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## A Letter Home to Parents

Jennifer Jennings Davis

Dear Parents of a Newly Declared English Major,

I promise you it will be alright.

Your child is embarking on a fascinating endeavor that will hone the intellect, develop laser-like precision with all forms of communication, and will cultivate an understanding and respect of the human condition that no other degree can provide. I'm sure you have heard news reports about how young people today need "21st Century Skills" to be successful professionals—they must be able to think critically, communicate effectively, analyze data in multi-media formats, and maintain technological fluency. You want your child to be competitive in the job market and an English degree can provide all these skills and more.

Now, I know you are not much interested in hearing about those English majors who have attained great success in the entertainment industry. People like Paul Newman, Paul Simon, James Cameron, or Sigourney Weaver are rare birds in a tough industry. You are realistic, hard-working people who want your child to be a productive member of society, by specifically (yet not exclusively) upholding a steady and respectable job that will become a career with decent benefits. I understand.

Your concern is that your child may not have similarly realistic goals. With that being the case, you surely are not interested in hearing about the likes of Truman Capote, Eudora Welty, or Robert Frost who made their livings primarily as professional writers. Quite honestly, this last set frightens you more than the first as you do not wish for your child to attempt to make her living exclusively as a novelist or poet. You understand this is more of a longshot than breaking into showbiz. You are wise. You know that your child is pretty sure about this English thing and you further know that

at some point the notion of being a novelist or poet will seriously cross her mind. You hope that this is only for one small, fleeting moment. Believe me, I truly understand.

Perhaps it will ease your trepidations to know that we English majors are well represented in other arenas. We are politicians, judges, journalists, and business executives (Mario Cuomo, Thurgood Marshall, Barbara Walters, and Michael Eisner). Astronauts, scientists, and doctors are also in our ranks (Sally Ride, Rachel Carson, and Benjamin Spock). You might find these professions more palatable, attainable, or at least somewhat comforting.

But your main concern is regarding the everyday, practicality of this major, and rightly so. What will your child *do* with it? Besides offering you assurances and citing famous English majors who have soared to fantastic heights, I can give you a few practical, down-to-earth examples of how my English degree has helped me maintain gainful employment over the past few decades. My degree has provided me the qualifications and nimbleness to successfully move in and out of many career sectors. I have been a technical writer creating manufacturing procedure manuals, crafting speeches for university officials, and composing articles, annual reports, and proposals; a junior-high, high school, and college instructor in the areas of English, journalism, speech, drama, and business; a university fundraiser with both outright and planned giving experience; and a director of a state-funded, non-profit program.

Though some of these jobs may seem disparate, they are actually connected through a common set of skills—skills that are in high demand and unfortunately for us all in limited supply—skills that not only I, but many others (famous and non-famous English majors alike), acquired during our undergraduate and graduate studies. With honesty and humility, I can assure you that this English major has managed to earn a respectable income pursuing these assorted professions, and over

the past twenty-odd years have yet to return to my parents' home with a hand out or in need of a place to stay. Please know that you and your child can have this peace of mind, too.

My first job in the fundraising field was with a statewide university system, four campuses that included a tier-one research institution, a medical center, and an endowment in excess of \$1 billion. The daily work environment was extremely corporate—aspirations for corner offices, cubicles filled with support staffers, and navy or charcoal suits. During lunch on my first day on the job, after a morning of reading texts on charitable tax laws and silently wondering to myself how I ever managed to land such a plum position, my boss said, “Look, we can teach anyone the technical aspects of this job, but we can’t teach the people skills. Knowing facts and figures is one thing, but knowing *how* and *when* to use them is a whole different ball game.” I competed with candidates who had MBAs, were CPAs or CFPs. They had experience in insurance, banking, and legal services. How did they not make the cut? What made me stand out? After much thought and years of experience, I have come to the following conclusion.

There are four unsung, transferable skill-sets of the English major that provide a secure foundation for attaining professional success.

**1. English majors know how to research and study.**

English majors are resourceful and creative when it comes to gathering information. Mind you I learned these skills in a pre-internet era where a bit more physical footwork was required, but the basics are still the same in this era of technology. We know how to dig for information, whether in databases or in the stacks of old. We know how to search, inquire, follow leads, and discern superior from

inferior information. We are critical of sources. We think of unique places and ingenious ways to gather information we need.

When preparing for that fundraising interview, the internet was in its infancy— websites for companies and organizations were not commonplace as they are today. If one wanted information from a company or organization, particularly a small one, direct contact was often required. I went to the foundation office on the campus of my alma mater and asked if they had a copy of an annual report I could have. The secretary, a true guarded mid-westerner, asked why I wanted such information. I truthfully said that when I was a student I received a scholarship that allowed me to complete my degree. I mentioned the name of the scholarship and said, “I’m thankful and am kind of interested in how this whole thing works.” She smiled and told me that the donors who started the scholarship named it after their son who died in childhood and never had the opportunity to go to college. “It’s a shame really. We didn’t know about this until the attorney’s office called us and told us they had left this gift in their will. We never got to thank them or shake their hands.” After accepting and finishing the offered cup of coffee, I left the office with copies of the past five-years’ annual reports, a commemorative pamphlet celebrating the history of the foundation, an assortment of newsletters and promotional materials, and some interesting stories from a lonely secretary who’d held her position for twenty some years. Today, all but the secretary’s stories can be found on-line.

The opening inquiry of the interview was, “Tell me what you know about our foundation.” I was able to tell my future boss when the foundation started and when each of the four campuses joined, how many standing committees exist and which board members serve on each committee (“If I understand correctly from last year’s annual report, it seems each board member is asked to serve on at least two

committees, unless you're Mr. So-And-So; he serves on four." I can still remember the smile that escaped my future boss's control with my utterance of that statement). I could recite raw numbers and percentages of dollars raised that came from individual, corporate, and foundation donors. And I was able to share a brief narrative about how I, a direct beneficiary of such generous philanthropy, was awarded a scholarship established by donors who made a gift to the institution from their will.

During my first-day luncheon, my boss confessed, "After you answered my first question, the interview was yours to lose. Everyone else said some version of they didn't know much, but were eager to learn. I don't have time for that. I knew by your response that you are thorough and that you know how to get the answers you need to do the job. By the way, how did you get all that information?"

The ability to effectively research landed me this job and others. The lack of these skills denied my competitors the opportunity. Good, strong English Departments demand impeccable research skills from their majors. I promise you, it pays off in very fruitful ways and is valuable in all sectors of employment. Mastery of this skill is achieved by few. Your English major child will be in this select group by graduation.

## **2. English majors understand the intricacies and complexities of character analysis.**

This is a key skill that your child will use every day in the workplace. With superiors and subordinates, with colleagues and clients, a significant portion of your child's future success will be connected to her ability to analyze the character in front of her and respond accordingly. Very few degree programs teach this skill, which is quite a shame due to its utility and extreme value in the workplace. It involves a keen eye for observation and a curiosity to understand how and why people work.

During courses in American, British, and World Literature, in creative prose and poetry classes, in philosophy and classics seminars, your child will analyze literary characters who have desires, goals, and motivations. She will contemplate the multiple forces that influence these characters in their actions and thoughts. I cannot impress upon you how absolutely valuable this skill is when sitting at the boardroom table. It starts with the power of observation—actions, behaviors, dress, objects in offices and on desks, etc. From the obvious to seemingly insignificant, all of these bits reveal meaningful information about people. They tell a story that the person often will not verbalize him or herself. The English major in the office notices that one of his teammates is more conscientious about making sure she’s in the break room at 9:30 every day when the VP is getting coffee, than she is about the quality of the work she is doing for her team’s project. Good to know when our English major is assigned as team leader and begins to assemble his team. He also notices the shadow of wiped-off baby spittle on his boss’s lapel, the two open cans of caffeinated soda on her desk, and the dark circles under her eyes that she almost successfully concealed with make-up. Not the day to discuss his promotion. Such details are overlooked by many, but prove to be valuable currency for the professional with a degree in English.

### **3. English majors master the science of communication.**

A portion of your child’s curriculum will be dedicated to courses focused specifically on the technical aspects of writing; however, she will be practicing her writing skills in every English class she takes. I have never known an English class not to require writing, though some are more rigorous about this requirement than others. Over the next four years (ideally) or more (realistically) your child will be writing every day. Please understand that writing is not exclusively a physical process. Even when your child is not composing language with a keyboard or pen, she

will be constructing it in her mind, sorting information, rearranging the order of her ideas, debating with herself how to turn a phrase. These are skills she will use every day in the workplace. Such practice cultivates very deliberate, precise thinkers, speakers, writers, employees, and leaders. Rarely will your child find herself saying in a professional conversation, “Well, you know what I mean.” Of course not. She’ll know exactly how to communicate her message in a myriad of ways depending upon her audience and the given situation.

Your child will learn how to master the persnickety balance of ethos, pathos, and logos. She will be able to compare and contrast various entities, explain causes and effects, and analyze processes. She will avoid logical fallacies in her own constructions (well, unless she is one of our ranks who ventures into politics or marketing, but they use those by design). And you can bet she’ll hone in on them as weaknesses in other’s arguments and will be prepared to counter such faulty claims, particularly with a graceful sophistication when used by her corporate superiors.

English majors are well-experienced with the exercises of inductive and deductive reasoning; divergent and convergent thinking. We can successfully navigate a situation that requires an examination of all viable possibilities, as well as a situation that requires concentrated focus on developing a particular option. These skills are especially useful, respected, and actively sought-after when developing business strategies or crafting proposals. Your child will be a strong asset to her future employer.

#### **4. English majors continually practice the art of communication.**

This is the most challenging of the four skill-sets enumerated in this letter and is not a guarantee to all English majors. And I must confess to you that I’m not sure that the art of communication can actually be taught, but it most definitely is

cultivated by the material studied in an English program. It involves the discerning examination of both content and form in the works of the Greats.

For the practitioner, the art of communication is never finished as one can always improve style or innovate craft (just ask a professional writer—they will find faults in their published works, areas in pieces of which they are not satisfied). This skill requires on-going practice and grooming, of which the English major eagerly accepts. With continual practice, it gets better, stronger, and more effective over time, but there is never an end that can be achieved. It is nuance and it elevates one from being perceived as merely competent to a level of admired quality and merit. In the workplace English majors know whether it is best to send an email, pick up the phone, or jot a handwritten note card and are aware of the implications each mode of communication conveys. Most in the office won't give it a second thought. We are mindful of how we craft our tone and diction. We understand the importance of timing when presenting a message and how to monitor the flow of information so that colleagues and clients are neither bored nor overwhelmed. English majors understand subtext. We know how to make meaning from the unsaid and know how to read the unwritten. There is no single answer as to how one does this, as it is utterly dependent on each given context. But by understanding the science of communication, one is well equipped to practice the art of communication.

Artfulness is also connected with ethics and integrity, which you well know is in dire need in corporate America. Your child will read the works of great writers whose themes explore right and wrong. Such works will serve as examples not only for writing, but for life as well. As mentioned earlier, not all English majors have a command of the art of communication. But the ones who do, or who practice it faithfully, have a profound respect for the power of the word. English majors

understand that language is a system of representations of greater things. We understand that many times we are personally reflected in what our words convey and how they are conveyed. If we say we'll have the presentation completed by 10 o'clock, we get it done by 10 o'clock. If our reports claim facts, we have verified them. If we shake your hand and say that we appreciate working with you, we mean it. And if we didn't mean it, we could devise a slew of assorted phrases to keep the meaning nebulous without being offensive. We are precise with what we communicate and how we communicate it. Our integrity is our work product, just like the writers we studied. And through the repetition of artful practice, we build respected reputations.

In closing, I can assure you that that the skills I've acquired through my training in the discipline of English have positioned me well to accept jobs that have challenged my intellect, kept me curious, have paid the bills, and have allowed me to observe many aspects of the human condition. My jobs have afforded me the opportunity to travel and the great fortune of meeting fascinating people who prima fascia may be viewed as ordinary to most. I have developed sustaining relationships, friendships really, with people of all ages and wildly diverse backgrounds. They have entrusted me with their stories and I have trusted them with mine. I have not only earned a living with my English degree, but have acquired experiences and encountered souls that have pieced together the lovely patchwork of my enrich life. Such a course of study shaped my sensibilities to be cautious and skeptical when warranted and to find beauty and value in very unusual places, people, and venues.

Fine parents, I do hope this is the type of life you desire for your child and that you are able to embrace her mighty fine decision to major in English.

I promise you it will be more than alright.

Sincerely,