

English

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In this State of the Discipline article, we examine the English Department, with a specific emphasis on how the English major has evolved over the last twenty-five years, as well as review the English teaching major.

IF YOU STUDIED English at BYU twenty-five years ago like I did, you likely would barely recognize the program today. At the time, the canon was narrowly focused around British and American literature. I gained excellent analytical, communication, and writing skills, but I felt terrified about graduating because I really had no idea how to find a job and little understanding of how to market the value of my education in nonacademic settings.

BYU students majoring in English today can expect an educational experience that emphasizes competencies over rote learning and prepares them with experience and training in how to market their degrees. The English major has been restructured into tracks that underscore professional development. The English teaching major has also evolved as faculty respond to changing technological requirements and state standards. Moreover, the department is now more focused on promoting faculty professional development.

An Evolving Canon

IN THE EARLY 1980s, the English Department's literary canon was fairly narrow, emphasizing traditional British and American authors, most of whom were male and White. But during the 1980s and 1990s, many literature scholars developed new theoretical approaches to texts and expanded the canon. However, the transition was not without the challenges such changes tend to create. For example, as a graduate student,

Jill Terry Rudy (now associate department chair and professor) planned to write her thesis on Zora Neale Hurston, a mid-twentieth century African American folklorist and author. Dr. Rudy's oral exam committee told her not to write on Hurston, which reflected its bias against changing the canon. Fortunately, Dr. Rudy formed a new committee with more pluralistic views who welcomed canon expansion, and she proceeded with the project.

"A lot of the problems of the '90s were not unique to BYU," she says. "The country was in the midst of culture wars. But the English Department has been in a good place to grapple

with diversity of culture because that's part of what literature does. It helps us think through relationships, from intimate to family to communities to nations to the world."

And the canon continues to evolve. "The idea of the masterworks of British and American literature has been long gone," explains Phil Snyder, emeritus professor and former department chair. A student's major track may expand their reading well beyond Shakespeare, Chaucer, and Milton.

The English major still requires three courses introducing students to the basic flow of literary history. But students can choose from a much broader range of literature. "The curriculum has become more multicultural," says Dr.

Rudy. "We include more Asian American, Native American, and African American voices."

"We might, for example, offer a 300-level course on modern American literature focused on the Harlem Renaissance," Dr. Snyder says. "Within a fairly traditional structure, the department provides a variety of approaches, depending on the professor's expertise."

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From Canon to Competencies

THE EXPANDING CANON has been accompanied by an emphasis on learning competencies and skills. Lance Larsen, professor and department chair, says, "In the mid-1980s, we were concerned with coverage. Now we focus more on competencies and how we approach certain tasks and the cultivation of sensibilities."

Kimberly Johnson, professor and former associate chair, adds, "We are trying to cultivate critical thinking and analytical writing. You major in English to become a more sensitive reader of all the different texts around us and to become a more authoritative writer or master of your own rhetoric."

"When our students go into the workplace or graduate school," Dr. Larsen says, "they're able to take a story problem or a societal conundrum and make sense of it. They're not doing rote learning; they're learning skills that they can apply to a variety of situations."

Because the College teaches so many students across campus—most BYU students are required to take basic general education writing courses as part of an effort to improve student writing across campus—the competencies taught in the College have a large impact. The English Department teaches a vast number of these classes. "At the university level, the department is seen as a kind of workhorse," says Dr. Larsen, "and we teach these writing skills, which are important across the curriculum. Because we have that kind of presence, I think that our English majors have a leavening effect at the university. English is where students think, where they read books, where they juggle contrary ideas."

Professionalization of the Faculty

BYU HAS ALWAYS had talented, well-trained English faculty. But over the years there has been an increasing emphasis on faculty professional development and publishing. Dr. Snyder says, "When I was a student, we had a good handful of publishing scholars." But publishing was not as high a priority as it is today, and having a PhD was not necessarily a requirement.

Expectations for faculty have shifted radically since then. Dr. Rudy says that, over the last couple of decades, "The focus of the department administration has been more discriminating about hiring faculty more engaged with their field, not just teaching. They are concerned with publishing, and that connects with faculty promotions."

The department has moved "toward professionalization and specialization," Dr. Larsen says, with the result that "we are probably more savvy readers, more political readers in a good sense, and more willing to engage difference and pluralism (texts that give voice to a number of distinct subject positions)." When hiring, "we look more at the overall success of candidates. The hiring standard has gone up every year."

Matt Wickman, professor and founding director of the Humanities Center, says, "BYU has a continually emerging presence in various areas of scholarship. The faculty are doing engaged work in all areas of literature, folklore, rhetoric, and media studies, and a greater number of faculty are publishing in high-end venues, more faculty publishing books and not just articles. English at BYU is finally a book discipline more than an article discipline."

One might think such expectations would harm teaching. But Dr. Larsen adds, "In most cases, the best scholars also make the best teachers. With the emphasis on scholarship, teaching has moved up several notches." Dr. Wickman says, "There has always been dynamic teaching here. In that respect, the only difference is, top to bottom, the quality of teaching is better."

Overhauling the English Major

TWO OTHER IMPORTANT shifts have taken place in BYU's English program. One is the reconfiguration of the major in 2021 after a serious evaluation of the program. Dr. Rudy says, "We looked at the curriculum because of senior surveys and alumni surveys, which suggested that students wanted more direction throughout the major." Frank Christianson, professor and associate dean, adds, "We saw it as a moral imperative to take seriously the question of how to prepare students for life after graduation. We worked hard to create a program that does this."

Under the new configuration, students choose between four different tracks, or areas of emphasis:

- Literary Studies
- Literary Media and Cultures
- Professional Writing and Communication
- Creative Writing

This provides much more direction for their study and prepares them professionally for their careers. Dr. Larsen says, "In some ways, the earlier curriculum was faculty oriented, and represented the vestiges of a coverage model: these are the texts that we want people to know, and if they read them, they'll be prepared to do a variety of things. This new approach is more student centered and allows students to make their own choices. It's more outcome based."

English+

THE OTHER MAJOR shift is the development of an experience-based, complementary set of major requirements called English+, which was implemented several years ago.

"English+ is about integrating experience with study and coming away armed with skills we call competencies," explains Dr. Christianson. Through English+, students meet with advisors to plan their college careers, find experiences outside the classroom to develop their skills (including

Fabulous Student Opportunities

MY STUDENT EXPERIENCE twenty-five years ago had its share of growth opportunities, but today's English majors enjoy a remarkable number and wide variety of opportunities. As an English major in 2022, you can:

- Participate in the Landscape and Literature Study Abroad program, and get credit for wandering around the Lake District in England.
- Complete an internship in Stratford-upon-Avon at the Shakespeare Trust or in Grasmere with the Wordsworth Trust.
- Screen actual submissions for *Fourth Genre*, one of the nation's most prestigious venues for nonfiction.
- Take a one-credit class as part of the English Reading Series, and hear weekly from national and international writers, including Pulitzer Prize winners like Natasha Trethewey, Yusef Komunyakaa, Marilynne Robinson, Charles Simic, and Tracy K. Smith.
- Minor in global women's studies, American studies, or international cinema studies.
- Write content and edit for a tech company like Adobe.
- Do original archival work in the library.
- Conduct outreach work guided by Indigenous communities with Mike Taylor.
- Master the basics of making paper and creating a book in Jamie Horrocks's Victorian aesthetics class.
- Experience a Provo City internship with Jamin Rowan.
- Analyze fairytales on television with Jill Terry Rudy, and co-author an article.
- Submit work to four department magazines or journals (*Inscape*, *Criterion*, *Experience*, and *Leading Edge*), or work on them as an editor.

internships, study abroad, and mentored research), and learn how to describe their skills effectively to potential employers. Students also learn how to find scholarships and other funding.

The core competencies of English+ include learning how to present oneself professionally, building cultural competence, cultivating successful professional relationships (networking), communicating effectively, and harnessing and synthesizing evidence.

Students thrive through English+ in large part because of committed faculty. "I see the proposals of the English faculty to work with students," Dr. Christianson says. "They are highly active in conducting mentored research, even though they get very little credit for it."

Dr. Wickman adds, "English+ has created greater attention to internships for students, and that means our students are leaving here with greater awareness of their opportunities and of the preparation that will give them an advantage in a competitive marketplace."

The English Teaching Degree

MUCH LIKE THE English major, requirements in the English teaching degree have evolved over the last quarter century. The English teaching degree is an intrinsically important part of the department. As Dr. Christianson explains, English teaching is "the purest professional development program in the College." Associate Professor Dawan Coombs adds, "English teaching majors are essentially English majors who

also graduate licensed to teach English or language arts in 6–12 grade schools."

English teaching is one of five secondary school teaching majors in the College, the others being Spanish, French, German, and Chinese. Professor Chris Crowe says, "One thing that sets our program apart from other universities is our range of focused pedagogy classes. Some institutions cram everything into one or two methodology courses, but we're fortunate to have distinct courses on specific components of secondary English teaching."

Dr. Coombs says, "English teaching majors fulfill the English+ requirement through student teaching or working as a first-year teacher in one of our partner schools. The full-time faculty in the English teaching program are all former middle or high school teachers who also have PhDs or EdDs in related fields."

The program has added new courses to better prepare students for full-time secondary teaching and to meet state and national standards for accreditation, including courses which instruct students on meeting digital needs in the classroom. Further, "We've added a practicum component," Dr. Crowe says, "to give students more time in schools working with students."

Dr. Coombs says, "Amidst all the changes—both those made in response to policy and those made to strengthen the program—preparing preservice teachers with the content knowledge, pedagogical skills, and the dispositions that will help them succeed has remained the priority."

FACULTY FAVORITES

The Stewardship of English at BYU

ULTIMATELY, THE AIMS of an English degree at BYU are similar to those of most degrees at the university—to study and learn in an environment that builds faith and prepares students for successful life after graduation. That means tackling difficult topics fearlessly—yet with a goal not to be harmed by engaging with those topics. “We do everything everybody else does” in teaching English, Dr. Snyder says, meaning the department covers a great variety of genres and teaching skills. But we do so “in a very ethical environment that is built on a foundation of faith and community.”

In addition, Dr. Larsen notes, “Our own scripture says, ‘seek ye out of the best books words of wisdom; seek learning, even by study and also by faith’ (Doctrine and Covenants 88:118). Very few English departments even attempt to marry the spiritual and secular as we do. At most universities, to quote Yeats, ‘the center does not hold’ the way it used to. At BYU our pursuit of all things virtuous, lovely, of good report provides focus. Our study of secular topics can be enriched by looking at them through a spiritual lens.”

That spiritual emphasis touches many things. Leslee Thorne-Murphy, associate dean and associate professor, says, “There is something particularly rich in using that kind of spiritual perspective on language that informs our

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spirituality, or reading of the scriptures. Dare I say that I’m a better ‘prayer person,’ because I study English? That might be a bit presumptuous, but I do think that my studies inform the way that I interact with my God and with my fellow brothers and sisters in the Church. I hope we consider the gift of language as God-given.”

Yes, the core of study in the English Department is the development of skills within the context of literary and media analysis, but there is something special and ennobling in studying with spiritual eyes. Dr. Wickman says, “When you study with spiritually speaking and spiritually inspired students and colleagues, you can arrive at a unique understanding about what it means to be human and what it means to be a child of God. That’s what I find most unique about teaching in the English Department—Spirit-fueled, Spirit-led conversations and insights into what it means to be human, into what it means to be a child of God.” ■



SNYDER:
COCONUT
CREAM PIE



COOMBS:
ICE CREAM



GROVE:
FRESH HOMEMADE PIE



LARSEN:
CHOCOLATE CLOUD CAKE



RUDY:
BREAD PUDDING



JOHNSON:
BLUEBERRY PIE

