English Dept. Exit Interview: Sarah Deffenbaugh

1. When you think back on your learning experience at USF what especially stands out in your memory? [Ask for both high and low points. Press for details. It can be more than just one or two memories. If the student doesn’t mention anything related to English, ask about that.]

As I think back on my classroom memories, the ones that stand out the most are obviously my English classes. From the first semester of college, I was absolutely terrified. However, my English class helped ease my fears. I was in an upper level English class, “Playtime in London” with Professor Duys. The English students welcomed me into the tight-knit group and made me feel comfortable. Right away, I knew that this was a special major and a special group of people. I immediately fell in love with being an English student. Over the course of the years, I struggled with self-doubt when it came to my abilities as a writer and student, but Dr. Ioanes and Dr. Spicer both have reassured me and supported me.

2. What kind of learner and thinker were you when you started out as a freshman at USF, and what kind of learner and thinker are you now? What caused the changes? How did your English courses and contacts with English faculty and other majors contribute to the changes? [Ask the student to distinguish among effects of courses, faculty, and other majors.]

Freshman year, I was an…institutionalized thinker. I didn’t stray far from what was conventional or what I believed people wanted to hear. Throughout college, I have shifted more and allowed myself to consider other possibilities and perspectives. I suppose the freedom of college helped that shift, but it was also my professors, who challenged me to think beyond what I was comfortable with. My English professors encouraged me to break out of my usual mindsets and paths of thought. For example, when writing my thesis, Dr. Spicer brushed away my cautious and expected answer to the question of how to prevent teacher burnout. He encouraged me to utter the ideas that seemed “taboo” to freshman me. The English department created an environment in which I felt safe enough to challenge my own ideas and break boundaries.

3. What are your feelings and thoughts about literature, and how have your English courses and contacts with English faculty and other majors affected those feelings and thoughts? How would you describe yourself as a reader?

I love literature and exploring new genres and books. I don’t have nearly enough time to read, and it was gratifying to have my courses surrounding literature. I felt so lucky to have my “textbooks” for my classes be novels and other forms of literature. I especially liked the literature of my English courses because they were mainly selections that I wouldn’t necessarily choose for myself. Because of that, my perspectives and reading realm expanded greatly. I would describe myself as a passionate and enthusiastic reader hindered by lack of time.

4. How would you describe yourself as a writer, and how have your English courses affected your writing abilities and the way(s) you feel about yourself as a writer?

If you had asked me at the start of college if I considered myself a writer, I probably would have laughed in your face and said, “Nope!” I was very self-conscious of my writing abilities. However, after successfully completing my English courses, I can confidently say that I am a writer - and I always was one! I was just too harsh on myself throughout college. The experience that most affirmed my identity as a writer was my thesis. I knew I wanted to complete a thesis rather than two pro-lit seminars because I wanted to prove to myself that I could do it. Writing my thesis was one of the most difficult yet rewarding experiences of my college career. The biggest challenge that I encountered was myself, but by completing my thesis, I affirmed that I am a writer. If I had to describe myself as a writer, I would say that I am a creative, flowing, unconventional writer. I have allowed myself to explore that side of my writing, and I would say I identify more with that than with the formal, professional, educational side.

5. To what extent do you think your education at USF is preparing you for a career? In what field(s)? More specifically, how well do you think your English courses have prepared you for work in the “real world”? How? Or why not?

A refreshing change from high school, my English assessments and final projects emphasized autonomy, choice, and creativity. This is preparing me for my future career as a teacher. I have learned what is effective with assessment and what is not. For example, standardized tests are not an effective way to assess students in English. I really appreciated how my English professors focused on giving us a choice as to what we want to explore for our finals and creativity in the medium to do so. I will definitely be implementing that in my teaching career: allowing students to express what they know in a way that is comfortable and achievable for them to do so.

6. To what extent do you think your education has been valuable in its own right? [Repeat question focused just on English classes.]

My mom would always say that your education is the most important thing, and no one can ever take it away from you, no matter what. I would agree with her. My education is extremely valuable. The lessons I have learned, the connections I have made, the empowerment I have felt all are results of my education. My experience with the English department has resulted in the most valuable memories, lessons, and relationships. I owe so much to the English department, the professors and the classmates, and I am endlessly grateful for them.

7. To what extent have you enjoyed your educational experience at USF? [Ask for comparisons, if the student has studied elsewhere.] More specifically, have you enjoyed courses and contacts in English?

My educational experience was my favorite part of my USF experience. The English classes were always so enjoyable - not only the content, but also the professors and classmates. I absolutely loved all of the discussions we would have together as a class. They were truly enriching in so many ways. I will forever treasure my friends, mentors, and memories I have thanks to the USF English department.

8. What would you suggest to improve the learning experience offered by the English Department?

I think what you all are doing is incredible. I love everything about the English department. If I had to suggest something to implement, perhaps it would just be more unique classes. Don’t get me wrong, I loved the classes that I have taken. And I know how much effort goes into designing new classes. However, it is the unique, quirky classes, like “Playtime in London” that have stuck out to me. If there are any other classes that put a fun spin on the requirements, I think it would intrigue new students.

EXTRA QUESTION: If you participated in the department’s conference, studied abroad, or tutored in the writing center, were these experiences valuable? In what way?

I participated in the Writers’ Conference my senior year, and it was definitely valuable. I never would have chosen to do it myself, but Dr. McDermott pushed me out of my comfort zone, which I am grateful for. It was interesting and inspiring to not only hear from the keynote speaker but also from fellow student writers. Overall, I thoroughly enjoyed my experience.

Outcomes: Run through these outcomes, which were written by the department, and ask if the graduate thinks she has met each outcome. [This is to satisfy a more strict interpretation of what assessment is supposed to be than most of us would prefer. Yes or No answers will do, but if students want to explain their answers, that’s okay.]

**Outcome 1: Reading**

Upon completion of the English major, students will have developed a literary ethics of reading, which involves close, nuanced reading and reasoned response that respects the integrity of the texts and their imaginative possibilities.

Yes

**Outcome 2: Critical Thinking**

Upon completion of the English major, students will have advanced competence in analyzing and interpreting texts in various contexts (social, historical, political, with regard to gender, race, class, etc.), within different critical traditions, and with an awareness of their own theoretical stances.

Yes

**Outcome 3: Writing**

Upon completion of the English major, students will have advanced competence in thinking and writing abilities in argument, organization, rhetorical sensitivity and style, conventions and mechanics, and the writing process.

Yes

**Outcome 4: Research**

Upon completion of the English major, students will be able to conduct critical inquiry into the interpretation of a literary text or texts.

Yes.

Before ending the interview, ask the student if she has anything else she’d like to talk about. Take notes as the interview is going on, and then after it ends, write everything up while it’s still fresh in your memory.

Thank you for everything. Dr. Spicer, Dr. Ioanes, Dr. McDermott, and Professor Duys: you will forever hold a special place in my heart. I love you all.

-Sarah