary to break the myth that most English majors should or will go into secondary school teaching. 6. Stress at all times the practical skills of reading, writing, and speaking. Give students practice, practice, and more practice in writing. 7. Give English majors better information about alternative careers; counsel them objectively, supportively, and helpfully whenever they show interest in such careers. (205)

Of course, some institutions do try to do this in an introductory course when they bring in guest speakers about the variety of interests in the degree program, an approach I plan to try this fall. However, even those classes can still limit the view of students. For example, a syllabus from Washington State University is structured around the five major areas of their major—literature, creative writing, rhetoric, professional writing and visual media, and texts in context (which I'm assuming is literary theory); however, the focus of the course is still on interpretation: “Interpretation is at the heart of everything we do, whether analyzing literature, understanding the appeal of Super Bowl ads or reality television, reading a battlefield letter from a Civil War soldier, trying to write a good poem, figuring out the ways in which texts imitate, resist, or speak intertextually to other texts, or seeing the ways in which cultural forces, including such features as social oppression and the pressures of the marketplace, shape authorial expression in various media” (Drews and Brewster 1). Though they mention creative writing in this statement and in the course, there are no assignments practicing creative writing or the workshop method, which is certainly essential for any English major who hopes to work in creative writing in any way during their time as an undergraduate. Also, there is no mention whatsoever of teaching, despite the fact that interpretation is integral to being a teacher at any level.

It is this omission of teaching in these courses that I find so odd, especially given our idea that many of our graduates will be teachers. Even though less than five percent of them will end up pursuing graduate degrees in English, we load these introductory courses with theory and analysis, while ignoring what roughly fifteen percent of our graduates will ultimately do in their careers. Thomas P. Miller and Brian Jackson write simply

> Perhaps the greatest weakness in English majors is their limited attention to the needs of the many majors who plan to teach. Discussions of teaching are often confined to a single methods course or exiled to departments of education. Reducing teaching to a methodical concern has enabled "content" faculty to avoid coming to terms with the fact that they teach for a living, and it has incapacitated the discipline in ways that have compounded the effects of confining writing instruction to the margins of undergraduate studies. (684)

On top of this omission, we leave out the wider variety of choices that might spark ideas of how students can pursue their passion of English in interesting ways while they are a student and after they have graduated.

Such a course should introduce students to every aspect of the English degree at a particular school, but it must go

beyond simply stating that film is an avenue for pursuit. Rather, students should be given the opportunity to practice in that sub-area, if even for a minor assignment, such as a one-page response or journal entry. Students should be introduced to the workshop method with at least one practical application of it, even if they have no interest in pursuing creative writing. If they become teachers, they will at least be aware of this approach to teaching, and it will serve them well in literature courses where they will serve as peer editor. If they do not pursue English in what we think of as a traditional form, they will learn how to give honest, constructive criticism, a skill that will serve them well in any forum, and they will begin to become better readers.

Along the same lines, they should examine film in the same way, at a minimum. Again, if they become teachers, they can begin learning how to lead a class through a comparison of a film and a written text or simply to discuss a film as a text itself. If they become creative writers, they will learn about changes in narrative and media. If they explore a different use for English, then they will at least have learned how better to analyze visual representation, the dominant discourse of our era.

I could continue with similar examples of linguistics and theory, among others, but the point should be rather clear by now. Detractors of such an approach would argue that the class would be shallow and would not give students the skills they need to succeed in higher-level courses. However, an introductory course should be wide, not deep; further exploration of any aspect of the discipline should be left to courses that focus on those areas. It is in those courses that the skills will be developed; they should simply be introduced in the first course in the major, much as we do with literature. We do not expect a survey course of major authors in American literature to have the same depth as a senior-level seminar on one author. In the same way, we should not leave the skill development to the introductory course, but we should weave it throughout the curriculum, developing the ideas that were merely mentioned in the first course in the major.

The other area where a broader version of the discipline could be given is in advising. For many professors, advising is simply a place where we help students arrange a schedule that will allow them to graduate with enough credit hours in the least amount of time. Of course, we go beyond this to help them take courses that will strengthen their interest in a particular area of literature or that we believe will help them in graduate school, but we do not discuss what other ways they might use their English degree after they finish at our schools.

It is here that our knowledge of the field and our own department serves us well. For example, I have an additional Master's degree in library science, so students who are interested in pursuing that area of graduate work are often directed to me. Unfortunately, they are usually encouraged to come see me by other students instead of the professors who know that I have such a degree. They do not ignore such concerns purposefully; instead, they do not think that a student might pursue anything other than an advanced degree in English or become a teacher. In a special issue of the *CEA Critic*, several professors wrote about advising and the English major. Philip J. Egan raises this issue when he discusses different conversations we should have with students at various points in their careers. It is at the first meeting that he believes this broadening of the discipline should begin: “And here, from the earliest moment [in advising], I think it's important to suggest that students think broadly about their major rather than narrowly” (Egan 45). However, the process of expansion should not end there. Instead, it should go throughout their degree program, as they begin to form ideas about what their lives will look like. Egan divides them into two groups—the ones who have a romantic idea about the English degree and those who have given up any hope of ever finding a job. He points out that both will benefit from such an opening of the discipline: “These students [ones who have unrealistic plans for their future] and the more despairing ones need to multiply the possibilities for themselves; they need to see the full richness that the world of writing, editing, research, and publishing offers. Yes, we can tell them, the jobs *are* there, but students need to know more about who they themselves are as well as what the market needs” (Egan 47).

It is our job to show them the wealth of opportunities that exist for English majors and to help them know themselves, as well. However, that involves getting to know our students and our colleagues in ways that go beyond the bare minimum. It is not enough to simply suggest classes that fit with students' sleep schedules and to write letters of recommendation for graduate school, where we've pushed them, though they would be happier as a librarian. Abram Van Engen argues that we must remember that the study of literature is not solely about the literature: “Students do not take literature to learn only what constitutes a metaphor or a simile; they take literature because metaphors and similes *say something*. In other words, the answer to the question ‘What do students of literature want a literature class to teach?’ is the same answer that ought to have put professors in the business to begin with: that it matters for their lives” (Van Engen 8). While his argument is true, we must know enough about our students' lives—their hopes and their dreams, and especially what they actually do with their lives once they leave our classes and our lives—to shape our teaching to them.

If we talk to our alumni and find out what they do after they graduate, we can shape our advising and our introductory courses to help our students decide what they should do with their lives. The discipline of English is a solid preparation for a wide variety of jobs, as decades of English majors have shown us. However, our students need to know what we are preparing them for, in all its permutations; otherwise, we have merely taught them literature and not how and why it can matter.

Appendix [return to text]

Special thanks go to Jaimie Moss from our Alumni department, as she sent out the emails about the survey.

Survey for English Graduates

I used our alumni office to contact students via email, sending them to an online survey. We had a response rate of 35% (71 out of 204), which is about average for an email survey. The questions and results from the first two questions (the only ones used for this article) are below.

1. What did you plan to do after graduating from Lee?

	Number of Respondents	Percentage
attend graduate school in Literature	14	19.7
attend graduate school in Creative Writing	0	0

attend graduate school in Rhetoric and Composition	0	0
attend graduate school in Education	4	5.6
attend graduate school in Library Science	1	1.4
attend law school	2	2.8
attend graduate school in something else	6	8.5
teach high school English	24	33.8
teach middle school English	7	9.9
teach another subject	0	0
go into publishing	4	5.6
work as a writer without attending graduate school	0	0
other	9	12.7
please specify:		
Total	**71**	**100.0**

2. What did you do after graduating from Lee? (if you did multiple things, please focus on the one that you did for the longest period of time or whatever you feel most defines your post-Lee life)

	Number of Respondents	**Percentage**
attend graduate school in Literature	8	11.3
attend graduate school in Creative Writing	0	0
attend graduate school in Rhetoric and Composition	1	1.4
attend graduate school in Education	3	4.2
attend graduate school in Library Science	1	1.4
attend law school	2	2.8
attend graduate school in something else	8	11.3
teach high school English	14	19.7
teach middle school English	6	8.5
teach another subject	0	0
go into publishing	0	0
work as a writer without attending graduate school	0	0
other	28	39.4
please specify:		
Total	**71**	**100.0**

3. Rate how well-prepared you were for graduate school in the following areas:

	Not Prepared	Slightly Prepared	Mostly Prepared	Completely Prepared
Research skills				

Reading ability

Knowledge of critical theories

Knowledge of literary periods

Writing ability

4. How did classes you took at Lee prepare you for the areas you felt you were well-prepared for? Please be as specific as you can.

5. What was lacking in classes you took at Lee that led to your being not as prepared in other areas? Please be as specific as you can.

6. List one or two classes, assignments, readings, events, or anything else from your time at Lee that relates to English that had the greatest positive impact on your professional life following your graduation.

7. List one or two classes, assignments, readings, events, or anything else from your time at Lee that relates to English that had the greatest negative impact on your professional life following your graduation.

8. Did majoring in English help you get your current job? If so, why? If not, why not?

9. Does having majored in English help you do your present job? If so, how? If not, why not?

10. What advice do you wish someone had given you when you began your English major at Lee?

11. If you were back at the beginning of your major again, what decisions would you make differently about majors, minors, course selection, foreign language courses, whatever? Please be as specific as possible.

12. Is there anything else you think we should know about the English major at Lee?

Demographic Information

13. Sex M F

14. Graduation Year:

15. Highest Degree Earned (anywhere):

[return to text]

Notes

[1] A short list of other useful articles that raise this question of what one can do with an English major include Philip J. Egan's “Beyond Academic Advising: The Stages of Student Anxiety and Advising Help for Undergraduate English Majors”; Thomas P. Miller and Brian Jackson's “What Are English Majors For?”; William H. Evans' “What Does the Research on Alternative Careers Say to English Departments and English Majors?”; John J. Clayton's “Planning and the English Major”; Mark Smith's “Advising English Majors: Myths, Truths, and Dirty Little Secrets”; Donald C. Stewart's “What Is an English Major, and What Should It Be?”; and J. Rocky Colavito, Lisa Abney, and Suzanne Disheroon Green's “Selling the Truth: What English Majors Need to Hear.” Though there have not been any recent books on the subject, Dorothy Bestor's *Aside from Teaching English, What in the World Can You Do?* raises interesting ideas that are still relevant to today's professors and students, even if the statistics and contact information are out of date. Thanks to my student worker Jordan Davis for helping with interlibrary loan requests to gather a wide variety of materials on this subject. [return to text]

[2] According to Audrey Williams June's “Who's Teaching at American Colleges? Increasingly, Instructors Off the Tenure Track,“ "At community colleges, four out of five instructors worked outside the tenure track in 2007. At public research institutions, graduate students made up 41 percent of the instructional staff that year. And at all institutions, the proportion of instructors working part time continued to grow.” Also, according to the Association of Departments of English, the percentage of PhDs who receive tenure-track positions has dropped from 51.1 percent in 1991-92 to 42 percent in 2000-2001 (“Career Information for Graduate Students and Junior Faculty Members” 4). [return to text]

[3] The English Coalition is “a group of eight professional associations concerned with the teaching of English from elementary school through graduate school” (Armstrong 33). [return to text]

[4] In 2008-09, job listings in English fell 22.2% (Gordon), for example. He also points out that this figure is not an “historic low,” but Rosemary Feal is worried that “an increasing share of English department jobs are for part-time or temporary positions that do not include the possibility of lifetime tenure” (Gordon). [return to text]

[5] According to the Association of Departments of English, in 1985, only nine percent of the job openings were in rhetoric and composition, but by 2000, it made up 21 percent (“Career Information for Graduate Students and Junior Faculty Members” 2). [return to text]

[6] See James Slevin for another approach to this in his article “Academic Literacy and the Discipline of English,” where he argues "that a curriculum at any given school should be developed on the basis of something besides the local needs of the students one teaches. Such development would require that teachers in English studies across the tertiary system imagine themselves together in a scholarly and pedagogical project deriving not just from local pedagogical questions but also from questions about the meaning and status of English studies, especially where it no longer has status. This intellectual project, widely shared across educational levels, may admittedly have attached to it, as different institutions will inevitably require, different names, titles, outcomes, educational objectives, desirable behaviors, skills, and so on. These permutations, many of them perverse, are almost unavoidable, but they need to be ignored” (Slevin 204). [return to text]

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