



# CAREER ADVICE

from Alumni

## AN ENGLISH MAJOR IS WORTH PURSUING!

In late February, the department hosted a “What Can You Do with an English Major” career session for interested students, bringing in the director of the Career Development Center and four alumni from the undergraduate and graduate English programs, who informally shared their experiences about their career journey. The information and stories presented at this event were both practical and helpful, so we thought we’d summarize them for this issue of *Writing in the Margins*.

### Career Resources Available to English Students

Diane Crist, director of the UST Center for Career Development (and a former English major herself), noted that career planning really has the following four main components: 1) self assessment, which focuses on your interests, skills, and values; 2) a reality check, or exploring what job occupations are available to you; 3) job and internship seeking; and 4) entering your career and being willing to make career changes as necessary. The staff at the Center can assist current students or alumni on a drop-in basis or by appointment and the Center regularly offers various career-oriented seminars throughout the semester. They also have access to information about local career fairs, such as an annual nonprofit career fair that occurs in March. Internships (paid or unpaid) are also a great way to gain some work experience before graduating, so English majors shouldn’t shy away from the variety of available opportunities, many of which can be found on the Center’s web site. Finally, Crist offered one final piece of advice: don’t underestimate the power of networking—finding a great job often does boil down to who you know and the personal connections that you’ve made.

### Dan Olson ('04, English/Political Science/Broadcast Journalism Major)

Dan is currently a graduate student at St. Thomas pursuing a joint degree in law and business administration, with an emphasis on athletics administration. He notes in his presentation that “I think a lot of people just assume that each of those two separate graduate programs wouldn’t necessarily have open doors to English majors, but in actuality, that’s not the case.” The active reading and writing in his English courses prepared him for the rigorous demands that law school makes on a student, and although he admits that he “hadn’t touched a calculator” since his first-year student calculus course, he discovered that “an MBA program isn’t all necessarily number-crunching; in fact, a lot of what you do there is read and write as well as group projects, and while I don’t necessarily have the aptitude to lead the way on some of the more complicated math, when we get those figures crunched, I’m the one that [the group] turns to when it comes to writing the report.”

Dan concluded his presentation by offering the following piece of advice: “being an English major can prepare you for any facet of the professional world because you learn to critically read and write and both of those skills can help you in any area that you go to.” In other words, don’t sell yourself short on the skills that you develop as an English major.

### Michelle Filkins (M.A. in English '03)

Because she “really liked the research part of being an English major and writing papers,” she enrolled in library school,

graduated with her M.L.I.S. in Library and Information Science, and worked in academic libraries. She then came to UST and completed the M.A. in English program, which works in tandem with her second career as a founder and editor for Spout Press. As an undergraduate student, she was involved with her school's literary magazine and assumed an editorial position her senior year. Because she and a few others wanted to continue to publish a literary magazine after college and publish a wide range of writers, they founded Spout Press, began a quarterly literary journal in 1989, and started publishing books in 1997. One of the projects the press is currently working on is titled *Poets 25 and Under*, which finds young, talented writers, and works with them closely to publish a chapbook of 8-12 poems.

She encourages students to get involved with different organizations and opportunities and network with classmates, for "you never know, the person sitting next to you might be somebody you personally and professionally know for the next 10-15 years." Also, build relationships with your instructors – you may want to ask them for letters of recommendation that you need for graduate programs – and think of them "as not just your instructor in that class, but as a mentor who can help you figure out how you can grow the skills that you're learning in the program." Furthermore, "make sure that you are keeping copies of work that you really like, because, whether it is a graduate program, whether you want to publish it later, or whether [it's] part of a job application, you might need a sample of your writing." Finally, "you're building a great set of skills that you can transfer in any number of ways, so think about what you're doing, not in terms just of your degree, but all of the things that you can bring to whatever career you end up in."

#### **Luke Taylor ('93 English Major, '03 Master of Business Communication)**

Luke has taken many different roads on his career path, including working as a junior high teacher right out of college, gaining skills as a technical writer while working at the UST Information Resources and Technologies helpdesk, and freelance copyediting. He also worked as a travel writer for four years, a position that was "exciting. [You] get to travel around and explore cities and places around the world on someone else's expense." Desiring to settle down a bit and add a commercial application to his undergraduate English experience, Luke enrolled in the UST Master of Business Communication program and then worked as a communications specialist for a Dutch-based financial services company before "doing some freelance script writing and directing with a media production company." Three years ago, he applied for a job in the creative services department at Minnesota Public Radio/American Public Media. After interviewing there, he was

eventually told the job had been given to someone else, but that they'd keep his application materials on file. Surprisingly, almost "a year to the day," he was contacted by the creative director again and asked to re-interview, which ultimately resulted in his getting hired.

Luke had two pieces of sage advice to offer: "there are very few career decisions that you can make that are irrevocable; take a job and if you find out that you don't really like it, there's a chance to change – just as long as you don't burn any bridges. Also, don't burn any bridges before you get to them...[there are many employers] who like to Google their prospective employees and they've actually found things by Googling people that have put them off hiring someone." In other words, be thoughtful about any blogs that you write or posts that you make online.

#### **Carolyn LaViolette ('05 English Major and Women's Studies Minor)**

Carolyn originally planned on becoming a biology major, but realized that she wasn't as enthralled with that as she thought; because she enjoyed her English classes, she chose to become an English major instead. During her senior year, she served a year-long internship with the Minnesota AFL-CIO, working with their communications director and helping to write press releases, organize press events, and write the weekly labor newsletter that went out to most of the unions statewide. During her internship, she met various state legislators who were active in the labor community, one of whom was State Representative Nora Slawik. Shortly after graduation, Slawik called and asked if Carolyn would like to work as an entry-level assistant for State Senator Chuck Wiger. Carolyn was thrilled with the offer and accepted it, working first as his assistant and then as the committee administrator for the elections committee for the Minnesota Senate. After her nine months were over and the 2006 session ended, she broadened her political experience by working as a field organizer for DFL Senator Don Betzold's election campaign. After he was elected, he called her and offered her a position as the committee legislative assistant for the state government budget division, which has jurisdiction over about twenty-five state agencies. Even though work at the capitol is very fluid and one isn't normally stuck in any particular position for a long time, she is "currently toying with the idea of possibly going back to school for a masters in either public policy or a law degree."

Carolyn concluded her presentation by offering one piece of advice: "let life play out and be prepared to change; it sounds...bizarre, for how can you prepare for change? I grew up thinking that I needed to have a plan...and I've learned...that it's actually better if you're just flexible."

The English Department would like to thank the four alumni who graciously volunteered their time to speak to students at this event. If you are a UST English alumnus or alumna and would be interested in sharing your career experiences with students at next year's career session, please let us know by sending an email to [english@stthomas.edu](mailto:english@stthomas.edu).