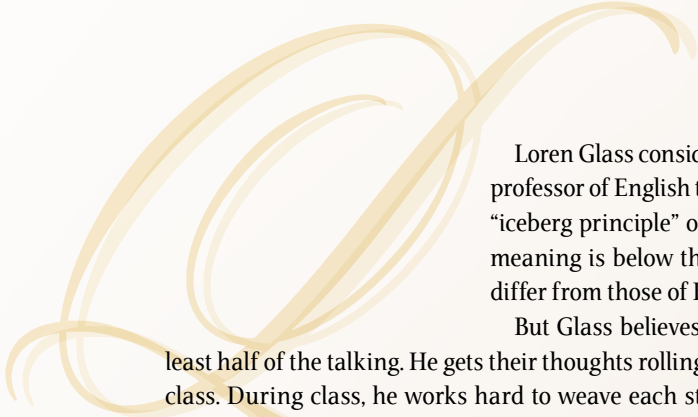


Window on the

The Department of English Creates Readers & Writers for Life

By Nicole Riehl



Loren Glass considers himself a talker. It wouldn't be hard for the associate professor of English to fill a 90-minute class with his own thoughts about the "iceberg principle" of Ernest Hemingway's work—how seven-eighths of the meaning is below the surface—or how characteristics of American novels differ from those of British novels.

But Glass believes the best learning takes place when his students do at least half of the talking. He gets their thoughts rolling by asking them to e-mail reflections of readings before class. During class, he works hard to weave each student's comments into the conversation. The result is robust, give-and-take discussions.

"Good teaching in English is about good listening," he says. "I see myself as improvising off their comments. As we analyze texts, I make sure I positively receive every student's comment and maintain a high level of engagement with them. One part of my mind is on the text, and one part of my mind really focuses on responding to them."

Glass's efforts to engage students exemplify the quality of teaching in the University of Iowa Department of English. The faculty strives to help each student develop strong writing and critical reading skills and encourages imaginative engagement with all types of texts, says Jonathan Wilcox, professor of English and chair of the department, which is part of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences.

"We hope our students become readers for life," Wilcox says. "Reading encourages empathy, involvement, judgment—a whole range of skills having to do with an imaginative leap beyond oneself. These qualities do more than help our graduates become good workers. They enrich people's lives and help them become global citizens, prepared to understand and critique the way things matter in the world."

The department's teaching philosophy involves emphasizing both writing and reading as crafts, says English professor Claire Sponsler.

"We spend a lot of class time helping students improve their ability to write good prose—which after all is the vehicle of clear thought—but we also stress 'deep reading,' the practice of reading slowly and attentively, with an awareness of what the writer is trying to do in and with language, and what cultural contexts shape a text," she says.



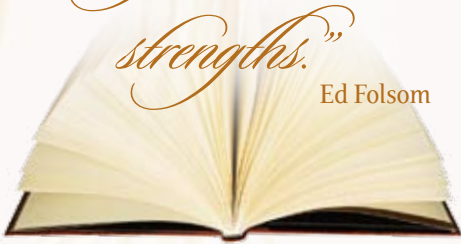
A Mainstay Then and Now

English has been part of the University's curriculum since the discipline's first course, Rhetoric and English Literature, was offered in 1861. Today English is the second-largest major in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, with nearly 1,000 undergraduates pursuing degrees. The department also has 150 graduate students and 46 full-time equivalent tenure-track faculty members.

"I'd like to think that students choose to study English because it encompasses so much," Sponsler says. "As an English major, you can study the workings of language, hone your analytical skills, confront new ideas,

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Ed Folsom



explore the past, encounter new cultures and ethnicities, and more. It’s the perfect window onto the world and one that continues to be relevant as the world gets bigger and more complex.”

To help students open that window, the department introduced a new gateway course in 2007. Introduction to the English Major: Theory and Practice gives English majors a common set of initial skills for literary study. It covers basic research and how to write a critical essay, familiarizes students with periods of literary history, and introduces varied approaches to reading and interpreting texts.

“What we’ve always done well is create independent, freestanding courses,” Wilcox says. “The faculty agreed that it would be valuable to have a course introducing English majors to these skills. Now we know the students have a baseline of knowledge we can build on.”

The department also launched a creative writing track for English majors in fall 2008, adding an extra dimension to The University of Iowa’s reputation as a powerhouse for writers. Knowing that many undergraduates attend the University to be near its renowned community of writers, the Department of English and the Iowa Writers’ Workshop teamed up to develop a creative writing experience for undergraduates.

“Creative writing was already occurring at the University at the highest imaginative levels in exciting and excellent ways as a graduate experience,” Wilcox says. “Now it’s occurring in a more structured way for undergraduates. It’s a fantastic, fitting addition to the department.”

The department’s central role in undergraduate education also involves overseeing the literature component of the college’s General Education Program, a set of courses in foundation disciplines that most University of Iowa undergraduates are required to take. Instructors in the department teach nearly 100 sections of the General Education course Interpretation of Literature each semester.

Despite the department’s heavy teaching load, English majors enjoy small classes—typically 15 to 25 students.

Julie Eslick, a native of Dayton, Iowa, who received a BA with a double major in English and classical languages in May 2008, appreciates how the department’s small classes gave her the

opportunity to interact one-on-one with faculty.

“I never took an English course at the University during which I did not feel a close bond with the instructor and a sincere growth of interest in the course’s subject,” Eslick says. “Most English courses are small, but every professor I had still pressed students to visit office hours, send questions via e-mail—whatever it took to spark interest and assure success in the class. The department is lucky to have professors who are both genial and intellectually brilliant.”



Opportunities In Class and Out

English majors have access to a wide range of courses in literature, cultural studies, language, and writing. Alongside courses on well-known authors like William Shakespeare or Mark Twain are opportunities to study the civil rights movement through films and texts; detective novels; science fiction; Indian, African, or Caribbean literature; and literature written in the Viking language Old Norse.

Everett Hamner, who received a PhD in English in August 2008, was impressed by the diversity of courses and the professional development opportunities the department offers its graduate students. For example, the department helped fund his trip to Washington, D.C., to research the Ralph Ellison papers, as well as a trip to Dartmouth College for a week-long institute with leading American studies scholars.

“Faculty members were very generous with their time and energy,” says Hamner, of Iowa City. “Whether that took the form of an impromptu office visit, an hour or two set aside for lunch or coffee, or time discussing the intricacies of fellowship applications or job interviews, these mentor-friends invested a great deal of themselves in me over the past five years.”

Hamner recently accepted a position as an assistant professor of English at Western Illinois University. Other alumni of the department have pursued a wide variety of career paths, becoming writers of all sorts and working in academia, business, or the publishing industry.

Department alumni include famous writers like Jane Smiley (MA '75, MFA '76, PhD '78), whose novel *A Thousand Acres* earned a Pulitzer Prize in 1992 and who received a University of Iowa Distinguished Alumni Award in 2003. T.C. Boyle (MFA '74, PhD '77) is the award-winning author of 19 books of fiction and the recipient of a 2008 University of Iowa Distinguished Alumni Award (see page 37). Among the department's many alumni scholars are Susan Gubar (PhD '72), Distinguished Professor of English and Women's Studies at Indiana University–Bloomington and a 2008 College of Liberal Arts and Sciences Alumni Fellow (see page 36), and Douglas Hesse (BA '78, MA '80, PhD '86), Professor of English and founding director of the Marsico Writing Program at the University of Denver.



Remarkable Research, Collaboration

Along with preparing students for successful careers, the department's faculty are heavily involved in research, dedicating half of their time to advancing the field, Wilcox says. Last year faculty members published 8 single-author books, 2 essay collections, 24 articles, 16 nonfiction essays, and 21 reviews. They also presented 71 conference papers or guest lectures and 26 readings.

"Some of the research has to do with producing works of nonfiction, and much of it has to do with analyzing texts in society," Wilcox says, noting that research strengths include 19th-century American and British literature, modern poetry, nonfiction writing, medieval literature, postcolonial studies, and African American literature.

Recent work by English faculty members includes *Dream Not of Other Worlds: Teaching in a Segregated Elementary School, 1970*, Huston Diehl's memoir on teaching in rural Virginia during the waning days of the Jim Crow South; *Oppenheimer Is Watching Me*, Jeff Porter's memoir on growing up during the Cold War; *Sedaris*, Kevin Kopelson's examination of the serious undertones in David Sedaris's humor; and *Pilgrim and the Bee: Reading Rituals and Book Culture in Early New England*, Matt Brown's look at Puritan reading practices.

Ed Folsom, Roy J. Carver Professor of English, studies the great American poet Walt Whitman and is writing a "biography" of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*.

U.S. News & World Report ranks the Department of English 15th nationally among public universities and 28th among public and private institutions combined. Wilcox notes that the department is strong in interdisciplinary work, embracing intersections all across campus. It collaborates with the Center for the Book, the American Indian and Native Studies Program, and the Departments of American Studies, Rhetoric, and Cinema and Comparative Literature, to name a few. Several faculty members have joint appointments in other departments.

"The field of English attracts people who are interested in analyzing the way discourse works in society in a broad sense," Wilcox says. "In the end, that allows a disciplinary looseness that's extremely valuable to English. We're always concerned with text and language, and yet the ways of analyzing those can draw from a number of disciplines."

Those connections have led to exciting collaborations for students and faculty alike.

"The department has never had a stodgy, traditional approach to the field, and I think that willingness to expand our conception of what 'English' means has been and continues to be one of our main strengths," Folsom says. "I'm proud of the way this department has been the seedbed of so many exciting programs—Women's Studies, American Studies, African American Studies, the Iowa Writers' Workshop, the Nonfiction Writing Program. Something new is always brewing, and that makes for an exciting place to work."

