

## NATION

## EDUCATION

# English majors, once disdained, back in demand

By Dean Rader

A rarity has occurred — the English major is being debated in the press. We're all so surprised we don't really know what to do. It's a little like meeting your favorite author: You feel both anticipation and dread.

It all began back in October 2012 when the Wall Street Journal ran a story in which Santosh Jayaram, a wildly successful Silicon Valley entrepreneur, praised English majors for their ability to construct stories about products or companies. He even uttered the words: "English majors are exactly the people I'm looking for."

Wow.

But that just got things started.

In late June, columnist David Brooks addressed the decline in the number of undergraduates majoring in English and the humanities in an opinion piece in the New York Times, calling for employers and students to rethink English as an important and valuable area of study.

Two days later, Steve Strauss wrote a piece for the Huffington Post on why he loves to hire English majors. Shared 8,300 times and "liked" by 34,776, Strauss' essay was an English department chair's dream come true.

Then, just last month, Jordan Weissman wrote an interesting piece for the Atlantic Monthly on the favorable employment numbers for English and humanities graduates.

These pieces make the future look bright for students of English, but the question is, as college tuition gets more expensive and as jobs get scarcer and more complex, is English a smart major in the long run?

I think so.

English majors possess two competencies that are difficult to quantify but highly sought by employers. The first I often describe as the "content/connotation/culture facility." By this I mean the ability to acquire and make sense of

structure and story while also paying attention to how that story is told as well as the cultural and historical values communicated in a literary text.

When someone spends four years reading, writing about and talking about complicated, nuanced texts, a kind of interpretive stacking occurs that enables a student (or an employee) to navigate the noise surrounding a document and pay attention both to what it's saying and (perhaps more important) to what it's doing.

Virtually no text is culture-free or value-free. Everything communicates more than what it says. Students of English and literary studies are trained to pick up on things like tone, metaphor, implication, intentionality, hesitation, argumentation and valuation — which can be, quite literally, a deal-maker or a deal-breaker. I see this fluency in my wife, who was an English major at the University of Chicago and is now a vice president of a Fortune 500 company.

English majors also tend to be good at what I call "deep decoding," which has less to do with plunging into an author's work and more to do with versatility. One of the great aspects of studying literature is learning the traits



Liz Hafalia / The Chronicle

of various genres. Literary study is unique in this regard.

Reading a novel is a lot different from reading a sonnet, which is a lot different from reading a play, which is a lot different from reading an autobiographical essay, which is a lot different from reading 12 essays about Wallace Stevens' poetry. Each genre has its own rules, its own histories, its own techniques, its own codes. In short, each genre is a system, and an English major must be proficient in all of these systems. In essence, English majors are the original cross-platformers.

But this is my perspective. What do our alumni think? I e-mailed several University of San Francisco English graduates and asked them if their degrees had prepped them for their chosen careers. The response was beyond encouraging, and I've decided to post them on our departmental website. Two are worth including here:

Shelley Lindgren seems an unlikely English major. In 2009, she was voted "best wine director" by San Francisco magazine and "best new sommelier" by Wine & Spirits and made the cut for the "top 10 sommeliers" by Bloomberg Markets.

For Shelley, her training in English was about exploration and articulation: "My incessant focus on wine and food in my papers and class discussions must have bewildered many a professor, but I learned so much that I'm able to use to this very day in my classes, cookbooks and interactions with guests

at the restaurants. More importantly, what I discovered about myself through all the reading and writing exercises gave me the confidence to pursue a hospitality career and follow my dreams."

One of my first students at USF, Chas Lacaillade, went on to business school at the University of Southern California and works in the entertainment field in Los Angeles.

"Being an English major," he writes, "taught me to explore the origin and results of thoughts and actions and not just respond to information as it presented. I also learned the importance of context and how to construct an argument or idea effectively." That is a good example of the content/connotation/culture facility I mentioned above.

Of course, English isn't for everyone, and it won't guarantee you a job upon graduation, like a major in accounting might. But, with people switching jobs every few years now, I can think of no degree more versatile or more interesting. I also believe that studying English makes you a smarter reader of the world. And as the world becomes more saturated with information, literacy (in all its forms) is the most employable skill around.

Dean Rader is chair of the English department at the University of San Francisco. To read more of his work, visit [deanrader.com](http://deanrader.com). To comment, go to [www.sfgate.com/submissions/#1](http://www.sfgate.com/submissions/#1)