

2018 Alumni Survey: Qualitative Outcomes

In Fall 2018, the Department of English Language and Literature at the University of Michigan launched an alumni survey that was intended to assess outcomes and identify areas of improvement for the department. The survey emerged from the conviction that alumni of the department possess a wealth of experience and knowledge that deserves to be recognized, and that they would be able to inform future directions for the department. Over 2,500 alumni completed the survey, offering an abundance of quantitative and qualitative data for the department. The following summarizes the survey's qualitative findings.

Career Success & Satisfaction

The survey offered strong evidence for the professional success and satisfaction of alumni. 86% of respondents reported that they saw an improvement in their writing, communication, and critical-thinking skills, with many emphasizing that such skills are highly valued in professional settings. 63% of respondents reported that their English major helped them land their first job. In long-form responses, 85% of respondents described the ways in which the degree contributed positively to their career success and satisfaction. The data demonstrate that the English major contributes to career success in many different fields, including those that are not typically associated with the discipline (e.g., business, law, and medicine) and those that are (e.g., writing, publishing, and education).

“Being an English major helped me become one of the strongest communicators in my work environments. Each year for nearly 30 years since I graduated, I have been commended in my performance reviews for being a strong verbal and written communicator. This is essential in the business field.”

Director, Global Engagement, top-ranked school of management - Class of 1990

“My English degree has provided me immeasurable value literally every day of my career. As an attorney, the skills I learned as an English major prepared me for the rigors of my career more fully than any other major in college could have in my estimation, as well as in that of many law school admissions officers. I learned critical thinking skills, analysis skills, logic, sophisticated vocabulary and essential skills as a writer: how to write clearly, concisely and persuasively.”

Assistant General Counsel - Class of 1989

“I went from being afraid to put my thoughts down on a page, to enjoying the excitement of presenting my ideas in coherent form. Communication skills are crucial in any field of work. ... I also think my background in English greatly impacted my appreciation of the liberal arts in creating good process in practicing medicine.”

Professor of Radiology - Class of 1963

Value of the English Degree

The survey data demonstrate that the strongest outcomes from the major include communication and writing skills, critical thinking, and a lifelong love of literature. Respondents valued such outcomes both for their professional utility and for a sense of personal fulfillment. More precisely, respondents identified the *understanding and analysis of the English language* and the *understanding and use of narrative* as significant skills that translate from the English classroom to professional settings.

"I often think about [an English professor] and how well her class prepared me for my career today. Specifically how she taught me to 'close read' - understanding how each word and its placement affects the overall meaning of a sentence, story, campaign, etc. It's directly related to brand positioning, where concision is key and every word counts."

Account Executive, Brand Strategy - Class of 2015

"The ability to create narratives out of chaotic facts... is a huge part of being a public defender. I interview my clients and figure out clear and compelling ways to explain their lives to my judge."

Attorney - Class of 2008

"My clients pay for my ability to craft a narrative and to write compelling prose. Without my degree, this would be a challenge."

Executive Search Consultant - Class of 2010

Alumni also emphasized the extent to which they valued the degree's versatility: they expressed a conviction that skills developed by the English major are useful in many different fields, and that their Michigan education fostered their ability to learn quickly and creatively.

"I have been successful in different careers, and I believe my education gave me the foundation to pivot to new opportunities."

Early Childhood Teacher - Class of 1992

"My degree in English... has allowed me to apply my knowledge and skills in a variety of fields and explore different cultures. The English degree can be applied to nearly any field that requires critical analysis of the written or spoken word."

Marketing Designer - Class of 2008

Many respondents also wrote that the English major was instrumental in developing their sense of ethics and empathy. These capacities, alumni suggested, have proven crucial in relational fields like business, medicine, and education, along with improving their personal relationships.

"As a physician I have to be able to relate to my patients and understand their backgrounds, their day-to-day lives, and their perspectives in their disease and treatment. I believe that studying English literature helps me do all of that, by exposing me to stories of different cultures and backgrounds and teaching me to view people and their problems from a number of different perspectives."

Assistant Professor, Department of Internal Medicine, Division of Hematology and Oncology - Class of 1998

Department Feedback

The survey collected suggestions for how to better serve current students in the Department of English. These suggestions aggregated around two themes: the necessity of supporting students as they develop technical and professional skills alongside the more traditional skills of literary analysis and writing, and the need for stronger and more directed career mentoring.

The survey also collected suggestions for how to better serve alumni in the department, which coalesced around the topics of continuing education, alumni communications, and networking and career services.