

## **THE 2024 ADVICE TO STUDENTS CONSIDERING GRADUATE WORK IN ENGLISH**

Copyright 2024 Professor Michael West  
Department of English CL 628H  
University of Pittsburgh  
mikewest@pitt.edu

- 1. What is this document?**
- 2. When should I start thinking about graduate school?**
- 3. What preparation are graduate programs generally looking for?**
- 4. Must I major in English if I plan to do graduate work in English?**
- 5. What are career prospects for holders of graduate degrees in English?**
- 6. How can graduate school be financed?**
- 7. To which graduate programs should I consider applying?**
- 8. How should I handle the application writing sample?**
- 9. How should I handle the GRE exams?**
- 10. How should I handle the application's personal statement?**
- 11. How should I handle soliciting letters of recommendation?**
- 12. How should I respond to multiple offers of admission? to unanimous rejection?**
- 13. Once in graduate school how can I maximize my career prospects?**
- 14. What different approaches do graduate degrees in writing demand?**
- 15. What different approaches do graduate degrees in film demand?**
- 16. What different approaches do graduate degrees in education demand?**
- 17. Case Histories of Graduate Applicants 2004-2005**
- 18. Case Histories of Graduate Applicants 2005-2006**
- 19. Case Histories of Graduate Applicants 2006-2007**
- 20. Case Histories of Graduate Applicants 2007-2008**
- 21. Case Histories of Graduate Applicants 2008-2009**
- 22. Case Histories of Graduate Applicants 2009-2010**
- 23. Case Histories of Graduate Applicants 2010-2011**
- 24. Case Histories of Graduate Applicants 2011-2012**
- 25. Case Histories of Graduate Applicants 2012-2013**
- 26. Case Histories of Graduate Applicants 2013-2014**
- 27. Case Histories of Graduate Applicants 2014-2015**
- 28. Case Histories of Graduate Applicants 2015-2016**
- 29. Case Histories of Graduate Applicants 2017-2018**
- 30. Case Histories of Graduate Applicants 2018-2019**
- 31. Case Histories of Students Who Left Academia for Various Reasons**

### **1. What Is This Document?**

Composed initially in 2004, then substantially revised and expanded in subsequent years, it

represents my advice to students applying to do graduate work in the various fields covered by Pitt's English Department. With the lapse of time it may gradually become outdated, though not very rapidly, I hope, for I plan to update it annually in electronic form as new data become available. It is based primarily on my semi-systematic investigation of the credentials and outcomes for about fifty Pitt students (plus a few from elsewhere) who applied for admission to many graduate programs in literature from about 1992 to 2013. Questionnaires that these students filled out at my request after going through the application process constitute a useful data bank, allowing future applicants to fine-tune their aspirations through comparison with the fates of past applicants, the most recent of which are summarized individually in Sections 17-28. **(Be aware, however, that fellowship amounts throughout are not quoted in constant dollars but must be adjusted for inflation).** In what follows I shall often have occasion to quote from these case histories. If any Pitt students contemplating graduate work in English would like to consult me, I'd be happy to discuss more specifically the results of applications comparable to theirs and provide them with a hard copy if they wish.

While some of my advice may well be relevant to students considering graduate work in writing, film, or education, my sampling of such students was relatively limited, alas, so what follows focuses on pursuing MA and PhD degrees in literature, with later sections that try to suggest differences that may apply to students planning graduate work in the other related fields.

A copy of this document was circulated to department faculty, who were invited to suggest modifications and improvements. Some have been incorporated, and I'll happily consider others. Thus the document has a semi-collective aspect. It is, I trust, at least as reliable as advice you are likely to get from any other faculty member, for it is probably based on more extensive knowledge of how Pitt applicants have actually fared in graduate admissions over the past decade than any other faculty member now possesses. But while I hope it reflects a substantial departmental and professional consensus on many issues, doubtless other faculty will disagree on particular points. That is natural and hardly to be lamented. You can make the best decision about graduate work by soliciting the opinions of several faculty whom you trust and trying to synthesize conflicting opinions yourself. My opinions merit your careful attention, but in the last analysis they are the opinions of one especially well-informed professor and not necessarily advice that all other faculty would endorse in every respect. Any document that tried to achieve complete consensus on these issues could only do so by lapsing into bland vagueness that would not help you much.

## **2. When Should I Start Thinking about Graduate School?**

It is never too early to start thinking about graduate school provided this does not lead to premature specialization and deter you from what should be your primary purpose at Pitt: acquiring the best liberal education that you can (for this is indeed the qualification most valued by graduate programs in English). No freshman entering Pitt should plan his course work as if certain that he will pursue a graduate degree in English or even major in English, for such certitude is essentially impossible and therefore unwise insofar as it may foreclose other

attractive educational opportunities here. Good planning as a freshman and sophomore is more a matter of keeping your options open. Feel no need to declare an English major prematurely nor to load up on English courses during your first two years at Pitt—if you indeed go to grad school there will be more than enough time for that. Recognize that graduate English programs often regard the best and most distinctive applicants as those who have built up strong areas of competence in related fields outside English studies. Foreign languages, for example, must (unlike English literature) be studied consecutively, so you need to lay the groundwork early in your college education if you wish to impress graduate admissions committees by having studied some foreign literature in the original language beyond the intermediate courses that satisfy Pitt's minimal distribution requirements--requirements so minimal as to render faintly ludicrous our claimed institutional commitment to global or international studies. Likewise if you want graduate admissions committees in English to salivate over a strong double major in a related field like history, philosophy, linguistics, political science, sociology, or even science, you'll probably need to start laying the groundwork for this during your first two years (as did the recent graduate whose triple majors in English literature, neuroscience, and history and philosophy of science culminated in a prestigious national Mellon Fellowship to study the relation between literature and science at Stanford). Don't let any commitment to English studies distract you from this.

But if you wait until fall semester of senior year to focus on graduate work in English as a serious option, you risk missing several opportunities to enhance your attractiveness as a candidate. As a junior interested in graduate study there are several steps you can and should take to maximize the credentials you will present for admission by the middle of your senior year. To begin with, you need to plan your remaining course work in other fields carefully so that you lay on the admissions table the most attractive package of expertise in related areas, perhaps by having it certified through double majors, formal minors, or certificate programs. Moreover you need to think carefully about the English courses you take. Applicants are typically asked to submit a paper as a sample of their abilities, which graduate admissions committees may evaluate with special emphasis on research ability. Harvard, for example, specifies a 15-20 page critical paper, not just an essay. Thus you may be at a disadvantage if by fall semester of senior year the only longer research paper you have written stems from a junior seminar. It's probably wise to select more than one English course junior year that requires a longer paper cum research bibliography, for such papers constitute the most effective writing samples for graduate applications. That way if for some reason your junior seminar paper doesn't pan out well, you have another string for your bow.

Broad historical surveys like the period courses that satisfy one requirement for our major are perhaps especially useful in helping students score well on the GRE subject test in English, which may be required of you, so it may make sense to take as many of them as you plan to before fall semester of senior year; and since questions involving critical theorists now appear on the subject test, a good course in that area might likewise pay dividends. Increasing numbers of graduate schools want completed fellowship applications in hand by December of senior year. Moreover the GRE subject test must be taken at the earliest opportunity senior year in order for

the results to be reported to those schools as part of a completed application, and taking it requires at least a month's advance registration. In 2002, for example, a student had to register for the GRE subject test no later than Oct. 4 in order to take it on Nov. 9 and have the results reported by Dec. 20, the last date acceptable by many schools, while in 2004 Stanford University's deadline for completed applications was Dec. 1, and UC Davis, Santa Barbara, Washington, Utah, and Oregon all demanded them by Dec. 15. So registering as late as Nov. 8 for the December 14 subject test that reported results by Jan. 17 would have foreclosed opportunities. In Princeton's words, "chances of being admitted are severely limited" for candidates whose test scores are not on hand at the beginning of the application process, although Indiana University more discreetly admits that "many of its graduate programs consider applications submitted after a deadline as long as all available spaces for students have not been filled by highly qualified applicants."

For a short explanation of why it's wise to start the application process itself "no later than the summer before your senior year in college" consult the Council of Graduate Schools' Timetable for Applying to Graduate School: <<http://www.cgsnet.org/ResourcesForStudents/timetable.htm>>. There are also several online networks offering advice, statistics, and sympathy about graduate English applications—e.g., englishobsessed, who\_got\_in, and applyingtograduateschool--that might intrigue, especially if you have oodles of time to sit at a computer sharing gossip and angst.

### **3. What Preparation Do Graduate Programs in English Want Most in Applicants?**

Programs vary, of course, so check out their websites for specific recommendations for applicants. But most programs will want a completed bachelor's degree by the time you enroll in the program—i.e., normally fall in a given year though some schools will consider midyear admissions, albeit seldom with funding. This means that your degree must be granted by summer's end. Admission, financial aid, and candidacy for a graduate degree are normally contingent on that. In some departments like Pitt's you might be allowed to take graduate courses without having been admitted to candidacy for a degree, so if a glitch delays the granting of your degree you could conceivably explore this option; but you are utterly unlikely to get money without it.

Beyond that, of course, they want the best candidates they can get. Harvard straightforwardly specifies that they expect at least an A- average in literature courses while an overall GPA on that level is not quite so important. At the University of Pittsburgh regulations stipulate that anyone offered a Teaching Assistantship must have an over-all undergraduate GPA of 3.0 (B average), and many other institutions probably have analogous minimal grade criteria for such financial aid. The University of Michigan speaks for many programs in wanting "a well-balanced program of study in English and American literature, including a strong range in period and genre. Some training in the history and structure of the English language is also desirable. Evidence that the applicant can satisfy the foreign language requirement in the first two years of the doctoral program is also necessary for admission."

Half the doctoral programs in English including most of the stronger programs like Michigan's will require intermediate-level knowledge of two foreign languages; other programs may allow advanced knowledge of one foreign language and literature or simply content themselves with modest reading ability in one. Concern about a student's ability to meet a program's language requirements for the Ph.D. is common, for some people prove incapable of meeting this requirement, so students who demonstrate in advance that foreign languages hold no terrors for them have a distinct advantage in the application process. Relying on language skills attested only by high school study is unwise.

#### **4. Must I major in English if I plan to do graduate work in English?**

In a word, no. Though many programs like Indiana's describe an undergraduate English major as the normal background for applicants, most also are perfectly willing to consider applicants with other backgrounds, especially if their major fields of concentration are deemed particularly relevant to English studies (e.g., a foreign language, philosophy, religious studies, history, political science, etc.). What is more important than completing a formal major in English is that applicants have a track record of marked success in a number of English literature courses (preferably resulting in some strong research papers) and be warmly recommended by some of their English professors. Pitt's formal minor in English (currently requiring 18 credits) might well serve this purpose. However, if you are a Pitt Writing major, which requires only four courses in literature, don't expect graduate programs in literature to value your writing courses very highly, since many writing programs have the reputation of being indulgently graded operations where students' egos are stroked while cultivating unrealistic fantasies about their "creative" potential. In that situation you might be well advised to take at least a couple of extra literature courses.

Outcomes for four Pitt students applying in 2002-3 dramatize these facts. One summa cum laude student never majored in English but completed double majors in history and linguistics as well as developing a reading knowledge of five languages; his background in English consisted of only half a dozen courses, but he did impressive work in them, authoring literary essays that won three prizes. He was offered lucrative honorary graduate fellowships in English by Harvard, the University of Pennsylvania, Illinois, and UCLA--indeed, everywhere he applied except Berkeley. A second summa cum laude student who was a philosophy major also took only about half a dozen courses in English but performed outstandingly in them, likewise authoring three prize-winning literary essays (one of them on German literature, where he had strong language abilities) and particularly impressed some of the most distinguished department faculty. Though he was rejected by Berkeley and Columbia, he was offered lucrative honorary graduate fellowships in English by Duke, NYU, and the University of Chicago.

By contrast, a third summa cum laude student with a GRE verbal score in the 92nd percentile had double majored in both English literature and English writing while editing a literary magazine.. But though her transcript was overloaded with English courses, she had ignored advice to pursue a language at the college level, relying instead on three years of high school Spanish, and the best

writing sample she could muster as she approached the end of her English major was rather weak, a critical essay rather than a true research paper--certainly nothing that could have contended for a prize. The results? Although this dedicated English major and highly graded poet had received top grades and shared the Burkhart Alumni Scholarship awarded to our top lit majors, her extensive course work in English lit did not keep her from being rejected by Michigan, Illinois, Cornell, Duke, Notre Dame, Johns Hopkins, Texas, and UMass. Wisconsin's was the only graduate program to accept her, and that without funding. Yet another summa cum laude student had a 3.98 university GPA, a GRE verbal score of 660 in the tenth decile, was a Burkhart recipient as a top major, had written a senior honors thesis for the B.Phil., was a University Scholar ranked in the top 2% of the junior class, editor of a literary magazine, had impressive postgrad work experience, etc. But her languages were limited to three years of high school Spanish and three semesters of college German. Although she received a good teaching assistantship at Minnesota, she was rejected by Penn, Brown, Columbia, Michigan, and Cornell. She rightly suspects that weak language background probably played a large part in freezing her out of those top-twenty programs, and looking back on her experience here she regrets that the importance of foreign language study was not more emphasized in the advising she received.

The lesson should be clear. Graduate programs do not regard over-concentration in English as a virtue. Strong GRE verbal and subject test scores like those presented by the two more successful applicants are more likely to be impressive than just piling up English courses with strong grades; likewise demonstrable strengths in foreign languages and related fields beyond English can outweigh the lack of a formal English major. One English lit course requiring a research paper that can serve as a strong writing sample may be worth two courses that don't. By requiring twelve courses (more than English departments at many other schools) Pitt's English Department demands far more of its majors' time than other departments (until recently Political Science required only eight) , and this can be counterproductive if it inhibits developing strengths in related fields. It rarely makes sense for majors aspiring to graduate school to take more than the minimum number of English credits required for the lit major. Their tuition money would be better spent on foreign language preparation, on completing double majors, formal minors, area certificates, or strong clusters in related fields, or simply on acquiring the kind of broad-based liberal education represented by the distribution requirements for Pitt's Phi Beta Kappa chapter.

By the time one receives a Ph.D. in English one has been forced to sit through so many repetitive seminars on periods, figures, and topics covered in prior course work that there is a real risk of overdosing even on literature that one loves. To overdose on the undergraduate level just increases the possibility of ultimate burn-out. Conversely, once one is enrolled in a graduate program in English, it is much more difficult to escape its requirements in order to cultivate strengths in related academic disciplines that were neglected at the undergraduate level. For all these reasons one should not commit one's undergraduate education precipitously to an English major--and certainly not under the delusion that it is the only route to graduate work in English.

## **5. What are career prospects for holders of graduate degrees in English?**

In a word, tight, though one must keep in mind the old adage, "There's always room at the top." For decades now graduate programs in English have been producing more Ph.D's in English than there have been academic jobs for, leading to major disillusionment for some graduate students who have invested a decade or more pursuing that degree. The median time for a doctorate in the humanities is now nine years, Louis Menand reports in The Academic Marketplace, eleven if one counts time not enrolled in grad school. In the MLA Newsletter and the ADE Bulletin the Modern Language Association of America and its affiliated Association of Departments of English publish an annual survey of the number of doctoral degrees granted and the number of academic jobs advertised in its Job Information List that you can consult for cold statistics in this area. For example, in 2006 there were 954 doctoral degrees granted in English while an MLA survey turned up only 458 job placements resulting from its Job Information List, so the search for a decent job often takes several years. A good many less desirable entry-level positions never appear in the MLA Job Information List but are advertised in venues like the Chronicle of Higher Education; indeed it's been estimated that only 60% of the jobs are advertised before the December MLA Convention. But while accurate statistics in this area are hard to compute, the volume of complaints from frustrated Ph.D.'s trying to piece together a living out of several part-time positions (increasingly popular with institutions because of the cost savings involved) or debarred from professional employment altogether makes plain that anyone beginning graduate work today must be prepared to compete hard for a good job at the four-year college level. While the number of advertised jobs in 2005 rose significantly from the number a decade earlier, slightly fewer were tenure-track. Between 1995-2005 Pitt's graduate program in English (ranked ca. 30th in 2005) claimed a success rate of 80% for placing its film and composition Ph.D.s in tenure-track teaching positions, but slightly less than 50% for its literature Ph.D.s--20% of whom were no longer working in higher education. Between 2004-2010 only 31% of Pitt's English Ph.D.s secured tenure-track jobs while another 46% got non-tenure-stream positions; most of these were presumably in composition, while about a quarter of those earning doctorates had not yet found employment teaching. The national average is probably not significantly higher according to the MLA. David Laurence's "Where Are They Now? Occupations of 1996-2011 PhD Recipients in 2013," combining data for English with modern language doctorates, showed half were in tenure-track positions with another quarter employed in higher education though not necessarily in tenure-track jobs. Nationwide the number of English majors shrank by about 20% in the decade between 2006-2015. Such fluctuations are not unprecedented, with the 1970s having witnessed a sharper decline before rebounding; but unless this downward trend in undergraduate enrollment stabilizes, job opportunities for English Ph.D.s will be affected. Lower-ranked programs like, say, Alabama may place a lower percentage of their Ph.D's while some more highly ranked programs may be more successful, but that rule is not invariable. Thus UCLA and Brown are top-ranked programs rumored to have had difficulty with placement sometimes, while Penn State, Wayne State, and West Virginia are lower-ranking programs reputed to do well by their doctorates. Bear in mind, however, that such reputations can fluctuate and lag the facts, so after lean times UCLA may again be riding high while Wayne State may not have enjoyed its wonted success most recently.

Keep in mind that the keen competition for tenure-track academic jobs is a good sign that on

balance they are attractive jobs, offering reasonable salaries, remarkable job security after tenure, flexible scheduling, excellent vacation time, potentially satisfying and useful employment with at least some mild social benefit, and better-than-average retirement benefits that have turned some emeriti into millionaires. To learn about the variety of college-level teaching positions in English see the [MLA Job Information List](#), which gives a fair conspectus of the range of academic job opportunities from the Ivies down to humble community colleges. A hard copy may be borrowed from our Chairman's office to consult in the Crow Room; moreover a student of any subscribing department should be able to scan the electronic version by visiting <www.ade.org>, then using an ID # obtained from their department and the password JOBLIST. Current salary levels at individual institutions throughout academia are tabulated annually by the American Association of University Professors in the [AAUP Bulletin](#), though since their figures are not broken down by field one should bear in mind that unlike, say, computer science, English is one of the lower-paid academic fields (everybody can speak it, so no high school football coach is deemed too dumb to teach it, etc.). Nonetheless an MLA survey suggests that people who managed to get hired as assistant professors of English in 2007 enjoyed average starting salaries of ca. \$45,000, with fringe benefits often adding another 20+% and family incomes topping \$75K. In 2010 a Pitt graduate completing his Ph.D in Wisconsin's premier program in literacy studies joyfully reported being hired by a fine Pennsylvania college at a starting salary in the mid-60s plus fringes (with a focus on on-line writing communities, he regards himself as the lucky beneficiary of a top program in a hot field, so do not count on emulating his good fortune). Some Ph.Ds in English go into secondary education and make satisfying careers there; salary scales in most public school systems like Pittsburgh's reward doctoral degree holders without the expectation of continuing research from them. For information about this possibility consult the department's academic advisors or faculty in the Composition Program with liaison to the School of Education, and see Section 16 below.

It would be naive to assume that a doctorate necessarily guarantees you a job that closely resembles positions held by English department faculty here at Pitt. College-level institutions vary widely not only in their pay scales but in their expectations of faculty, just as wannabe college teachers vary widely in the importance that they attach to teaching vs. research. It's certainly true that the top jobs in the profession as measured by dollars and prestige go to productive scholars eager to churn out books and articles, and the rewards for doing so include reduced teaching schedules. Here at Pitt your senior English professors normally teach only two courses a term; but they are expected to be engaged in scholarly publishing that can make their long four-month summer vacations hardly vacations. Many academic jobs at institutions further down in the pecking order (like Pitt's branch campuses) carry three or four-course loads teaching students denser than your classmates here at Pitt's main campus (our current average verbal SAT is above 600) with correspondingly lower salaries; but the expectations for scholarly productivity there are generally lower, so there may be more effective vacation time as well as more time to focus on teaching.

And your own ambitions may well fall on the pedagogical side of the research/teaching continuum. Theoretically the doctoral degree represents training in how to do literary research,



as certified by a dissertation. But historically a great many Ph.Ds (once estimated at ca. 75% though that percentage has probably dropped in recent decades as colleges have escalated their demands for faculty publication) never published any research after completing their dissertations, which served as ersatz, make-believe research. Now the need for ersatz, make-believe research is often satisfied by the production of mediocre books and articles that serve little real purpose except the promotion of their authors' careers. Although much of this "scholarship" may have no real audience but deans, some of it is no doubt intellectually beneficial in stimulating the academic authors' own minds and so insuring their continued self-education. But one can honorably decide that much of what passes for research in literary academia is high-flown nonsense that distracts academics from their teaching more than improving it.

However, if your career ambitions are focused mainly on college teaching with minimal pursuit of scholarship, you should be aware that such ambitions probably relegate you to the lower echelons of the profession in terms of rewards--not that satisfying and eminently useful careers cannot be made there. Precisely gauging your career prospects as a teacher of English in higher education as opposed to secondary education is thus to a considerable extent a matter of assessing your commitment to--and talent for--the scholarly side of the academic reward system. If you could not be content teaching a four-course load to non-native speakers at El Paso Community College but aspire eventually to a position at a research university like Pitt, you need reasonable grounds for thinking that you can compete effectively for jobs at that level.

## **6. How can graduate school in English be financed?**

Doctoral degrees in medicine and law lead to higher average earnings for M.D.'s and lawyers than for academics. But at the end of four years of medical school a resident with an M.D. and a salary of ca. \$45,000 may be carrying indebtedness approaching \$200,000 while an attorney's legal education can run up a six-figure bill for his three-year J.D. A Ph.D. in English normally takes more time than doctoral degrees in medicine or law and leads to less remunerative employment. But the good news is that it should be nowhere near as costly, for there is much more financial aid available along the way from other sources than burdensome loans. Indeed, if after exploring all your options the only way you can finance graduate work in English involves going heavily into debt, that is a good indication that your qualifications may not enable you to compete effectively for jobs with more promising students in Ph.D. programs whose graduate education is largely subsidized by their institutions. In that situation you should perhaps reconsider pursuing a graduate degree in English.

Financial aid comes in three main forms. Honorary fellowships carry no teaching responsibilities and normally provide a stipend sufficient to cover tuition and very modest living expenses while taking graduate courses full time or working on a dissertation. Teaching fellowships (usually called teaching assistantships or TAs if held by graduate students who have not yet earned an M.A. degree) are essentially part-time jobs teaching lower-level courses, esp. freshman English. These "apprentice" teaching positions are offered to graduate students while they take graduate

courses part-time or work on dissertations. Many graduate departments also have some minor jobs as graders, research assistants, or administrative assistants that may be awarded on a per-course basis rather than on an annual contract as teaching fellowships usually are. One Pitt student who went to SUNY Stony Brook without a teaching assistantship but with a promise of other support was able to fund his M.A. there fully with such part-time jobs, but without an explicit advance institutional commitment to funding you should not count on emulating him.

Unlike undergraduate scholarships, which are most often need-based, graduate fellowships are normally merit-based, so your family's financial standing is not considered in awarding them. However some fellowships may be targeted for minority-group applicants, who face less stringent admission criteria. Thus in 2006 a student with a Spanish surname, whose family had been American citizens for generations and who was so thoroughly anglicized that he knew no Spanish himself nor was regarded by his friends as Hispanic-American, was accepted everywhere he applied despite underwhelming GRE verbal scores of 550 below the 75th percentile and quantitative 450/11%. He turned down lucrative fellowships from Ohio State and Washington as well as TAs with minor honorary components from Santa Cruz and Colorado for a six-year, \$20K package from Penn State, more than the top university fellowship offered normal applicants (cp. the cases in Sections 19A and 20B). While he did have a cum laude record as a University of Colorado English major with a strong application essay and some presentations, such largesse would not have showered on him had many universities not treated his application as an underprivileged minority student's eligible for special decanal funding. Affirmative Action regulations put considerable pressure on universities to demonstrate ethnically diverse student bodies, so students belonging technically to groups deemed underprivileged may enjoy a considerable edge in the admissions process. See Section 18, H '06.

Since graduate education in English can be time-consuming, honorary fellowships that shorten the path to a Ph.D. and full earning capacity are highly desirable. Thus one Pitt applicant in 2005 was overjoyed to win a prestigious four-year university fellowship at Rice that not only paid \$22K/year but required teaching only four semester courses during the two non-honorary years, making it possible to complete the degree in 4-5 years. Some programs will offer all their incoming graduate students honorary fellowships for the first one or even two years, renewable as teaching fellowships for a number of years thereafter contingent upon satisfactory performance. Such honorary largesse is more typical of the leading private universities, which can thus justify their steep undergraduate tuition by promising that their undergraduates are not normally instructed by first-year graduate students. Though most public universities will have a few honorary fellowships available for their very best incoming graduate students, the more typical basis for financial aid at state institutions is graduate teaching assistantships, renewable upon satisfactory performance for a specified number of years. Indeed, while students pursuing only an M.A. in English at Pitt must pay for it out of their own resources, no one is accepted into the doctoral program after the M.A. without being granted a teaching fellowship, which is viewed as mandatory teacher training.

The most prestigious and lucrative honorary fellowships are offered by the great national and

international fellowship foundations. The Rhodes, Gates, and Marshall scholarships subsidize graduate education at Oxford, Cambridge, and all other British universities, while the Mellon and Javits fellowships may be used for graduate education at any American university. They are intensely competitive--unless you have at least a 3.9 GPA over-all (and top GRE verbal scores for the Javits and Mellon), it is probably a waste of your time to apply for them. The application process is time-consuming, and the international fellowships have even earlier deadlines than those for graduate school admissions. But if you have outstanding qualifications, and especially if you are as interested in British as in American literature, you should definitely investigate this possibility no later than the first week or two of your last fall semester at Pitt. In 2002 one outstanding Pitt student who had won half a dozen English department prizes had the satisfaction of declining a Mellon Fellowship to accept a four-year Javits Fellowship to the University of Chicago's interdisciplinary Program in Social Thought, while in 2005 another outstanding student happily settled for a Mellon to Stanford to study the influence of science upon literature. Honors College supervises all applications for these fellowships, which require institutional endorsement, and thanks to its expertise Pitt has an impressive track record in producing more Marshall scholars than any other institution in Pennsylvania. Judy Zang at Honors College is also a useful source of information about applying for graduate fellowships of any sort.

Many graduate programs like Pitt's will be happy to admit M.A. students whom they do not offer to fund. But should you pay tuition for an M.A. degree in English that may prove worthless as a job credential? As the [MLA Job Information List](#) will inform you, there are certainly some positions open within the field to M.A.'s or ABD's (the profession's slang term for graduate students who have finished "all but dissertation," which some never do). For example, a few years ago one mature woman with an undergraduate degree in political science returned to Pitt to take postgraduate English courses, then after taking an outstanding M.A. in English at Duquesne was hired by Beaver Falls Community College and went on to chair the department of humanities there. A number of Pitt's part-time lecturers in English hold only M.A. degrees. But in general the M.A. has distinctly second-class status within the field, and for that reason many prestigious programs are reluctant to consider applicants whose goal is limited to that degree. At Pitt, for example, there are essentially two programs, a terminal M.A. program with no guarantee of continuing and a combined M.A./Ph.D. program; students admitted to the former cannot be departmentally funded whereas all admitted to the combined M.A./Ph.D. program receive honorary first-year fellowships and can continue to the Ph.D. given satisfactory performance. Consider that fact carefully when specifying on applications the degree you are aiming for since little may be lost by aiming for a Ph.D. but eventually settling for an M.A. in combined M.A./Ph.D. programs that may give out M.A. as a consolation prize to those deemed unworthy to proceed to doctoral work (on the other hand, applying for a combined doctoral program if your qualifications are marginal may subject you to tougher competition). Some schools like Virginia may have separate terminal M.A. programs that are rigidly separated from their doctoral programs (where the M.A., if awarded, is just a stepping-stone to the Ph.D.) with no possibility of eventual transfer and no financial aid to applicants.

When even the Ph.D. cannot guarantee full-time employment in the field, relying on an M.A. in

English as a ticket to a satisfying academic job is risky unless you aspire to a career in secondary education (especially in private secondary schools) or at the community college level, where about two-thirds of the faculty hold only M.A. degrees. For that reason you should think very carefully before investing grandfather's legacy in graduate education in English unless you can approach it purely as personal enrichment, an extended liberal education that may not lead to professional certification or constitute a job ticket. If your college record does not qualify you for some sort of funding in graduate school, most families should not be expected to support graduate work in English as they may have supported your college education, for the financial payoff is much less certain. If you're determined to pursue a graduate degree in English in the absence of any institutional support, rather than taking out a loan or asking your folks to shell out yet more tuition a better course may be to shoulder the risk yourself by paying for it out of your own pocket.

How can you do this? Here are some strategies that by keeping your initial investment low may make the process seem somewhat more feasible if not necessarily advisable. Like many universities Pitt pays employees like secretaries relatively low salaries in comparison with private employers, then compensates for this by offering them free tuition benefits. Some Pitt employees take jobs here for precisely that reason, and a few have financed graduate degrees in English on this basis; presumably similar policies hold at many other schools. State universities normally charge out-of-state applicants a steep tuition differential; but should you apply to a state university elsewhere that accepts you without funding, it is normally possible to defer admission for one year. In that event you might be able to move immediately to that area, find a job and establish residence in one year, then begin part-time graduate work a year later at in-state tuition. Indeed, many graduate departments like Pitt's make provision for admitting tuition-paying students to take individual graduate courses as special students without admitting them to candidacy for an M.A. degree. Getting your foot in the door of a graduate department this way gives you a chance to show them what you can do, and if you impress the professors whose seminars you take on such a part-time basis, that gives you a distinct leg up in applying for regular graduate student standing. One Pitt graduate with a disappointing GRE verbal score worked for a national chain of bookstores that allowed employees to transfer between outlets in different cities; at one point he thought of applying to programs in cities to which he could move while keeping that employer. Another Pitt graduate took a job near his home in New Jersey, prepping high school drop-outs for the GED diploma while pursuing his M.A. part-time at the Rutgers branch campus in Camden; it lacks a doctoral program, but after completing his M.A. there with some distinction he was able to move into Wisconsin's top-ranked Ph.D. program in literacy studies.

### **7. To which graduate programs should I consider applying?**

There are over one hundred programs granting a doctoral degree in English and scads more that like Rutgers/Camden offer only an M.A, so the first question you face is whether to apply to programs offering only the M.A. Unless there is some compelling reason like location, applying to terminal M.A. programs if your ultimate ambition is a Ph.D. is probably unwise. Why?

Graduate programs limited to an M.A. are often so limited because neither the local faculty nor the local library resources are deemed capable of supporting quality doctoral work. And even M.A. programs in pretty good institutions like Georgetown, Clark University, or VPI may leave their degree holders at a disadvantage when it comes to applying elsewhere for admission to doctoral programs, for most doctoral programs have an understandable tendency to protect their own M.A.'s in the application process. This means that the bar is set much higher for M.A. holders applying from outside than from inside. At Pitt the disparity has sometimes been grotesque, so it has been extraordinarily difficult for students applying from outside to gain admission to our doctoral program (which is now limited to ten fully funded students per year) since so many of the places were taken by our own M.A.'s, who in their prior years here were able to acquire faculty patrons. Indeed, many outside M.A.'s recently accepted feel pressured by funding rules essentially to retake their M.A. credits here. Terminating a so-so M.A. student who is favored by a couple of faculty and wishes to proceed to the Ph.D. once enrolled in an M.A./Ph.D. program is an awkward, painful and often highly politicized process, and many graduate departments like ours do not handle it very well. For many reasons (some of them humane and quite defensible) a foot in the door is hard to dislodge, and the result is that M.A.'s applying to doctoral programs from outside may be at a striking disadvantage (though Pitt's terminal M.A.'s in English have enjoyed remarkable success applying to other Ph.D. programs).

So it is to the advantage of anyone aspiring to a Ph.D. to have a foot in the door of a program that grants one, and with over a hundred to choose from you have a wide selection. Not that you should be eager to enroll in the bottom thirty or so listed in the National Research Council's 2010 ranking of about 135 doctoral programs (see <http://chronicle.com/page/NRC-Rankings/321/>.) Thus the University of North Carolina branch campus at Greensboro may run a purported doctoral program in English, but it did not earn a numerical ranking, while the doctoral program at Indiana University of Pennsylvania was not even surveyed by the NRC. Programs ranked below 100 by the NRC may well be paper programs and probably have pretty dismal placement statistics in the collegiate job market. If you can do no better than these, you should reconsider your career ambitions. The 2009 annual ranking published by U. S. News and World Report ranked 94 doctoral programs, and there are perhaps another twenty that might in a pinch be worth attending among the 46 that they listed but declined to rank. Drawing on NRC data, the website [www.phds.org](http://www.phds.org) helpfully lists ca. 120 programs that it ranks variably on personalized criteria that you indicate a preference for; it also lists unranked some 300 weaker programs offering graduate work on some level (perhaps M.A. only) that you'd usually do well to stay away from if you can.

Which are the most desirable, and where have you the best chance for acceptance? The National Research Council's rankings are perhaps more highly respected throughout academia but are open to challenge on complicated statistical grounds, less easily summarizable, and maybe less user-friendly--though the computer-adept may be able to extract from them more precisely personalized info (see <http://chronicle.com/article/A-Critic-Sees-Deep-Problems-in/124725> and for the NRC's separate rankings on twenty specific variables see the NRC site itself <<http://www.nap.edu/rdp/>>). Unlike the NRC rankings supposedly based on accurate data and amalgamated to rank programs over-all only within a very broad and hence rather vague range,

U. S. News and World Reports polls academics throughout the profession, relies largely on their sense of institutional reputations to synthesize relevant criteria, and emerges with a perhaps hyper-precise over-all ranking on a five-point scale that ranges from Harvard, Berkeley, and Yale tied for first with scores of 4.9 down to Ohio University, Loyola of Chicago, New Hampshire, New Mexico, and Wayne State tied for eighty-ninth with scores of 2.5. With a score of 3.5 Pitt was tied for thirty-fifth in 2009 with Minnesota and Maryland, just behind Penn State and five other programs at twenty-ninth with a 3.6, and just ahead of Carnegie-Mellon, Rice and Southern California at 3.4. The NRC and U.S.News can sometimes differ substantially in their rankings—for example, while U. S. News ranked Pitt 35<sup>th</sup> and U Conn 71<sup>st</sup>, the NRC ranked U Conn somewhere between 7<sup>th</sup> and 35<sup>th</sup> while placing Pitt somewhere between 52<sup>nd</sup> and 85<sup>th</sup> overall. But provided you don't hang up unduly on discrepancies like this or assume the rankings are more precise than they are, such polls give a useful sense of the profession's pecking order. It changes over time--two decades ago Pitt was deservedly ranked as low as 72<sup>nd</sup> by U.S. News--but our improvement from that ranking to our current level was once cited as the most notable improvement among all graduate English programs, and ranking changes for the duration of your graduate education will probably be gradual and of negligible impact on your professional future. Harvard has always been Harvard, and Ball State has always been Ball State (well, not quite, for Ball State University was once Ball State Teachers' College).

What does it take to get into Harvard? You can find that out from their website, where, like most graduate programs, guidelines for prospective applicants are posted. And it is important to have some idea of those guidelines, for most departments impose fees for processing graduate applications (although you may be able to request fee waivers in case of demonstrable financial exigency). In 2003 Harvard's application fee was a lordly \$85, while Pitt's was only \$40, and on a claim of financial hardship our department was willing to consider applications without fee, requiring payment only upon ultimate acceptance. With the best information in the world, it is still impossible to predict exactly where you may be accepted unless you apply to very low-ranked schools. To gain admission to the best graduate programs for which you are qualified normally requires multiple applications, as the following example may suggest.

In 2001 our best undergraduate major had a 3.99 GPA and a GRE verbal score in the 100th percentile coupled with a subject test score in the 97th percentile; moreover the paper that served as his writing sample won our Kay Prize for the best essay in English literature. All these virtues also won him the major share of the Burkhart Award that goes to our top majors--and in addition he carried a full double major in Spanish. Impressive credentials, you might think? Indeed they were, for they won him an honorary fellowship (including summer support) of \$17,500 to Brown as well as somewhat less lucrative fellowships to Penn State, North Carolina/ Chapel Hill, Emory, Rutgers, and Pitt. But despite this extremely powerful undergraduate record he was nonetheless rejected by Cornell, Duke, Johns Hopkins, and the University of Pennsylvania. Had he through mischance or over-confidence applied only to those four schools, which are not clearly superior to Brown, he would have been out in the cold and a very promising academic career would have been aborted early (as matters turned out, he voluntarily aborted it later when after finishing graduate course work successfully he found literary theory disillusioning and

decided to apply to law school; see Section 28C).

So one is wise to apply widely--perhaps at least eight applications instead of the four that are common in applying to college. Remember, you are essentially looking for a job--would you look for a job by sending out only four résumés? Since all those applications may involve fees, the cost can be considerable, but it is money well invested when your professional future is at stake, so unlike graduate school tuition it is money you should not be ashamed to ask your parents for. The cost of finding a school willing to offer you maximum financial support is, after all, much less than the cost of doing without it. Nonetheless, one wants to avoid wasting application fees on impossible dreams, so one carefully reads websites like Harvard's. There one is told that an A- average in English courses may suffice--but we may suspect that this applies only to minorities or graduates of the Ivies and potted Ivies, and that a Pitt student applying from a department with a reputation for easy grading like ours had better have nearly all straight A's. Moreover Harvard kindly admits that applicants without a GRE verbal score of at least 700 (i.e., 96th percentile) are wasting their time and money applying. One only wishes that other top schools showed similar candor re their GRE requirements, for some like Michigan are reputed to have a tacit cut-off GRE verbal score at the 95th percentile for all except minority applicants. The top twenty programs probably prefer applicants with GRE verbal scores in the top decile. Duke vigorously downplays the importance of GRE scores in describing its admission process but reveals that the average GRE verbal score of entering graduate students is 668, well into the top decile.

Pitt traditionally placed less importance on GRE scores than most comparable schools, so one year not too long ago all four of our teaching assistantships awarded to incoming M.A. students went to students whose GRE verbal score fell below the top decile. But GRE scores are taken more seriously here now that we offer all incoming grad students a year's honorary fellowship, and they are perhaps the most important variable determining where you can reasonably apply. To avoid wasted fees it is therefore important to know your GRE verbal score, at least, before deciding which schools to apply to, as the following case may suggest. One Pitt magna cum laude student had a strong record in English courses, with a GPA in our major of 3.9, so without knowing his GRE scores faculty naively encouraged him to apply to Berkeley, the University of Virginia, California/Irvine--three top-twenty programs--with 46th-ranked Arizona as an anchor. Alas, when his GRE verbal score came in, it was a disastrous 50th percentile. Predictably all four schools rejected him--applying only to such programs was a total waste of his money. Yet he was a student with real ability and an otherwise strong record who might conceivably have carved out a career in English studies. His was a case of over-confidence compounded by poor advising. Even with such a weak GRE score, by applying more widely to less demanding programs he might have gained admission to an M.A. program somewhere, raised his GRE score on a retake, and hoped to transfer to a stronger doctoral program after the M.A.

That was the route taken by another Pitt magna cum laude senior English major with a disappointing GRE verbal score in the 80th percentile and a disastrous subject test score in the 35th percentile, who was rejected by Arizona, Tufts, U Cal/Santa Barbara, U Mass, Notre Dame,

and Georgetown. She was accepted by 62nd-ranked SUNY/Stony Brook without funding, but only offered a teaching assistantship by lowly Alabama, which U. S. News and World Report (2001) did not rank among its top eighty. She wisely chose to take the TA rather than pay tuition at Stony Brook, and burned up the track in Alabama's M.A. program. When she applied to doctoral programs three years later she had raised her GRE verbal to the 100th percentile and GRE subject to the 80th percentile on retakes; two prizes she won late senior year were now part of her application, and she had presented conference papers and had an article accepted for publication. The results? Although U Pennsylvania, Stanford, Illinois/Chicago, and Brown all rejected her, she was showered in vain with offers of ordinary teaching fellowships by Rochester, Colorado, Wisconsin, and Penn State. She finally turned down a two-year honorary fellowship at Maryland as well as an honorary fellowship at Vanderbilt to accept a one-year honorary fellowship + TF at 18th-ranked Northwestern, which she thought a stronger program for her interests in the Renaissance and where she very successfully completed her Ph.D. (albeit so disillusioned by what she now sees as the pretensions of literary theory that she no longer wishes a college teaching career, preferring instead the more pragmatic challenges of public secondary education; see Section 28A).

So acceptance by a low-ranked program need not spell the end of an academic career (see esp. student B'06 and B'11 in the concluding case histories). And there are certainly doctoral programs where Pitt students have gained acceptance on rather modest qualifications. For example, one Pitt senior with a GRE verbal score in the 60th percentile and a subject score in the 66th boasted no better than a B/B+ average in our major and took a non-honors B.A. Although she was rejected by Kentucky, Illinois/Chicago, Miami/Ohio, Kent State, and several other schools, she was offered unfunded admission by Louisville, Akron, and Cleveland State and teaching assistantships by Case Western Reserve and Alabama. Neither doctoral program is ranked by U. S. News and World Report, but it is possible to make a respectable academic career starting in either school. Another student with weak foreign language preparation and an undergraduate degree in medical administration took some postgraduate English courses at Pitt to improve her liberal arts background, where she struck me as a B student. But when she applied to graduate programs after presenting a conference paper (laughably easy to do--see Section 13 below), although Penn State and Arizona rejected her, Kentucky and Pitt accepted her without funding while unranked Cincinnati, Clark, and U Memphis all offered her TAs.

Choosing where to apply is thus a matter of assessing all your qualifications realistically, especially GRE scores, and finding faculty advisors who will not only back you and suggest programs they endorse but who are well-informed about the competitive credentials necessary for Pitt students to gain admission to them. Overrating and underrating your credentials can both be costly. You can and should do much of the necessary research yourself by scanning the list of ranked programs and deciding what geographical criteria you favor (Northeast? unsafe metro sophistication? rural university town?), then consulting individual programs' websites. Though I cannot vouch for its accuracy, there is also a rather elaborate website listing 140-odd American graduate programs that allows you to factor in your specific selection criteria and supposedly emerge with an individualized ranking of programs best suited for you--consult



school.phds.org/rankings/english.

For more specific information about programs you may want to look at complete graduate catalogues, which are usually available on microfiche in Hillman; see the desk there for directions. Indeed, when you've narrowed down your list of tentative possibilities, before investing application fees it might be a good idea to query directors of graduate admissions at schools you're interested in about the number and size of teaching assistantships they expect to offer incoming students next year; for these numbers can fluctuate significantly from one year to the next. Thus Indiana and California-Santa Barbara both had off years recently with very few TA's for incoming M.A. students, Wisconsin seldom awards first-year TA's, Nebraska's and CUNY's mostly pay only ca. \$9K, etc. All other things being equal, your Pitt degree may command a trifle more respect from Midwestern and Southern schools that are eager to diversify their programs; but be aware that some lower-ranking programs in these areas may tend to place more of their Ph.D.'s in their own region.

One other option, of course, is to take a graduate degree at a British or Canadian university. The British equivalent of our National Research Council published in 2001 a Research Assessment Exercise, a list of fifty institutions offering graduate training in Anglo-American literature, ranked for reputation and effectiveness from 2 (Dartington College of Arts) to 5 (Oxford, Cambridge, and a couple of dozen others). In 2008 a British government survey supplemented this by assessing the quality of research produced by the average faculty member at eighty-seven British English departments, in which the two Oxbridge departments (by far the largest and both highly ranked, of course) were nonetheless judged in virtue of some sleepy dons to have on average less energetic faculty than York, Edinburgh, Manchester, Nottingham, Exeter, and Queen Mary's College University of London, for example; see Research Assessment Exercise 2008 at <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/table/2008/dec/18/rae-2008-english-degree>>. British advanced degrees are popular with Europeans who want to teach English, for they are relatively cheap compared to American ones and can be completed in three years or so--typically with rather more emphasis on independent study than on courses and seminars. But unless you have a Rhodes, Gates, or Marshall scholarship expect to pay most of the freight yourself, for financial aid like teaching assistantships may be hard to come by for foreign citizens (that's why the degrees can be completed quickly--no part-time teaching responsibilities). British universities tend to view offering graduate degrees to fee-paying foreign students as a profit-making enterprise that helps to balance their academic ledgers. Thus one recent Pitt grad with a strong but not overpowering record was rejected by seven of the eight good American doctoral programs to which she applied for fellowships, but accepted unfunded by Oxford and the University of London's Kings College; see Section 19C. Though the intellectual level of British programs may be high and the immersion in British culture richly rewarding, especially for specialists in English lit, it's unclear how much respect a British Ph.D. without teacher-training with American students will command in the American job market. One Pitt summa cum laude student with a GPA in our major of 3.85 was accepted without funding by the Universities of Edinburgh, York, Leeds, Sussex, and East Anglia, and chose to do graduate work at Edinburgh--an excellent school indeed. But this is probably not an option most Pitt students can afford to

exercise. If interested in it, talk to department faculty with British backgrounds like Colin MacCabe, John Twyning or Nicholas Coles. Canadian graduate programs much more closely resemble American ones, and educational credentials for and from them probably cross the border more readily. The University of Toronto has outstanding graduate programs in medieval and Renaissance studies as well as in many other fields, and someone interested in colonial or Commonwealth literature might well investigate Canadian options.

What about applying to Pitt as inertia or local ties sometimes lead students to do? Although we have a well-regarded graduate program, one should think twice about applying to it from our undergraduate English major. Most universities take a dim view of "academic inbreeding"--i.e., of hiring their own graduates--so a department where many faculty hold degrees from their own institution is likely to be a weak one (only one of our fifty-odd tenure-stream faculty members holds a Pitt graduate degree, and upon completing it she took a job elsewhere for several years before returning here). A similar attitude often prevails in graduate admissions, so top schools are highly selective about taking undergraduate majors into their own graduate programs. (Though Pitt has no formal policy debarring our undergraduate majors from applying here, individual faculty on our six-person Admissions Committee sometimes do, so internal applicants may have trouble garnering the requisite amount of support) In the academic marketplace holding all three degrees from the same institution is probably a minor liability (unless perhaps they're all from a top school like Yale). Undergraduate English majors here would benefit from exposure to other English departments with different ways of thinking. Breadth is an intellectual virtue, and by confining your education to one department for ten years or more you risk sucking its few specialists in your areas dry. Moreover, unlike our undergraduate major Pitt's graduate program in literature is now very narrowly focused on only four areas: medieval/Renaissance literature, media or material studies, children's literature, and race/poetics/empire. Most traditional undergraduate English majors will probably find their interests better served in other good graduate programs. If you cannot get into a good program elsewhere, have family ties that prevent your applying elsewhere, or particular interest in the areas covered by our program, then it may make sense to apply here. But you should certainly not count on getting in. In 2005 two students co-ranked #1 in their class of Pitt lit majors applied; only one was accepted (the first in some while), and her record was so strong she had better offers from other schools and wisely turned Pitt down for twelfth-ranked Virginia, just as the prior in-house admission was able to turn Pitt down for Brown. All other things being equal, a student familiar with Pitt's approach to English studies from an undergraduate major here who is accepted by another program of roughly comparable quality stands to benefit from shifting there for graduate work. German academic tradition fostered the notion of the Wanderjahr where a student wandered from one university to another in search of the best mentors, and Pitt English majors likewise should be ready and even eager to wander afield for their graduate education.

### **8. How should I handle the application writing sample?**

As explained above, the writing samples most desired are critical research papers with bibliographies or footnotes. Many institutions request a maximum length of 20 pages and some

even less, though it's not always clear whether these page limits stipulate double spacing. If in doubt, it doesn't hurt to inquire. Writing samples are extremely important--many faculty evaluating applications to Pitt's program profess to set more importance by them than by any other aspect of an application including grades and GREs. You may thus find yourself confronting a need to have two writing samples--a longer paper that you feel represents your abilities at their best and a shorter paper for programs that stipulate a lower length limit. One Pitt student applying to interdisciplinary programs with emphases in different fields used no fewer than three different writing samples. If you plan on applying to top programs with December deadlines, that means term papers from Fall semester senior year may be finished too late to be used, so be aware that whatever will serve as your writing sample/s should probably be completed by the end of your junior year. Choose your courses junior year so that your junior seminar is not the only one requiring a longer research paper.

Faculty recommending you are almost invariably asked to fill out forms ranking you among other students, and prizes offer unimpeachable comparative evidence of excellence. Since faculty's grading standards differ, in some cases you may be uncertain which of your papers is the strongest, so the collective response of our prize adjudicating committees--which function much as graduate admissions committees will function--may be helpful in clarifying which paper will best serve as your writing sample. All other things being equal, it's probably better to submit your strongest paper regardless of topic rather than a weaker one more closely related to an area you hope to specialize in.

And even if you enter an essay that does not win, revising and improving it for entry along lines recommended by your teacher is not only an excellent educational exercise but one likely to result in a paper that makes a more impressive writing sample. It's certainly the case that a majority of Pitt students accepted by top graduate schools in recent years have won one or more of these prizes, and a competitive prize can do much to bolster an unimpressive GPA or GRE and make graduate admissions committees pay attention. Deadlines for the department prizes are normally early in the fall while the deadlines for the Ossip prizes, UCIS symposia, the departmental conference, and the newly established Showcase for undergrad research fall in the spring; for further details consult the department website, the chair of the department's Awards Committee, the chair of the College Writing Board, UCIS, the department's director of literature, or the Undergraduate Dean's office, which is compiling a comprehensive summary of all awards open to competition throughout the university. The department should try to announce the awards late in the fall term but before December, so that favorable results can be incorporated in your applications and letters of recommendation. Occasionally a paper a student has authored receives an honor after an application has been submitted but before admissions decisions are made in April. If in the spring of senior year a paper of yours is accepted for publication or for presentation at a regular academic conference or wins a national prize, you may wish to update your applications by informing graduate admissions committees of that fact.

It goes without saying that any paper you use as a writing sample should be carefully proofread--more carefully proofread than your teacher's comments may have prompted you to think

necessary. Pitt's Composition Program has many virtues, but encouraging our faculty to demand careful proofreading is not always one of them. Graduate admissions committees will probably not be so indulgent toward weak or sloppy writing as your teachers here may have been. You may wish to ask faculty recommending you to review your writing sample and make suggestions.

### **9. How should I handle the GRE exams?**

The GRE exam currently consists of four parts: scores for verbal aptitude, quantitative aptitude, analytic writing, and an optional test for knowledge of a subject field like literature. Few graduate programs in English pay much attention to the required quantitative score--Pitt certainly does not--so don't worry unduly about it. On the other hand some graduate schools like Duke's may use the combined verbal/quantitative score as a rough screening device for applicants to all departments, with a combined score below 1200 deemed unusually low; indeed, top programs in some humanities fields like philosophy are reputed to have a combined verbal/math cutoff score of 1450 with a 700 minimum sectional score. So you should certainly put forth your best efforts on the quantitative test and not simply blow it off. Duke claims that in a recent year the average scores for the thirteen entering students in English were 668 verbal, 611 quantitative, and 5.72 analytical writing. Not all schools will require the subject test--Duke, for example, doesn't. If one could be sure of applying only to schools that don't require it, one could ignore it. Unfortunately it must be scheduled well in advance--often before you can be sure exactly which schools you wish to apply to--so it's difficult to proceed as if you will not have to take it, especially if you're applying to top programs with December deadlines. Scores are reported both as raw scores--a number from 1 to 6 for the analytic writing section and from 200 to 800 for the other sections--and a percentile equivalent. You take the verbal aptitude and quantitative aptitude sections on a computer and get your raw scores instantly; the percentile equivalents necessary to make exact sense of them are only reported to you a couple of weeks later, but you or someone knowledgeable can usually estimate pretty well what the raw scores mean without further waiting. The numbers reported to you represent the percent of students scoring below you, so a percentile of 99% is the highest reported and means you are in the top 1%, the 100th percentile.

Probably the most important section is the verbal aptitude score, which many programs use as a rough cut-off when screening applications. In many ways it resembles the verbal aptitude section of your SAT test, for same company administers both. But while your SAT score is a rough predictor of how well you will do on the GRE, the two tests do not correspond exactly since the pool taking GREs is more selective. In 2003, for example, three students who had perfect 800 SAT verbal scores on entering Pitt received GRE verbal scores of 720, 710 and 690 respectively. Putting them in the 99th, 98th and 95 percentiles, these were still very strong scores but not quite the best imaginable like their 800 SATs. Students who had scored impressively in the 700s on their SATs also reported mild disappointment that their GRE verbal scores were not quite so high as they hoped. Other students who scored in the seventh or eighth decile put their graduate plans on hold or retook the exam.

While it may seem niggling to worry over the difference between 95th and 96th percentiles, that difference excluded a student from consideration at Harvard and any other top schools applying the same screening criterion. Moreover Honors College believes that successful candidacy for Mellon and Javits fellowships essentially requires GRE verbal scores in the top 2%, and prime fellowships at some schools may also be swayed by such thinking. It's certainly the case that many graduate schools including Pitt require recommenders to rate candidates on scalar forms where the best rating one can check is a box indicating that the candidate falls in the top 1 or 2%. Because of the way bell curves stretch out at the ends but hump up in the middle, the actual difference in verbal aptitude between two students falling in the GRE's 98th and 97th percentiles is far greater and more significant than that between two students falling in the 50th and 49th percentiles. So there is reason to suppose that student concern about getting the best GRE verbal scores possible is not misplaced.

How can one do this? Although ETS likes to imply that its exams resist direct cramming, the experience of many Pitt students suggests the contrary. Students who have taken the exam with mildly disappointing results when applying to M.A. programs, then retaken it after cramming when applying to doctoral programs, invariably report sharply improved scores. One such student raised her score from the 80th to the 100th percentile; likewise another student raised her score from 550 to 630 (90th percentile); a third crammed for three years to raise a verbal from 85% to 100%, a subject from 55% to 80%; a fourth crammed for two years to jack a verbal from 75% to 99% and a subject test from 45% to 80%. All four students found these efforts richly rewarded with honorary fellowship offers. There are, to be sure, commercial courses purporting to prepare one for the exam, but these can be expensive. Retaking the exam is also expensive and not permitted within a three-month period, though there's ample reason to suppose that with better preparation many students could improve their scores. Thus one student who scored in the 75th percentile in October 2002 retook it after cramming in September 2003 and came out more satisfyingly in the 87th, while in 2009 a student whose first score was a disappointing 590 retook it in a few months and emerged with a 650 that put her in the 93rd percentile and on track for the strong teaching assistantship she eventually received (see 22A). However a few schools might discount sharply improved scores as due to cramming.

Perhaps the best and cheapest strategy, therefore, is to invest a little effort in preparing for a month or two before taking the GRE exam the first time. There are several cram workbooks designed for that end on the market for under \$20 as well as flash cards for around \$50. A senior who jacked his score in half a year from 75th to 87th achieved worthwhile results with the Princeton Review's Verbal Workout for the GRE Exam, as did another student who thus summarizes the preparation that jacked his verbal score from the 85th percentile pre-MA to the 100th percentile in his final MA year:

You correctly recommend the Princeton Review Verbal Workout for upping GRE scores. It has the most accurate practice questions on the market; I have been through every book. But the book by Wu is geared only toward short-term improvement and its word list is abbreviated. Barron's GRE Review has the most comprehensive word list at 3,500 words. It has been pilfered and placed on the

internet so there is no reason for students to buy it. The net is a source of numerous GRE word lists. When it boils down, it is all about time spent with index cards. I had a stack six inches high. It is ironic; I increased my stock in a profession that claims to value critical thinking by rote.

Both these students' experience leads them to counsel students taking the exam to sleep well the night before and approach it in a relaxed manner rather than trying to sandwich it into a crowded daily schedule.

More recent advice about how to cram comes from Student B'11 below, who over five years raised his verbal from 520/63% to 650/93% and his disastrous subject test to a respectable 640/76% by using websites like <<http://www.urch.com/forums//forum.php>>, which he found "invaluable." He also touts <<http://www.codecoax.com/grerc/>> as a reading comprehension practice tool developed by a test taker in India, as well as the free math lessons on <[khanacademy.org](http://khanacademy.org)> for improving scores in quantitative reasoning.

For the GRE Subject Test, I tried to adopt a similar approach. Instead of attempting to read the material that will be covered on the exam—a mistake I made last time—I focused on developing a working knowledge of the texts through flashcards. The Princeton Review's *Cracking the GRE Literature in English Subject Test* provides a good starting point for this process; however, I ultimately found the information available on web-based resources like "Vade Mecum: A GRE Literature in English Study Tool" (<http://web.duke.edu/~tmw15/index.html>) to be more helpful in identifying test material. From there, having expended a fair amount of energy creating and studying flashcards, I turned my attention to the highest of all mediums: video. Tom )'Bedlam's YouTube channel "Spoken Verse" (<http://www.youtube.com/user/SpokenVerse>) offers engaging readings of over 900 poems with text. Along the same lines, I used Netflix and the local public library to secure copies of important plays and adaptations of literary works I had missed out on in my studies. In either case, my goal was the same: absorb as much material as possible in the shortest amount of time.

He concludes that because of "a vibrant community of test takers on websites" internet resources now outweigh print ones in acing GRE tests.

Incidentally, on this and many other aspects of graduate education the Career Room at the Carnegie Library maintains many shelves of useful how-to books to browse. Moreover Pitt's library system now has a website listing its useful resources for students taking exams for grad schools; consult <<http://pitt.libguides.com/examprep>>. Cramming for the GRE subject test (as opposed to the aptitude test) is more complicated, time-consuming, difficult, and less important - -but still quite possible. For a sample version of that test with many useful tips the Princeton Review's *Cracking the GRE Literature in English Subject Test*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed., should be available there as well as in the Crow Room. It's right in suggesting that almost all the historical material covered on that exam appears in volumes of the Norton Anthologies devoted to English and American literature, so if you've time and energy scanning them cursorily the summer before senior year gives you a quickie prep in periods you didn't take courses in.

## **10. How should I handle the application's personal statement?**

In addition to your transcript and a form listing special accomplishments, language background, etc., most graduate programs will ask you to submit a personal statement explaining your desire to pursue a graduate degree with them. What kinds of statements are likely to make favorable impressions on the committee reviewing applications? Bear in mind that while some programs may operate with rough quotas in mind for the number of applicants to be admitted in the various chronological subfields of English studies (wannabe medievalists, modernists, etc.) and give faculty in those subspecialties the major voice in determining whom to accept, many programs may well have one committee drawn from various subspecialties that evaluates all applications. If admissions are likely to be decided by a matter of votes around a table from diverse faculty, how can you garner the most votes?

Perhaps the most common weakness in personal statements is the tendency simply to rehearse information available elsewhere in the application, so that what emerges reads like a narrative transcript. While you might certainly mention a couple of courses that helped shape your aims, the personal statement allows you to articulate larger themes that have engaged your interest as an undergraduate, interests that may cut across academic disciplines or chronological periods in a way that your transcript doesn't highlight. Are you just a compilation of courses and grades? Moreover, it allows you to highlight relevant aspects of your personal history as nothing else in the application process does. Strive for a voice that suggests why you as a person might be an appealing student to have in a seminar--or an appealing teacher of their undergraduates. What makes you want to be a teacher, and is there any reason to think you might be good at it? A touch or two of judiciously understated humor might appeal to many faculty if done well.

How specific should you be about your intellectual goals in English studies? Some modest sense of direction is desirable, but not so much as to risk implausibility. Are you really qualified to define the topic of your doctoral dissertation yet? Is it in your interest to do so? Remember, most faculty around the table are probably hoping to admit students who want to take seminars and do dissertations with them, so if you specify your topic prematurely you risk alienating as many potential supporters as you attract. People are rarely if ever penalized for changing their focus in graduate school, so be honestly tentative where it's prudent to be tentative in framing your intellectual goals. If your undergraduate English courses are unbalanced, with a focus in one area but lacunae in others, you will lose no points by admitting the fact and expressing a need to explore subjects you're unfamiliar with. Indeed, the traditional rationale for M.A. programs has been to round out incomplete undergraduate literary education while serious specialization is reserved until doctoral work. Most Ph.D programs expect students to pass "comprehensive" exams of some sort at some point in their graduate career, so acting as if you only want to cultivate interests you've already defined may make you seem undesirably narrow. And since narrowly focused Ph.D's wind up with fewer jobs to apply for, many programs may be properly reluctant to admit people likely to swell their total of unemployable doctorates.

Wannabe specialists in modern and post-modern literature are a glut on the market, for senior

English majors too often lack a sound historical sense extending prior to the 20th century and so don't speculate about specializing in other eras. All other things being equal, you probably enhance the attractiveness of your application by suggesting at least a secondary interest in some earlier period, for departmentally entrenched specialists in earlier periods may crave potential disciples (note that the Pitt student applying with eventual success in 2013 and again in 2014 to specialize in post-modern literature included in his impressive qualifications a Certificate in Medieval and Renaissance Studies and modest UTA experience teaching Middle English). Since perhaps a majority of jobs in the profession--not only those held by TA's--involve teaching students to write rather than just appreciate literature, an honest interest in composition and literacy studies may also mark you as an economic realist. While jobs in English studies are most often categorized in terms of five major chronological eras (Medieval, Renaissance, Enlightenment, Nineteenth-century, and Modern), departments advertising in the [MLA Job Information List](#) classify positions in many other ways as well, including "generalist." Ph.D.'s with grounding in earlier periods like medievalists can probably make more plausible claims to competency in modern literature, which one tends to absorb by osmosis, than modernists can to being competent to teach medieval literature. Rather than pigeon-hole your academic future in one period, think about defining an area of interest in graduate study that will embrace several periods, thereby appealing to various chronological constituencies on the admissions committee and maximizing the number of jobs you can eventually apply for.

You can do this most plausibly if you use the personal statement not to itemize courses but to define your intellectual interests. Citing a couple of books you've read that illustrate themes you want to pursue in graduate school is a good idea, as is showing acquaintance not just with canonical or offbeat authors but with secondary scholarship that serves as a model for your own intellectual ambitions as a tyro scholar. Avoid undue specificity about goals, but also beware of cliched generalizing about "literature." Arnoldian musings about the value of classic texts or the latest po-mo jargon about how the critic can rectify unjust power relationships are both likely to irritate some on the admissions committee and bore others. You can probably demonstrate your literary intelligence more effectively than by almost inevitably shopworn efforts to summarize the nature of literature as a whole. If you go overboard in proclaiming a desire to save the world by teaching teenagers to like poetry, read novels, discuss movies, and maybe even write correct English, you may come across as naive to some, however much others on the admissions committee may be flattered in their preconceptions by such sentiments.

A personal statement may kindle a committee's warmth toward a particular candidate if the candidate successfully communicates his attraction to that particular program. Everybody loves to be loved, after all. But personalizing application essays to eight or more programs can be a lot of work. The easiest way is to compose a basic statement that you adapt to the individual programs you've decided to apply to by inserting a few sentences about why that particular program appeals to you--a particular faculty member whose work you've read, a faculty mentor with degrees from the program, distinctive features of the program, a relevant journal based in the department, unusual library resources, seminars offered with intriguing titles, etc. This shows you've done your homework investigating the program and are more likely to be a good fit than



candidates applying blindly just on the basis of rankings in the latest U. S. News and World Report.

Of course, one major reason for your interest in a particular program may well be its location near an employer, a spouse, or a significant other. But it's probably not a good idea to be frank about this--or about the fact that really you just want as much money as any school will give you and hear that this one has lots to dispense. Novels are not the only form of fiction that appeals to English departments, alas, so couch your supposed preference for a particular graduate program decorously in terms of its alleged intellectual merits.

### **11. How should I approach soliciting letters of recommendation?**

Most programs ask for three letters of recommendation, requesting that they be supplied in one of three main ways: mailed directly to a department or graduate school office, given to the applicant in a sealed envelope signed across the flap to be included with other application documents, or submitted electronically on a secure online site emailed to the recommender and supposedly accessed with a password. But although most programs may now express a preference for the latter, be cautious in asking recommenders to use it, for such sites differ substantially and can be extremely awkward and confusing, demanding more electronic expertise than some recommenders may possess. Electronic websites may limit the length of letters in a way that forces recommenders to tailor-make longer recommendations by shortening each differently. They may make it difficult simply to paste in a letter from another electronic file, esp. if the recommender uses a word-processing program other than MS Word, and they may prohibit editing on-site any text pasted in. One Pitt professor who had promised a student to write a letter found the electronic process so frustrating that he reneged at the last minute, making the student whose application was jeopardized contemplate prosecuting under the Academic Integrity Code. Fortunately that student was able to find a last-minute substitute; but while his anger was understandable, so too was the professor's, and even in the unlikely event the professor had later been sanctioned, that would have done nothing to remedy a student's defective application. Another strong student was less fortunate, for a Pitt professor who had promised to write a recommendation never did so nor informed the student of this fact; but even though all his applications were rejected, the student decided that pursuing sanctions was not advisable. Other faculty who have promised to recommend students found that they could not cope with the electronic format, so to meet promised deadlines they had to summon students to their offices during Christmas recess to help them with the process or engage in frantic last-minute efforts to secure properly signed paper recommendation forms from students. And that's not always possible.

Given the risks inherent in soliciting electronic recommendations, students should be careful when asking people to use that mode, regardless of what a graduate program says it prefers. Students should inquire whether faculty undertaking to write electronic recommendations know the pitfalls that may be involved and will submit their electronic recommendations far enough in advance of any deadline to allow for a fall-back procedure if a glitch develops. I myself explain

to students that if a school's electronic site limits the length of recommendations so much as to force me to shorten the long letters I carefully compose, I simply cannot cut my basic letter down to meet varying length requirements and may have to submit hard copy on departmental stationery. One electronic system called The Common Application requires recommenders to make an irreversible decision about whether to send hard copy recommendations before even being allowed to access the site and discover how their electronic submission functions! Another common system called Interfolio promises convenience for referees who write only one basic letter but poses complications for a referee whose letters (like mine) may be individualized by department applied to. So students asking me for recommendations need to investigate this issue carefully while deciding where to apply.

Whom should you ask for recommendations? People who know your academic work well enough to write in detail about it and who you have reason to think esteem it. A letter from a part-time instructor for whom you wrote several papers may be preferable to a letter from an eminent professor for whom you were merely one of a sea of faces in a large lecture course. At the same time one should recognize that academia is hierarchically organized for good reason, so letters from senior faculty may carry a little more weight. Most of Pitt's part-time lecturers are fine teachers with long experience, and even a relatively inexperienced TF might be qualified to write an effective letter, especially as the department has begun to attract better TF's by offering all incoming graduate students first-year honorary fellowships. But it is unwise to have more than one letter from a low-ranking source. At least two of your three letters should be from tenure-stream faculty (Assistant, Associate, or full Professors), and at least one preferably from a tenured professor (Associate or full). Very occasionally a letter from someone who knows your work in a non-academic context (like, say, an editorial internship) might be apropos if the work bears directly on your academic abilities; but letters from ordinary employers are not likely to be effective. If you have a double major or strong abilities in a related field besides English, a letter from a faculty member in the other discipline might well be appropriate. However, if you are not an English major, you may be better off having all three of your letters if possible from faculty in English since you're trying to establish your qualifications to do graduate work in that new field and can afford to let the ancillary expertise of your major speak for itself.

Presumably the people you approach have given you some sort of positive feedback already. If not using electronic format, you will be asked to supply each of them with a program's paper form for answering some standard questions about your qualifications, with a space for you to sign waiving (or claiming) your future right to see their recommendation. Waive it both as a matter of courtesy and self-interest, for formally confidential recommendations carry more weight.

That does not mean, however, that you are not entitled to know how your recommenders view your record. A few may even offer to give you a copy of their recommendations. And you should press anyone you contemplate asking to recommend you for frank feedback about the perceived strengths and weaknesses of your application. If your recommender has been ecstatic about your work in one course and acts as if he needs no further information, his advice about

where to apply is probably naive. Bring a transcript, bring copies of a couple of your best papers for other courses, and ask for advice about which would make the best writing sample. Candidly discuss what you see as your record's limitations (including GRE scores already taken or in prospect), and see whether he agrees. A potential recommender may be able to reassure you, and if one has serious reservations about your fitness for graduate work in English, these should become apparent in such a discussion. Nor should you shrink from them. Remember, unless your applications are grounded on a realistic sense of your qualifications judged competitively, not only do you risk wasting dollars on application fees--you risk wasting years of your life in futile pursuit of a Ph.D. that proves meaningless in terms of employment.

Be aware that almost all programs specifically ask recommenders to comment both on an applicant's strengths and weaknesses. Recommendations that ignore the latter will lack credibility, so your ideal recommender should demonstrate critical sympathy when scrutinizing your record. If your foreign language preparation is mediocre, for example, that fact will be evident from your transcript, and your recommender can do nothing to conceal it. Rather than ignore this obvious weakness, an effective letter should concede it in order to authenticate whatever claims are made for your other abilities. Recommenders with the requisite critical sympathy can also be helpful in casting an eye over your proposed writing sample and a draft of your personal statement.

Together with your own investigations, consulting potential recommenders should help you decide which programs to apply to. When you've drawn up a list, get the necessary forms from all. Note the earliest application deadline, and try to have all the necessary forms to your recommenders at least a week or two beforehand (though ideally not so early as to exclude possible pending honors like the results of any prize contests in which you're competing). If you're applying to top schools with December deadlines as well as to other schools with January or February deadlines, it's still a good idea to pick your anchor schools earlier than their deadlines and submit all your application materials to your recommenders in November in one packet, for forms that dribble in one at a time are perhaps more liable to be ignored or lost by faculty.

Yes, that does happen, for many English faculty are not very well organized, and even some departmental administrators have failed to keep commitments to write letters of recommendation. To minimize this possibility give your recommenders a cover sheet together with all forms and stamped envelopes for non-electronic recommendations. The cover sheet should list in order of deadline (earliest first) all the programs to which you're applying and specify for each program exactly what form the letter should take. Mailed directly to the school at a particular address? Mailed or given to you in a sealed, signed envelope to be included with your application? Submitted electronically? Discuss beforehand with your recommenders when they think they will be able to submit their letters. Then without being positively insulting say that in view of the horror stories you've heard about missed deadlines and absent-minded professors (especially when end-of-the-term responsibilities devolve on them), you'd like to query them by email a week before the first deadline to be sure their recommendations have indeed been sent. If any repine at such an arrangement, think twice about using them.

At the same time be aware that writing proper letters of recommendation can be burdensome and that no faculty members are obliged to write them as part of their duty. You are asking a favor of faculty. Their only obligation is to write in a timely manner any recommendations they promise to write. Reciprocate their courtesy with a thank-you note informing them of the results of your applications after April 15th.

## **12. How should I respond to multiple offers of admission? to unanimous rejection?**

Offers of admission to all graduate English programs that subscribe to an MLA protocol are supposedly synchronized so that they're all tendered on or about April 1st. Students offered money in the form of a TA or an honorary fellowship are typically given two weeks to decline or accept, so it's not just the IRS that regards April 15 as fish-or-cut-bait time. Increasing numbers of programs are tendering offers prior to April 1st in an effort to lure students with campus visits etc. but still allowing the mid-April deadline for decisions; however, a few schools now impose an earlier acceptance deadline on their top honorary fellowships--e.g., Lehigh. Some schools, perhaps especially those with low TA stipends, may now supplement TAs with small honorary awards but use those as an excuse for imposing an earlier acceptance deadline than April 15--e.g., Miami of Ohio. Students offered admission without funding are understandably given a much longer time-table, for they may need considerable time to decide whether they can afford to attend. Offers of admission (as distinct from offers of funding) are generally deferrable for one year. Occasionally an offer of funding may likewise be deferrable (see Section 19C), but this is not normally the case.

In 2004 CMU (seeking to bolster a novel graduate program) tried to screw an earlier commitment out of some applicants by tendering them in February a so-called "scholarship / fellowship" (actually just a partial tuition remission of ca.\$12,000, leaving the student responsible for the bulk of their hefty tuition of ca. \$28,000) and demanding that applicants decide in March to accept it by ponying up a substantial deposit prior to hearing from other programs observing the April deadline. This practice is unique in my experience and ethically dubious in ignoring the common deadline to which most reputable graduate programs subscribe. For that as well as for other reasons I discourage students from applying to CMU (or to any other programs with similar practices if such exist) since your application fee will not purchase you the right to compare their "offer" (likely a whomping bill) with potentially better offers from other programs. If a school listed as subscribing to the MLA protocol then sets an earlier acceptance deadline than April 15, you might theoretically be within your rights to request the refund of your application fee, though whether reporting this violation to the MLA will help you extract it remains to be seen.

Indeed, you should be aware that increasing numbers of programs seem to be giving their directors of admissions modest room to negotiate with applicants. This was born home by the experience of another Pitt senior in 2004 who applied to a dozen programs on a record that had some notable strengths but also some weaknesses. Starting as a science major, she took a couple of years here to gravitate to English studies. Consequently not only was her GPA barely magna level at ca. 3.55 but her average in English courses did not rank her among our top dozen or so

majors. Moreover the early focus on science kept her from pushing her four years of high school French or any other language at the college level. However with excellent course distribution and strengths in all three divisions she qualified for Phi Beta Kappa unlike most English majors. Her GRE verbal score of 690 was strong (95th percentile) but would have excluded her from consideration at Harvard; and while her analytic writing test garnered the top score of 6.0, her subject test score of 660 ranked her in the 88th percentile, very creditable but not overwhelming. Doing much to offset other shortcomings was the fact that she had won a Brackenridge Undergraduate Fellowship the summer before senior year and used it to maximum efficiency in producing half-a-dozen related papers totaling ca. 100 pages. Constituting perhaps the functional equivalent of a senior honors thesis on modernist and proto-modernist fiction, her fine essays won three prizes senior year in the Snead and Kay competitions while one was accepted for presentation at a couple of conferences and made a splendid writing sample. Uncertain how these credentials would be evaluated, she had applied very widely in the hope of finding some program that might tender her an honorary fellowship, and the results amply justified the wisdom of this strategy (even though it cost her parents handsomely in application and test fees), illustrating the variety of responses to the same credentials that an applicant may encounter. Johns Hopkins and Pitt rejected her outright. Wayne State and Illinois/Chicago admitted her without money. Maryland and Indiana admitted her unfunded but with the promise of a TA second year. Temple and Kentucky waitlisted her for money. Case Western and Penn State offered her TAs. But lowly Baylor offered her their top honorary fellowship of \$16,000 while 59th-ranked Texas A&M weighed in with a newly founded first-year fellowship of \$33,000 plus tuition--the most munificent by far of any program including the Ivies (after the first year of luxury sufficient to pay off her undergraduate indebtedness, it reverted to a more modest TA for the next four years, but left her free to pursue her options elsewhere after the MA). Moreover, when she contacted Penn State to explain her situation, the Director of Admissions there, though unable to match it, promptly offered to supplement her TA with \$3,000 more in honorary money in the hope (vain, as it understandably proved) of tempting her to spurn filthy Texas lucre. Other seniors applying in '05 encountered even more various responses and options for supplements, while one applicant in 2014-15 found UC Irvine professing striking willingness and ability to match competing offers. So while competing offers hardly entitle an applicant to bargain arrogantly, tactfully presented they just might enable one to nudge an offer up somewhat or otherwise enhance one's appeal to a given program.

Suppose, then, you are in the happy situation of having applied to eight programs, three of which accept you with honorary fellowships, three of which offer you TA's, one of which accepts you without funding, and one of which says you are wait-listed for an honorary fellowship. What should you do? It's difficult to imagine a situation where it makes sense for you to pay tuition in one graduate program if you're funded elsewhere. To pay tuition to go to Harvard, for example (if that's still possible), would simply mean that you would be regarded as one of the weakest students there. And since many Ivies are probably not placing their weakest students given the widespread suspicion that the scholarly training in English that they offer is irrelevant to the needs of many humbler institutions looking to hire, you would not necessarily be better off vocationally paying tuition to attend a top institution just for the cachet of the name. So except in

highly irregular circumstances that are hard to specify, your rule of thumb should be, "Show me the money." If one school wants to charge you \$15,000 a year for a piece of paper that may or may not lead to a job while another school offers to pay you \$15,000 while you acquire a similar piece of paper, the latter school is at least putting its money where its mouth is by betting that your chances of ultimate professional employment are worth modest investment on their part.

So scratch the offer of unfunded admission. A similar logic might seem to dictate preferring honorary money to a TA, and indeed it generally does. One exception might be cases where very low-ranked programs like Cincinnati or Baylor with problematic recent histories and suspect placement have a lone honorary fellowship or two for their best incoming students. Turning down 59th-ranked Texas A&M's honorary fellowship for 27th-ranked Penn State's TA would have been a bad decision for the student mentioned in the penultimate paragraph, but turning down 119th-ranked Baylor's might conceivably have been defensible. While it's a good thing to be a big duck in a small pond so that faculty eventually recommending you to the marketplace can describe you as one of their best students, an honorary fellowship at such schools might conceivably offer poorer long-term career prospects than a TA at an established Big Ten program, particularly if the student's area of interest is better served by the bigger program. On the other hand, one could argue for accepting the honorary fellowship at the lesser school and then trying to transfer to a Big Ten school after the M.A., which might shorten the path to a doctorate by a year or two. Such a strategy took one Pitt student--who declined unfunded admission to middling Stony Brook to accept a TA from much lower-ranked Alabama--from Alabama to her honorary doctoral fellowship at Northwestern.

In 2004 another outstanding Pitt student did finally decide to turn down a good first-year honorary fellowship of \$15,500 to Boston College (ranked ca. 62nd) to accept a \$12,000 TA at Penn State (ranked ca. 27th) with a small honorary sweetener of \$2500; however, proximity to a fiancé probably played more of a role in that decision than strictly professional logic. Unless there are some such compelling reasons for turning down honorary money to labor in the salt mines as a TA, assume therefore that your choice falls between honorary fellowships from three institutions. (Or, if no programs offer honorary fellowships, between offers of TA's at several schools--in either case you must decide between roughly comparable offers.) First, not waiting for two weeks but with all due speed you should decline offers from all the schools you clearly don't plan to attend, so that they can tender their fellowships to candidates further down on their waiting lists. After all, you hope for the same consideration from applicants to the program where you are wait-listed.

Usually you can be clear enough about your preferences to narrow your choices down to two or three programs immediately. Perhaps the program where you're wait-listed is one that you'd dearly love to attend--say Yale--while the other honorary fellowships are from Rochester, Vanderbilt, and Cincinnati. Little thought is required to eliminate your anchor school Cincinnati, but the choice between Vanderbilt and Rochester is tougher.

Many programs today, Pitt among them, offer to fly their top choices in to see the campus, and a

visit may be well worth the effort even if the school won't pay for it. The Pitt student who went from Alabama to Northwestern initially thought she would pay to go to Stony Brook; she only made what she now feels was the right decision after flying to Alabama at her own expense and discovering that Tuscaloosa was not quite so bad as she'd imagined. Likewise one Pitt student choosing an honorary fellowship at UCLA found his subsidized visit there gave him information that emboldened him to turn down honorary fellowships from two even more highly rated programs, while another's visit to Indiana helped encourage her to accept their honorary fellowship instead of unfunded admission to a more prestigious program at the University of Chicago (see Section 19C). If graduate program largesse or your family's budget doesn't permit a flight, perhaps you can drive. A visit permits you to quiz current graduate students, who can offer invaluable scuttlebutt about a place about where you'd probably be spending at least 2-3 years.

Now is the time, if you've not already done so, to investigate the placement record of a program with great care. Ask the Director of Graduate Studies (which you can do by email if necessary) to list all the Ph.D.'s granted in English over the last 3-5 years together with their current place of employment and, if possible, terms of the job--if academic, tenure-track or temp? Any program should be willing to provide such a list, for the doctorates they grant are public knowledge and you can compile that much yourself if need be from university records. If a program director has no such list and seems reluctant to compile one, trying instead to fob you off with generalizations about "where our doctorates go," that is a major danger signal. Directors will tend to remember and cite the Ph.D.s they've placed in decent academic jobs while those squeezed out of the profession illustrate the old adage, "Out of sight, out of mind." Ideally you want more than anecdotal evidence; you want percentages of the kind afforded by a comprehensive list of placements and failures. Better an honest list that includes numbers of Ph.D.'s no longer working in academia (hardly surprising when the country's over-all placement rate may be only 50 %) than vague assurances that their program does quite well at placement, thank you. A student who visited Michigan and Wayne State before accepting an honorary fellowship from the latter was surprised and pleased to learn that Wayne State was then placing at least as large a percentage of its doctorates as its august Big Ten competitor--apparently because many low-ranking schools with jobs to fill imagined Detroit as an urban jungle and figured that anyone trained to teach there can perform well in the classroom even with their own dullards.

As for being wait-listed at a school, that may mean very different things. When Pitt was recruiting incoming graduate students chiefly by offering TA's as we did until a few years ago, about half the time our offers were declined. To get four acceptances we usually had to work down through a list of our eight or nine top applicants ranked in order, so standing fourth on Pitt's TA waiting list then was not a bad position. But at other schools a waiting list may mean something very different. One Pitt student who had applied to Harvard, the University of Pennsylvania, Illinois, UCLA, and Berkeley was rejected by the latter, given honorary fellowships by Illinois and UCLA, and wait-listed at the two Ivies. Discounting his chances at the Ivies and misliking Illinois, he was flown to UCLA, wined, dined, and shined on by the California sun, and cheerfully accepted the top fellowship in their graduate Medieval/Renaissance Studies program. Then, two weeks after being wait-listed at the Ivies,

both Harvard and Penn told him that honorary fellowships had devolved on him. Inquiring further by telephone, he learned that he was Harvard's waiting list, that since not many people turn down Harvard fellowships he had been the only applicant so designated.

Had he known this initially, he might have been more sanguine about his chances at Harvard and less ready to make a commitment to UCLA. So if you are wait-listed by a school you're interested in, by all means call and ask the director of graduate admissions there to estimate as specifically as possible just what your chances are.

What should you do if the two-week deadline forces you to make a commitment to one school and then like this student you find yourself faced with a tempting offer from another? That's a question that ultimately you must answer for yourself. This student not only felt himself committed to UCLA but felt that his intellectual opportunities there were just as good or even better, so he was able to decline Harvard's fellowship without much angst--thereby putting himself in that very select group who can say that they rejected Harvard instead of vice versa. But another Pitt student who had applied to several MFA programs and been rejected everywhere, accepted a job with a non-profit employer, then belatedly was offered a fellowship out of the blue at Ohio State. After much soul-searching she decided to rescind her job acceptance and take the fellowship. Perhaps situational ethics plays a role in such decisions, for renegeing on commitments may have very different impacts on the organizations affected. Renegeing on a commitment to accept a Pitt TA in the days when our waiting list was a mile long did little if any harm to Pitt, for there was always someone else of virtually equal ability standing next in line and eager for a TA. Renegeing after the two-week deadline on a commitment to UCLA's top honorary fellowship in order to accept Harvard's, however, may make it difficult for UCLA to find a candidate of similar ability at that point. Faced with such a situation, you should perhaps ascertain as best you can the actual consequences of rescinding a commitment, take counsel from your recommenders and anyone else whose ethical advice you value, and make a decision you can comfortably live with.

What should you do if all your programs reject you? or if no program offers you anything but unfunded admission? First of all, think long and hard about whether teaching English on the college level is the right career for you. Could you be about as happy teaching English in secondary school with an education degree? Would taking some other job for a year or two put you in a better position to assess just how committed you are to graduate work in English? How likely is it that if you have trouble getting admitted with funding to graduate programs in English, you will eventually be one of the 50% to emerge from them with an academic job? Are you in a hurry to become upwardly mobile economically, or can you afford to mark time in what may prove only an extended liberal education? Upon mature reflection did you apply widely enough, and what weaknesses in the record on which you applied might be remedied in future applications? Should you pay to take graduate courses somewhere as a special student without being admitted to degree candidacy? Discuss these matters with trusted academic advisors, then if determined to reapply devise a strategy that promises better success.



### **13. Once in graduate school how can I maximize my career prospects?**

If you were forced faute de mieux to enroll in a low-ranking program with a weak placement record, transferring to a better program for doctoral work should be a top priority. The way to do so is also the way to maximize your chances in the marketplace if you stay in any program for both M.A. and Ph.D. degrees. Upward mobility in literary academia is basically a function of demonstrated scholarly ability, demonstrated teaching credentials, and demonstrated administrative reliability and initiative.

How can you can you demonstrate scholarly ability? Strong grades in graduate seminars help, of course, but not so much as you might think, for grading in many graduate programs is notoriously lax. To avoid further stressing already stressed graduate students many programs have an anti-competitive ethos, and the intimate relations between professors and graduate students can breed a hothouse atmosphere where both groups curry favor with each other, with professors seeking disciples and graduate students faculty patrons. Although a few of the very largest programs have reputations for cut-throat competitiveness, smaller programs like Pitt's may not. Graduate grades here, for example, were so uniformly laudatory that our graduate admissions committee found them largely useless for differentiating between applicants to the doctoral program from our own M.A. program, and an effort to require faculty to grade graduate students in a meaningful fashion by ranking them in the top, middle, or bottom third of their seminars provoked graduate student opposition and was soon abandoned. A memorial service for a Pitt faculty member featured tributes by two graduate students praising the deceased for having given them higher grades than they deserved, and their sentimental effusions were tendered and received as pedagogical compliments. So graduate grades at Pitt are so inflated as to be quite unreliable, and the situation is doubtless no different at many other graduate programs.

Do not suppose, therefore, that running strong grades at one graduate program will necessarily impress admissions committees at others. Everyone applying to doctoral programs has graduate GPA's over 3.75, which are a necessary but hardly sufficient condition for admission. And much the same holds for letters of recommendation from graduate professors. You must find some graduate faculty willing to vouch for your ability; but unless they are unusually eminent or have reputations for rigorous evaluation that they foster by writing scrupulously comparative letters, their testimonials may not do you as much good as you hope. It would probably be hard to differentiate the 50% of Ph.D.'s in English who get hired from the 50% who do not on the basis of their letters of recommendation alone, for formulaic laudatory phrasing can blur them all together for readers charged with scrutinizing graduate dossiers. Yes, you should seek out, cultivate, study with, and if need be judiciously flatter the professors in your graduate program who seem likely to have the most clout when time comes for letters of recommendation; but do not fantasize that anyone's clout can compensate in today's marketplace for competitive shortcomings in your record.

The best way of impressing faculty at other schools with the quality of your work is finding someone willing to attest to its value who is not based in your own program (for your own

graduate professors are essentially paid to extol it and so help place the school's graduates). There are two main ways of doing this. Easiest is getting some of your papers independently "certified" by presenting them at supposedly competitive conferences. Academia teems with conferences on all topics. If an MLA member will give you his MLA number and password, you can locate some upcoming literary meetings by accessing the MLA website's list; lacking that, the University of Pennsylvania's graduate English students maintain a helpful website where current calls for papers can be conveniently accessed--<<http://www.english.upenn.edu/CFP>>. Conferences exist chiefly because academic institutions subsidize faculty to present papers at them in the conviction (perhaps naive) that this fosters knowledge. Some conferences are highly selective, featuring papers only by invited eminences, but most exist to provide a forum where faculty can impress their implacable deans with evidence of "scholarship." They tend to be hospitable to anyone who ponies up the registration fee, for many academics do not attend conferences unless given the opportunity to present a paper there and so rack up brownie points. Most institutions have policies for subsidizing attendance at them even for graduate students, but only if the attendee is presenting a paper.

So the lowest rung on the ladder of demonstrable scholarship involves getting a paper proposal accepted at a conference. This often does not even require a completed paper, for many conferences accept one-paragraph proposals for papers yet to be written. Thus a graduate student at Alabama had a brief proposal for a paper accepted at a NEMLA conference, then wrote the paper the week before the meeting. This is not difficult, for in order to fit as many papers as possible into the program and so maximize attendance many conference organizers limit presentations to 15-20 minutes, about the length of time needed for an 8-10 page paper. Your paper may be miserable--many are--but no one pelts you with overripe fruit. The worst you can expect is some embarrassing questioning from your audience (which may be small enough to be numbered on the fingers of one hand if more popular panels are scheduled for the same time slot), so deans, hiring committees, and admissions committees are generally none the wiser about the ultimate value of your "contribution to knowledge." Even beginning graduate students should take advantage of prevailing subsidies to present whatever papers they can get accepted and so gain "exposure" to current thinking in their fields. If your paper is good, you may make a useful contact; thus one student presented a Pitt undergraduate paper at a conference where it impressed a journal editor who subsequently published it while she was in graduate school, thereby helping her to move to a better one.

Indeed, conference presentation is well within the ability of good undergraduates pointing for graduate school, for Pitt has funds for subsidizing the presentation of undergraduate papers. In recent years Pitt undergraduates have presented papers at more than half-a-dozen meetings like the Conference of the Society for Utopian Studies, the Southwest Conference on Christianity and Literature, the West Virginia Shakespeare and Renaissance Conference, the Ohio Shakespeare Conference, the annual meeting of the Robinson Jeffers Society, the International Conference on Romanticism, the Popular Culture Association of the South, The College English Association, the South Atlantic MLA, etc. One of these papers was published as a result of conference presentation, another won a conference prize, while other students got disinterested advice from

faculty attending that helped them improve papers to serve as writing samples, alerted them to good graduate programs, altered their career plans, etc.

Conference presentation certainly helps dress up an application to graduate school either at the M.A. or doctoral level. But because it's relatively easy, there are limits to how far it will carry you. The more important test of the value of your ideas is publication by some organ independent of your school (for there is a justifiable academic prejudice against "in-house" publication just as there is a justifiable prejudice against academic inbreeding). Finding someone willing to listen to your paper provided you also listen to his is one thing; but finding a journal willing to select your paper competitively from a large pool of submissions and commit scant resources to publishing it is a more impressive accolade. It is scarcely too early for beginning graduate students to start thinking about publication, particularly if they are eager to change programs, for even though a formal acceptance is about as impressive as actual publication itself, the process of getting an article accepted for publication can take years of submitting it to various periodicals. (For one way that graduate students might shorten this process see Michael West, "Re-editing the MLA's Guidelines for Journal Editors," College English, 47: 1985, 726-733). Faculty advisors can often suggest how the wannabe academic author might go about getting a strong seminar paper published. For a rationalization of this process, which constitutes academia's central means of professional evaluation, together with suggestions about how to pick likely journals in English studies, see Michael West, "Evaluating Academic Periodicals: Tell It in Gath for Ye Must, Young Men, but Publish It Not in Askelon," College English, 41: 1980, 903-923--now dated on specific journals but useful methodologically.

Acceptance for publication is the most impressive way a graduate student can confirm that the A grades decorating his seminar papers did not represent professorial indulgence but genuine merit judged by comparative, competitive, thoroughly professional standards. And graduate students with a bright future in the profession should be doing a paper in some M.A. course that is at least potentially publishable, for increasingly the résumés that land introductory jobs for doctorate-holders already list publications. Although some prestigious programs like Columbia's tend to discourage students from trying to publish strong seminar papers before they've reached the dissertation stage and are nearing the marketplace, this strikes me as dubious advice (ignoring it helped student 19A parlay his Columbia Ph.D. into a good job). It is certainly possible to make the transit from a low-ranking M.A. program to a higher-ranking Ph.D. program without publication; thus the Pitt undergraduate philosophy major who did an M.A. at Arizona State secured an honorary fellowship to the University of Chicago's doctoral program with strong grades and teaching at Arizona and a much better research paper to serve as a writing sample, which he feels "made a huge difference." But for other upwardly mobile Pitt students the route out of low-ranking M.A. programs was paved with publication. .

Of course, it was also paved with demonstrated teaching ability. Presumably any program will offer its TA's teacher training that involves some evaluation. But vague references to good teaching in letters of recommendation may not demonstrate it to the satisfaction of admissions committees and employers elsewhere. Most campuses now have some form of soliciting

students' opinions of teaching and quantifying the results comparatively, so that a teacher's performance in the classroom is rated against those of other teachers on that campus. Whether or not your department's composition program requires such evaluations, use them to document your teaching ability in every course you teach.

Do not delude yourself that your own self-administered surveys or laudatory reports from a director of composition will swing much weight elsewhere unless they are comparative. To say of a teacher, "Many of his students think the world of him," is not to say all that much, for students are inherently biased in favor of their teachers--i.e., the average grade they give their teachers is above-average, just like their teachers' grades. On Pitt's campus a teacher who was top-rated by half his students and bottom-rated by the other half would rank not in the middle but in the bottom quintile of Pitt faculty on surveys administered and quantified comparatively by our Office for the Measurement and Evaluation of Teaching. When you are seeking a teaching job elsewhere, you want if possible to be able to say that as a teacher you have received higher ratings than have many of your peers. That was an important part of the success story of the Pitt graduate who rose from Alabama to Northwestern, for in addition to sharply enhanced GRE scores, conference papers, a glowing letter of recommendation from the chaired professor in her field, and an accepted article, she could point to a record of demonstrably superior teaching effectiveness.

Finally, in addition to scholarship and teaching some schools may put modest value on administrative ability. But do not delude yourself that developing impressive graduate credentials involves anything like the absurd scramble to stack up clubs and organizations for college admissions that may have characterized your final years in high school. If administrative assistantships, volunteer work, or graduate student politics begin to impact your performance in seminars and your own classes, drop them like a hot potato, for your achievements as a scholar and a teacher are by far the most important part of the credentials you present to other schools. Indeed, if you find yourself in a program that you hope to leave advantageously for another, it may be wise to keep yourself slightly aloof from too much involvement with other graduate students, for enormous amounts of time can be wasted by joining in the griping that is endemic in programs where most graduate students feel justifiably insecure about their abilities and huddle with each other for relief.

That said, demonstrable administrative initiative, creativity, and reliability are virtues worth cultivating. They played their minor part in the success story of one Pitt undergraduate disappointed at not being awarded a TA here, who wisely decided to accept one at Duquesne rather than continue in our M.A. program unfunded. When after taking her M.A. there her husband was transferred to the Detroit area, she won an honorary doctoral fellowship at Wayne State with a record that included considerable work heading a departmental organization of graduate students devoted to staging obscure medieval-Renaissance morality plays locally in Pittsburgh and then videotaping the productions for national distribution (of course, her record also included a published article first written as a prize-winning Pitt undergraduate paper, conference presentations, superior grades, teaching credentials, and recommendations as the

cream of Duquesne's crop of M.A.'s).

If you find yourself enrolled in a low-ranking program and your hopes of moving upward and outward after the M.A. are frustrated, alas, you should carefully evaluate your situation within the program before deciding to remain in it for a doctoral degree. Don't focus on your flattering grades, for many professors feel pressure to fill seminar seats so that they can keep riding their intellectual hobby-horses before admiring audiences of supposed cognoscenti rather than be reduced to teaching mere undergraduates. Does a realistic assessment of your relative standing in the program coupled with what should now be your insider's knowledge of recent placement statistics there suggest that their Ph.D. will really qualify you to compete successfully in the current marketplace for what you regard as a satisfying academic job? If not, it's time to take up some other career. Moreover, if you remain in a doctoral program after the M.A., allow for the possibility that you may not be able to land a satisfying academic job teaching college literature by exploring opportunities during your doctoral candidacy that might make that degree more attractive to non-academic employers. The MLA maintains a website called Connected Academics that offers many useful suggestions for planning your teaching, research, and administrative experiences as a grad student so that they become qualifications for other jobs.

#### **14. What different approaches do graduate degrees in writing demand?**

The most common graduate degree in writing is a Master of Fine Arts, though some programs award M.A.'s in Writing and others may even offer doctorates in writing with the option of doing a creative dissertation. In the past the MFA in writing was regarded as the terminal degree in the field and to some extent retains that status, meaning that many English departments specifying a Ph.D. in English as the qualification for Assistant Professor rank and salary will nonetheless appoint MFAs as Assistant Professors to teach writing courses. But with the proliferation of doctoral degrees in Writing the MFA's status as a terminal degree has been eroding somewhat, so that it may not always command the respect as an academic hiring credential that it once did. Pitt MFAs in fiction and poetry are rarely successful in finding academic jobs on the strength of their degrees alone, for hiring institutions now tend to want the degree backed by publication. If a graduate writing program does not succeed in getting its degree-holders published, its degrees have relatively little commercial value per se with the exception perhaps of degrees in nonfiction. For this reason asking one's family to underwrite the degree may seem inappropriate. Whereas work as a literary scholar really requires academic certification, it is of course quite possible to be a writer and get published without paying for a graduate degree. Many academic institutions hire writers without graduate degrees to teach writing on the strength of their publications alone.

The main professional organization is the Associated Writing Programs, which issues The Writer's Journal every other month; copies are on file in the Crow Room. Most graduate writing programs are listed in the AWP's Official Guide to Writing Programs. It is non-evaluative, however, and there seems to be no generally accepted, quasi-objective ranking of graduate writing programs similar to the National Research Council's ranking of doctoral programs in English. Iowa, Stanford, and Columbia are among those that enjoy top reputations. To get a

sense of the pecking order students must consult faculty mentors here for advice. Since opinions differ, it's wise to inquire widely.

A few graduate MFA programs like Iowa's are strictly segregated from an institution's English Department, so a background of literary study is not deemed essential. But like Pitt's the majority of MFA programs overlap with programs in English literature and composition, requiring students to take seminars in those areas in addition to their writing seminars. Therefore some background in English literature is advisable, perhaps more than the minimum four literature courses required by our writing major. Many applicants to Pitt's MFA program are rejected because scanty preparation in literature raises suspicions that they will not be able to pass the required graduate seminars in literature and composition.

Graduate writing programs tend to weight the importance of various credentials for admission rather differently than do literature programs. GRE scores loom large for admissions committees screening applicants in literature but are probably the least important credential for committees evaluating MFA candidates. By far the most important evidence of MFA admissibility is the writing sample, which instead of being limited to one paper with a maximum of twenty pages more typically comprises a portfolio of up to fifty pages of the student's writing. Recommendations are perhaps the next most important factor providing they come from people clearly familiar with the student's writing. While good grades are desirable, they are perhaps slightly less important than for prospective literary scholars. A particularly relevant academic background is perhaps also less important. If a student has thrived in several literature courses but taken few or no writing courses, admissions committees will tend to treat the student's sample portfolio as evidence per se of creative talent. In the absence of a strong portfolio indulgent grades in writing courses will do the student little good, while the presence of a strong portfolio and recommendations may well sway an admissions committee toward an applicant from any discipline, even applicants with minimal grounding in English courses. And if the quality of a student's writing is attested by publication in something other than a house organ, which is typically true for about a third of the serious contenders for admission to Pitt's MFA program, so much the better. A truly talented undergraduate writer probably has more opportunity to find outlets for publication than does a tyro literary scholar.

### **15. What different approaches do graduate degrees in film demand?**

There are two basic types of graduate programs in Film Studies, although some programs combine the two to some extent. Clearly, students must first decide what aspect of Film Studies most interests them:

- 1) Graduate school in film production (which includes video, digital cinema, etc.). Most often such programs offer an MFA (Masters of Fine Arts) which is considered a "terminal" degree (much like an MFA in Creative Writing, Theater, or Studio Arts). These programs are best for students who want to work in some aspect of the film industry, be it Hollywood (film or TV), industrial cinema,

documentary film, etc. Within the broad area of “filmmaking,” one can specialize in such sub-fields as: directing, cinematography, editing, or screenwriting. The major programs in this area are on the U.S. coasts: California (UCLA, USC, California Institute of the Arts) and New York (NYU, Columbia). Schools in the state of Florida (a sun-belt area friendly to production), are also going into graduate filmmaking production these days. Other excellent programs exist at the University of Texas/Austin, University of Iowa, University of Wisconsin, etc.

2) Graduate school in “cinema studies” or “critical studies” (film history, theory, criticism). In this area, schools offer both Master’s and Doctoral degrees—but only the latter will qualify someone for teaching at the college level in a tenure-stream position. Be aware that these programs do not prepare one for careers in the film industry itself but rather for quasi-academic study of film. While a Master’s degree is sometimes relevant for secondary school teaching, few districts have a specific license in Film Studies although sometimes Media Studies is an aspect of licensing in English or Communication Arts. Other professions for which a Master’s or Doctoral degree are relevant include: film exhibition, museum curatorial work, film archive work, journalistic film criticism, arts administration. Doctoral and Master’s programs in Film Studies are organized very much like those in Literature or Art History—with courses that focus on themes, genres, “authors,” periods, and theoretical issues. Some programs may require minimal work in film production (just to give people some hands-on experience). Some of the major programs in this area are those at UCLA, Columbia, NYU, USC, University of Texas/Austin, University of Iowa, University of Wisconsin, University of Chicago, University of Pittsburgh, Emory, Rochester, etc.

For MFA programs in film production, one is not generally required to have had an undergraduate major in Film Studies, though such a major is certainly relevant. Of course, it is a good idea to have taken some Film Studies courses (production or history). Some schools (even the most selective) are often looking for the most creative and intelligent students, whatever their major happens to have been. In general, programs in filmmaking require that a student submit some sort of “portfolio” of creative work (films, videos, photographs, screenplays, short stories, poems, art works, etc.). Most schools will require the Graduate Record Exam but no specialized area exam in Film Studies exists.

For Masters or Doctoral programs in film history, theory, and criticism, one is not generally required to have had an undergraduate major in Film Studies, though such a major is certainly relevant. Of course, it is a good idea to have taken some Film Studies courses (history and/or production). Most schools will require a “writing sample” and, if a student has a paper on the topic of film, it is best to submit that one (if it is of top quality.) If not, submit your best paper on another subject. The Graduate Record Exam will be required and schools will look most at the Verbal and Analytical scores (and largely ignore the Quantitative score). The requirements for a

Master's or Doctoral degree in Film Studies are much like those for any other field in the Humanities and will generally require course work, comprehensive exams, a thesis and foreign language proficiency. Film is a global medium, with important films and film scholarship appearing in many different languages, and since the nature of the field is so inherently comparative, a strong undergraduate foreign language background may pay even bigger dividends than in literary study.

The National Research Council does not currently rank graduate programs in film production or film history (as they do programs in English, foreign languages, Art History, etc.). Peterson's Graduate and Professional Programs (2003) offers helpful non-evaluative descriptions of 60 programs. Three other sources give some evaluative guidance by purporting to focus on a limited number of top programs. U. S. News and World Report (www.usnews.com) lists nineteen top MFA programs, Karin Kelly's and Tom Edgar's Film School Confidential (1997) profiles 26 programs, and Julie Mackaman's Filmmaker's Resources (1997) lists over 90 programs with a particular emphasis on MFA and MA programs. Combining such resources with similar guides focused on undergrad film programs (e.g., Peterson's Colleges and Universities at www.petersons.com) should let one gain a sense of the direction of film studies at a particular school. You might also consult

GradSchools.com: [http://www.gradschools.com/listings/east/film\\_east.html](http://www.gradschools.com/listings/east/film_east.html)

Film Schools: <http://www.iohk.com/UserPages/mlau/spidfilm.html>

Film Education. Com <http://www.filmeducation.com/usschools.html>

Society for Cinema and Media Studies: <http://www.cmstudies.org/>

University Film and Video Association: <http://www.ufva.org/>

American Film Institute: <http://www.afi.com/>

A detailed four-page bibliography of over a dozen printed and web guides to film programs that explains the special features of each is available from the office of Pitt's Film Studies Program. Of course, the advice of trusted faculty can also be very valuable in deciding which programs to apply to

## **16. What different approaches do graduate degrees in education demand?**

Pitt undergraduates interested in primary or secondary-school teaching face a bewildering array of options. There are at least two graduate programs in education that prepare one for teaching jobs, the Pro Year and the M.A.T. There are also M.Ed. degrees more commonly taken on a part-time basis by practicing teachers in mid-career who start out with a B.Ed. Moreover many states and foreign countries eager to recruit teachers of English have various programs that put Pitt B.A.'s directly in their classrooms (often classrooms in disadvantaged urban areas) without immediate further training. At the other end of the secondary education spectrum private schools may also be ready to employ teachers holding only a B.A. in English; a few have programs that after two years teaching there provide one with a fellowship for a Master's degree of one's choice, and a straight M.A. in English might be a worthwhile job credential in private secondary education. Some of these options, however, will require that certain courses be taken here either as part of an undergraduate English major, in the School of Education, or in the Linguistics



Department as training in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages, for which a specialized TESOL Certificate exists.

To explore their pros and cons of all these options you need expert professional counseling. Our departmental undergraduate advisors are well qualified to help you understand the different requirements involved in different programs. The department also sponsors an annual workshop in the fall for students interested in teaching careers, with presentations on opportunities for teaching abroad and representatives from Pitt's Graduate School of Education. Talking to someone from the School of Education is especially advisable if you are considering how to prepare yourself for public-school jobs out of state. Requirements for state certification in Pennsylvania are more demanding than those in some other states and will usually transfer, but if you have another state immediately in mind, an advisor from our School of Education can find out precisely what the requirements there are. It's not a good idea to wait until senior year to begin investigating all these complex possibilities, for three education courses are required for admission to the Pro Year program and one's English courses should fall within certain prescribed categories, so sophomore year is none too early to begin planning one's curriculum to meet these requirements.

Pennsylvania does not require teachers to have a Master's degree but simply to be certified; thus holders of a Bachelor's degree in education from schools that (unlike Pitt) grant them need only meet state certification and continuing education requirements to qualify for a permanent position. However, most school districts calibrate their salary schedules so that holders of a Master's degree are paid slightly more--typically around \$1,000. Some districts argue that holders of a Master's degree may actually be pricing themselves out of the educational job market, but other districts welcome M.A.T.'s on the theory that they are getting in effect a second-year teacher at a beginning teacher's salary. Consider this before deciding whether to pursue a Master's degree or just the Pro Year as a credential for public school teaching. Bear in mind that while Pitt's M.A.T program is very highly regarded within the state, our Graduate School of Education exists largely to offer advanced degrees in the field and may have a vested interest in recommending them.

For various reasons (burn-out is one, another is the fact that many women who enter teaching leave when they start families) turnover among teachers entering primary and secondary education is alarmingly high, with nearly half of them leaving the profession within five years. In this situation it could be argued that it's unwise to complete a full-fledged Master's degree before learning from experience on the job whether it's one you want to stay with. Indeed students in M.A.T and M.Ed. programs have often waited a few years before enrolling on a part-time basis, with many programs listing students' average age as around thirty, and some programs may even require a year's experience in the field for admission. On the other hand, educators can argue that if more beginning teachers were fully prepared for the challenges of the job by completing Master's programs first, they would have more satisfying experiences in their classrooms and be more likely to remain in the profession.

Admission to the Pro Year and M.A.T programs and state certification will probably require taking the PRAXIS I Test, formerly known as the National Teachers' Exam, which measures basic skills in reading, writing, and math. Schools vary in the GPA requirements expected of candidates for admission. Harvard wants at least 3.5 in the proposed field of subject specialization while Pitt demands an overall GPA of 3.0. However other programs will accept candidates with GPAs ranging down to 2.5 and perhaps even lower; moreover in Pittsburgh, for example, Carlow College offers programs leading to certification that are rather less stringent about the English courses that must be taken as prerequisites. Successful completion of a Master's degree or certification will entail taking the PRAXIS II Tests, which test mastery of the subject field where certification is sought as well as knowledge of pedagogical methods and concepts. Top education programs like Harvard and Penn require the GRE Exams for admission to Master's programs, but other schools like Pitt do not. But most schools will require them for admission to doctoral programs in education; however, admission to doctoral programs normally occurs only after some teaching experience has been acquired in the field. GRE requirements for doctoral programs in education are notably lower than for doctoral programs in English. For example, while Harvard demands a minimum GRE verbal score of 700 for candidates for the doctoral degree in English, the mean GRE score for its doctoral students in education is only 596, and the mean doctoral GRE verbal score at Pitt's Graduate School of Education is nearly a hundred points lower than that.

Pennsylvania state certification requires a practicum--i.e., a practice teaching experience in some public school. Students who have done their practicum at a certain school may have an inside track on jobs that open up there. An important consideration in evaluating programs leading to certification or advanced degrees in education is thus where they place their students for practica. Another important consideration in evaluating programs is the rate at which their graduates pass PRAXIS exams for state certification. The pass rates of graduates from any school of education should be available at <[www.ed.gov/offices/OPE/News/teacher\\_prep/index.html](http://www.ed.gov/offices/OPE/News/teacher_prep/index.html)>.

The American Council on Graduate Education evaluated doctoral programs in education in 1995 on the same basis as it did doctoral programs in English, and new up-to-date rankings just emerged in 2010. If you wish to get a sense of the pecking order among doctoral programs, you can also consult U.S. News and World Report's most recent edition of America's Best Graduate Schools, which in 2004 on the basis of polling throughout the field ranked the top fifty from Harvard on down, with Pitt ranked forty-first. In consulting such rankings, however, bear in mind that doctoral degrees in education are not geared to turning out practicing teachers in K-12 classrooms. There are two common doctoral degrees; the Ph.D. in Education is generally for people who want to teach at universities or work in government while the Ed.D. trains educators to work in the field as administrators of schools or school districts. Interestingly, the administrative challenges in education are currently such that some graduate programs are having difficulty recruiting good candidates for doctoral degrees from among the ranks of talented teachers despite the markedly higher salaries that school officials like principals command. If your ambitions are limited to a K-12 teaching career, a school with only a strong master's program in education might serve your needs as well as one with a doctoral program, for the

forces linking the quality of master's to doctoral programs are perhaps less powerful in education than in English studies. Peterson's Graduate Programs in Education (2004) contains unranked summaries of master's and doctoral programs in education, with useful information about such matters as number of faculty and students, areas of specialization, and financial aid available.

Public primary and secondary school teachers are generally governed by union contracts that after a brief probationary period make advancement within a given school largely a function of seniority and degree held, with little scope for principals to take individual merit into account in determining salary. Since improving one's knowledgeability continually throughout one's career is less directly rewarded in such an environment, graduate programs in education may focus less than graduate programs in English on providing graduates with the skills to do so. But of course K-12 teachers eager to leave one school district for a more congenial or better-paying one improve their chances of doing so by developing evidence of demonstrable teaching effectiveness. For English teachers such résumé-enhancing evidence may well include various kinds of publication ranging from textbooks to pedagogical articles to local journalism to creative writing to computerized teaching aids, whether or not their graduate programs have specifically prepared them to produce such materials. While there is fierce demand for secondary-school teachers qualified in foreign languages and sciences, and aggressive recruiting for English teachers willing to work in less desirable districts, the over-all secondary-school marketplace for those qualified in English is probably closer to steady-state at present, with supply more or less equal to demand--unlike the very tight market for English teachers competing for jobs in higher education.

## **17. Appendix: Case Histories of Graduate Applicants 2004-2005**

A '05. As the winner of a national Mellon Fellowship to Stanford this student was an outstanding success story--a fifth-year senior who took an extra year here as a Provost's Scholar to graduate with completed requirements for three degrees: a B.S. with a major in Neuroscience and a minor in Chemistry, a B.A. with majors in English literature and the History and Philosophy of Science, and a B.Phil for a fine senior honors thesis, "Robinson Jeffers's Inhumanism, Phenomenology, and the Eco-Modernist Perception," a chapter from which took first prize in Snead Competition. In prior years two essays of his on Melville and Jeffers took second and third prizes in that contest. His rigorously graded hard science background kept him from graduating summa (which requires a 3.75 GPA), but his many other accomplishments undoubtedly helped his application stand out, a point worth emphasizing given many students' fixation on high GPAs. These included: presenting papers not only at the annual Jeffers conference in Carmel but at a neuroscience conference; several Pitt grants for summer study here, at the Jeffers archives in the University of Texas, and for summer study of modern and postmodern British literature at the University of Edinburgh; a publication on Allan Ginsberg, "Poetically Protesting (the self) within the Superpower," accepted by the online journal LISA: Literature, History of Ideas, Images, Societies of the English-Speaking World; undergraduate teaching assistantships in both neuroscience and literature; heading the Honors College Activities Community; founding the Dead Poets Literary Group in UHC; and volunteer work not only

tutoring high school students but with the Pitt Outdoors Club, the Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy, and an environmental group in Gila National Forest, New Mexico.

Drawing on this impressive record, he had a strong writing sample on eco-poetry and was able to write an unusually effective and well-focused application statement about his plans for a career exploring the interface between literature and science. After a month and a half cramming for the GRE exam he emerged with a verbal score of 740 (top percentile) offsetting a lower subject test score of 650/86% and an analytic writing score of 5 on the 6-pt scale. ("The single BEST thing to do from my experience," he reports re the verbal GRE, "is to download the Barron's word list online and go through and make a notecard for each unfamiliar word . . . lots of them surprisingly, even after four years of humanities education"). I suspect that graduate programs were also favorably impressed by the fact that as a senior he took intensive beginning French, supplementing his shaky high-school Spanish with second language so that he seemed likely to pass graduate language exams soon after entrance. He applied to eight programs including terminal M.A. programs at Vermont and Nevada/Reno as well as Ph.D. programs at Stanford, U Washington, UC Davis, UC Santa Barbara, Oregon, and Utah. Accepting him with a 3-yr TA, UC Davis had nominated him for an honorary fellowship while Santa Barbara admitted him but without first-year funding due to budgetary problems (it's worth noting that even a record as strong as his can't be sure of fellowship support at any given school, so applying widely is necessary). When Stanford offered five years of support including two with honorary fellowships at 18K, he withdrew all his other applications but Washington; and his Mellon then kicked that figure above 20K. He completed a dissertation on the urban and suburban imagination in nineteenth-century Britain, published some articles, served as a lecturer at Berkeley, was for two years Assistant Director of the Franke Program in Science and the Humanities at Yale. After brief stints teaching English for a girls private school in Hartford, CT, and the Springfield, MA, public high school system, 2021 found him working for two years as an English teacher at a small, five-person educational start-up company in Massachusetts.

B '05. Another former English major who did very well in his applications to doctoral programs graduated in '02. Although after a slow start freshman year his 3.45 GPA here only qualified him for a cum laude degree, he took second prize in the Kay competition with a strong essay from his senior seminar on forced native labor in Defoe and Conrad. Following graduation he parlayed his modest Spanish into a year teaching English in Ecuador, then with fair fluency returned home to New Jersey to pursue an M.A. in English at Rutgers/Camden, which offered cheap in-state tuition, free lodging with his parents, and proximity to a fiancée. Supporting himself during the first year by tutoring GED candidates, which paid better than Camden's TA, he was also certified to teach high school Spanish. Deciding that the most secure and exciting future lay in literacy studies, in 2004-5 he applied to a dozen programs with strength in that area, including ours, with gratifying results. Pitt accepted him with first-year honorary funding (15K), and so did Wisconsin/Milwaukee (first yr hon. 24K, then TF @ 11K + 3.5K summer support), while Temple awarded him a four-year fellowship incl. two years honorary at 14K. Wisconsin/Madison, Arizona, and U Mass weighed in with TFs though Miami-Ohio, Penn State, and Maryland only waitlisted him while New Hampshire, Ohio State and Texas all rejected him.

After much soul-searching he decided to forgo honorary money with us to accept Wisconsin/Madison's modest TA at ca. 10K (one course/semester load) augmented with a small first-year honorary sweetener of 2-3K and subsequent workshop assignments that should bring his annual stipend to around 13K. Swaying his decision, in addition to the superior national ranking of Wisconsin's department and the well-known appeal of the Madison campus, was the opportunity to work with Shaughnessy Award winner Deborah Brandt in a premier literacy program that boasts 100% placement; he also found Pitt's graduate seminar topics rather narrowly focused and wisely thought two degrees from the same school might not serve him as well in the marketplace. The wisdom of that choice was born out when in 2010 he had a dozen interviews at the MLA Convention and wound up with an excellent job at a quality liberal arts college where in 2017 he was tenured with an award-winning book in composition studies.

What made his a strong application that triggered positive responses from many programs in literacy studies? Although the terminal M.A. program at Camden is not an academic powerhouse, it apparently did a good job by him as a favorite son with a 4.0 GPA who won a special Dean's Award for an outstanding graduate student as well as an essay prize there. Indeed, if their graduate seminar topics are broader than Pitt's, he may have seemed well prepared for many programs and not prematurely specialized. Certainly one thing that made his application stand out in the crowd was his well-attested foreign language fluency, which is likely to play an especially important role in the marketplace for literacy specialists. Another was his perfect GRE verbal aptitude score of 800, which he jacked from 650/88th% in 2002 by dint of much cramming with the online Barron's list, arduous but amply justified in his view by the results (his quantitative and subject scores also rose nicely to the 80% level from ca. 60% though his analytic writing score held steady at 5/6). Camden's M.A. program evidently helped him compose a strong writing sample and application statement, as well as two papers that he presented at conferences, and he's grateful for the interest that faculty there took in helping him as their strongest student move up and out. At the same time he's wary of advising students ambitious for doctorates to pursue M.A. work in terminal M.A. programs--not so much because of the quality of the faculty in his experience as because of the difficulty in maintaining a competitive approach to one's seminars in a program heavily populated by terminal M.A. students.

C '05. A third applicant this year was a summa cum laude Pitt B.A., '01, who shared in the Burkhart Award for our best lit majors and then after declining a TA at Case Western took a fully funded one-year M.A. at SUNY Stony Brook. He acquitted himself very creditably there but found the campus costly and barren of graduate student life while the department lacked senior specialists in the Renaissance. So after completing his M.A. he left to teach in a NYC high school for two years. When he reapplied to doctoral programs in 2003-4 the results were disappointing, for he was rejected by Maryland, Penn State, Penn, Temple, Michigan, BU, and Boston College--indeed, everywhere he applied but Stony Brook. Deciding not to return there, he took a job teaching English in a burgeoning former business college in his hometown of Allentown, PA, where his M.A. made him one of the ranking faculty members. Reapplying in 2004-5, he rightly concluded that without publications or serious foreign language study in college he might have aimed too high the prior year on nothing more than good grades at Stony

Brook, a strong but not overwhelming GRE verbal score of 690/95th%, and fine teaching credentials. And he feels that he probably made a major mistake in 2003 by not exerting himself on the GRE's quantitative section under the misimpression that it would make little difference to graduate admissions in English when in fact some schools require a minimum score on the GRE verbal and quantitative aptitude tests combined in order to qualify for a TF. When he retook the test, in 2004, his scores rose to verbal 700, quantitative 690, and subject 650.

This year he got some visibility for the graduate seminar essay on feminist issues in Webster that served as his writing sample by presenting it at the Ohio Shakespeare Conference, and that seemed to make a substantial difference. While Duke, Ohio State, Maryland, and Penn State all rejected him, he did much better with lower-ranking schools. Drew admitted him sans funding, George Washington U, Duquesne, and Delaware all offered him TFs, and he was given a TF and waitlisted for an honorary fellowship at Wayne State. That became academic, however, when Lehigh awarded him a four-year university fellowship with 1st and 4th year honorary @ 20K, 2nd and 3rd year TF at 13.6K--stipulating, however, a decision deadline too early to wait out Wayne State. Though theirs is a relatively small program that was ranked 114th in the American Council of Graduate Education's 1995 rankings, Lehigh has decided to shed its image as a second-tier engineering school by pumping a lot more money into its liberal arts programs, of which his lucrative university fellowship is one of the first fruits. The program is on the move upward and boasts three well-published Renaissance specialists. They've successfully placed a number of their doctorates in lower-tier schools by turning out Ph.D.'s who are generalists with strong teacher training. This student felt that the program's educational aims coincided with his own and that if he graduated as their top Ph.D. three years later he should be able to get a much more satisfying position than his previous job with the quondam business school. He turned his dissertation into a book on seventeenth-century literary and intellectual history and took a job teaching in a midwestern community college where in 2021 he was both an adjunct professor of English and a Grant Writing Specialist.

D '05. Although a strong student who took her degree magna in virtue of an over-all GPA above 3.5, this student was not one of the five honored with a share of the Burkhart Award reserved for the department's top literature majors. As a native of West Virginia she applied only to her state university and was awarded a TA. She had thoughts of transferring to a stronger program after her MA thesis but--believing that West Virginia (ranked 113<sup>th</sup> in 1995) enjoyed reasonable success in placing its Ph.D.'s--took her Ph.D. there in 2013. With a dissertation on modernism and a few articles, in 2017 she was a full-time Instructor in Writing at Duquesne mulling a couple of book projects.

## **18. Appendix: Case Histories of Graduate Applicants 2005-2006**

A '06. A Chancellor's Scholar with a near-perfect GPA on his way to a summa B.A., the recipient of the lion's share of the Burkhart Alumni Scholarship this year was by departmental consensus our top lit major. He also won first and second prizes in the Miller essay competition

with two fine essays on Auden's political poetics and Kristeva's theories about the nature of poetic language; the latter served as a strong writing sample though perhaps the more orthodox research paper that won first prize would have served even better. In prior years an essay on Whitman took a third prize in the Snead competition and was presented at the Intl. Conference on Romanticism. His double major in Religious Studies equipped him with four semesters of Sanskrit, which together with three semesters of college French, a semester of elementary German, and four years of high school Latin made him an unusually well qualified applicant linguistically. His GRE scores were verbal 650/93%, quant 700, analytic writing 5.5/86%, and subject 690/93%. Strong but not overpowering, these scores would probably not have qualified him for Ivies like Harvard, which stipulates a 700 minimum. But he had no interest in the Ivies, feeling that his holistic theoretical and literary ambitions could be as well or better pursued in smaller programs. Applying to Rice, Rochester, Vanderbilt, NYU, SUNY-Buffalo, Oklahoma, Nebraska, and Miami-Ohio, he was waitlisted at NYU and Vanderbilt (Vanderbilt's waitlist is divided by specialty, so he would have moved up only if the student most directly comparable to his projected specialization declined) and offered money everywhere else, from Nebraska's piddling TA @ \$9K to much better TAs with honorary components at Miami-Ohio (11K + 5K hon), Rochester (\$13K first year hon.+ 2K summer RA), Oklahoma (TA 12K + 3K hon), SUNY-Buffalo (TA 10.5K + 4K hon). He accepted a plum four-year university honorary fellowship from Rice starting at 22K that required teaching only four semester courses over this period and should have let him finish his doctorate in 4-5 years. His interests meandered into film and media studies. In 2011 he published an article on the San Francisco setting of Hitchcock's Vertigo and claimed to be completing a dissertation on the intersections of underground experimental film and commercial sex cinema in that city, but whether he ever did so is unclear. As of 2021 his whereabouts and occupation are unknown, so he's probably left academia.

B '06. Though not quite a Burkhart honoree, this student was also a very strong senior major who managed finally to graduate summa with a GPA above 3.75. Fine papers made him a three-time finalist in the UCIS Undergraduate Research Symposium while his essay on Jane Austen was honored in the Ossip competition and his essay on Middlemarch won second prize in the Women's Studies Competition. With four semesters of college Spanish plus summer study in Mexico and a Certificate in Latin-American Studies as well as elementary German he had a decent language background. Alas, his GREs were a bit disappointing-- verbal 520/63%, quantitative 640/70%, analytic writing 5/70%--and his subject test in English was so low that he decided to apply only to programs that did not require that score. He was waitlisted for TAs at Miami-Florida, Nebraska, Kansas, and Purdue, but received a solid offer from Oklahoma of a one-year TA at \$11,500 with the possibility of some additional honorary money. But he chose to accept a two-year offer from Miami of Ohio of \$11,500 for a TA involving only one course per semester instead of Oklahoma's two. When Miami made a Dean's honorary supplement of \$1,000 (note the difference from the 5K honorary supplement offered A '06 above) conditional on a deadline before April 15, he decided his waitlists were not worth waiting out, especially since a chaired professor at Miami is expert in British nineteenth-century fiction where he has a particular focus. For his subsequent career see Section 23 B'11.

C '06. This very distinguished lit major from the class of '04 won one of the three top shares of the Burkhart Alumni Scholarship on his way to his summa B.A. His outstanding essays took a first prize in our Miller competition and three second prizes in the Kay and Snead contests, while a short story of his took second place in the Three Rivers Review Fiction Contest. His impressive GREs were verbal 97%, quantitative 33%, analytic writing 95%, and subject test 99%. His only language was four semesters of college French, but as a theoretical admirer of Erich Auerbach's Mimesis he had taken many courses on earlier European literature in translation, giving him unusual sophistication about the development of fictional genres over the ages. As a senior he was turned down by three Ivies but awarded a fat four-year McCracken fellowship of 18K by NYU with two years honorary. Uncertain about job prospects in English, he turned that down to work for a couple of years as a museum docent, travel, pursue a relationship, and see whether his professional commitment persisted. It did indeed, to the point where he published a theoretical essay in an online journal. Reapplying in 2005-6 to Harvard, Princeton, Columbia, Chicago, Northwestern, Michigan, Washington, Ohio State, Minnesota, and Temple, he was rejected by all but the last three, which offered him good fellowships. He accepted Minnesota's honorary university fellowship of 21K for the first year with a four-year TA @ ca.12K to follow, since the Twin Cities seemed a livelier metropolis than Columbus, Ohio, where his visit to OSU left him feeling that a Cultural Studies hegemony in that department made life unpleasant for faculty and insecure for grad students, most of whom had to reapply after the M.A. Minnesota by contrast promised more ideological freedom and more apparent departmental focus in his preferred area of nineteenth-century fiction. During his seven years there changes in departmental faculty left him without as large a choice of advisors as he might have wished for his ultimate dissertation on British modernist fiction. By the time he took his doctorate in 2013 his interests had shifted slightly. Though he'd presented half a dozen conference papers, he'd published no straightforward literary scholarship but had a small-press novella in print together with half-a-dozen stories, creative non-fiction pieces, public opinion essays in little magazines, and occasional poems. Twenty-five applications during his last two years produced no job offers except for two relatively well-paying and compatible adjunct positions during 2013-20 teaching congenial creative writing and literature courses at U Minn and another local college. Since his wife held an attractive local job, he felt decently rewarded as a non-tenure-stream teacher making between \$30-40K annually, claiming several adjunct friends in Minneapolis felt similarly. Now, however, NTS jobs at U Minn are being reduced, so he thinks he may soon need to apply more widely for jobs on a bibliography comprising a slew of experimental short stories, three novellae (two self-published but with strong reviews in Publishers Weekly and on Amazon), and some more conventional academic literary scholarship and essays.

D '06. This writing major, '03, who double majored in Philosophy, took only about four English lit courses here but authored two outstanding essays on Shakespeare's history plays that won two Ossip second prizes, the Kay Prize, and a prize in national competition for the best undergraduate essay published in the Pittsburgh Undergraduate Review. His fiction also won two departmental prizes here while he took his degree summa cum laude. To pay down student loans after graduation he taught for two years at a boarding school for problem children under the



AmeriCorps program while meditating where his future lay in education. His applications to grad programs combined remarkable strengths with some notable weaknesses. His GRE scores his last semester at Pitt were only 75% verbal and 45% subject, so by cramming diligently on his own for two years he jacked them to a powerhouse verbal score of 740/99% and a solid subject score in the 80th percentile, which undoubtedly did much to offset his lack of literary background. The fact that he had taken no language in college was partially offset by the strength of his prize-winning Shakespearean writing sample while his practical teaching and administrative experience allowed him to claim more educational sense of purpose than did his still rather unfocused aims within English studies. Applying to Cornell, Indiana, Penn, Minnesota, Rochester, SUNY-Buffalo, UMass and Penn State, he was rejected by the first four but offered TAs by Penn State (14K) and UMass (12K) while Rochester and Buffalo waitlisted him for funding. When Penn State upped its offer with a nice honorary supplement of 3K, he decided to wait no longer but happily take a spot in the strongest program to accept him, with a potential focus on medieval/Renaissance studies. Despite generally positive intellectual experiences there, he decided to leave after the M.A. because as a TA he was frustrated by his inability to forge the sort of holistic relationships with his students that he'd enjoyed in a private school setting. He was also concerned about the kind of specialization doctoral work requires and haunted by dreams of intimate education in a quasi-pastoral setting. But a year off teaching at another boarding school convinced him that on balance a college teaching career had more to offer, so he returned to Penn State to pursue a doctorate with a focus on the interface between environmentalism and nineteenth-century American literature. In the Penn State Adventure Literature Program, a series of courses combining classroom instruction with outdoor field components like canoeing, kayaking, and backpacking, he taught courses about the Chesapeake Bay and Cape Cod, with additional forays into the South Carolina low-country and West Virginia mountains. The year before completing his dissertation on early American agrarian literature (Crevecoeur, Jefferson, and the historical background of US farming) he had three eco-critical articles in print, one of which won a prize. Applying to five jobs, he landed four MLA interviews yielding two campus visits. Neither panned out in a job offer, but in 2014 with degree in hand, a teaching award, and other articles circulating, his six MLA interviews yielded an ideal assistant professorship at a good upstate New York college that valued his literary breadth, experiential pedagogy, and ability to contribute both to their English and Environmental Studies departments. Now in 2021 with nine lengthy articles published very strong journals including another award-winner, he's met the school's reasonable criteria and is happily tenured teaching various American lit courses, environmental lit, and creative writing. His is a textbook case of how shrewd planning enabled him to demonstrate both the multi-functionality and scholarly focus that smaller schools want, and he counsels job applicants to research very carefully the schools where they're applying and tailor their application letters to specific circumstances there.

E '06. His female coeval was one of our very best lit majors, awarded a top share of the Burkhart Alumni Scholarship in '03 and double-majoring in Religious studies as well. Fine essays of hers on various topics were honored in the Snead, Miller, and Ossip contests as well as a couple of regional competitions, and she capped her five-year career here as a Chancellor's Scholar with an excellent B. Phil. thesis on Daniel Deronda as well as an essay on Oscar Wilde that won the Kay

prize and served as a strong writing sample. With two years of advanced language study at Pitt culminating in a semester's study in France, her French is better than garden variety though she did not carry it all the way through college. With strong GRE scores of 710/98% verbal and 720/98% subject test, she was a legitimate candidate for the Ivies to which she aspired. After Princeton and Cornell rejected her senior year in 2003 when she was ambivalent about graduate work and did not apply elsewhere, she decided to work as a paralegal for a couple of years to see whether law school would suit her better. Jobs at three law firms convinced her the answer was no, so in 2005-6 she applied to graduate programs more zealously and broadly. Princeton and Yale rejected her, but other strong programs including ours happily admitted her. NYU awarded her a four-year McCracken fellowship starting with a first-year honorary at 20K, Michigan offered her a five-year TA at 14.5K with the first year honorary and various supplements bringing the annual stipend to between 16-18K, while Virginia merely ponied up a five-year TA starting at 14K with research assistantship work rather than teaching the first year. In the end, however, it was the overwhelming faculty strength of Virginia's twelfth-ranked program that prompted her to spurn superior gold from NYU, Michigan, and Pitt. Given her special focus on 18th- and 19th-century British fiction, she's confident her decision was the right one, and after scanning Virginia's very distinguished department roster, which boasts eight or so chaired professors, one may see why. However, after finishing course work at Virginia, she decided not to write a dissertation but to pursue a non-academic career for reasons explained in her entry in the last section.

F '06. One former major was constrained by local ties to limit her applications to Pittsburgh schools. Although we rejected her, she was accepted by Duquesne's M.A. program.

G '06. Another Pitt graduate with a less impressive record who had taken an M.A. at U Alabama and then held various adjunct teaching positions around Pittsburgh applied to the Ph.D. program at Duquesne but was rejected.

H '06. As summarized in Section 6, a University of Colorado graduate with a GPA of 3.58, a minor in French, and a very well-received 18-page paper on Crevecoeur that had garnered summer grants in support and conference presentation, had disappointing GREs, with a verbal score of 550 below the 75th percentile, a quantitative score of 450 (11th%), and an analytic writing score of 5/6. However he hit the jackpot applying to graduate programs, being admitted everywhere he applied. He chose Penn State's offer of 20K per year for six years over almost equally impressive honorary fellowships from Ohio State and U Washington, TAs from Cal/SantaCruz and Colorado, and acceptances from Brandeis, SUNY Buffalo, and William and Mary's MA program in American Studies. While this record of success reflected substantial extra-curricular strengths on his part, more than anything else it's due to his Hispanic-American ancestry. Ironically, his thoroughly anglicized family has been here for generations, and though his French minor gave him better than average language preparation, he knows no Spanish. Affirmative Action regulations put considerable pressure on universities to demonstrate ethnically diverse student bodies, so students belonging technically to groups deemed underprivileged may enjoy a considerable edge in the admissions process.

I '06. By contrast a WASP male Vassar graduate who had been working in publishing for a couple of years applied to nine programs. His GPA was 3.4 with a 3.7 in his English major, for which he had written a senior thesis on Henry Adams. While he believed that it made a strong writing sample, he was less confident about his GRE scores; since his SAT verbal score had been 700, his GRE verbal may or may not have been in the top decile. He was rejected by every doctoral program he applied to-- Brown, Michigan, Duke, and Minnesota--but had better luck with M.A. programs. Chicago's and Maryland's M.A. programs accepted him sans funding while Delaware, Miami of Ohio, and Nebraska all awarded him TA's.

J '06. A Pitt student with a self-designed major in the Humanities including a certificate in children's literature was admitted to the M.A. program in English at West Virginia University.

### **19. Case Histories of Graduate Applicants 2006-2007**

A '07. With double majors in English literature and the History and Philosophy of Science, this outstanding student applied to graduate programs in English where he could explore the relations between science and literature. With a GPA of 3.96 and GRE scores of 730/99% verbal, 800/96% quantitative, 5 of 6 analytic writing, and 670/89% subject, he was eminently well qualified. His slightly lower analytic writing score was offset by consecutive first prizes in the departmental contest for essays in American literature, a departmental prize for our best literature major, a university second prize for the best research paper by any Pitt student, a junior summer research fellowship, and a prize from Phi Beta Kappa honoring him as the Pitt junior with the most distinguished record. He also presented papers at two conferences, one of which took second prize for the best student paper at the Conference of the Popular Culture Association. To four years of strong high school Latin he added an advance college course in Roman literature his senior year as well a semester of intensive French. Though he did not reach the interview stage, his proven leadership record made him a legitimate candidate for a Rhodes or a Marshall. Harvard, Yale, and Princeton all rejected him, which suggests the level of competition at the top Ivies, as did Stanford, Duke, and Wisconsin; but elsewhere he had better luck. Turning down offers ranging from waitlisting at Michigan, terminal M.A. admission at Chicago, tuition remission with a small readership of 6-7K at Berkeley, honorary fellowships of 15K at Indiana and Minnesota, and Penn State's top university six-year fellowship with two years honorary at 18K, he decided to accept Columbia's fine offer of a six-year fellowship with two honorary starting at \$20,600. There he completed his course work impressively, published three very solid articles, and won a fellowship to complete a wide-ranging dissertation on apocalyptic themes of species extinction in American literature. Beginning a tenure-track position in 2013 as Assistant Professor at the University of Nevada at Las Vegas, where his wife is also tenure-track, in 2021 he was a tenured Assoc. Prof. there and clearly embarked on an important academic career, with his revised dissertation published to acclaim by Cambridge University Press, a slew of important articles, an edited volume of essays from Cambridge UP on apocalyptic themes, etc.

B '07. Almost as impressive was the record of another Pitt senior with a 3.9 GPA, who shared second prize as our best English literature major with one other student. Her GRE scores were

680 verbal, 400 quantitative, 6 of 6 analytic writing, and 600 subject test. To four years of high school Spanish she had added a semester of Irish Gaelic and four strong semesters of college Russian culminating in service as an undergrad TA in a Russian literature course. As her graduate ambitions began to jell junior year, she realized that she had not written any particularly strong term papers, so she invested considerable work in expanding a shorter paper she had written for one course to enter in prize competition--with gratifying results. Her essay "Dark and Holy Thoughts: Despair in Spenser and Donne" won the department prize for best essay in British literature 1500-1900 and, in a version ultimately expanded to over thirty pages, the first prize for best undergrad research paper in the university, so she had a very strong writing sample. Presenting shorter versions at two conferences gave her an opportunity to demonstrate her teaching promise, which was confirmed when Pitt's UCIS Undergrad Research Symposium awarded her first prize partly for effective oral presentation. Founding editor of the Newman Club's student magazine surveying Catholicism and culture at large, she applied to grad programs with the goal of working on the interface between literature and religion, with particular focus in the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Notre Dame, Vanderbilt, Yale, UCLA, Minnesota, Illinois, and North Carolina all rejected her, while Boston College offered her only tuition remission for its M.A. program--perhaps partly because her two main languages are not centrally geared to medieval-Renaissance studies? However Wisconsin offered her a five-year fellowship starting with a research assistantship of 9K coupled with a small summer honorary of 3K, then a very modest TA thereafter. Indiana trumped that with a nice six-year fellowship with the first year honorary at 15K. She was sorely tempted by the U. Chicago Divinity School's offer of tuition remission for its joint M.A. program in Religious Studies and Literature, with possibilities for part-time work then and a TA thereafter, but finally decided she could not afford to pass up Indiana's more secure and lucrative package making her completely self-supporting. Now married and degreed after a doctoral dissertation on exegetical traditions and Elizabethan lyric, she has the highest praise for Indiana's program, where in addition to excellent training as a Renaissance scholar (including acquiring some Latin and Italian) she found congenial faculty and students sharing her interest in the religious background of literature. Winning prizes both for outstanding teaching and an outstanding seminar paper (which Indiana's faculty should perhaps have pushed her to publish earlier), in 2013-14 she applied for jobs but came away with only one MLA interview and doubts that many in her cohort of Indiana grad students have secured tenure-track positions. After completing a year-long colloquium on Renaissance translation meeting monthly at the Folger Shakespeare Library, she had an article accepted for publication but decided not to revise her dissertation for publication. Though she found some decent adjunct teaching gigs within range of her architect husband's Ohio address, longterm academic prospects near Columbus became less appealing than returning to her native region, so in 2017 they moved to Pittsburgh where she took a temporary position teaching freshmen at a private academy, then landed some adjunct courses at Pitt. These evolved into a Visiting Lecturer position with a guaranteed annual course load that she's now teaching contentedly, pushing various summer research projects while pondering the possibility of making a permanent academic career as an NTS lecturer.

C '07. Another very strong student had likewise tied for second prize as the department's best

senior English literature major the year before while completing a late-starting double major in Classics. Ambitious to gain entry to a top graduate program where she could focus on the influence of the Classics on English literature but rightly diffident about the short term papers she had contented herself with throughout her English major, she decided to take a fifth year at Pitt. She hoped to strengthen her credentials by honing her Greek and Latin while working as research assistant to a English professor editing a nineteenth-century ms. with manifold classical allusions and quotations. Her work on this project would serve as an entry in prize competitions, her graduate writing sample, and ultimately as an honors thesis for Pitt's B.Phil. degree in addition to her B.A. A paper on Oscar Wilde's classical aesthetics stemming from this honors work took second prize in the departmental contest for essays on British literature and made a solid application writing sample. With Certificates in Film Studies and Medieval/Renaissance Studies, she had impressive intellectual range, and service as arts and entertainment editor for the campus newspaper plus extensive debate experience gave promise of lively performance as a teacher. Unfortunately she allowed her other irons in the fire to distract her from cramming for the GRE's and was disappointed to score only 650/92% verbal, 600 quantitative, 5 of 6 in analytic writing, and 600 in subject test. Realizing that these results would jeopardize her aspirations to top programs, she wisely applied widely. Duke, UCLA, Columbia, Northwestern, Vanderbilt, and Penn State all rejected her. UMass and U Toronto waitlisted her for funding for their Ph.D. programs while Chicago, Kings College London, and Oxford all offered her unfunded admission to Master's programs. The only school to offer her the fellowship to which she'd aspired was Rochester. But she was able to defer Rochester's nice package of a first-year honorary of 15K followed by a TA at 16K and with her family's support accept Oxford's offer of unfunded admission for their one-year Master of Studies degree, which left her the possibility of applying to other doctoral programs than Rochester's if her record at Oxford warrants--which she did with a happy outcome. See A'08 below

D '07. After compiling a so-so GPA of 3.29 during her first two years at Pitt, this talented but sometimes lazy and undisciplined student elected to spend her junior year at University College London reading mainly philosophy. Compiling the equivalent of an A- average there, she was galvanized by her experience abroad into a desire for a British Master's degree in literature. Funding for American Master's candidates there is rare, so by agreement with her family she left Pitt to complete her American B.A. in English much less expensively as a senior at Hunter College CUNY, where she was able to live with a relative--on the condition that the money she thus saved her parents they would apply to a postgraduate year in London. With improved professional focus she burned up the track in Hunter's English program, writing essays that ultimately won five prizes, including three Hunter fellowships for study abroad totaling 9K. The elegance of her writing samples helped offset a rather modest foreign language background only through intermediate German. Applying to University, Birkbeck, and Kings Colleges at the University of London, she was accepted unfunded by all three. Kings' master's program appealed to her most, but they made admission contingent on a 3.7 GPA her senior year at Hunter. Since they required a decision in the spring before she knew her grades that semester, she chose a master's program at University College London where faculty knew her abilities better and stipulated only a 3.4 GPA. As matters turned out, her Hunter GPA senior year

comfortably exceeded 3.7, but given her record of underperforming in courses that bored her she feels content with her decision that discretion was the better part of valor.

She finished her M.A. at University College London quite disillusioned with the program, which she found staffed by largely lackadaisical British faculty--she claims her only good teacher there was American--and a waste of money. She enjoyed all her readings but felt the program added little value to them. While she toys with the possibility going on for a doctorate with a dissertation on some aspect of global English, she's found a satisfying job teaching communication skills at a London technical college catering largely to Commonwealth immigrants hoping to improve their English and perhaps crack the UK job market. Unlike the USA, in Britain an M.A. plus publication can serve as the launching base for a respectable academic career, so she's enjoying her teaching duties while focusing her creative energies for the nonce on watercolors, poetizing, and performing her own songs on the guitar in bar gigs.

E '07. Completing majors in both English literature and writing, this strong student graduated magna. Essays of hers won four prizes at Pitt, so her graduate writing sample on Ralph Ellison was a good one. With a minor in French her language background was more than adequate, and she had studied abroad. Her GRE scores were decent enough: verbal 620/88%, quantitative 560/58%, and analytic writing 5.5 of 6. Perhaps her most serious shortcoming was that her impressive record in English was based largely on her writing--remaining taciturn in her classes, she had done little to show potential as a classroom teacher. Despite considerable strengths she was rejected by the University of Iowa's MFA program, by Minnesota's doctoral program, and by M.A. programs at Oregon, Ohio State, and U. Illinois at Chicago. McGill accepted her unfunded to their M.A. program as did Pitt's School of Library and Information Science, while Miami of Ohio waitlisted her. Fortunately, just as she was preparing for a future as a librarian, Miami called on the evening of April 15th to offer her a TA at 12K with tuition remission plus a small summer grant of \$1800. After a campus visit she decided to accept and discover whether teaching English is indeed her metier.

F '07. A Northwestern undergrad with a 3.9 average in her English major and a 3.72 GPA overall wrote a senior thesis that earned honors and an award, constituting a strong writing sample. She also had a minor in French and a year's study abroad at Oxford. Her GRE verbal was an impressive 720, quantitative 560, and analytic writing 5 of 6. Despite these very strong qualifications, she decided to apply only to terminal M.A. programs in the hope of gaining entry to a top school. Admitted unfunded everywhere she applied by Yale, Stanford, Penn, Brown, Virginia, and Pitt, she chose to pay the freight at Yale. In retrospect she feels that she may have been somewhat too diffident about her abilities in forgoing applications to combined M.A./Ph.D. programs, but was emboldened to pick Yale when they told her that occasionally terminal M.A.'s were accepted into their doctoral program. Apparently she was not, however, for with her Yale M.A. she moved to New York city where she's free-lanced as a writer and editor while pursuing a Master's in Education at Columbia, presumably hoping for a career in secondary education.

G. A writing major with a distinguished record and very strong recommendations from Pitt

faculty was admitted to the Alabama's MFA program with full funding.

H '07. Another writing major concentrating in creative non-fiction with a double major in biology compiled an impressive record at Pitt, graduating summa with a 3.88 GPA. After working for five years as a social worker, he suddenly found his experiences in that field demanding expression in poetry. Hoping to start an academic career as a teacher of poetry, he applied to four MFA programs; the poems that he'd written over the past year constituted a portfolio that was perhaps adequate but not particularly impressive. Rejected by Wisconsin, Arizona, Oregon, and Idaho, he is now considering preparing himself to teach science on the high-school level.

I '07. A Pitt student with a double major in English literature and writing was admitted to the M.A. program in publishing at the London School of the Arts.

J '07. A Pitt film major with a strong record was accepted into the University of Wisconsin's film program. In addition to a TA with full tuition remission she was awarded the first-year McCarty Scholarship on the basis of the paper on 3-D film that she submitted.

## **20. Case Histories of Graduate Applicants 2007-2008**

A '08. After deferring an honorary first-year fellowship at Rochester to pay for a one-year Master of Studies degree at Oxford, this student (C '07 above) acquitted herself very creditably there, achieving the mildly unusual distinction of being selected as a tutor in her spring semester. With strong recommendations from Oxford and Pitt faculty she reapplied at the doctoral level to Chicago and Toronto, which had admitted her to their M.A. programs sans funding, as well as to doctoral programs at NYU and BU. Rejections from Chicago, NYU, and BU did little to dampen her pleasure when her first choice Toronto admitted her to their Ph.D. program with the promise of at least a TF at 15K plus tuition and perhaps some honorary funding as well. On the strength of this offer from a stronger school she declined Rochester's honorary fellowship and plans to matriculate at Toronto after working for perhaps a year in the U.K. to refurbish her exchequer and further her love affair with English culture. So in this case (atypical in my view) paying for an M.A. from a strong school proved an investment that ultimately paid dividends. Before rushing to emulate her, however, note that three of the four doctoral programs where she reapplied were not swayed by the Oxford master's degree. Also note that she ultimately decided not to go to Toronto but to leave English studies to stay and live in Britain; see H in last section.

B '08. This Pitt senior squeaked out a summa cum laude degree double majoring in English and History and posted strong test scores: GRE verbal 680/97%, quantitative 710/75%, analytic writing 6.0/97%. With intermediate college German plus a semester and a half of Japanese and a couple of years of high school French, his language preparation was only so-so, but thanks partly to his historical orientation he had developed an international perspective, receiving a summer fellowship to study the Romanian revolution and completing a Certificate in Medieval and Renaissance Studies. His application essay was a very solid paper on world literature in

translation deploying a knowledge of classical epic and Dickens to pursue theoretical questions raised by Erich Auerbach, but it had not been honored in any prize competition. His ace in the hole was ultimately his unusually well focused and developed commitment to specializing in writing pedagogy. An undergraduate teaching assistant in four courses, for several semesters he was also a paid peer tutor in our Writing Center, and his experience there led him to serve on a panel at a conference. The University of Illinois at Chicago, Arizona, and (surprisingly!) SUNY Albany all rejected him while Wisconsin-Milwaukee and Wisconsin-Madison dithered about admission and funding. But Ohio State ponied up a TA at 13.5K, while Texas A&M offered a TA with summer teaching for 13.5K plus a 5K first-year honorary supplement. Penn State quickly pulled out all the stops and offered him their top university fellowship (save for officially sanctioned minorities—see H'06), a five-year package with one and a half years honorary starting at 18K with possible 3K supplement for summer teaching. To his chagrin he was unable to accept it when they could not make a decent offer to his fiancée applying in psycholinguistics. But he was not too crestfallen with his second-best offer at Illinois, which offered her a plum fellowship, since his first-year TA there pays 9K for one course each semester plus a 6K honorary supplement, while if he chooses to teach two courses per semester in later years he could earn 19K annually. He wished the Writing Track at Illinois were as integrated with the literary side of the dept as it is at Penn State, but cost of living in Urbana is lower, so these two fledgling professors commenced their graduate education buying a comfortable house rather than huddling in student rentals. His two best offers suggest how students with a genuinely developed commitment to composition studies may have an edge in the graduate admission sweepstakes. Looking back on his application experience, he offered these salient points of advice: 1) apply to schools with a variety of deadlines, for some may reply early enough to let you skip later applications; 2) watch out for unorganized depts that claim subject test scores are not necessary and then renege; 3) once accepted, be upfront about it if applying with someone else since helpful efforts to pull wires may ensue; 4) your anchor school is not necessarily your anchor school! But with no real worries about eventually finding an academic job except those involved in combining any search with an academic partner's, he dropped out of the program without ever completing a doctorate; see last section.

C'08. This student received a B.A. in English from the University of California at Davis in 2005 with a history minor focused on Jewish studies; her GPA in her major was 3.92, over-all 3.59. While there she demonstrated her commitment to minority literatures by spending a year abroad at the University of Cape Town, South Africa, and writing a decent honors thesis on the loss of voice in South African lit and society. It garnered honorable mentions in university prize competitions and eventually served as a graduate writing sample. After graduation she held positions with Jewish organizations in Boston where she was able to demonstrate administrative leadership, then decided she wanted a Ph.D. in English. She had studied Hebrew, intermediate German, and a little French; her GRE scores were 690/96% verbal, 680/78% quantitative, analytic writing 5.0, and subject test a lowly 470/26%. She applied widely in 2006-7 and was rejected outright everywhere largely because of what she now feels was a seriously inadequate personal statement couched in vague terms that gave no sense of how she planned to use her graduate degree to teach Jewish literature and Holocaust studies. Before reapplying on virtually



the same credentials in 2007-2008, she recast her statement to show how her knowledge of postcolonial theory would be harnessed to that specific goal—with gratifyingly different results. To be sure, Cornell, Columbia, Harvard, UCLA, and Brown all rejected her, but now she was offered TAs by UMass and Clark while NYU, BU, and the University of Washington all admitted her with the promise of full funding in subsequent years. She was sorely tempted by the over-all quality of Washington's program on the West coast where she'd like eventually to settle, but the first-year TA coupled with the presence at UMass of a more eminent expert in Jewish studies eager to mentor her tipped her toward Amherst. This case demonstrates the impressive dividends that simply refining, honing, and focusing the personal statement can yield.

## 21. Case Histories of Graduate Applicants 2008-2009

A'09. This student was not an English major, but as a Slavic major with reasonably fluent Russian (he was an undergraduate teaching assistant at the intermediate level) as well as nine years of Spanish and a couple of years of Latin, he had a far more impressive language background than most applicants. His GRE scores were 660/94% verbal, 680/67% quantitative, 5.5/90% analytic writing. Qualifying for a Pitt magna degree with an over-all GPA of 3.74, he compiled an A- average in the several English courses he took. In those courses he was a very lively contributor to discussions but had trouble making his critical abilities flower in a longer focused research paper. He spent a year after graduation revising his best undergraduate English research paper, which was on the B level. The resultant graduate writing sample was adequate but awkwardly written and probably the weakest part of his application. He was accepted by all graduate programs to which he applied. Archival library programs at Pitt and Texas gave him no funding, and neither did graduate English programs at SUNY Buffalo, Cincinnati, and Rochester. But the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee offered him a \$12K TF (1-2 load) for one year, albeit with no guarantee for the future. He declined that to accept Case Western Reserve's TA at \$13.5K rising to \$16K second year. In retrospect he feels that while his lack of the training afforded by a complete English major disadvantaged him at some programs, the background in foreign languages and literatures that he acquired in its stead made him uniquely attractive to others. Having just finished graduate course work and contemplating a dissertation embracing fantasy, science fiction, and queer theory, he can't say enough in praise of Case's underrated program, which for the last four years has placed every graduating Ph.D. in a lower-echelon but tenure-track job (not coincidentally, applications there have doubled since he applied, so it's now more selective). With his current \$16K TF carrying a 1-1 load plus additional teaching opportunities, he claims the program has not required running into debt

B'09. Not an English major, this student was a Pitt history major who also minored in French, serving briefly as a volunteer tutor for students at a local high school with an international focus and later spending a semester abroad at Pitt's program in Nantes (she also had AP intermediate Spanish). After a slightly shaky start in her first two years, her over-all GPA was 3.6, qualifying her for a magna degree; but she had a 3.9 average in her history major. She had substantial work experience as a Washington intern for a Senator, summer director of a community social services center, and volunteer caseworker at a local center for immigrants and international students.

Becoming increasingly interested in the relation between history and literature, she took several English courses. Awarded a Brackenridge summer fellowship, she wrote a fine essay on cultural parallels between the Transcendentalists and the Beat Generation that took first prize in the English department's competition for essays in American literature; she won that prize again senior year with another outstanding essay on economic issues in Dreiser. After graduation she spent a year working at a lowly job in Pitt's library while readying applications for various graduate programs. While her GRE verbal was a solid 640/91%, her quantitative was 600/49% and her analytic writing score was a very disappointing 4/32%, a result she attributed to unfamiliarity with writing computer essays. Her LSATs were good enough that several law schools accepted her with partial scholarships but not enough to make her feel able to afford them. She was admitted to Maryland's joint MLS/MA in History program with a focus on preparing for careers in archival work, but they offered no funding, which is in scant supply for MLS degrees. And both Boston University's and George Washington University's graduate American Studies programs rejected her despite what would seem impressive credentials for work in that field synthesizing history and literature. Although the weak GRE writing score didn't help, one would think that would have been offset by a prize-winning writing sample. It may be that American Studies programs are more selective, or it may be that she simply didn't apply widely enough in that field. Certainly hers should be a competitive application if she applied to comparable graduate English programs proposing to concentrate in American literature. Whatever the reasons for her outcomes, she decided to replenish her exchequer with a better job, mull over the results, and perhaps with a clearer sense of her goals and strategies reapply to programs in the future.

## 22. Case Histories of Graduate Applicants 2009-2010

A'10. This student compiled an extremely impressive record at Pitt, graduating summa with a 3.98 GPA and being named co-winner of the departmental prize for the best senior English literature major. She also won the departmental prize for best essay on American literature with a paper on Louisa May Alcott that Women's Studies rejected with suggestions for revision and resubmission; another paper on the supposed maternal instinct in canonical feminist texts was presented at the CEA's national conference. Her GRE scores were verbal 650/93rd%, quantitative 720/75th %, analytic writing 5.5/93%, and subject test 540/49%—all quite strong except for the last, which reflected her rather too narrow focus on literary feminism as an undergraduate. With only three semesters of college Spanish to her credit when applying, her foreign language background was relatively weak; and though her personal statement displayed a solid prose style, it perhaps lacked real imaginative flair. To offset these shortcomings, however, she had a political science minor manifesting her pragmatic bent, an outstanding competitive work ethic, and substantial business and administrative experience. It was therefore rather surprising when 9 of the 12 programs she applied to rejected her--Brown, Rutgers, CUNY, NYU, SUNY Stony Brook, Tufts, Boston College, and UMass. Brandeis accepted her without funding, Texas A&M offered her \$9K plus tuition in their M.A. program, and only UConn came up with the kind of doctoral fellowship she'd hoped for, a handsome five-year TA starting at \$20K, which she happily accepted. Winning the department prize for best grad student essay, she

became assistant editor of the journal MELUS on multi-ethnic literature. Presidency of the GSO was followed by two years as founding organizer of a successful graduate employee union affiliated with the United Auto Workers. She authored over a dozen conference papers but her draining administrative workload allowed her to push only one through to actual publication in 2014. Completing a promising dissertation on violence with racial or sexual overtones in post-Civil War lit in 2016 (one chapter already accepted by a top journal), she was a visiting Assistant Professor at West Point for 2016-17, where she won awards for administrative excellence. Ten MLA interviews during 2015-16 resulted in five campus visits and an Assistant Professorship with graduate teaching responsibilities at Louisiana University in Lafayette (the capital of multi-ethnic Cajun culture) starting in 2017.

B'10. With a GPA of 3.68 qualifying her for a magna, this student's over-all record at Pitt was not quite so impressive as A's above yet exceeded hers in a couple of respects. Her GRE verbal of 680/96th% and her subject test score of 580/65th% were somewhat better while her analytic writing score of 5.5 was just as good. Moreover with four years of Spanish and a year of elementary German her language background was a bit stronger. With a focus on children's literature, she feels that the major weakness of her application was her writing sample. She applied while living elsewhere a year after graduating. While her former Pitt professors were supportive, she was reluctant to ask them to help edit her writing sample, which consisted of two papers she revised substantially from their college versions; they had not won major departmental prizes. Unable to decide between them, she wound up submitting both totaling some 25 pages. In retrospect this may not have been so good a tactic as picking one paper and polishing it with some postgraduate help to the highest level possible. Rejected by Pitt, Vanderbilt, Southern California, North Carolina, and eventually UConn, she was waitlisted at Ohio State, Temple, and Florida. But Illinois State University, which has a program in children's literature, offered her a TA of \$6900 plus tuition, which she declined in order to accept Texas A&M's better offer of \$9K plus tuition. Then upon completing her M.A. there, she was admitted into Pitt's Ph.D. program with a focus on children's literature.

### **23. Case Histories of Graduate Applicants 2010-2011**

A'11. Majoring not in English Literature but in English Writing, this impressive applicant had completed only four literature courses before fall semester of senior year; however, she carried a full double major in German, where she demonstrated outstanding abilities as their best student. Her late-blooming decision to make an academic career in English studies led her the summer before senior year to revise for prize competition two essays on Whitman and on translating a poem by Brecht. Both won first prizes in English department contests; moreover she qualified for Phi Beta Kappa and a summa degree, while her GRE scores 780=99% verbal, 720=77% quantitative, and 5/6=84% analytic writing fully supported her intellectual promise. Her major weakness was taciturnity in English literature classes; though urged to participate in discussions, she preferred not to volunteer, simply following lectures from the sidelines—a trait that invited questions about her promise as a teacher of literature. Nonetheless her strengths were so impressive that with a prospective specialization in Renaissance poetry she was emboldened to

try for several top programs, using as a writing sample her prize-winning essay about the theory of verse translation exemplified by comparing English versions of the Brecht poem. Alas, Princeton, Brown, CUNY, Chicago, NYU, Boston College, Rochester, and GWU all rejected her. Only Virginia admitted her, and that without funding to their terminal M.A. program only. Interestingly Virginia was the only school that allowed her to submit two essays as writing samples, so they had also seen her very strong paper on Whitman, which probably would have made a better writing sample for the other programs. With the wisdom of hindsight her applications foundered on that mistake plus the taciturnity that rendered her teaching potential suspect--and too few anchor schools. Fortunately she was offered a TA by Pitt's German department, so taking an M.A. there gave her a chance to demonstrate what she could actually do as a teacher while mulling over whether to reapply for doctoral work in English programs later on. After successfully completing her M.A. in German, she could clearly have gone on to doctoral programs in either English or German if she wished. But she decided to take time off from academia while pondering that decision as well as non-academic career options while interning at the Public Theater in New York City.

B'11. Described above as B'06, this student burned up the track in Miami's M.A. program, emerging with their prize for the best M.A. student and publishing an article in an online journal. But while burning up the track he also came close to burning himself out. He found the single-minded focus necessary to thrive in his studies psychologically debilitating. Although he found Miami's well-to-do but academically unambitious undergrads disappointing, he taught well; and he definitely achieved his goal of compiling a record that enabled him to transfer to a better doctoral program. But completing his one-hundred page M.A. thesis required a degree of self-isolation in the library that was emotionally taxing. After a semester off from academia, to replenish his exchequer he accepted a temporary semester appointment as visiting instructor teaching four composition courses at a solid small Pennsylvania college, then two year appointments teaching comp and intro lit at a state university in Indiana, where his spirits were reinvigorated by contact with students. They were also lifted when a chapter of his M.A. thesis was accepted for publication by a solid journal as well as a review by a top periodical; he also published other reviews and presented a number of papers at conferences. Most importantly, an article he wrote was accepted by another top journal in Victorian studies emanating from Cambridge Univ. Press. With a strong teaching record and other enhanced credentials like a GRE verbal score that improved from the 63<sup>rd</sup> percentile in his MA applications to the 93<sup>rd</sup> percentile in Ph.D. applications, he applied to doctoral programs with a projected focus on imperial ideology in 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century British and American literature. Rejected by Northwestern, Colorado, and Indiana, he was waitlisted by U California-Riverside, but eventually offered TF's by Missouri (14.5K), Illinois-Chicago (15K), and Ohio State (15K). The choice ultimately came down between a Notre Dame TF with first year honorary (17.5K, 1/1 load thereafter) and a straight TF at Illinois-Urbana (19-20K, 2/2 load). Since along with its honorary and lighter teaching load Notre Dame demanded more course work and a second language, he concluded that his time to degree would be no greater at Illinois, which boasted more possible faculty mentors and claimed that 85% of recent Ph.D's have gotten tenure-track positions. Comfortably ensconced, debt-free now, and married, he's completed course work and had a third

article published in a quality journal. His initial sampling of the job market in 2016-17 produced no interviews, but with projected completion of his dissertation in 2018 he hopes to do better. Estimating that 65-75% of recent Illinois lit Ph.D's are teaching at college level with at least half getting tenure-track positions, he looks forward with guarded optimism to testing the job market again in 2017-18. His is a textbook case of how good undergraduates with disappointing initial GRE scores can nonetheless work their way up the academic ladder toward the top

C'11. This very strong Phi Beta Kappa from the University of Washington ('10) had a 3.8 GPA plus a 3.93 in his English major, with departmental honors for a senior thesis, condensed versions of which served as his writing sample as he'd planned. His GRE scores were 680/96% verbal, 790/91% quantitative, 5.5/94% analytic writing, and 630/79% subject—very strong but not quite overwhelming. To his four years of high-school Japanese he'd added a little self-study in Spanish, but with a focus in post-colonialism/mixed-race studies now deeply regrets not pushing Spanish and adding French in college. Along with powerful recommendations his writing was his hole card; one essay of his had been recommended for publication by a professor. Columbia and Chicago rejected him. Berkeley admitted him but with minimal funding (6-8K). UCLA, NYU admitted him with full funding (23K and 21K respectively), and Vanderbilt with extremely lucrative funding (34K). After initially waitlisting him, Penn eventually offered him full funding for 5 years starting at 23K. He visited all these schools and concluded that Penn was indeed the best fit, given budget crises in the UC system, metro distractions at NYU, and fewer potential mentors plus spottier placement statistics at Vanderbilt. Visiting Penn at his own expense while still on their waitlist apparently helped get him off it; his obvious interest sparked reciprocal interest in potential mentors who said they'd put in a good word for him.

D'11. Majoring in history with minors in English and religious studies, this student compiled a very powerful record at Pitt, graduating Phi Beta Kappa and taking two second prizes in the Snead contest with essays on Melville and John Updike. After spending a year working for Honors College, she moved to eastern Tennessee with her husband where she entered U Tennessee's grad program in English in 2013, completing her M.A. thesis in Rhetoric, Writing, and Linguistics in 2015. After working as a part-time lecturer in first-year writing courses there and elsewhere, 2021 found her on the faculty of a community college in Texas. With an article on the history of literacy education in Mississippi published in College English in 2020, she appears to have a career as a college writing instructor well underway.

#### **24. Case Histories of Graduate Applicants in 2011-2012**

A'12. This student had a strong record at Pitt, writing papers that placed in a couple of departmental prize essay competitions. But in applying to ca. half-a-dozen graduate programs he overestimated its strength by limiting himself largely to top-twenty programs, which all rejected him. He found a congenial job working for the firm JSTOR that specializes in packaging academic journals electronically and is currently mulling over whether to reapply more widely in the future.

## 25. Case Histories of Graduate Applicants in 2012-2013

A'13. This Pitt cum laude double major in English writing and literature slowly abandoned the dream of becoming a writer to focus on literature late in her college career after a 13-page footnoted essay of hers on the German Holocaust poetry of Paul Celan took third prize in the departmental Miller contest for essays on modern British literature, literature in translation, or critical theory. Though she'd won another minor award for an essay on Whitman, the Celan essay showed awareness of continental critical theory and made the stronger grad writing sample. With four years of high school German plus three semesters of college French, her language background was adequate but not impressive; likewise her over-all GPA of 3.4 (3.48 in English courses). A couple of writing internships doing blogging and secretarial work for local non-profits gave her some business experience to talk up, while a couple of summers as a camp counselor and three semesters tutoring Somalian refugees helped bolster her commitment to a teaching career. But her ace in the hole was undoubtedly very strong GRE scores: verbal 168/98 %, quantitative 153/56%, analytic writing 5.5 of 6. After wisely scaling down her initially unrealistic ambitions for top-forty programs, she applied to Irvine, Oregon, Stony Brook, Syracuse, Illinois/Chicago, LSU, and UNC Greensboro. Only Louisiana accepted her and that off the waitlist (whew!), offering a TA of \$16.5 with a low one-course load throughout. The department has some strength in the modern literature that attracts her most, so she set off to Baton Rouge to try her luck. Her first year she won a prize for the best paper by an MA student in her cohort of eleven, then later another for the best paper by any grad student, then in 2020 two prizes for the best departmental dissertation. Enjoying the South more than she expected, she finished her degree during two years at the New Orleans branch campus. She presented at several conferences on the department's tab including one in Europe, but published just a few book reviews or small press lit journal pieces. But she became fiction editor of one such journal and used her time at LSU to intern at their press, eventually turning down a permanent job there. Though her record may be the strongest in her cohort, LSU's national reputation is underwhelming and their placements have been mainly in composition. Where she worked became more important than staying in academia, so she decided not to chase adjunct positions with 4-4 comp loads but use her burgeoning editorial skills to compete for university or trade publishing jobs if she could not land an attractive TS teaching appointment. Currently a freelance writer and editor in Ann Arbor after following a partner to Michigan, she's polishing her dissertation while applying for jobs. As a finalist for several including an ACLS fellowship to Yale's Humanities Center and a Mellon fellowship to Northwestern UP, she's confident she'll land one but suspects it will take her out of academia. Her advice to Pitt students contemplating lower-level grad programs is to use them to develop alternative career paths, perhaps getting a year or two of business experience before grad school since a Ph.D. may disqualify one for entry-level positions where one can gain it.

B'13. This 2011 graduate of Allegheny College with a 3.7 GPA and double majors in English and Psychology tried her luck two years ago in the University of Vermont's M.A. program, the best option available to her without stronger GREs (73% verbal, 73% analytic writing, 21% subject). She taught well there, presented a couple of conference papers, got A's in all her seminars, and wrote an M.A. thesis on language in The Island of Dr. Moreau and Dracula. But

none of the four doctoral programs to which she applied accepted her incl Pitt, Colorado, Mich State, and WVU. She plans to look for a teaching job and apply again more widely and less ambitiously next year after trying to raise her GREs, improve her sketchy language background, and publish or present some of her thesis or seminar papers.

## **26. Case Histories of Graduate Applicants in 2013-2014**

A'14. With a majors in both English Literature (GPA 3.89) and Philosophy as well as minors in History and German, this student had an outstanding liberal arts background for graduate work in English. His overall GPA of 3.65 put him on track for at least a magna. GRE scores were solid: verbal 98%, quantitative 53/4%, analytic writing 5.5/97%. Though primarily interested in modern literature, he demonstrated an impressive range of interests by earning a Certificate in Medieval and Renaissance studies and working as a UTA for a medieval course. As a senior he enrolled in three graduate seminars. Other relevant experience included serving as a political intern for a U.S. Senate campaign and senior editor of UHC's literary magazine Collision. Perhaps the weakest part of his record was his writing sample. Though he'd written several strong undergraduate papers that won minor awards, only one was honored with a major departmental essay prize, placing second in the Miller Contest. His writing sample on Ezra Pound reflected his projected interests better but was not judged prize-worthy by our Awards Committee. His was a record that would probably have won him a TA at mid-level programs had he applied widely, but he could afford only four applications. Believing that his career goals in English studies could only be realized from a top program, he applied to Chicago, Pennsylvania, Vanderbilt, and Penn State. Chicago offered him an unfunded M.A. while the rest rejected him, alas. He plans to reapply somewhat more widely this coming year when he hopes that a completed senior thesis on Pynchon, a stronger GPA, and a B.Phil project that he was granted postgraduate funding to finish in the fall of 2014 will lead to a more positive outcome.

## **27. Case Histories of Graduate Applicants in 2014-2015**

Reapplying as a fifth-year senior on enhanced credentials, the above student had much better luck. Though still below summa level, his GPA had risen to 3.72. To GRE scores of verbal 97%, quantitative 52%, and analytic writing 97% he had added a strong subject test score of 89%. By the end of his fifth year he'd been allowed to enroll in half-a-dozen graduate seminars and performed well in them. Supported by a Brackenridge summer fellowship, his B.Phil thesis on Charles Olson provided him with a better writing sample; he also won another second prize in the Miller contest for an essay on Conrad and wrote a departmental honors thesis on Pynchon.. Though rejected by Duke, CUNY, UC Santa Cruz, and Vanderbilt, he received TA's from Texas (14K); Illinois (17K 1st yr, 1/1 load, 19K after w 2/2 load) and Wisconsin (20 K 1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> yr 1/1 load, variable load after + summer funding). SUNY Buffalo offered an honorary Presidential 1<sup>st</sup> yr fellowship of 21K with later 1/1 TF's; Penn State an 18K fellowship teaching 5 courses every two yrs + summer funding. He was strongly tempted by the strength in poetics at UC Irvine, which offered to match any fellowship offer within reason. But Rutgers took him off their waitlist for a 28K 1<sup>st</sup> yr fellowship followed by 26K TA in yrs 2-4 reverting to 23K fellowship in yr 5 and a guaranteed TA or fellowship for 6<sup>th</sup> yr. Even though Irvine jacked its offer sharply to a

29K 1<sup>st</sup> yr fellowship, 24K TA yrs 2-4, a 5<sup>th</sup> yr 21K TA, Rutgers' additional 6<sup>th</sup> yr of funding and a claimed 66% placement rate mostly in research institutions proved irresistible. His experience leads him to doubt the efficacy of contacting professors where one's applying, to emphasize how undergrad specialization opens doors at some programs while closing them at others, and to stress the difficulty of matching writing samples with the theories most in vogue in any program.

### **28. Case Histories of Graduate Applicants in 2015-2016**

Graduating in 2013 and working for a couple of years in a social service organization, this student then decided to pursue her dream career of teaching college English. After a false start in the sciences her GPA was 3.24, leaving her just short of an honors degree. In her English major her GPA was ca. 3.52. Taking GRE exams twice, she scored slightly better the first time: verbal 164=95th %, writing 4/6, subject test 54%. Though she'd presented a couple of papers at the department literature conference, she'd won no major prize, so she invested considerable effort in revising and improving her best undergrad paper. Sharing first prize in the 2015 Kay contest, her essay on Dickens made a solid writing sample buttressing her prospective specialization in Victorian literature. Wisely limiting her hopes for top-60 schools to just Oregon, she was rejected there but offered a TA by Marquette, waitlisted for one at Washington State, and offered a half-tuition scholarship at New Hampshire. But UNH so appealed to her for various reasons (among them extended family members living nearby) that she declined chances of better support at the other two schools. To pay her share of first-year out-of-state tuition she took out a loan for \$13K while part-time library and administrative jobs helped cover her living expenses. With a 3.95 GPA in grad courses she finished her M.A. halfway through her second year, then got full-time work for six months while her 2017-18 applications to Ph.D. programs were pending. As a vice-president of UNH's GSO she enjoyed congenial relations with her fellow students. From a conference paper accepted for presentation at the MMLA she distilled a strong essay on male privileging of sexual language in Lady Chatterley's Lover. Though rejected by seven of the ten doctoral programs where she applied (Wisconsin-Madison, Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Rutgers, Washington State, Colorado, Delaware, Boston Univ), she was waitlisted for a TA at Nebraska and awarded a full-tuition scholarship + 17K TA by SUNY Binghamton, but happily decided instead to accept the University of Iowa's full-tuition scholarship + 19K TA. After her first year in Iowa City she has no regrets about her choice, reports enjoying her teaching assignments, and has a couple of projects inching hopefully toward publication. Her case illustrates the possibility of rising in the academic hierarchy by using a lower-level M.A. program to bolster one's credentials for applying to higher-ranked doctoral programs.

### **29. Case Histories of Graduate Applicants in 2017-2018**

A '18 As a Pitt professor's son with faculty tuition benefits this undergraduate was able to pursue a wide variety of interests over six years including majors in psychology and sociology as well as a history minor and a certificate in German studies. But he never took an English literature course until junior year. Finding the experience transformative, he took a second course and used an independent study to develop a paper on D. H. Lawrence that took first prize in the department's Miller competition and was selected for presentation at the UCIS Undergraduate Research Symposium. He graduated magna cum laude; Phi Beta Kappa election



attested to the unusual breadth of his liberal education. Deciding belatedly that he wanted to pursue graduate work in English, he turned down a handsome job offer to stay in Pittsburgh and work odd jobs including tutoring ESL students. His GRE subject test score was understandably low in the 32<sup>nd</sup> percentile and his quantitative only so-so at 51%, but he had powerful verbal and analytic writing scores of 98% and 99% respectively. Notable strengths in foreign language included not just his background in German linguistic/literary/critical studies but near-fluent Spanish acquired during a semester studying in Buenos Aires followed by months traveling through South America while working menial jobs. He was rejected by Penn State, Vanderbilt, Purdue, Connecticut, Missouri and (after waitlisting) Case Western, while CMU offered him merely 45% tuition remission. Cincinnati offered him a measly TA of \$12K for 1 course/semester, upping that to 13K under negotiation, while Duquesne and Temple waitlisted him for funding. But Temple's waitlist does not finalize till May 1, so after LSU quickly took him off their waitlist to tender a TA at \$17,850 for one course/semester, he cheerfully decided to accept that rather than wait out the other options. After his first year he reported that extremely high student fees of ca \$3700 brought his TA down to ca. 14K, which troubles other TAs more than him since he has a partner with a good salary. Rather than teach his first year he chose a research assistantship that left him more time to fill gaps in his literary background by strenuous reading. At times he wondered whether he'd stay for the doctorate. But faculty were helpful, encouraging and stimulating, so he was generally content with his choice. Much will depend on how he likes his first experiences teaching freshman composition during his second year.

B '18 An English major at the University of Exeter, U.K., this student spent her junior year at Pitt. Among her courses in American literature here she took one in the Roaring 20s, for which she wrote a strong paper on sea imagery in Eugene O'Neill's works that took first prize in the department's Snead essay contest. Returning to Exeter for her final year, she applied to Oxford's graduate English program. Since her senior thesis on Pynchon was still in process, she polished her O'Neill paper to use as her main writing sample for Oxford. On the basis of that and her strong work at Exeter and Pitt she was admitted to Oxford's M.A. program in English and American literature.

C '18 Applying unsuccessfully for a Fulbright to the University of Birmingham convinced this Allegheny College graduate that she wanted to pursue a Ph.D. in English when it was too late to take GRE's or apply to American programs. So she applied to three British M.A. programs: Birmingham, Kings College London, and Durham. Her college record was outstanding: 3.99 GPA, Phi Beta Kappa, other honors including prizes junior and senior years as the best English major, a strong French minor with study abroad that included teaching English to French middle school students, plus substantial experience tutoring Allegheny students in both French and English. Her writing sample was a prize-winning research essay on the interrelations of Shakespeare's Measure for Measure, King James' Basilikon Doron, and Machiavelli. Accepted sans funding by all three British M.A. programs, she wisely chose Durham's because it promised greater flexibility in pursuing further work outside the Renaissance. With the broader base in English literature that she'll acquire with her M.A. she plans to take GRE's and apply to American doctoral programs.

### **30. Case Histories of Graduate Applicants in 2018-19**

A '19 With double majors in English and Mathematics as well as minors in French and Latin, this very strong Pitt student applied both to graduate programs in English and Physics on a pending magna degree and a 3.9 GPA in English courses. His dual focus kept him from applying quite as widely in either discipline as would have been advisable. His GRE verbal was only in the 88<sup>th</sup> percentile and his GRE writing score 5/6, but he'd hoped that impressive teaching experience plus splendid preparation in foreign languages, where his minors in French and Latin supplemented by beginning German ideally supported his interest in Renaissance studies, would tempt some strong English programs to overlook that. But Harvard, Columbia, University of Pennsylvania, Penn State, and Boston College all rejected him despite strong recommendations, and his physics applications were equally unsuccessful. His application essay (which he never tested by submission for department essay prizes) was solid but demonstrated theoretical finesse without particular relevance to his proposed Renaissance specialization, and his personal statement might have been improved. In retrospect applying only to three Ivies, Penn State (ranked #26 by U.S.News), and Boston College seems hybridic. This is a talented student who even in today's depressing academic marketplace probably could make a career as an English professor though whether at a level that would tempt him to do so is less clear. He moved to New York City to try his fortunes elsewhere, and a few months away from academia convinced him its attractions were overrated in comparison with his prospects working as a data analyst for a major New York bank.

B '19 During her junior year abroad at Pitt this exchange student from the UK wrote a strong paper on carnivalesque elements in Shakespeare that won a departmental essay prize and received other awards. After graduating with first class honors from the University of Exeter she applied successfully to the Masters program on Issues in Modern Culture offered by University College London, her preferred choice.

### **31. Case Histories of Students Who Left Academia for Various Reasons**

Some of those described below left graduate study for reasons that may prove temporary and with generally positive feelings about their programs and the profession at large. Others, however, felt sorely disillusioned. Coupled with feedback from other majors who've been considering grad school, the following reports suggest that Pitt's English department may have oversold some of its best undergraduates on the prospects for directly bringing about soul-satisfying social change via Ph.D.'s in cultural studies. For all our preoccupation evinced in the foregoing pages with getting students into the hottest graduate English programs where the theoretical teakettle burbles most noisily, perhaps it's our majors who enter MAT or other education programs to whom we should look more for self-validation. That I can name only a few of the majors who've gone on to careers in secondary or elementary education troubles me, for I'm sure there are many more who tend to fall through the cracks in the department's system for reward and recognition. Yet perhaps it's these relatively unsung and under-remembered disciples of ours who will shoulder the real educational task of bringing about the social justice that our literary theories claim to foster. Such at any rate seems the conclusion of several of our best and brightest who entered grad programs with high hopes and bright prospects but now no

longer wish to be exactly like Pitt English faculty. If your exposure to current academic literary theory makes the gripping in some of the following case histories resonate with you already, you may be able to save yourself the considerable time, money, and energy that can be wasted by a false career start.

A. As described Section 7, this magna Pitt grad did poorly on her GREs and had to settle for a TA at Alabama; but after burning up the track there while publishing an article she turned down a lucrative two-year honorary fellowship at Maryland to accept a one-year honorary doctoral fellowship + TF at Northwestern, which she thought a stronger program for her interests in Renaissance studies. In their doctoral program she also distinguished herself, winning a university-wide prize for the best essay by any graduate student, publishing again, and compiling a strong teaching record. But though she prospered there, eventually completing an ingenious dissertation exploring the relations between Renaissance drama and Renaissance barbering, this protracted seven-year process left her thoroughly disillusioned not only with her own work but with the entire field of cultural studies. While working on her dissertation she had been doing volunteer fund-raising and organizing for a non-profit program seeking to provide enrichment for students in Chicago's public schools, and when the program reached the point of needing a paid executive director, she leapt at the chance to join a world "bigger and more well-connected than the lit studies world felt." That increasingly struck her as a hypocritical enterprise making grand claims to a public mission while burying its head in the sand about our society's real educational problems. She grew tired of "hiding in a cubicle and realizing that the deeper I go into a project, the fewer people I have with whom I can talk about it." She never bothered to look for an academic job after taking her Ph.D., for the disappointing results of her Northwestern peers convinced her (rightly or wrongly) that even if successful an academic job search was all too likely simply to land her in some less desirable location than Chicago like Idaho. She left the non-profit after a year or so for a much more highly paid job in curricular development with a large educational corporation, directing their national tutoring program's very congenial workforce, "lots of disaffected PhDs." But their clients were largely students at elite prep schools whose yuppie parents were trying to wangle special privileges for them, and even the charter school movement in Chicago, where she was under consideration for a job as assistant head of school, ultimately struck her as not serving the neediest students. So she re-credentialed herself for a public school career via Chicago's Academy of Urban School Leadership. Modeled on programs created by Obama's education guru Arne Duncan, it offered a one-year Master's combining course work with mentored teaching in a high needs school. Most distinctively it paid students a modest living wage in return for their commitment to teach four years afterwards in the Academy's program for turning around the worst public schools (ones scheduled to be closed for failing to meet standards) by firing all personnel and restaffing completely with Academy graduates. After helping clean up some of Chicago elementary education's Augean stables at a starting salary of \$62K, with her four years obligatory service finished she happily continued there because "high school students show so much more outrage and passion about everything. It's great!" But after several years teaching freshmen and sophomores the joys of Walt Whitman, whose rebellious streak they adored and imitated, she switched to teaching middle schoolers to love Shakespeare. With considerable freedom to create her own curricula, she's won research

fellowships that resulted in a published educational article and a subsidized summer in Florence to explore teaching Dante. Soon she'll reach the top of a salary scale (ca. \$90K) that should put her slightly ahead of a Pitt English professor with forty years service. She admits to depressing days when she sees kids she's taught let down by the dysfunctional school system beyond her classroom, but as successful mistress of what goes on within its walls she relishes what she sees as the real-world challenge of her job in contrast to the road not taken of competing strenuously and perhaps unsuccessfully for what seems in retrospect just a cozy job as a pretend revolutionary in some college English department.

B. While majoring in Religion at Pitt with ancillary interests in the Philosophy and English departments (a philosophy paper was published while his literary essays won half a dozen prizes), this brilliant student's record won him a lucrative national Javits fellowship. His interdisciplinary interests led him to choose to take it at the University of Chicago's Program in Social Thought synthesizing literature, philosophy, religion, history, psychology, and cultural theory. But his first two years of graduate courses were marked by visceral revulsion from cultural theorists in vogue in Chicago's program, "theorists who claim to have some insight into human struggles but whose writing shows no indication of being a human being or even having made the acquaintance of any such creatures." At one point he even considered shifting his fellowship to work on an M.S.W. there. Despite co-authoring an article on Shakespeare for the prestigious journal Modern Philology he foresaw no future he wanted to be part of in English departments given what passes for philosophical profundity there. After passing his project exams "with distinction" he struggled vainly to find an interdisciplinary dissertation topic that pleased both him and Chicago faculty, eventually leaving the program. He first thought that it would be easier to pursue such interdisciplinary interests as composing music, translating Sanskrit, and writing essays on his own while making significantly more money in commercial real estate than anything academia would ever be likely to pay him--then when commercial real estate hit bottom along with his firm, he decided that true happiness lay in the less profitable but more satisfying career of a professional classical musician and teacher, with time between gigs to pursue his many ancillary intellectual interests from opera to Borges. He toyed with the possibility of pursuing doctoral work in musicology but was so happily situated in Chicago that he decided not to do so.

C. Another outstanding Pitt English major, whose record leading to a handsome fellowship from Brown was described in Section 7, abandoned all academic ambitions. He thrived in his course work in American literature, loved teaching, and has the warmest of praise for Brown's graduate English program, which he heartily recommends. But his sense of the marketplace's unpleasant pressure to choose exam and dissertation topics in fashionably recondite theoretical modes made him "loathe trying to see trends in critical thought and to predict the next big thing." What he finds particularly ironic "about contemporary literary criticism and theory is that even while its claims to social importance grow louder and more confident, its audience gets smaller and smaller. Even the finest critics are, these days, writing for only a handful of other specialists, who have been trained to decipher the arcane language of some particular niche in the field." After toying with a career in secondary education like 29A above, he left Brown to enter law

school in the Washington, D.C. area and then joined a major firm there.

D. Concerns like those of student A above also motivated this remarkable student, whose record is described in Section 12, to walk away from her prestigious \$34,000 Presidential fellowship at Texas A&M after only one year sans degree to work as a tutor for disadvantaged high school students rather than continue further with "a system of graduate education that encourages students to question the construction and maintenance of injustice -- and then write papers about it rather than attempt to alter it." After winning more than half-a-dozen essay prizes at Pitt she felt that literary academia teems with Ph.D. wannabes who can write such papers as well as she while there are too few people willing to deploy their talents in the educational trenches where real social progress can be made. She tutored bilingual students in Texas for a year, then worked for two years in a charter school in a high needs area of Boston, which she loved. More recently she coached preppies in NYC on how to mount successful applications to Ivy League schools, but found this less satisfying and has therefore applied to law schools as offering better opportunities for reforming society.

E. This outstanding Pitt summa shared the award for our top English major with one other student while compiling a 4.0 GPA over-all. Carrying a double major in political science, she also won that department's award as their top major as well as minoring in German with a semester abroad. Essays of hers were honored in four university prize competitions, and one took second prize in the national competition for essays on Renaissance culture sponsored by Early English Books Online. Initially she had planned to be a high school teacher, but as she realized her abilities she began thinking of doctoral work. With GREs of 700/96% verbal, 6.0/95% analytic writing, and 670/90% subject test, as a senior she did not advance beyond the interview stage in the Rhodes but without seriously applying to any American schools was nonetheless via the grapevine offered an honorary fellowship in Comparative Literature by Penn State. She declined that to work as an administrator for a local non-profit program like Americorps recruiting college grads to teach in high schools while she cultivated a relationship and mulled over her future. Next year she applied to eight programs in English, and though rejected by four Ivies she was offered a first-year honorary fellowship of 15K by Boston College, a Penn State TA in English of 12K with an honorary supplement of 2.5K, a TA of 14K by Fordham, and a puny CUNY TA @ 9.5K. Declining Boston College's honorary fellowship to remain within commuting proximity to her Pitt-based fiancé, she acquitted herself very well both as scholar and teacher in Penn State's M.A. program but with marriage chafed increasingly at weekday separation from her husband. Failing in her effort to transfer to Pitt's doctoral program, she decided to leave Penn State after the M.A. and take a job as a staff writer with Pitt's Office of Public Relations. She looks back warmly enough at Penn State's program and enjoyed doing scholarship. But as a mother living in eastern Pennsylvania for more than a decade now it made less sense to pursue a teaching career than to work for her husband's dental practice. However, with all her four children in school she's recently been thinking about looking for adjunct work in nearby colleges, so it's not inconceivable that she might eventually return to academia.

F. Fourteen years ago this fine Pitt English major, who had top grades and won an essay prize,

accepted a TA in Pitt's graduate program (after being rejected by three other strong schools) partly because she loved literature, partly through inertia, and partly to make a little money, although the idea that in the future she might seriously "need to make money was hazy at best." She acquitted herself very creditably and would probably have been accepted into the doctoral program had she not born her first child a few days after handing in her final assignment for M.A. coursework. The demands of motherhood, soon augmented by two more children, left her without energy ever to take the exam for her M.A. degree. She looks back warmly at her graduate experience learning about literature and how to teach composition, skills that she's been able to use raising her kids and designing an ESL course. For many years she simply offered her services online as a free-lance editor, proofreader and blogger at \$10/hr. Recently, however, she's eased back into education by working as a tutor in the Writing Center at a community college willing to hire her without a completed graduate degree

G. Described above as E'07, this student, who had been hesitating between a career in library science and teaching college English, was very pleased with the M.A. program at Miami of Ohio, where she concentrated in Composition and Rhetoric. She has high praise for their teacher training, for supportive faculty who helped her publish a couple of book reviews, and for congenial grad students, who according to her have little trouble going on to Ph.D.'s at other schools if they wish, including Syracuse and UMass her year. Her main reservation involved Miami's location in a small town with few cultural attractions and many high-income undergrads who don't miss them. Nonetheless she would consider applying for the doctoral program there were she sure she wanted to go on in English studies, esp in Comp & Rhet. She was uncertain whether comp or lit interested her more within English studies and also whether she wanted a life in academia, so she returned to Pittsburgh and has pursued other job opportunities there after deciding that her future lay neither in academia nor library work.

H. After her Oxford M.A. had gained her funding in Toronto's doctoral program, student A'08 above found that her longterm Anglophilia coupled with a more particular romance altered her plans. She left English studies for a job in the UK with an organization representing private schools. Living happily in London, she bought a flat with her partner and after studying law there was practicing as a solicitor.

I. An unusually distinguished career as a Pitt English major landed student E'06 in Virginia's prestigious graduate program, where she completed her course work and served as a TF. Marrying in 2007, she returned to Pittsburgh in 2009 to rejoin her husband, planning to start a dissertation while he finished a doctorate in Classics at Pitt. A part-time job to help with family expenses led to further work as a fund-raiser for non-profit organizations, which she began to find more satisfying than life as an isolated researcher trying to imagine a genuinely significant new approach to nineteenth-century British fiction. She had relished the cut-and-thrust of intellectual debate in her seminars at Virginia, for whose graduate program she has high praise; likewise she admired their undergraduate major for requiring more standard survey courses than Pitt's had, which left her with gaps in her knowledge of the Anglo-American canon that she felt sometimes disadvantaged her in competition with an unusually impressive cohort of graduate

students from the Ivies and Oxbridge. But she did well in her seminars there and has fond memories of her studies both at Pitt and Virginia. She was less fond of her experience as a beginning teacher, so spending a lifetime reading flawed undergraduate prose held no particular appeal. Assessing her likely situation as a mid-ranking Ph.D. from a top program, she was especially worried by the difficulty some talented members of her graduate cohort were experiencing finding satisfying tenure-track jobs; and that worry was compounded by the prospect of having to combine an academic career with her husband's. The time, effort, and financial deprivation necessary to complete a dissertation came to seem too risky an investment for the uncertain career results it promised. As a professional fund-raiser for a worthy non-profit medical organization serving disadvantaged third-world communities she's using her college French minor more than she did as a tyro literary scholar while gaining hands-on experience with post-colonial cultural problems that her job may put her a better position to alleviate than would theorizing in a college classroom. With her husband embarking on a career in secondary education in Pittsburgh, the prospect of building satisfying careers for each in a city they both love trumped the possibility of chasing will-o'-the-wisps through higher education at the mercy of the academic marketplace. Though she toys at times with the notion of eventually doing a dissertation, my guess is that her status as ABD is permanent and the right choice for her.

J. This student (B '08), who won a good teaching fellowship in composition studies at University of Illinois, chose to leave their program without completing a doctorate and cannot now be located. Whether this decision was prompted by disillusionment with the program, with the prospect of a career teaching composition, or by personal problems is unclear; however one should assume that had he completed the Ph.D. he could have found a tenure-track academic job.

K. This student ('02) came to Pitt on a prestigious Chancellor's Scholarship and double majored in Philosophy and English. With a summa B.A., his impressive record included an essay that won second prize in both the Snead and Ossip contests and upper-level courses in German literature. His GRE scores were verbal 99%, quantitative 67%, analytic 83%, and subject 99%. Warmly recommended by a chaired professor with whom he worked closely on an ambitious theoretical essay about spatial aspects of American literature, he was rejected by Berkeley and Columbia but offered five-year fellowships by Duke (\$18K), NYU (\$16K+) and Chicago (\$15K). Preferring Chicago's program, he completed a dissertation on the sense of touch in Augustan literature and became an Assistant Professor at a fine small liberal arts college in Minnesota. Approaching tenure, however, his father's death prompted soul-searching about contenting himself with a comfortable but predictable academic career teaching English. He resigned his position ca. 2013 with no clearer goal than finding more satisfying work, then eventually developed opportunities as a communications consultant that led to a current six-figure income serving clients whose problems offer him what he sees as more challenging variety if less security than did his life as an English professor.

L. Rethinking his ambitions after his failure to gain admission to top grad programs in either English or Physics, this talented student (A '19) moved to New York City to try his fortunes there. Now working happily as a data analyst for a major bank, he's abandoned his quondam

academic plans without regret and looks forward to a more satisfying career in other fields.

M. After a reasonably satisfying first year at LSU, this talented student (A '18) was challenged by but ultimately enjoyed his first experiences teaching composition next year, enjoying great freedom in designing his own courses. Grad seminars within the department seemed limited, so he wound up taking two good, stimulating seminars in other departments. But with the arrival of Covid teaching online became much less satisfying, and he chafed increasingly at the high workload involved for relatively low pay. He decided to leave the program with his M.A. after fall semester his third year and take a better-paying online job in tech writing with skills he'd developed. With such mobile employment he and his partner can leave Louisiana and travel widely since she has a travel-related job. He believes he acquitted himself creditably enough in the M.A. program so that should he ever decide to apply to a comparable Ph.D. program his record would be competitive. But unless he decides to return to academia he should be regarded as someone who left the field for more satisfying and remunerative work elsewhere.

N. With no apparent academic connections since ca. 2013, this student with a distinguished Pitt record (A '06) who won an impressive fellowship to Rice has not been heard from in years, could not readily be located in 2021, and probably left academia years ago. .