

## Ten Reasons Why Majoring in Literary Studies Makes Excellent Sense in the Twenty-first Century

Some of our Literary Studies graduates become professional Literary Scholars; most do not. And yet their education here has helped them forge successful and fulfilling lives. In recent decades there has grown the unexamined idea that one goes to college to study exactly what one wants to do for a living. The liberal arts have always been based on the *examined* argument that to live in a free society, one must be aware of contexts (historical, authorial, etc.) and be able to cast a critical eye on what the world promulgates. The liberal arts teach core skills and attitudes that serve its students well, not only in the professional world, but also in their personal lives.

**English/Literary Studies, what's the difference?** “English,” the traditional name for both the Department and the Major, comes from a time when the body of knowledge was rooted in the British and American canon of “great books.” Although we are still the “English Department,” we have changed our major’s name to “Literary Studies,” to emphasize the form (literature) over the language (English). We teach British, American, Anglophone, and World Literature in translation to prepare our students for a globalized world with a constantly developing media dimension.

**You will learn to construct your own tools to navigate and facilitate your career path.** The need for people who can analyze complex systems, assess resources, identify problems, and construct lucid prose marks perhaps the most emphatic interconnection between Literary Studies and the professional world. Whatever you do for a living, being able to write well and see critically will be important skills.

**What's in a Word?** Turns out, a lot. Understanding the structure of language, how words in construction can imply, invite inferences, deceive, inform, and yes *move* the reader puts our graduates a step ahead for others in recognizing and employing language for the greater good—and help educate others of language with less altruistic intentions.

**How can somebody possibly think that?** There’s something that we often hear. Learning to read literature is learning how to see the world through someone else’s eye. We learn to practice empathy when we enter into the different moral universe of each novel, play, poem, passage. Close Reading, a term we use to express seeing exactly what is on the page, rather than our “impressions,” is one of the greatest protections against misreading others, which can lead to projection, stereotyping, and working from unexamined personal motives.

**Around the World (and Time) in a Dozen Novels.** Reading literature is the most accessible and potentially insightful way to travel, both in time and space, to reimagine our contexts and localized assumptions, to see the world by seeing it through the eyes of people in that world.

**Negotiate Media.** The formats and presentations of language are constantly changing, but the basics remain: What is the text trying to do? What is the media consumer’s response? Does the authorship of the message matter? Who is the audience? What are the assumptions that are unexpressed? Understanding how to read and interpret literature (hyper-intentional language) readies our students for a world awash with messages.

**Teach Your Children Well.** “Great books,” if we can still use this term, are “great” for some enduring reasons: they contain wisdom, moving description, voices for the voiceless, our highest

ideals, and darkest temptations. Having a knowledge of how Dante, Virginia Woolfe, James Joyce, and Toni Morrison have experienced and understood alienation, for example, gives us resources to confront our own trials in life, and to better enjoy our own happiness. Is there anything more noble than teaching a child to read? It opens the world up for them, teaches them how others have responded to challenges; provides them with role models to imitate or be wary of.

**The Art of Persuasion.** “Rhetoric” often carries the sense of disingenuousness, but it needn’t. At its best, persuading someone through language is not a deceptive, underhanded activity. In fact, the best rhetoric makes no secret that it is trying to convince the reader of something. The best rhetoric is a transparent explanation and support of a moral idea. Our graduates have learned how to use tone, word choice, syntax, vocabulary—not to delude the reader, but to express good will and clarity to a reader who may be in a frame of mind different from the message’s character.

**Life-long Learning.** This is one of the pillars of the Liberal Arts: “commencement” is the beginning of the journey, not its conclusion. This means, in part, always to be reading something, not necessarily literature, but necessarily books from a broad variety of authors, epochs, and genres. Someone who is always reading is always thinking about something new.

**Find (and Keep) Happiness.** Reading good books gives pleasure. Please read that sentence again. Literature was not invented to give undergraduates homework. People crowded to Shakespeare’s plays not because it was an assignment, but because it was fun. When a new book was published or released in Cold War Eastern Europe, people formed lines around the block to buy the book, even if they didn’t know what the book was about; in the dearth of free knowledge, they knew its worth. Happiness also teaches tolerance before judgment, inquisitiveness before condemnation, correction before punishment.

**What Our Students Do:** Lit Club, Belltower, SMUniverse, reading, Sigma Tau Delta

**What Our Faculty Do:** Study Abroad, Scholarship, teach in CORE

**What Our Graduates Do:** All sorts of careers