Understanding English Literature and Composition Graduates' Experiences Entering the Workforce Following Graduation

Trina Hansen Harding

Brigham Young University

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Understanding English Literature and Composition Graduates’ Experiences

Entering the Workforce Following Graduation

Trina Hansen Harding

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Science

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ABSTRACT

Understanding English Literature and Composition Graduates’ Experiences Entering the Workforce Following Graduation

Trina Hansen Harding
Department of Instructional Psychology and Technology, BYU
Master of Science

As college degrees become more common and the cost of these degrees increases, so does the debate about the worthwhileness and value of a college education, and of specific college degrees. One side of the debate uses statistical data about starting salaries and unemployment rates to claim that degrees within the humanities and liberal arts do not provide a good return on investment while the other side claims that a liberal arts education fosters the broad so-called “soft skills” that employers value most. However, both sides of the debate have neglected the perspectives of the graduates themselves, particularly as they transition from the university environment to the workforce. In this exploratory mixed-methods study I sought to understand this transition and English graduates’ perceptions of their degree, first through semi-structured interviews with 8 participants who graduated between 2010 and 2019, and then through the responses of 338 graduates from the same time frame who participated in a validation survey used to determine the pervasiveness of the themes identified in the interviews. I learned that, while the initial transition from degree to employment is challenging for many English graduates, most eventually found work that they are satisfied with. Perceptions of the English degree vary over time, but most participants recognized the skills they gained in the English major and appreciate the professional value of these skills, especially later on in their careers. Participants identified some factors, such as networking, prior internship and work experience, and completing a minor that made for a more positive transition to employment. They also pointed to ways that the English department could better prepare students for and support them during this transition including encouraging more applied experiences, helping students recognize their English skills, and better identify and talk about potential career paths open to English majors.

Keywords: liberal arts, college graduates, employment, humanities, English departments
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank Royce Kimmons for his guidance, patience, and encouragement throughout every step of this process. His help was invaluable. Thank you to Heather Leary for her counsel in qualitative design and analysis, and to Stephen Yanchar for his thoughtful reading and helpful feedback. I also thank the other faculty, the administration, and my fellow students in the Instructional Psychology and Technology program for such a great experience.

I am grateful to the English department for funding and supporting this research. Additionally, this work would not have been possible without the participants who generously shared their time and experiences with me.

My thanks and love to my family. My five children willingly took on cooking and laundry responsibilities to allow me more time to work. My parents and siblings cheered me on and offered helpful advice. My husband, Guy, steadily encouraged, loved me through my frustrations, and always expressed full confidence in my abilities.
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DESCRIPTION OF THESIS STRUCTURE AND CONTENT

This thesis, Understanding English Literature and Composition Graduates’ Experiences Entering the Workforce Following Graduation, is written in a journal-ready format that combines the requirements for a traditional thesis with the format required for journal publication. The existing literature on this topic is found primarily in statistical reports and opinion pieces. As a result, it is difficult to identify a specific target journal with precedents for publication. The journal-ready portion of the manuscript conforms to submission requirements for journals such as Studies in Higher Education and Journal of Higher Education. Both of these journals address broad issues in higher education, including program administration and this study is likely to be of greatest interest to administrators. A journal focused on education in the liberal arts, such as Liberal Education, could be a good fit for this research, though the text would need to be edited further to meet word count restrictions.

The journal-ready article includes an abbreviated portion of the extended literature review. This extended literature review is included in Appendix A of this document and includes its own list of references. Additional appendices include the guiding questions for the interviews, the complete survey used for the quantitative portion of the study, and the Institutional Review Board approval for this study.
Introduction

There is a perception in the United States, sometimes promoted by public figures and media sources, that certain college degrees (including those in the liberal arts) are ill-suited to employment after college (Jaschik, 2011). This perception is bolstered by national data that consistently places graduates with liberal arts degrees near the bottom in terms of both graduate employment rates and starting salaries when compared to graduates with other degrees (Carnevale et al., 2012; Carnevale et al., 2017; Midwestern Higher Education Compact, 2014). Though some students, parents, and university officials believe employability is the primary desired outcome of a university education, others (including many employers) recognize the immense value of other aspects of a liberal arts education (e.g., Anders, 2017; Deming, 2019).

Much of the evidence used in the debate about the value of a degree is based on large amounts of quantitative data that focus on starting salaries and unemployment rates or return-on-investment calculations that take into account tuition costs, student loans, and long-term earning potential (Carnevale et al., 2019). In contrast, those arguing in defense of liberal arts degrees cite employer data valuing the broad so-called “soft skills” these programs foster. But what is missing from the discussion is an understanding of the lived experiences of liberal arts graduates as they transition from the university environment to the workforce and an understanding of whether factors like salary and return-on-investment are primary elements that influence their perceived value of their degrees (Haskell et al., 2012).

The purpose of this study was to better understand the experiences of English graduates as they navigate the transition from university to the workforce. Of particular interest was graduates’ perspectives on how well their English degree prepared them for professional (rather than academic) success, as well as their perceptions of the value of their English degree.
Identifying academic, personal, and environmental factors and perceptions that inform the work experiences of English graduates will help shape the broader arguments about the value of a liberal arts degree as well as help guide curricular and policy decisions that support student endeavors beyond graduation and the transition from student to employee.

**Literature Review**

**Note on Terminology**

According to the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) website, the term liberal arts refers to both *liberal education* and *specific disciplines in the liberal arts* (n.d). Because of the usage of the term *liberal arts* in the literature, the many similarities regarding employment and program outcomes between English programs and others within the humanities and social sciences, and a lack of studies focused specifically on English graduates, I drew from research in the social sciences, humanities, and English. In this report I used the term *liberal arts* to refer broadly to college programs, majors, and graduates from the social sciences and the humanities.

**Introduction**

Perhaps more than ever before, higher education requires a significant investment of time and money (Friedman, 2019; National Center for Education Statistics, 2019a), and students want to be sure that investment will be worth it. As a result, students, their parents, and state and federal government agencies have asked schools to quantify the benefit of higher education (Svrluga, 2019).

Pressures from multiple stakeholders have led to numerous studies that focused primarily on quantitative data to try and answer the question about what a degree in a specific major or program is worth. In an effort to understand higher education from an individual investment
standpoint, Georgetown University’s Center on Education and the Workplace published a report titled *A First Try at ROI [Return on Investment]: Ranking 4,500 Colleges* (Carnevale et al., 2019). The report acknowledged the challenge of considering return on investment in education in the same ways we might with other financial investments. However, they maintained that “the potential return [of a college education] is a key consideration when choosing where to enroll and what to study” (p. 1).

**The Worth of a Major**

In this and other quantitative comparisons, graduates from English and other humanities programs were grouped with other liberal arts graduates and consistently showed lower starting wages and higher rates of unemployment than their peers from other majors. A 2012 study by Carnevale et al. found that bachelor’s degree holders overall fared much better than those without a college degree, but among college graduates, those from the humanities and liberal arts averaged higher unemployment than most technical majors or majors that were closely aligned with a specific industry or occupation. A report from the Midwestern Higher Education Compact in 2014 found that the 10% unemployment rate among humanities majors was the highest out of all graduates with those from the social sciences right behind at 9%. Humanities majors also had higher rates of major-job mismatch, meaning that more humanities graduates were working in fields unrelated to their area of study. The report claimed that such mismatches resulted in lower salaries than for graduates working in a field closely related to their studies.

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, in 2019 liberal arts and humanities graduates remained among those who had the highest unemployment and they also had the lowest salaries when compared with other majors. In fact, “Liberal arts and humanities was the only field for which young adult bachelor’s degree holders had both below-median
earnings and an above-average unemployment rate” (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019b, p. 5). For instance, social work and human services majors had lower average starting salaries than liberal arts/humanities majors, but the unemployment rate for social workers was only 1.6 percent compared to 5.8 percent among liberal arts/humanities graduates. Based on these outcomes from multiple sources, some argue that, especially when considered in terms of personal economic benefit, liberal arts degrees are simply no longer valuable and that we can actually harm our national economy if we continue to encourage students to pursue these degrees (Gerber, 2012).

How are we to understand the repeatedly dismal performance of the humanities and liberal arts graduates in these reports? One likely reason for the employment disparity is that liberal arts majors have a more broad or “generic” focus than career or field-specific programs (Fenesi & Sana, 2015). Higher education liberal arts classes and programs have generally been “more focused on creating thinkers and explorers than on transferring content” (Bowen, 2018, p. 28). Thus, the non-specific nature of these programs may not indicate uselessness, but it does mean that the path to employment is often not a direct one (Deming, 2019; Gray, 2012). Because of the breadth of their college experience, liberal arts majors, including English majors, are often still figuring out what it is they want to do after graduation. Additionally, they are more likely to change careers (Berrett, 2012). Relatedly, the broad and less-direct path may leave liberal arts students with misconceptions about the skills that they are graduating with as well as what type of employment is available to them (Haskell et al., 2012). These factors indeed contribute to lower salaries, at least in the short term.

However, when considered in the longer term, humanities and liberal arts degrees do provide a good return on investment (Dorfman, 2014; Hill & Pisacreta, 2019). Humphreys and
Kelly (2014) found that over a longer term and when including graduate education, there is not as much disparity between liberal arts graduates and those with applied degrees in terms of salary. Deming (2019) also cited advanced degrees in areas such as law and medicine as well as mid-career positions in management and business as reasons why liberal arts majors catch up in terms of salary later on.

**Benefits of a Liberal Arts or Humanities Degree**

Not reflected in these earnings and employment data is an assertion that the same broad, non-specific characteristics that define a liberal arts education (and likely contribute to lower starting salaries) also foster the exact skills that employers most want in their employees (Cohen, 2016). A 2013 survey for the Association of American Colleges and Universities found that employers considered skills like innovation and critical thinking as very important to success in the workplace. Employers also indicated that they “prioritize critical thinking, communication, and complex problem-solving skills over a job candidate’s major field of study when making hiring decisions” (Hart Research Associates, 2013, p. 4). Each year, the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) publishes a list of competencies that employers find most desirable in recent college graduates. Many of the competencies that consistently appear on the list are the very competencies being taught in humanities and liberal arts courses, including critical thinking, oral/written communication, and global/cultural fluency (Brown, 2015; NACE, 2019). In 2002, the Association of American Colleges and Universities claimed, “A liberal education is a practical education because it develops just those capacities needed by every thinking adult: analytical skills, effective communication, practical intelligence, ethical judgment, and social responsibility” (p. 26).
Liberal arts programs claim to teach these desired skills and competencies, but they are often more difficult to observe or quantify than other skills related to specific fields of work (Deming, 2019). For instance, in a 2007 study that set out to examine the outcomes from liberal arts programs, Seifert et al. (2007) found that liberal arts studies did indeed have positive effects on the development of four of six identified liberal arts outcomes, including intercultural effectiveness, lifelong learning, psychological well-being, and leadership. A 2011, Canadian study also found that liberal arts alumni recognize and value the skills they developed through their education and that they use these skills in their work after graduation (MacKay, 2010).

This flexibility means that English graduates and other liberal arts graduates may be better equipped to handle the rapidly changing and fluid work economy (Anders, 2017; Bowen, 2018; Deming, 2019; Nicholas, 2018; Smith, 2018). Across all fields, the jobs that are available to graduates today vary greatly from the offerings of years past, and as technologies continue to develop and evolve, so will the jobs. Bowen (2018) claimed, “In the new learning economy, students need to prepare for jobs that do not yet exist, in which they will use information that has not yet been discovered” (p. 28). He claimed that this is why a liberal education has so long persisted as a valuable way to educate for career success. If you compare job postings today to those from a decade ago, you will see many skill requirements that simply did not exist 10 years ago (Deming, 2019). Bowen (2018) stated, “picking a major based upon past returns is no more than a bet, a gamble with one’s future” (p. 30).

As an example, Carnevale et al.’s 2012 study of unemployment rates by college major found that since the housing market crash in 2008, architects had a much higher rate of unemployment than other majors, indicating that too close an alignment to a specific field or industry may leave individuals more vulnerable to changes in the market. Furthermore, working
outside of one’s specialty (major-job mismatch) is much more a problem for students with more applied degrees than those with more broad, liberal ones. The Midwestern Higher Education Compact (2014) reported that major-job mismatch was more detrimental (in terms of salary) to those with STEM and applied degrees and less detrimental to Humanities graduates.

**Reconciling Contradictions**

This leads us to grapple with data, studies, and opinion pieces that present two seemingly contradictory realities: liberal arts majors do not do as well as other majors in terms of employment after graduation, yet they are likely to graduate with the skills employers most want. We cannot simply ignore the reality of earnings data especially while students face rising tuition costs and uncertainty about their ability to pay back student loans, but neither can we discount the purported benefits that liberal arts programs can provide.

Though first job outcomes are most often used to determine the value of a college program, Bridgstock and Jackson (2019) suggested a much broader, three-pronged approach to fostering employability after graduation. They recommended not only focusing on employment at graduation, but also on a general readiness to enter a profession (a point that acknowledges that students must also learn how to be more broadly employable) and “living and working productively and meaningfully across the lifespan” (p. 474). This longer-view approach agreed with Bender’s (2013) assertion that “the aim of education ought to be more ambitious than the first job—for the sake of the graduate as well as for society. It must be preparation for a career and for citizenship. That means a practical education, but in a different key” (p. 112). Smith (2018) advocated for a broad liberal education “imbued with the fluidity to adapt” (p. 1037) to best prepare graduates for employment and for handling the general challenges of life in this day and age. But what does this practical, fluid education look like?
In 2002, the Association of American Colleges and Universities outlined goals and direction for higher education. In terms of the liberal arts, they encouraged education that helps students move beyond the classroom and participate in real world projects and opportunities off campus. This approach, they claimed, “erases the artificial distinctions between studies deemed liberal (interpreted to mean that they are not related to job training) and those called practical (which are assumed to be)” (p. 26). Nikitina (2009) claimed that it was maybe even more important for humanities students than for other majors to have the kinds of experiences where they can transfer their theoretical knowledge to applied action.

Many institutions are trying to figure out how to maintain the valuable broad liberal and theoretical basis of understanding that a liberal arts education provides while finding new ways for students to develop and apply the very real and marketable skills that they gain. One approach is to look at integrating high impact practices identified by Kuh (2008), including collaborative projects, service-learning, ePortfolios, and internships into their traditional humanities and liberal arts programs. Indeed, the number of internships completed and GPA at graduation are “major predictors of initial career outcomes” (Townesley et al., 2017, p. 6). One of the reasons internships are helpful may be that they provide a context outside of academia in which students can understand how they can use the skills they have gained. In a 2012 study with psychology students, researchers discovered that most students had trouble identifying their liberal arts skills and understanding how they may be relevant in a workplace setting (Haskell et al., 2012). This means that, along with providing internships and community or work-based projects for students, schools and programs also need to help their students identify, understand, and converse meaningfully about the broader skills they are gaining through their liberal arts studies.
Thus, we see that the majority of the conversation about the value of an English degree is taking place via statistical reports, opinion pieces, and employer research. One area of focus that has been mostly neglected in the ongoing debate is the perspective of liberal arts students and graduates themselves (Haskell et al., 2012; Nicholas, 2018; Smith, 2018). Graduates are the ones navigating this transition, yet we have very little documentation about what their experiences are like. Without richer information directly from graduates, we have an incomplete understanding of the entire debate. Only with a complete picture, one that includes the lived experience of liberal arts graduates, will we begin to discern the reality and severity of a liberal arts dilemma, and what, if anything, institutions of higher education should be doing about it.

**Methods**

This study utilized an exploratory mixed-method design (Creswell, 2008), sometimes called a sequential exploratory method (Hollstein, 2014) or exploratory design (Almalki, 2016). The first and primary phase in this process was an exploratory qualitative inquiry intended to identify prominent patterns in the experiences of recent English graduates at the target university. I used the themes identified in this first phase to inform a second-phase validation survey to determine if the patterns are common to a broader sample of English graduates from the same university.

This study sought to answer the following research question with accompanying clarifying questions:

What are the work-related experiences of non-education English majors as they enter the workforce following graduation?

a. What aspects of their educational experience do graduates perceive as a benefit or a detriment in their employment experiences?
b. What are graduates’ perceptions of their English degree in light of their work experiences?

The qualitative data identified major themes related to the research question and the quantitative data determined if these themes were consistent across the larger population.

This section explains the justification for the specific mixed-methods methodology, the context for this study, the participants, the research procedures, and data analysis.

**Methodology**

This study sought to better understand the experiences of English majors as they enter the workforce. However, I found very few existing or related studies of this topic to guide my questioning. Additionally, I was seeking to understand potentially complex individual experiences in which there is a significant degree of the unknown and potential for notable diversity. For these reasons, I used an exploratory mixed methods design with a primary focus on the initial qualitative inquiry.

Exploratory mixed methods was defined by Creswell (2008) as a two-part process where data collected during a qualitative exploratory process informs what is measured or looked for in the quantitative section. The benefits of beginning with an open-ended qualitative inquiry include being open to new and even unexpected information (Hesse-Biber, 2010) and allowing information from the participants themselves to inform any quantitative instruments (Creswell, 2008). Hesse-Biber (2010) also recognized the potential of qualitative approaches to generate hypotheses. Further, she stated that “qualitative approaches privilege the lived experiences of individuals with the goals of understanding, promoting social change, uncovering subjugated knowledge, and providing a unique venue for qualitative researchers to generalize and test out their ideas” (p. 467).
Qualitative data are used to explain quantitative data in explanatory (as opposed to exploratory) studies (Creswell, 2008), but Hollstien (2014) asserted that a more open, exploratory approach is most suited to situations where there are no clearly predicted outcomes and where there may be a wide variety in responses from participants. In this study, I recognized that I was working with a group that was inherently diverse (e.g., in terms of why they chose the major, what they got out of the major, what they wanted to do after graduation) and did not believe that quantitative surveys were equipped to handle the diversity I anticipated encountering among our respondents (Hancock, 2007). In addition to being diverse, human experience is also nuanced, and qualitative inquiry allows researchers to better understand those nuances. For instance, Griffin et al. (2011) studied gender and race issues among black faculty. They worked to not only understand the frequency of certain incidents or behavior but also to explore possible “extra burdens” of these incidents on their study participants (p. 47). These nuances add to the richness of our understanding and help paint a complete picture of a situation. In a 2018 study about employability narratives and liberal arts graduates, Nicholas (2018) argued that “exploratory research . . . driven by an inductive, qualitative approach brings attention to the richness of individual storylines without the constraint of preconceived categories or suppositions” (p. 2).

This rich, flexible exploratory process can then inform the development of quantitative instruments used in the second phase of a mixed methods approach. This QUAL-quant approach to mixed methods research fits Creswell’s (2008) definition of exploratory mixed methods where the qualitative phase is emphasized more than the quantitative and the quantitative is “intended to build on or explain the qualitative” (p. 561). Hollstein (2014) described this approach as sequential exploratory design. Other mixed methods approaches may use qualitative and
quantitative instruments simultaneously, but a sequential approach uses one phase to directly inform the phase that follows. In many cases of sequential exploratory research, the qualitative data is used to inform, develop, or justify quantitative instruments, but the primary emphasis is given to the quantitative results of the study (Hollstein, 2014).

Hesse-Biber (2010) cited the historic prominence of a quantitative focus in mixed methods research where qualitative approaches are often “secondary” (p. 457). She contended that in mixed methods research qualitative approaches have been neglected and are sometimes used primarily as “ornamentation” (p. 457) for the quantitative data. However, Hollstein (2014) argued that the initial qualitative phase of inquiry can indeed stand as the most significant part of the study.

Among several reasons why researchers choose an exploratory mixed-methods approach, Hesse-Biber (2010) discussed using “a quantitative study to test the validity of qualitative findings on a wider population” (p. 465). For instance, Cabrera (2011) used narratives from qualitative interviews to identify themes related to racial “hyperprivilege” in higher education. The qualitative inquiry was then followed by a quantitative survey to see if these themes were generalizable and to explore additional components that had come to light in the qualitative portion. Generalizability to a wider population is particularly important for research that may inform potential changes in institutions or organizations. According to Griffin et al. (2011), qualitative research alone may be insufficient “because [such studies] do not supply institutional researchers and leaders with the information they might want or need” (p. 47) to best meet the needs of the entire population of the institution. In addition to generalizability, a quantitative follow-up can allow for a better understanding of relative priority or relative importance of the qualitative themes (as in Kimmons, 2016).
Context

This study focused on graduates from the English Department at a large, religious, privately-owned university in the western United States. The student body is approximately 33,000, with the majority of students maintaining full-time status. The English Department is the largest of the eight departments in the College of Humanities and is consistently in the top ten majors at the university based on student enrollment. English majors are predominantly female (approximately 70%), and 15% of English majors graduate with secondary teaching credentials. Approximately 30% of English majors attend graduate school the year following graduation with a majority of these graduates continuing on in English studies or entering law school.

In 2015, the English Department introduced the English Plus (English+) initiative. The initiative encourages (and even requires) students to engage in “applied” experiences such as an internship or an applied minor, with aims to (a) help students recognize the ways in which they can use the skills they have gained in their major in a professional (non-academic) setting and (b) help them gain the vocabulary and experience necessary to talk about these skills with potential employers. One of the main anticipated outcomes of this initiative is a smoother transition from college to employment. Thus, understanding the post-graduation employment experiences of English+ graduates is essential to understanding and informing initiatives like English+.

Participants

Study participants were involved in (a) semi-structured interviews and/or (b) a validation survey.

Interview Participants

This study targeted English Department alumni who graduated between 2010 and 2019 who have been employed full time since receiving their bachelor’s degree and before beginning
any graduate studies. The study was also limited to graduates who did not seek a teaching license as part of their degree. Based on information provided in graduation surveys, there are approximately 1,000 department alumni who fit this description.

100 randomly selected non-teaching graduates (10 from each of the graduation years being targeted) were invited to complete a brief online questionnaire that asked for (a) basic demographic data (including year of graduation and gender), (b) information about any graduate studies completed, (c) a history of employment since graduation and (d) whether or not students had participated in experiences like internships or an applied minor while they were an undergraduate. Respondents were also asked to state their willingness and availability to participate in online interviews.

From the 24 responses to the questionnaire, I selected the first six interview participants to create a group that represented a variety of professions and a range of graduation years while also reflecting the student population in terms of gender and race. English department data show that graduates between 2010 and 2019 were 74% female and 26% male so I interviewed more women than men. Additionally, I interviewed one Asian student as students of color represent 11% of the English Department student body. I also tried to interview participants representing a variety of careers. Though the study excluded alumni who graduated with their teaching credentials, some of the respondents indicated that they have ended up working (usually through alternate routes of licensure and after working other jobs) as teachers. Because of this phenomenon, I included an alternate route to licensure schoolteacher among the interview participants. Table 1 shows the makeup of the interview participants.
Table 1

Interview Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Graduation Year</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Profession*</th>
<th>Applied Experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>Clinical Evaluation Report (CER) Writer</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Director of Analytics and Automation</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Senior Data Analyst</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Publication Editor</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Multimedia Content Writer</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Writer, Editor, Podcast Producer</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>ALR Middle School English Teacher</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Insurance Risk Manager</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Current or most recent job title

After interviewing the first six participants I decided to interview two more in an effort to either challenge or confirm the patterns I had observed so far (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). In order to find another participant who had not participated in applied experiences while in school, I sent the questionnaire to 10 more randomly-selected graduates and selected one of the two respondents for my final interview.

I interviewed each participant for 45 minutes to one hour, and participants were offered a $25 gift card as compensation for their time.
Survey Participants

The second phase of the study also targeted graduates from the last 10 years who are or have been employed full-time since graduation, but in this phase, participants were invited to complete an online survey rather than participate in an interview. All English alumni (not including English teaching graduates) were invited to participate via email. Department graduation surveys indicate that approximately 50% of non English teaching graduates seek employment after graduation. However, the email data provided by the department could not differentiate between individuals who sought full time employment and those choosing to go to graduate school, work part time, or not work, so the invitation was sent to all non-teaching alumni (n=1,896) though the estimated potential population size for the study was approximately 900. The email invitation indicated that the survey was intended for those seeking employment after graduation, so a good portion of the non-response rate can be accounted for by individuals who did not seek employment after graduation. Additionally, the first question in the survey filtered out those respondents who did not meet the employment criteria. In the end, 338 participants completed essential elements of the survey, for an estimated response rate of 37.5%.

The median survey completion time was 15.2 minutes, and respondents were entered into a drawing for a $100 cash card. These incentives, as well as other best practices for survey dissemination (Saleh & Bista, 2017), were utilized to encourage a higher response rate. Experts are divided as to what response percentage is needed in order for an email-based study to be considered valid (Carley-Baxter et al., 2009). For the purposes of this study, I approached a 40% response rate from the target population, which is considered average for email-based surveys (Saldivar, 2012). I sent three follow up email invitations to encourage survey participation. In addition to response rate, I considered how representative the respondents were of the larger
population in terms of gender, race, employment, and graduation date (Morton et al., 2012).

Table 2 shows how the participants compared demographically with department graduates. Table 3 shows the spread of participants over the graduation years included in the study.

**Table 2**

*Survey Participant Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic</th>
<th>Value</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Department percentages for 2010-2019</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>256</td>
<td>75.92%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>21.36%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.59%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>313</td>
<td>92.88%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hispanic or Latino</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2.97%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.48%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Black or African American</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.30%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.30%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other (Mixed Race)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2.08%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In order to focus the scope of this research and because so much of the survey ended up focusing on experiences beyond the job search (career progression, etc.), I selected not to include individuals who, despite plans to enter the workforce, had so far been unable to secure full-time employment. I created a survey path that allowed these individuals to share their experiences with the department, but their data were excluded from this study. There were only three
participants that fell into this category and each one had obvious or potential extenuating life circumstances that had been factors in their inability to find full-time work and these three are not included in the number of participants for this study.

**Table 3**

*Survey Participant Graduation Years*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Participants</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data Collection and Analysis**

*Interviews*

The first phase of data collection included semi-structured interviews with English Department graduates. Through both email communications and discussion at the beginning of the interview, participants were informed about the purpose of the research, the expectations of their participation (i.e., time commitment), and how their data would be handled to ensure privacy. I recorded the audio from all interviews to use in reviewing and transcribing the sessions.

Unless scheduling did not allow it, each interview transcript was coded before moving on to the next interview. Interview transcription and analysis followed established qualitative research processes (Creswell, 2008). Saldaña (2009) recommended using a combination of basic coding methods in the first round of analysis. In my first cycle, I used attribute coding to note participant information for data management, but most of the codes were descriptive in order to
capture emergent topics. Where it was important to preserve the participants’ voices or specific wording, I used *in vivo* coding instead of descriptive codes.

First-cycle coding after each interview allowed me to identify emergent themes and look for those themes (including asking additional questions) as well as counter examples in subsequent interviews. After interviewing the first six participants and completing the first round of coding, my negative case analysis led me to search for cases that may contradict the emerging hypotheses, so I selected two additional interviewees. While these additional interviews contributed valuable and new points of view, it became clear that further interviews likely would not be sufficiently helpful to justify additional time and expense (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

Interviews began with informational questions about the participants including the following:

1. What year did you graduate?
2. What was your first job after graduation?
3. What work are you doing now?

Additional guiding questions throughout the interview encouraged participants to talk about their experiences finding work, their perceptions of their education, and factors affecting their employability and effectiveness at work.

The completed qualitative coding informed statements that represented the major themes, patterns, or relationships from the data (Saldaña, 2009). I used thematic network analysis to identify Basic Themes which were then arranged into Organizing Themes, “according to the underlying story they are telling” (Attride-Stirling, 2001, p. 389). Some Organizing Themes ended up requiring Sub-O rganizing Themes in order to capture the complexity of the ideas.
Organizing Themes were used to identify Global Themes that characterized the experiences of graduates (see Table 4).

Table 4

Sample Coding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quote</th>
<th>Basic Theme</th>
<th>Sub-Organizing Theme</th>
<th>Organizing Theme</th>
<th>Global Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Your English major is very broad. Like what are you going to do when you graduate?</td>
<td>very broad</td>
<td></td>
<td>Flexible/Broad Application</td>
<td>Value of the English Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When I finally found that job editing, [my English degree] was something I was super proud of.</td>
<td>super proud</td>
<td>positive current perceptions</td>
<td>Perception of the English Major</td>
<td>Value of the English Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[It] was not my dream job. I didn't love it. It was only $12 an hour, but it was full time.</td>
<td>not my dream job</td>
<td>First job satisfaction -</td>
<td>First Job Satisfaction</td>
<td>Job Satisfaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I wasn't looking ahead. . . I needed to have taken more personal responsibility.</td>
<td>take responsibility</td>
<td></td>
<td>Personal Responsibility vs. Outlined Path</td>
<td>Program to Practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I just wanted to have fun and take my classes and graduate as fast as possible. And you know, I didn't want to do anything extra.</td>
<td>I didn't want to do anything extra</td>
<td></td>
<td>Expectations</td>
<td>Program to Practice</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Validation Survey

The interviews yielded a greater breadth of topics than I had anticipated. I was surprised at how many different factors participants identified as influential, as well as the range of experiences expressed in the interviews. Both of these factors greatly influenced the creation of
the quantitative survey including the number of questions, response options, etc. Spending time
with the qualitative data also helped me to see the categories and ways questions could be
grouped in order to cover a lot of ground without overwhelming participants. The survey was
designed to understand the pervasiveness of the qualitative themes among a larger number of
participants. The survey included four categories, (a) basic information including demographic
information and first job title, (b) the job search, (c) the first job, and (d) the English major. The
majority of the survey consisted of Likert-scale or ranking questions with at least one free-
response question in each of the three main categories.

The survey was constructed using best practices to try and ensure validity and reliability
(Ruel et al., 2016). I tested the completed survey with an initial, small distribution. I used the
responses from that distribution to test for internal reliability. Internal reliability was determined
by calculating Cronbach’s alpha coefficient for several multi-part Likert scale questions in the
survey (see Table 5). Additionally, the survey was comprised of clearly written, concise
questions to avoid ambiguity. Limited, meaningful response items also helped to ensure
reliability. After establishing face validity through question reviews by English department
leadership and external research faculty, I established content validity by ensuring that all the
questions related specifically to the experiences of finding employment and perceptions of
participants’ degree and schooling experiences. By including open-ended questions, I also
increased the validity of the survey tool by allowing respondents to clarify or more fully explain
responses or points of view. This is especially important in social studies where the concepts
being measured may be more abstract than in other types of studies (Ruel et al., 2016).

Survey data was compiled using web-based survey software from Qualtrics. My analysis
looked primarily at descriptive statistics to determine central tendencies of this population. Free-
response answers were not analyzed for this study but were used to provide clarification and explanation.

**Table 5**

*Internal Validity*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Questions</th>
<th>Cronbach’s Alpha</th>
<th># of items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Likert scale questions about English major studies (positive)</td>
<td>.892</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likert scale questions about English major studies (negative)</td>
<td>.720</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likert scale questions about skills gained in the English major, important to job hunt, and important in professional development</td>
<td>.896</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Trustworthiness**

During the qualitative data collection, I wrote research memos after each interview in an effort to capture and remember the context and specific elements of the interaction. Memoing also allowed me to track my own thinking and decision making during the course of the study (Birks et al., 2008). I also used a constant comparative method in the coding to compare results between interviews and to inform the ongoing data collection process (Fram, 2013).

Each interview participant also had the opportunity to participate in member checking at two different points in the research. First, following each interview, each participant was sent a summary of their session and invited to comment on how accurately that summary represented their thoughts and experiences (Kornbluh, 2015; Thomas, 2016). Secondly, interview participants were invited to review the validation survey before it was distributed more broadly (Kimmons, 2016).
The memoing, interviews, multiple member checks, and surveys provided method triangulation for the study (Carter et al., 2014). Additionally, the free response data from the survey, while not analyzed for this study, provided an additional point of triangulation as I noticed similar patterns in these responses as I had noticed in the interviews. Finally, I used regular peer debriefing and negative case analysis to further check my emerging conclusions as well as personal biases (Creswell, 1998; Williams & Kimmons, 2020). The negative case analysis took place throughout all stages of analysis and was captured through memoing and peer debriefing. This allowed me to put checks on my thinking all along the way and helped me understand complications (e.g., disagreements) as well as consensus in the data.

All interview data (transcriptions and codes) was deidentified via the assignment of a participant number instead of a name, and individual participants are not identifiable through the data presented in the final report. Likewise, the survey was completed anonymously, and survey data is presented in aggregate.

Limitations

This study was limited in scope to a specific population at a single institution. However, the detailed information about the context and process as well as thick data from the interviews should allow other institutions to replicate the study themselves or transfer relevant findings to their specific contexts (Williams & Kimmons, 2020).

Results

A thematic network analysis (Attride-Stirling, 2001) of the qualitative data produced four global themes; (a) The Value of the English Degree, (b) Transition to Work, (c) Job Satisfaction, and (d) Program to Practice.
The Value of the English Degree

Participants articulated the benefits they gained from the English major through three organizing themes of (a) Strong Foundation, (b) Flexible/Broad Application, and (c) Personal benefit. They also discussed their (d) perceptions of the English major (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Value of the English Degree

The Strong Foundation organizing theme included the sub-organizing themes of the skills of (a) communication, (b) critical thinking, (c) analysis, (d) empathy, all of which were identified by participants as skills that they learned from the major. They talked about being able to communicate effectively and persuasively as well as structure and present complex or abstract
ideas clearly. Several participants credited their schooling with teaching them “how to think; how not to just take things for granted” and “how to learn,” as well as how to understand diverse points of view and connect with other people.

Three participants ended up in jobs that require data analysis skills and all three indicated that they learned analysis in the English major. One participant explained, “Once I started doing [data analysis], I was like, okay, this is exactly what we did in every class, just in a different way. . . We'd have to pull [literature] apart and you couldn't take it at face value. You had to dig deeper. . . it just felt like it came second nature to me.”

After articulating several of the skills gained in the major, one participant stated, “I feel like the bachelor's in English is useful particularly as a foundation, because you can always add to that foundation.” Another participant who is now in a higher-level leadership role stated, “I think in large part I am where I am because [of] the foundation that I had coming out of the English program.” Another participant expressed that if someone with an English degree got additional training “in something that's a little bit more technical, you'll be fine, but sometimes it's harder to do it the other way around.”

This idea of the English degree as foundational relates to the organizing theme of Flexible/Broad Application. Participants described the degree as a good springboard to other studies and said that it provided a skill set that would be valuable in any job. Participants who found themselves working in a field they had not anticipated or one that is not obviously related to an English degree talked positively about being able to use their skills in diverse ways. One participant stated, “There is no shame working in an unrelated field.” While several participants felt that this flexibility was one of the great strengths of the degree, some, alternately, felt it was one of the real challenges, particularly in terms of the transition from school to work because the
English major did not prepare them for a specific job or career. As one participant stated, “Your English major is very broad. Like, what are you going to do when you graduate?” Another participant said, “I [felt] like the skill set [could] help in any job . . . But one thing that was hard for me is that there wasn't a defined career path.”

Several participants also described how they felt their English major was valuable to them on a personal level. These ideas are expressed in the Personal Benefit organizing theme. One participant shared, “I value my English degree, like on a personal side and not necessarily always on like a capitalistic and like job [or] employment side.” Other participants talked about personal aspects like a greater appreciation and enjoyment of the literature they read for pleasure or the ability to better navigate personal relationships as personal benefits they gained from the major.

Under the organizing theme of Perceptions of the English Major are the sub-organizing themes of (a) positive experience in the major, (b) more negative perceptions during the job search, and (c) more positive perceptions of the degree now. Most participants said they were glad to have majored in English and said they would choose to major in it again. One said, “I think I might do it again if I had to go back.” Another participant indicated she would probably look around at other options first before deciding. But none of the participants indicated that they regretted their degree. In recollecting their time in the major, most said that they had “loved” their English studies. One participant expressed, “The thing that I really liked, it was kind of like my personal indulgence, was being able to read great literature and I feel like it's a real bummer to leave a university and not read some of the classics [and] talk about them.”

The participants who struggled more in their job hunt had more negative perceptions of their degree during this time. One participant who worked for a time in food service described,
“In the beginning I started to kind of question why I studied English specifically. I almost was, not embarrassed, but it just seemed like, especially when I was working at . . . those entry level jobs, like I was living the stereotype of the English major.” Another participant expressed that during the job search, “I was just kind of like, ‘This is a useless major, no one wants me unless I'm teaching.’” More than one participant questioned their major choice during the job hunt, and some felt that it was not a very marketable degree.

For most participants, once they were able to find a satisfying work experience, they again expressed positive perceptions of their degree. One participant described this phenomenon by saying, “I mean there were days definitely where it was like, ‘Oh, if I'd gotten, you know, a business degree or something, I could be making more money.’ But I've always been glad I got an English degree. . . I'm glad I got my degree in English for sure.” Another participant expressed, “When I finally found that job editing, [my English degree] was something I was super proud of and knew it was a strong asset to getting that job.” Other participants discussed how they always recognized the value of their degree, even during the transition from school to work. As one participant stated, “I always felt like it [the major] was valuable. I don't know that everybody always agrees with me, but I feel like it's valuable.” This participant further talked about how her major/minor combo and work experience put her on equal footing with PhD-level co-workers.

Transition to Work

Participants’ experiences as they transitioned from their English major to work were varied but can be divided into two main organizing themes including (a) Ease of Transition, Negative and (b) Ease of Transition, Positive. Each of these organizing themes has multiple sub-organizing themes (see Figure 2).
Ease of Transition, Negative

The negative experiences of the transition to work can be understood through the sub-organizing themes of (a) frustrating job search, (b) an unclear career plan, and barriers that made finding work more difficult like (c) lack of experience, (d) lack of guidance and (e) difficulty recognizing and articulating skills. Participants who did not have work lined up at graduation described their job search as anxious, turbulent, a struggle, and felt that it took longer than they had anticipated. One of the challenges that graduates encountered was not really knowing what kind of job or career they wanted. Many expressed that they wanted to do “something related to
English,” but did not have specific ideas of types of jobs they might like or what companies or organizations they might want to work with.

Participants identified additional barriers to finding work, especially a lack of experience. As one participant put it, “I just graduated. How am I supposed to get experience if no one will hire me without experience?” Another problem for participants was a lack of guidance about how they could get experience while they were in school. One participant described, “I had to really look hard to find the classes that actually had practical applications.” Another said, “I would have loved to have had more knowledge about these opportunities when I was a student because I basically did two internships after I graduated.”

Participants also felt a lack of guidance when it came to knowing how to find work. For instance, a number of participants talked about how much they would have liked to have seen examples of English alumni. “It would have been nice to hear from people who came in and were like, ‘here's what we did with our degree. Here's how we were able to transition from our bachelor's degree in English to the career that we have now.’” None of the participants felt they had received very good career preparation in the English department or at the university. Several talked about not knowing where to look for jobs or how to go through the application process. Some indicated that they did not know there were career resources they could have used, and one described the resources she did find as “not practical.” One participant expressed it this way: “I feel like when you're in high school, they're like, ‘Okay, this is how you apply for college’. . . And then when you're in college they're just like, ‘Hey, you're done. See you later’. . . [More preparation] would have helped guide me into a better job initially, where I kind of found my way there on my own.”
A participant who had a more positive transition to work said that the English major “is marketable as long as you know how to market it.” In several of the interviews, however, participants indicated that, indeed, they did not know how to market themselves or their skills. One participant talked about not being prepared to talk about the degree in a job interview and added, “I felt like I had the skills to do the job, just not to get the job.” Relatedly, some participants struggled initially to recognize the skills they had from their schooling. For example, one participant indicated that she “didn’t realize . . . this was stuff [skills] I got in the major” until a couple of years into her career. In both cases, this presented a barrier to finding work.

**East of Transition, Positive**

Especially when compared with alumni who had a hard transition, participants who had an easier time finding work after graduation did not talk much about their job search experience in either positive or negative terms. In most cases, they had opportunities lined up before they graduated. Factors that appeared to positively influence the transition included sub-organizing themes of (a) networking (b) internships, (c) a minor, and (d) on-campus applied experiences like specific courses, working on campus magazine staffs, participating in campus clubs, and student jobs.

Participants spoke positively about experiences with campus clubs and campus publications, saying they were able to use their skills in new ways, and to explain those skills to others. “I was the one English major in the [business] club. It was almost like I was doing job interview prep.” Most participants who got minors to complement their English degree talked about how the minor provided specific, marketable skills, and a vocabulary for other fields. One participant described the minor as, “It was kind of my key to translating my skills into real life work.”
Participants had similar experiences with student jobs. In some cases, the student job provided specific technical skills (e.g., HTML editing), and in other cases participants were able to build personal relationships and learn how to be professional. Similar benefits came from internship experiences where participants talked about gaining specific skills and experience. The first job for one participant came directly from an internship. Another described an internship as providing “a foot in the door.” Another participant used an internship to learn what it would be like to work in a particular field and then decided to go in a different direction for a career.

Finally, networking emerged as a theme strongly associated with a positive transition to work. Almost all of the participants used personal or professional (through campus jobs or internships) networks to find either their first jobs, or to find better employment opportunities. One participant described how important networking had been in her career and encouraged others to prioritize professional connections. She said, “In my undergrad program and through internships, [I tried] to do my very best job for whoever I worked with so that by the time I was done working with them, they were like, ‘Yeah, I would give her work again.’” In her case, networking was key in her first job and subsequent opportunities.

**Job Satisfaction**

Under the global theme of Job Satisfaction, three organizing themes were identified; (a) First Job Motivations, (b) First Job Satisfaction, and (c) Current Job Satisfaction (see Figure 3).

Several motivations emerged as basic themes relating to *First Job Motivations*. The primary motivator for most participants was a need to earn money. In some cases, participants were less concerned about the work they did, even settling for a job they were not excited about in order to receive a paycheck. One participant’s motivation was, “get paid; get that money.”
Yeah, I don't think I really had any goals beyond that.” Other participants described wanting to find something related to the degree, but more often participants were motivated by adding work experience to their resume and “the opportunity to learn.” A main motivator for a couple of participants was finding work in a specific location to be close to family or a spouse, and a couple of others talked about the importance of a good working environment.

**Figure 3**

*Job Satisfaction*

In terms of *First Job Satisfaction*, most participants had fairly lower job satisfaction in their first jobs, ranging from “very low” satisfaction to “it was not my dream job.” One participant was hired as a writer but soon decided, “I didn't love it mostly because I wasn't very interested in the things they did. . . It was hard with the subject matter that I was writing about. I
wasn't really interested in it.” Other participants described their first jobs as draining, boring, and “not something I wanted to keep doing.”

One participant indicated, “I had to work harder to prove myself . . . [but] once I kinda got up to the level, as far as the technical skills, as some of the other people, I’ve loved it ever since.” Other participants with higher first job satisfaction talked about their jobs being “a good fit,” challenging, and “really good for me.”

As interview participants discussed their current (or most recent) employment, they expressed an overall much Higher Current Job Satisfaction than what they felt with earlier jobs. A couple of participants talked about how they appreciated the challenge of their current work, while others mentioned enjoying being able to use creativity on the job. One participant said, “It's just the job that I unexpectedly liked.” Another observed, “I don’t think it [my career] could have worked out better.”

**Program to Practice**

The global theme of Program to Practice included organizing themes of (a) Expectations, (b) Personal Responsibility Versus Following an Outlined Path, and (c) Open-Minded (see Figure 4).

In terms of Expectations, some participants expressed the perception they had had that finding a job after graduation would come easily. One participant talked about discovering that, “You can't just be like, ‘Oh, I have my English degree, give me a job’ and it's going to happen.” Another expected that finding work after graduation would be like finding work while in school where “they just hire anybody.” “It was so frustrating to go into it thinking, ‘I’ll get a job’ and then just keep getting denial emails or not hearing back at all.”
These expectations tie into the theme of **Personal Responsibility Versus Following an Outlined Path**. Several participants talked about how there is a disconnect between university majors or programs where you take outlined, prescribed courses, and a career where you have to be the one outlining your own plan. One participant described college as being almost always about “the textbooks and the classes and the professors and the assignments,” rather than outlining a plan for after graduation. Several participants talked about how they “needed to have taken more personal responsibility” for their path while they were in school and “taken more initiative” to find ways to “get involved as much as possible.” At the same time, one participant admitted that things like internships “felt like more work” and she “didn’t want to do anything extra” (other than the classes required for the degree) while she was an undergraduate student.
Similarly, another participant said, “I think I had a lot of professors encourage internships and things, but I was like ‘more work,’ but it pays off in the end.”

Some participants strongly encouraged current students to keep an *Open Mind* about their degree and their skills and to not limit themselves as they take responsibility for figuring out their individual career paths. One participant said, “I think that the biggest thing to be successful with an English degree is to always keep your mind open to opportunities and possibilities.” She encouraged students to try new things, even those that are hard or unfamiliar, and “you're going to eventually find something that's a pretty good fit.” Another participant advised, “put yourself out there and branch out to jobs, even ones you wouldn't think you'd like.”

**Quantitative Results**

As part of the initial section of questions, the qualitative survey asked participants to indicate how long it took them to find their first full-time job after graduation. Over a third of the participants had a job lined up before they completed their degrees, and almost a quarter were hired within two months of graduation. About 8% of respondents took more than a year to find full-time employment (see Figure 5).
The bulk of the survey asked participants to respond to six-point Likert-scale questions indicating their agreement with statements about the job search process, their first jobs, and their perceptions of the English major. Over half of respondents agreed that they felt frustration during their job search, that it took longer than anticipated, and that they settled for a job they were not excited about so that they could have income (see Figure 6). On the other hand, a majority of respondents also indicated that they knew how to articulate the skills that they brought to a job and that their skills matched those in the descriptions of jobs they were applying for. Participants expressed mixed levels of satisfaction about their first jobs after graduation (see Figure 7). About 88% of respondents agreed that they used skills from their English major in their first job, but less than 60% felt that the job was aligned with their major.
Participants were asked to think about individual skills in the context of the job hunt, career progression, and what they learned in the English major and to respond again on a Likert-scale (see Figure 8). The skills listed included those traditionally associated with the English
major (e.g., writing skills), those that were identified in the qualitative research (e.g., problem solving, analysis, empathy), as well as technical skills and teamwork skills, which are valuable skills but not as closely related to English studies. A majority of participants agreed that the skills listed helped them find their first jobs and even more so helped them progress in their careers. Participants also agreed that they learned most of these skills as part of their English major. Technical skills, which could be interpreted multiple ways, had the most disagreement, but 67% of participants agreed that they learned technical skills in the English major.

**Figure 8**

*Individual Skills in Context*

When asked about their perceptions of the English major, almost 98% agreed with the statement, “I enjoyed my English major” and 57% strongly agreed (see Figure 9). Similarly, nearly 90% agreed that they would major in English again, and 51.4% strongly agreed. Most would also recommend the major to a family member or friend, and 41.6% strongly agreed. Conversely, a majority of respondents (paradoxically) agreed that “I wish I had chosen a major
with a clearer career path.” Participants indicated that they would have appreciated more career examples from English alumni and more applied experiences as part of their university experience. Most respondents did not agree that English is a useless major, though 3.5% strongly agreed, 4.7% agreed, and 15.8% somewhat agreed.

**Figure 9**

*Perceptions of the English Major*

![Figure 9: Perceptions of the English Major](image)

**Discussion**

In contrast to the existing data, this study did not focus on earnings data to understand the success of English graduates. Nor did this study try to defend the English degree by laying out the skills that English majors should graduate with. Rather, this study sought to understand the neglected perspectives of the graduates themselves (Haskell et al., 2012; Nicholas, 2018; Smith,
in order to add some new insights to the ongoing debate about the value of the English degree.

That some English majors struggled after graduation is a fact, but it does not appear to be as dire a situation as some would assert. In fact, graduates who seriously struggled appear to be in the minority and there were numerous examples of graduates thriving during this transition and finding professional satisfaction and success. While many graduates experienced frustration during a job search that took longer than they anticipated, it was also not uncommon for an English graduate to have a job lined up at graduation. Additionally, while graduates may have felt like they were settling for a job they were not excited about for their first job, most agreed that these first jobs were indeed a good starting point for their careers. Many moved into more rewarding positions fairly quickly in their careers. Rather than trying to express the value of the degree strictly in terms of positive and negative professional outcomes, we need to better understand what factors during the major and after graduation account for the differences in the positive and negative experiences that graduates have.

For instance, graduates who struggled more after graduation often recognized that they needed to have started earlier looking for jobs earlier, as well as taken more personal responsibility for deciding on a career plan while they were still in school. Going into the interviews from my vantage point of having worked with English students in applied experiences, I had expected more discussion about the specific applied experiences students had and the benefit of those to students in their job searches. While participants did speak positively about internships and applied minors and their influence on the job search, they spoke as much or more about things like networking, learning how to talk about their skills, and being willing to
apply for jobs or in fields they had not previously considered. I was surprised at the breadth experiences that were identified as being influential in the job hunt.

**Practical Implications**

While the respondents in this study overall had mostly positive career outcomes so far, there are certainly steps that English departments can take to help their graduates have a smoother transition from degree to work. Because English is not a pre-professional major, students could use more guidance and reassurance about both the skills they are gaining and the breadth of employment opportunities that are available to them. One way to accomplish this would be to create occasions for students to learn from or connect with alumni from the program. Not only would this expose students to a wide variety of employment possibilities, but it would also help them better understand the path between the English degree and work in those fields. Participants expressed both that they wished they had seen more of these examples while they were students, as well as a willingness to share their experiences with current students.

Departments could also do more to provide “applied” experiences to students. These are experiences with a more explicit connection to work outside of academia. Applied experiences could be incorporated as a part of traditional literature and writing courses (e.g., assignments that require students to present their literary analysis using various media forms could expose students to new technology and promote digital communication literacy), or could be distinct, project-based courses with specific professional development learning objectives. Students could also be directed to applied coursework or experiences outside the major courses that align with a student’s personal and professional goals. Minors and classes from other programs, internships, campus clubs, student journals, and student jobs were all mentioned as experiences that benefited graduates during their transition to work. Overall, the more opportunities participants had to
apply their English skills, the easier it was for them to recognize, develop, and articulate those skills. Additionally, applied experiences often gave students more confidence in their abilities as well as concrete examples of their skills at work.

Efforts to provide more experience and more career guidance could help address the apparent paradox that appeared in the quantitative data where a majority of participants indicated they would choose the English major again but also wished they had a major with a clearer career path. One way to interpret those responses is that respondents seem to see the value in the major but wish that it had a more direct path to a career. While there is no one specific career path from the English major, making some of the options more apparent could make a significant difference for students.

Several interview participants talked about challenges to finding work such as not having experience, not being prepared for the application process, and not knowing where to go to look for jobs they would be qualified for. Survey respondents did not indicate these same challenges as prevalently, but these are likely areas where the university and department can do a better job of helping students. Most universities have career resources available to students, but many of the interview participants felt that they either did not know where to go for career help or that the help offered by the university was not really applicable to their experience as an English major. Therefore, there is room for departments and career counselors to work together better to both spread awareness of the resources available and to help career counselors understand English and other liberal arts majors and perhaps better tailor resources to their needs.

Even without these types of adjustments by English departments, the data suggest that there is professional value in the skills and competencies that students gain through their studies. A majority of participants not only found their degree to be helpful in landing that first job, but
also identified skills gained in the major as being extremely valuable in their careers long-term. This would also seem to suggest that the ongoing arguments in favor of a liberal arts education are indeed justified.

**Implications for Future Research**

Because participation in this study was voluntary, it includes the possibility of participation bias where only those graduates who felt good about their employment outcomes would want to participate. While, as indicated, many of the respondents had overall positive employment outcomes, this study did include opinions from graduates who were somewhat to highly dissatisfied as well. Since this is the first study of its kind, there is no way to know if this representation was accurate or to what extent participation bias occurred. Future studies could examine the potential bias issue more closely.

This study did not include perspectives from English graduates who chose to pursue freelance writing/publishing work. Neither did it explore how graduate level (e.g., MA, MS, MBA) or professional doctoral (e.g., JD or MD) studies affect employment outcomes for English BA graduates. Freelancers and students who pursue graduate degrees represent a significant portion of English graduates so these perspectives and outcomes are important to understand through additional research. This study also did not include the data of graduates who have been unable to find full-time employment. Though this group appears to represent only a small percentage of graduates, further study is needed to understand the real numbers and lived experiences of these individuals.

Likewise, this study did not include English majors graduating with teaching credentials. These students were excluded from this study because they were considered to have a clear career path. Experiences like student teaching and state licensure, which are part of their major
program, as well as frameworks like campus teacher employment fairs are designed to lead directly to specific employment after graduation. A different study altogether would be necessary to understand the experiences and outcomes of students in this group.

Though participants indicated multiple factors contributed to career success, future research could focus on specific on-campus experiences (e.g., minors, internships) to determine which are most aligned with career success after graduation, either generally or for work in specific fields. This information could be valuable in terms of student advisement and could also inform curricular decisions within English departments. Student advisement could also benefit from a better understanding of the types of work English majors end up in (both as a first job and beyond) and the motivations for these careers. Many respondents mentioned the importance of “meaningful” work, but more research is needed to understand what that means and how that translates to actual careers. Relatedly, it would be useful to explore the ways that students navigate the higher levels of career ambiguity in majors like English. Participants indicated that the freedom to work in so many different fields was both a blessing and a curse of the English degree. Further study could reveal ways to better help students use this aspect of their degree to their benefit.

It is true that, for many graduates, it may be difficult to draw a straight line between their English education and their career success, but, with the right guidance, on-campus experiences, and student effort to develop and use the skills associated with the major, graduates have proven again and again that they can leverage a liberal arts education into a successful career. One interview participant told the story of an interview with a top company executive while applying for his first job. The applicant explained the value of the English degree and the interviewer responded by saying, “So my daughter wants to be an English major, but I told her it was a dumb
idea. I'm going to call her and tell her that she should, because you've convinced me.” The participant got the job.
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APPENDIX A

Review of Literature

Note on Terminology

According to the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) website the term liberal arts refers to both liberal education and specific disciplines in the liberal arts (n.d).

Liberal Education

A liberal education refers to an educational philosophy that promotes a breadth of knowledge of a diverse range of subjects, including science, languages, culture, and the humanities. The aims of a liberal education are the development of learners into socially responsible individuals and the cultivation of skills such as critical thinking and problem solving.

Specific Disciplines in the Liberal Arts

Specific disciplines within a university, primarily those found within the humanities and social sciences, are frequently labeled as liberal arts programs. In much of the literature, particularly in the reports on earnings and unemployment, liberal arts/humanities was designated as a separate category from other programs. Other liberal education subjects such as mathematics and science had their own separate categories. In his book, You Can Do Anything: The Surprising Power of a “Useless” Liberal Arts Education, Anders focuses exclusively on the experiences of graduates from the humanities and social sciences programs including anthropology, English, history, sociology, linguistics, etc. (Anders, 2017). Because of the usage of the term liberal arts in the literature, the many similarities regarding employment and program outcomes between English programs and others within the humanities and social sciences, and a lack of studies focused specifically on English graduates, I drew from research in
the social sciences, humanities, and English. In this report I used the term liberal arts to refer broadly to college programs, majors and graduates from the social sciences and the humanities.

**Introduction**

It is likely that almost every English literature major at a university in the United States has had to endure questions or jabs about post graduate work that involve serving coffee or taking fast-food orders (Matz, 2016). At the very least, English and other humanities and liberal arts majors face questions, confusion, and often ridicule about their choice of study from friends, students in other programs, and family members. Some who level criticism use current economic trends and the growth of tech-related jobs (Cohen, 2016; Dorfman, 2014) to disparage these areas of study, but in reality, the critique of liberal arts programs is in no way a new discussion. Debates about the value of a liberal education versus technical or specific professional training have been around for centuries (Bevins, 2012).

**History**

Historically, higher education in the United States was founded on the ideal of a liberal education. The belief and aim of this type of education has been a focus on “individual development that prepares one for a complete life” (Pascarella & Blaich, 2013, p. 7). While this type of education has taken on many different forms and emphases over the years, it likely grew out of the Greek tradition and most often included broad intellectual development with a focus on democratic citizenship and an emphasis on breadth over specialization (Mulcahy, 2008). Liberal education traditionally involved the following: a study of languages (including Greek and Latin), logic, reasoning, philosophy, math, science, and history; varied readings (including literature); exposure to other cultures; and an emphasis on analysis, critical thinking, and argumentation (Nussbaum, 2004; Pascarella & Blaich, 2013).
People began to predict the death of the liberal arts education in the 1800s. There was a push at this time toward professional training, specialization, and practical application (MacKay, 2010), which, according to Jones (2016), divided people concerned with education into two camps: the generalists who advocated for a broader education aimed at individual improvement and the careerists who believed that the primary goal of education should be career preparation and job training. The education model that we commonly see at universities today, which combines some kind of general education requirement along with a specific major or program of study, was first used at Wake Forest University in the early 1900s and was a sort of compromise between these two camps (Jones, 2016).

During the two World Wars, the pendulum between these two educational ideologies swung back and forth, at times promoting a more general, liberal arts approach as being vital to leadership and to cultivating global peace, and at other times, pushing to educate in the hard and applied sciences claiming that, “Winning the war required chemists, not humanists” (Jones, 2016, p. 47). The Harvard Report in 1954 recognized the need for specialization in education but also advocated for a strong, broad, general education by stating that, “a society controlled wholly by specialists is not a wisely ordered society” (Harvard University, 1945, p. 53).

Events like the 1947 report from President Truman’s Commission on Higher Education (Gilbert & Heller, 2013), the G.I. Bill, the Cold War, and the Soviet Union’s successful launch of Sputnik in 1957 meant that entities like governments and corporations were increasingly involved in discussions and decisions about higher education. According to Mulcahy (2008), these organizations overall were less interested in broad, liberal forms of education and instead were more concerned with issues of employability, national and personal economic progress, and access. In this environment, study focused on the liberal arts was often seen as something
bordering on the frivolous. Liberal arts programs were characterized as elitist areas of study because only the wealthy could afford to pursue education that was not directly tied to gainful employment after graduation (Berry, 1966). Fifty years later, these issues of frivolity and elitism are still quite common in the arguments against liberal arts programs within colleges and universities (American Association of Colleges and Universities, 2002; Cohen, 2016; Jones, 2016; Svrluga, 2019).

Over the decades, researchers have aimed to show the employability of liberal arts graduates and the ability of liberal arts programs to help their students meet employability goals (Berry, 1966). At the same time, programs have experimented with ways to infuse the liberal arts with more practicality (Alexander, 1974). In 2002, the Association of American Colleges and Universities published a report titled Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College wherein they urged “an invigorated and practical liberal education as the most empowering form of learning for the twenty-first century” (p. x-ix). They also recommended that professional programs, or career-focused programs, also have a strong liberal arts component.

However, the arguments that liberal arts programs are outdated and impractical continue, often spurred on by economic changes. Most recently, the 2008 economic downturn in the United States and around the world ushered in a new round of criticism. In the aftermath, a number of lawmakers leveled criticism specifically at liberal arts degrees (anthropologists, philosophers, and French majors were named specifically), threatening to cut federal funding for those programs in favor of increased funding for STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) majors, arguing that taxpayer money should only go to programs that lead directly to employment after graduation (Cohen, 2016; Dorfman, 2014). While the economy has
improved in more recent years, some continue to suggest that a liberal arts education is outdated and institutions will simply no longer be able to afford to offer these types of programs (Harris, 2018).

These prophecies persist, but so far, so do the liberal arts in both liberal arts colleges and in liberal arts programs (such as the humanities, where English majors usually reside, and social sciences) in universities. There have certainly been some casualties along the way in this ongoing battle, but English (2012) maintained, “We in English studies have become so habituated to visions of decline that we fail to appreciate our discipline's resilience, which has kept it relatively stable here in the United States” (para. 3). Indeed, numerous articles and books have been written to counter the criticism leveled at the liberal arts, offering evidence and anecdotes praising the professional merits of a liberal arts degree (Anders, 2017; Dorfman, 2014; MacKay, 2010). However, despite these defenses of liberal arts degrees, ongoing concerns about the relevance of these programs continue to manifest in discussions at all levels of government, in shifting program enrollment numbers, in parents’ unwillingness to support a child’s desire to study the liberal arts, in student worries about what they will be able to do once they graduate, and even within and among liberal arts departments exploring potential changes and additions to their programs in hopes of attracting and maintaining more students.

Commoditization of Education

The efforts by lawmakers to shift education funding based on employability represent a fundamental shift towards understanding the value of higher education primarily in terms of employment outcomes. In 2015, the governor of Wisconsin proposed edits of a century-old mission statement known as the “Wisconsin Idea” to reflect more modern priorities. The long-standing “Wisconsin Idea” emphasized the goal of improving the lives of everyone in the state
through higher education. The proposed 2015 edits included removing phrases like “the search for truth” and replacing them with the primary stated goal of “meeting the state’s workforce needs” (Harris, 2018). Ultimately, the changes did not go into effect, but their proposal (despite the governor’s claim that the wording in the proposal was a mistake) highlights an important, ongoing shift in how the country views higher education.

Bender (2013) described this shift when he stated that “higher education is no longer considered a social good. Rather, it is an individual good, with the individual thought of as an actor in a marketplace” (p. 112). Naidoo and Williams (2015) argued that when institutions view students as consumers, they fundamentally alter the purpose and nature of higher education. Berrett (2012) also described this shift and warned of a growing “consumerist ethos” in higher education (para. 6).

In reviewing a Tennessee study, Berrett (2012) provided further evidence that a consumerist or investment approach to higher education does indeed exist and that it is a change from previously held opinions about higher education. Prior to 2006, students indicated that their main motivation to go to college was to study subjects they were interested in. By 2006, a majority of students instead cited job preparation as their main reason for going to college (Berrett, 2012; Svrluga, 2019).

Some argue that this shift to higher education consumerism can be blamed on a move away from fully state-funded higher education to a model that is more dependent on support from corporations and other donations. This funding model has resulted in increased tuition and an institutional vulnerability to marketplace forces (Naidoo & Williams, 2015. Others see consumerist forces like needing new and impressive facilities to attract students and donors as at least partially to blame for the increases in tuition (Woodson, 2013).
Indeed, tuition levels as well as student loan amounts are at an all-time high (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019a). In 2019, student loan amounts in the United States surpassed 1.5 trillion dollars, which many believe constitutes a financial crisis (Friedman, 2019). Perhaps more than ever before, higher education requires a significant investment of time and money, and students want to be sure that investment will be worth it. These very real economic conditions are pushing students, their parents, and state and federal government agencies to ask schools to quantify the benefit of education (Svrluga, 2019). Most often this benefit is calculated in terms of a graduate’s ability to get a job, begin earning a competitive salary, and pay back the student loans.

**The Worth of a Major**

Consumerist attitudes, economic realities, and pressures from multiple stakeholders have led to numerous studies that focus primarily on quantitative data to try and answer the question about what a degree in a specific major or program is worth. Among other things, these studies claim that it is important for prospective students to know, before they select a program, what their earning potential will likely be after graduation (Fenesi & Sana, 2015). Indeed, prospective students are using the data generated from these studies in making their decisions about where and what to study (Tomlinson, 2017).

In an effort to understand higher education from an individual investment standpoint, Georgetown University’s Center on Education and the Workplace published a report titled *A First Try at ROI [Return on Investment]: Ranking 4,500 Colleges* (Carnevale et al., 2019). The report acknowledged the challenge of considering return on investment in education in the same ways we might with other financial investments. However, they maintained that “the potential
return [of a college education] is a key consideration when choosing where to enroll and what to study” (Carnevale et al., 2019, p. 1).

In almost all of these quantitative comparisons, graduates from English and other humanities programs were grouped with other liberal arts graduates and consistently showed lower starting wages and higher rates of unemployment than their peers from other majors. A 2012 study by Carnevale et al. found that bachelor’s degree holders overall fared much better than those without a college degree, but among college graduates, those from the humanities and liberal arts averaged higher unemployment than most technical majors or majors that were closely aligned with a specific industry or occupation. A report from the Midwestern Higher Education Compact in 2014 found that the 10% unemployment rate among humanities majors was the highest out of all alumni with the social sciences right behind at 9%. Humanities majors also had higher rates of major-job mismatch, meaning that more humanities graduates were working in fields unrelated to their area of study. The report claimed that such mismatches resulted in lower salaries than for graduates working in a field closely related to their studies.

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, in 2019 liberal arts and humanities graduates remained among those who had the highest unemployment and they also had the lowest salaries when compared with other majors. In fact, “Liberal arts and humanities was the only field for which young adult bachelor’s degree holders had both below-median earnings and an above-average unemployment rate” (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019b, p. 5). For instance, social work and human services majors had lower average starting salaries than liberal arts/humanities majors, but the unemployment rate for social workers was only 1.6% compared to 5.8% among liberal arts/humanities graduates.
Based on these outcomes from multiple sources, some argue that, especially when considered in terms of personal economic benefit, liberal arts degrees are simply no longer valuable and that we can actually harm our national economy if we continue to encourage students to pursue these degrees (Gerber, 2012). Indeed, it is impossible and likely unwise to ignore the statistics in these reports, but the situation is not as simple as the numbers would lead many to believe. Studies that look only at employment outcomes right out of college overlook longer-term factors of investment and reports that focus solely on numeric outcomes of employment are still not telling the entire story.

So how are we to understand the repeatedly dismal performance of the humanities and liberal arts graduates in these reports? One likely reason for the employment disparity is that liberal arts majors have a more broad or “generic” focus than career or field-specific programs (Fenesi & Sana, 2015). Higher education liberal arts classes and programs have generally been “more focused on creating thinkers and explorers than on transferring content” (Bowen, 2018, p. 28). The non-specific nature of these programs does not indicate uselessness, but it does mean that the path to employment is often not a direct one (Deming, 2019; Gray, 2012). Because of the breadth of their college experience, liberal arts majors, including English majors, are often still figuring out what it is they want to do after graduation. Additionally, they are more likely to change careers (Berrett, 2012). Relatedly, the broad and less-direct path may leave liberal arts students with misconceptions about the skills that they are graduating with as well as what type of employment is available to them (Haskell et al., 2012). These factors indeed contribute to lower salaries, at least in the short term.

Another factor to consider in terms of starting salaries is the types of jobs that graduates want after graduation. Students who choose the humanities or liberal arts may be less interested
in securing positions that come with higher starting salaries than in finding jobs that align with their interests and beliefs. These graduates “may be willing to take more fulfilling but lower-paying jobs” (Gutting, 2013, para. 4). Similarly, Deming (2019) acknowledged that liberal arts students may be more interested in higher education for purposes other than career preparation.

When considered in the longer term, while they still may not compete with some of their engineering counterparts, humanities and liberal arts degrees do provide a good return on investment (Dorfman, 2014; Hill & Pisacreta, 2019). Humphreys and Kelly (2014) found that over a longer term and when including graduate education, there is not as much disparity between liberal arts graduates and those with applied degrees in terms of salary. Deming (2019) also cited advanced degrees in areas such as law and medicine as well as mid-career positions in management and business as reasons why liberal arts majors catch up in terms of salary later on.

Benefits of a Liberal Arts or Humanities Degree

The broad, non-specific characteristics that define a liberal arts education and likely contribute to lower starting salaries also foster the exact skills that employers most want in their employees (Cohen, 2016). In the 1950s, the Bell Telephone Company established a humanities training program for their executives through the University of Pennsylvania. The belief was that the broad, literature-based education was necessary to help ensure that new developments in science and technology were used for the benefit of society (Berry, 1966). As technology has progressed, the need for the kind of training the Bell Telephone Company was aiming to provide has only increased. “The more we create a constant low-level hum of digital connectivity, the more we get tangled up in the vastness and blind spots of big data, the more essential it is to bring human judgement into the junctions of our digital lives” (Anders, 2017, p. 4-5).
Employers recognize the need for these humanistic skills and value them highly. A 2013 survey for the Association of American Colleges and Universities found that employers considered skills like innovation and critical thinking as very important to success in the workplace (Hart Research Associates, 2013). Employers also indicated that they “prioritize critical thinking, communication, and complex problem-solving skills over a job candidate’s major field of study when making hiring decisions” (Hart Research Associates, 2013, p. 4). Each year, the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) publishes a list of competencies that employers find most desirable in recent college graduates. Many of the competencies that consistently appear on the list are the very competencies being taught in humanities and liberal arts courses, including critical thinking, oral/written communication, and global/cultural fluency (Brown, 2015). In fact, critical thinking has been rated highest by employers for the past four years (NACE, 2019). In 2002, the Association of American Colleges and Universities claimed, “A liberal education is a practical education because it develops just those capacities needed by every thinking adult: analytical skills, effective communication, practical intelligence, ethical judgment, and social responsibility” (p. 26).

Liberal arts programs claim to teach these desired skills and competencies, but they are often more difficult to quantify than some of the skills related to specific fields of work (Deming, 2019). A 2007 study set out to examine the outcomes from liberal arts programs. Seifert et al. (2007) found that liberal arts studies did indeed have positive effects on the development of four of six identified liberal arts outcomes, including intercultural effectiveness, lifelong learning, psychological well-being, and leadership. A 2011 Canadian study also found that liberal arts alumni recognize and value the skills they developed through their education and that they use these skills in their work after graduation (MacKay, 2010).
Broad, non-specific skills like those fostered in the liberal arts may also allow for more flexibility in terms of what fields liberal arts students can go into. Berry found this to be true in her 1966 study of English graduates. She found that English graduates were successful in a variety of fields including, but not limited to, education and writing professions. She argued the following:

> With a critical mind sharpened by a liberal arts curriculum, with a knowledge and understanding of people gained through... studies in literature, and with communication skills far beyond those of most of his peers, [the liberal arts graduate] can creatively and imaginatively pursue any number of established vocations” (p. 8).

Berry did recognize that for many careers, English majors would need some additional, vocation-specific training but maintained that her report “should dispel the stereotype of the English major as one equipped for only a few kinds of positions in the career world” (p. 8).

This flexibility means that English graduates and other liberal arts graduates may be better equipped to handle the rapidly changing and fluid work economy (Anders, 2017; Bowen, 2018; Deming, 2019; Nicholas, 2018; Smith, 2018). Across all fields, the jobs that are available to graduates today vary greatly from the offerings of years past, and as technologies continue to develop and evolve, so will the jobs. Bowen (2018) claimed, “In the new learning economy, students need to prepare for jobs that do not yet exist, in which they will use information that has not yet been discovered” (p. 28). He claimed that this is why a liberal education has so long persisted as a valuable way to educate for career success.

**Challenges of Higher Education as Job Training**

The evolving job market with its shifting supply and demand issues and an economy that, as history proves, goes through up and down turns, argues against higher education becoming too
focused on preparing students for specific careers. One case study along these lines comes from the field of petroleum engineering. Over many years, there simply were not enough petroleum engineers to fill open jobs. This high demand led to an increase in starting salaries for students graduating from these engineering programs. In fact, petroleum engineers earned the highest starting salaries of all engineers for several years (NACE, 2016). This led to a push from students and universities that increased enrollment in petroleum engineering programs. In 2014, 95% of petroleum engineering graduates found jobs in the field. The next year, that number dropped to only 64%. This was a result of both increased enrollment in the traditionally high-salary-outcome programs combined with the price of oil dropping and companies cutting jobs (DiChristopher & Schoen, 2015). In 2019, enrollment in college petroleum engineering programs was on the decline, and the long-term projections for that field are still unknown as oil prices continued to fluctuate (Rassenfoss, 2019).

Even institutions who do their best to design programs that will make it easier for students to transition to the workplace simply cannot know for certain the exact jobs that will be available for students at the completion of a four-year degree. If you compare job postings today to those from a decade ago, you will see many skill requirements that simply did not exist 10 years ago (Deming, 2019). Bowen (2018) stated, “Picking a major based upon past returns is no more than a bet, a gamble with one’s future” (p. 30).

Carnevale et al.’s (2012) study of unemployment rates by college major found that since the housing market crash in 2008 architects had a much higher rate of unemployment than other majors, indicating that too close an alignment to a specific field or industry may leave individuals more vulnerable to changes in the market. Furthermore, working outside of your specialty (major-job mismatch) is much more a problem for students with more applied degrees
than those with more broad, liberal ones. The Midwestern Higher Education Compact (2014) reported that major-job mismatch was more detrimental (in terms of salary) to those with STEM and applied degrees and less detrimental to Humanities students.

Frey and Osborne (2017) highlighted another risk of close major-job alignment when they predicted that almost half of the jobs in the United States are at risk for computerization, meaning those specialties (including accounting, library sciences, insurance jobs, and others) have a high chance of being computerized or automated within the next couple of decades. They claimed that to stay competitive, employees will have to “acquire social and creative skills” (p. 269).

These social and creative skills are also important in securing that vital first job after college. Even as several universities have streamlined their programs to focus on industry-specific outcomes, employers are still reporting that graduates are underprepared for the work, and graduates are not always able to find work in their fields (Lyons & Hill, 2015). All of this means that a strict focus on practical skills needed for first jobs out of college without complementary training in social, creative, and critical thinking skills could potentially handicap graduates as they try to progress through their careers and even, if job market conditions are not ideal, as they try to find their first jobs (Alexander, 1974).

Reconciling Contradictions

Thus, we grapple with data, studies, and opinion pieces that present two seemingly contradictory realities: liberal arts majors do not do as well as other majors in terms of employment after graduation, yet they are likely to graduate with the skills employers most want. We cannot simply ignore the reality of earnings data especially while students face rising tuition costs and uncertainty about their ability to pay back student loans. Additionally, negative
perceptions about employability can lead to decreased enrollment in programs (i.e., the liberal arts programs) that do not appear in these studies to offer a good return on investment (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019a).

We also cannot ignore the valuable education that liberal arts programs can provide. As Brown (2015) suggested, “concerns with the employability of graduates need not be read as an invitation to erode the liberal arts values underpinning public higher education” (p. 49). Bowen (2018) proposed that “the key to reclaiming the public trust in higher education and the liberal arts is to foreground our existing commitment to graduating self regulated learners” (p. 28). Further, he says that we should encourage students to select a major that will inspire them to change “and thereby come to understand the central process of learning,” rather than focus on “specific content the student might need later” (p. 30).

The Association of American Colleges and Universities (2002) was perhaps trying to reconcile the conflicting issues of value when it proposed the “practical liberal” education. But there are challenges to shifting a traditional liberal arts curriculum to incorporate career readiness or applied projects. Based on the results of their study, Fenesi and Sana (2015) concluded that “humanities programs are clearly less able to facilitate goals of finding related and appropriately qualified employment” (p. 395). Whether this is due to the nature of liberal arts degrees as discussed above, or challenges specific to institutions is unclear, but there are some intrinsic challenges within the liberal arts and humanities programs that may make innovation and changes inherently more difficult or even impossible.

Some faculty and administrators feel that liberal arts programs need to keep their theoretical focus. These individuals sometimes strongly reject the notion that a liberal arts program should even try to teach practical employment skills. For instance, Maitzen (2017)
claimed, “the utilitarian defense we’ve been relying on tacitly concedes the fundamental irrelevance of our actual subject” (para. 6), and Bridgstock and Jackson (2019) said that these types of opinions on the issue of employability among stakeholders can make it difficult for organizations to move forward productively.

Even those who see the benefit of incorporating career prep and practical training or application may still be resistant to teaching it. Alexander (1974) reported that this resistance comes from faculty who are simply limited in experience and resources. Some of these, he said, “have a narrow, inadequate sense of career preparation” (p. 4). Most university professors have been on a track of increasing specialization and narrowing of focus their entire careers. The research and publishing emphasis in most institutions of higher education rewards this specialization, but specialization may present challenges in teaching more broad concepts or cultivating applied experiences for students (Bender, 2013; Nikitina, 2009). Faculty recognize their lack of exposure to fields other than academia and may “assume [they] have little to add to the conversation” (Brown, 2015, p. 50).

**Adjustments to Liberal Arts Programs**

Though first job outcomes are most often used to determine the value of a college program, Bridgstock and Jackson (2019) suggested a much more broad, three-pronged approach to fostering employability in universities. They promoted focusing on employment at graduation, but also on a general readiness to enter a profession (a point that acknowledges that students must also learn how to be more broadly employable) and “living and working productively and meaningfully across the lifespan” (p. 474). This longer-view approach agrees with Bender’s (2013) assertion that “the aim of education ought to be more ambitious than the first job—for the sake of the graduate as well as for society. It must be preparation for a career and for citizenship.
That means a practical education, but in a different key” (p. 112). Smith (2018) advocated for a broad liberal education “imbued with the fluidity to adapt” (p. 1037) to best prepare graduates for employment and for handling the general challenges of life in this day and age. But what does this practical, fluid education look like?

In 2002, the Association of American Colleges and Universities outlined goals and direction for higher education. In terms of the liberal arts, they encouraged education that helps students move beyond the classroom and participate in real world projects and opportunities off campus. This approach, they claimed, “erases the artificial distinctions between studies deemed liberal (interpreted to mean that they are not related to job training) and those called practical (which are assumed to be)” (p. 26). Nikitina (2009) claimed that it was maybe even more important for humanities students than for other majors to have the kinds of experiences where they can transfer their theoretical knowledge to applied action.

Many institutions are trying to figure out how to maintain the valuable broad liberal and theoretical basis of understanding that a liberal arts education provides while finding new ways for students to develop and apply the very real and marketable skills that they gain. One approach is to look at integrating high impact practices identified by Kuh (2008), including collaborative projects, service-learning, ePortfolios, and internships into their traditional humanities and liberal arts programs. Indeed, the number of internships completed and GPA at graduation are the “major predictors of initial career outcomes” (Townsley et al., 2017, p. 6). One of the reasons internships are helpful may be that they provide a context in which students can understand how they can use the skills they have gained outside of academia. In a 2012 study with psychology students, researchers discovered that most students had trouble identifying their liberal arts skills and understanding how they may be relevant in a workplace setting (Haskell et
This means that, along with providing internships and community or work-based projects for students, schools and programs also need to help their students identify, understand, and converse meaningfully about the broader skills they are gaining through their liberal arts studies.

Another approach to fostering career readiness within a liberal arts program comes from CSU San Marcos’ College of Humanities, Arts, Behavioral and Social Sciences. In 2013, they launched a Career Readiness Initiative that used multiple approaches including curricular changes and increased dialogue about the career options to “cultivate career readiness” among liberal arts students (Brown, 2015, p. 54). Other schools use political activism as a way to engage humanities students and to allow them to use their humanistic approaches, communication, and critical thinking skills (Nikitina, 2009).

Next Steps

Not much is yet understood about the efficacy of these programs, and it will take time before we can really see what results from them. In the meantime, the debate is ongoing.

The majority of the conversation is taking place in opinion pieces and reports with the emphasis on statistical data and employer research. One area of focus that has been mostly neglected in the ongoing debate, however, is the perspective of liberal arts students and graduates themselves (Haskell et al., 2012; Nicholas, 2018; Smith, 2018). Graduates are the ones navigating this transition, yet we have very little documentation about what their experiences are like. Berry’s 1966 book used interviews to try to understand this point of view among English graduates, but much has changed in the past 50 years. Without richer information directly from graduates, we have an incomplete understanding of the entire debate. Only with a complete picture, one that includes the lived experience of liberal arts graduates, will we begin to discern
the reality and severity of a liberal arts dilemma, and what, if anything, institutions of higher education should be doing about it.
References


https://www.aacu.org/liberaleducation/2018/spring/bowen


https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/hard-times-2012/

https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/CollegeROI/


APPENDIX B

Interview Questions

The following questions were used to guide the conversation during the interviews:

I. Foundational Information

A. How long ago did you graduate?
B. When did you get your first job after graduating?
C. What is your profession at this point?
   1. How long have you been at this job?
   2. How many other jobs (if any) have you held since graduating?

II. Job Hunting

A. Tell me about your experience finding your first job after graduation
   1. What were your main goals or motivators in your job search?
   2. What types of jobs did you apply for?
   3. How many jobs did you apply for?
      a) How many interviews did you have?
   4. How long did your job hunt take?
   5. Did you experience any barriers to finding work?
      a) Explain any barriers you believe you encountered.

B. Tell me about this first job you had?
   1. What were your responsibilities or tasks on the job?
   2. How do/did you like the job?
   3. How did you use skills you learned in the English major in that job?
   4. Were there any challenges in this job that related back to your degree?
C. Tell me more about what you are doing now

1. Do you like what you're doing? Is there anything you dislike, etc?

III. Degree-specific

A. How much do you feel like you're using your degree skills?

B. How did you feel about your English degree/education during your job search?

1. How do you feel about your degree at this stage in your career?

2. If you were able to do it over again, would you choose to major in English again?

C. What aspects of your university education do you feel have been most helpful to you in your career?

1. Did you take any specific courses or have other campus experiences that you feel affected your hire-ability or your on-the-job success?

2. Is there anything you would change about your university experience in light of your work experiences?

D. What advice would you give to students currently majoring in English?
APPENDIX C

Quantitative Survey Questions

All Likert-scale questions used the same six-point scale: Strongly agree, Agree, Somewhat agree, Somewhat disagree, Disagree, Strongly disagree. The Likert-scale questions that asked about specific skills also included an option for “not applicable.”

Basic Information

1. Upon graduating with my BA from the BYU English departed, my immediate career goal was (select the option that best fits)
   - Finding full time employment
   - Attending graduate school
   - Finding freelance/contract/part-time work
   - Full-time homemaking/child-rearing
   - Other

2. When did you graduate with your degree in English?

3. Gender

4. Race

5. Title of first full time job title after graduation

6. Are you still employed in this same job? Y/N

7. Do you still work with the same company as you did in your first job after graduation?
   Y/N

8. How many different employers have you worked for since graduating with your BA?

Job Search After Graduation

9. How long did it take you to find full time employment after graduation?
• I had a job lined up at graduation
• 1 month
• 2 months
• 3 months
• 4 months
• 5 months
• 6-12 months
• more than 1 year
• I have not been able to find full-time employment

10. What factors motivated you in your initial job search after graduation (select all that apply)?

• Salary/income
• Begin a specific career/work at a specific company
• Get general work experience
• Work in a field related to your major
• Learn what careers were available/Learn what careers you were interested in
• Work in a specific geographic area (e.g., hometown, proximity to spouse’s work)

11. (Forwarded responses from Q. 10) Please rank how motivating each of these factors were for you in searching for your first job after graduation, from most motivating (first) to least motivating (last).

12. List any other motivating factors in your initial job search

13. What factors motivated you in accepting your first job after graduation (select all that apply)?
- Salary/income
- Begin a specific career/work at a specific company
- Get general work experience
- Work in a field related to your major
- Learn what careers were available/Learn what careers you were interested in
- Work in a specific geographic area (e.g., hometown, proximity to spouse’s work)

14. (Forwarded responses from Q. 13) Please rank how motivating each of these factors were for you in accepting your first job after graduation, from most motivating (first) to least motivating (last).

15. List any other motivating factors in accepting your first job

16. (Likert-scale) Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with each of the following statements about your first job search.

- The job market was healthy at the time I graduated
- I knew where to look for the jobs that I wanted
- I knew what I wanted to do (what type of job I wanted) after graduation
- I had the experience I needed in order to get the job I wanted after graduation
- I felt prepared to find a job and enter the workforce.
- I was able to articulate the skills I had gained in my major in job applications and interviews
- The skills I gained in my major matched those in the descriptions of jobs I was interested in applying for
- My job hunt took longer than I expected
- I struggled to find jobs that I felt qualified for
I lacked confidence in my ability to do the work that companies were hiring for
I felt discouraged about finding work
I settled for a job I was not that excited about

17. Which of the following helped you to land your first job (select all that apply)?

- The English degree/English skills
- A non-English minor
- A second major
- Prior work experience (non-internship)
- Internship
- Personal network
- Professional network
- Personal drive or other personal attributes

18. (Forwarded responses from Q.17) Please rank how helpful each of these factors were for you getting your first job after graduation, from most helpful (first) to least helpful (last).

19. Did anything else help you get your first job?

20. (Likert-scale) The following skills positively influenced my ability to get my first job

- Writing skills
- Research skills
- Analytical skills
- Oral communication
- Persuasive abilities
- Understanding diverse opinions
- Empathy
- Critical thinking skills
- Problem solving skills
- Ability to work with others on a team
- Technical skills

21. Any other skills not listed here that positively influence your ability to get your first job?

22. In hindsight, what would you have done differently when seeking that first job?

First Job

23. (Likert-scale) Reflecting on your first job, please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements

- I utilized skills that I gained in my English major in my first job
- My first job was aligned with my major field
- My first job was aligned with my major field
- My first job was professionally rewarding
- I was satisfied with my first job (as a first job)
- I was proud of my first job
- The salary for this job was what I expected as a college graduate
- The salary for this job was sufficient for my needs
- My first job was a good starting point for my ultimate career goals
- I was dissatisfied with my first job
- I was always on the lookout for a better job
- I felt underutilized in my first job
- I did not feel professionally challenged in my first job
24. (Likert-scale) Thinking beyond being hired for my first job, the following skills positively influenced my ability to progress in my career.

- Writing skills
- Research skills
- Analytical skills
- Oral communication
- Persuasive abilities
- Understanding diverse opinions
- Empathy
- Critical thinking skills
- Problem solving skills
- Ability to work with others on a team
- Technical skills

25. Any other skills not listed here that positively influence your ability to progress in your career?

**English Major**

26. (Likert-scale) Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with each of the following statements about your English major studies.

- I enjoyed my English major
- I received career guidance during my undergraduate studies
- I knew where to find career guidance in the department/on campus
- The English major prepared me to enter the workforce
● I developed professional skills and competencies during my undergraduate education

● I would choose to major in English again

● I would recommend the English major to a family member or close friend

● My English degree has benefitted me personally

● My English degree has benefitted me professionally

● I wish I had chosen a major with a more clear career path

● I wish I had seen more examples of careers that were available to me with my major

● I wish I had had more “applied” experiences during the major (e.g., internship, publication work, leadership opportunities)

● English is a useless major for trying to find a first job

27. (Likert-scale) I learned the following skills as part of the English major.

● Writing skills

● Research skills

● Analytical skills

● Oral communication

● Persuasive abilities

● Understanding diverse opinions

● Empathy

● Critical thinking skills

● Problem solving skills

● Ability to work with others on a team
- Technical skills

28. What did you appreciate most about your English studies in relation to your first job?

29. What did you appreciate least?

30. What do you wish you had known about career pathways when you started as an English major?

31. In hindsight, what would you have done differently as an English major to help with that initial job search?
Memorandum

To: Royce Kimmons
Department: BYU - EDUC - Instructional Psychology & Technology
From: Sandee Aina, MPA, HRPP Manager
Wayne Larsen, MAcc, IRB Administrator
Bob Ridge, PhD, IRB Chair
Date: May 22, 2020
IRB#: IRB2020-211
Title: Understanding English Literature and Composition Graduates’ Experiences Entering the Workforce Following Graduation

Brigham Young University’s IRB has approved the research study referenced in the subject heading as exempt level, Category 2.

This category does not require an annual continuing review. Each year near the anniversary of the approval date, you will receive an email reminding you of your obligations as a researcher and to check on the status of the study. You will receive this email each year until you close the study.

The study is approved as of 05/22/2020. Please reference your assigned IRB identification number in any correspondence with the IRB.

Continued approval is conditional upon your compliance with the following requirements:

1. A copy of the approved informed consent statement can be found in iRIS. No other consent statement should be used. Each research subject must be provided with a copy or a way to access the consent statement.
2. Any modifications to the approved protocol must be submitted, reviewed, and approved by the IRB before modifications are incorporated in the study.
3. All recruiting tools must be submitted and approved by the IRB prior to use.
4. Instructions to access approved documents, submit modifications, report adverse events, can be found on the IRB website, IRIS guide: http://orca.byu.edu/irb/IRIS/story_html5.html
5. All non-serious unanticipated problems should be reported to the IRB within 2 weeks of the first awareness of the problem by the PI. Prompt reporting is important, as unanticipated problems often require some modification of study procedures, protocols, and/or informed consent processes. Such modifications require the review and approval of the IRB. Please refer to the IRIS website for more information.