The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency:
A Viable Career Option for an English Major

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Abstract

I propose for your consideration that a job working with the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) is a viable choice for a UH English major with strong analytical, critical thinking, and writing skills. My research has yielded insight about the traits and skills that one must possess to be successful as well as what the actual job of a CIA Source Officer entails and how a solid background in English supports this career choice. I offer for consideration a career option besides publishing, writing, law, journalism, public relations, advertising, and, well, okay, teaching. The US Government (including the FBI, CIA, and the Library of Congress) is an employer of people with English majors. The most intriguing for me, and hopefully my audience, is the CIA. One of my aims was to show how an English major with good thinking and writing skills can not only fit in the CIA, but fit well.
English Majors are considered among the most intellectual types of students when compared to analogous majors at the University of Hawaii: Manoa. Cogitative proficiency and analytical writing capacity are skills that not every student graduates with. While having a majors such as Biochemistry or Engineering may land the graduate a job more quickly, being able to read and write efficiently is just as important for a college graduate. For my term project in English 464, I propose for your consideration that a job working with the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), while unconventional, is nonetheless a viable choice for a UH English Major. This paper will offer insight about the traits and skills that one must possess to be successful as well as what the actual job of a CIA Open Source Officer entails and how a solid background in English will support this career choice. It will also touch on the graduation phobia and take a glimpse into how I arrived at this unconventional career choice as well as some things I would have done differently.

A favorite question throughout college went something like this: “What is your major?” When I replied, “English”, the initial response was along the lines of, “Well, what are you going to do with that degree?” or, “There are no jobs for you” or even, “That is a dead end major.” Many times, too many times to count, my confidence in having chosen English as my major was struck down. It seems that culture has created stereotypical ideas and agendas, some apparently unfavorable, for English Majors in the 21st century. Society offers little recognition and consideration for the rigorous work that goes into each upper division English course. An English graduate must possess not only a strong motivation and determination, but also a high degree of discipline, concentration, and persistent diligence. Altogether, these qualities will lead to proficiencies that will work for an English major with the challenges evident in today’s career world.

The uneasiness of finding a job after graduation is intimidating. While finishing my last semester at UH Manoa and gearing up for the future, I found myself consumed with several recurring questions: “Are you ready for what lies ahead once you stroll across the graduation stage? Will you successfully steer yourself through a challenging job hunt? Ultimately, are you ready to start your career and do you know what you want? Is higher education an option?” These are questions and fears that many
From an English Major to the CIA

graduation candidates with an English major at UH Manoa may be experiencing. In order to make informed post-graduation decisions, I am acutely aware that I must thoroughly familiarize myself with my field of study, perfect my English skills, and earn experience as quickly as possible. The conventional expectation is that an English major will become a teacher, proofreader, editor, or possibly author; however, this is somewhat stereotypical. There are unconventional options for every major, including English. An inspiring career counselor may suggest that history majors should also consider law, and anthropology majors advertising, while humanities majors can think about acting. It is in this spirit that I began to explore unconventional options for an English Major.

The Importance of Making Timely Choices While in College

On the first day of school at the University of Hawaii, I was an embarrassed twenty-two year old undeclared major who had transferred from Pasadena City College in Pasadena, California. One thing that I knew with certainty was that I had a love for health and fitness. For the first year, my intention was to major in Health, and I dreamt of finding a job with the FDA. I took unnecessary classes and wasted much of my time. In looking back, I sometimes think I could have already graduated if had I only pursued help sooner from a college advisor. Instead, as I often mistakenly believed, I convinced myself that I could do everything on my own.

In an effort to reverse this trend, the first thing I did was go on the UH Manoa website and search for advising. The first choice that popped up was the MAC (Manoa Advising Center.) I immediately located a number under “contact us” and made the first step in moving forward in a more solid college direction. Over the phone, I was able to make a same-day appointment with an advisor who was assigned to me. I quickly grabbed my books and headed to the Queen Liliʻuokalani Center for Student Services building, room 101.

I remember well the day I went to my first advising session after having been a college student for almost three years. The initial reason I sought counseling was because I was unsure how to go about declaring an official major. Although I had taken several classes in Health Sciences, I did not feel satisfied with my choice. I knew from
age twenty-three that I liked to think things through, voice opinions, and learn about cultures and the human condition. I could have easily chosen Anthropology as my major, but Anthropology seemed to be an even more dead end major. As I sat in the waiting room, reflecting on the last three years of college, panic-like symptoms began to take over. “What am I doing with my life?” I continued to ruffle through the papers in my binder. “I am 23 years old and have no plans with my life.” Finally, after ten minutes of waiting, a young student working at the front desk called my name, “Natalya Bobich, your advisor is ready to see you.” I stood up and followed her to meet the advisor. A man, quite young in age, perhaps late twenties, greeted me with a calm smile and told me to sit down. He pulled up my records and looked through my grades. He began asking a variety of questions: “How do you like it here at the UH Manoa? Do you have any friends on campus?” An instant feeling of relief came over me. After getting to know me a bit, he proceeded to address the real task at hand and inquired why I came to the MAC center that day. I told him, “I need help moving on with my college career and I am not sure what to do.” “Well, Natalya, I can see here that you have had some rough patches in your college career, but I can also see some strong points as well.”

Continuing our conversation and his analysis of my college records, I began to notice that motivation has been a key issue and may have hampered my success as a college student. I had the intelligence, but lacked the motivation to follow through. This was my problem. He went on to tell me about how he majored in English, and that, based on my records, perhaps a major in English would be a good idea for me. I found myself in agreement with him. Studying English, it seemed, would offer interesting options in that it translates to every career choice and acquiring English skills would certainly help me to improve myself. I also realized that, as a college student matures, things become clearer and motivation becomes easier when there is a definite direction in sight.

Graduation phobia can be somewhat intense. I feel it even now, at twenty-five. There will be many people, back home and in the career field, to whom I will have to prove myself. While in school, it seems life has a pattern and somewhat comforting routine. My schedule was set, and I knew in advance what I would be doing. As I contemplate graduation, uncertainty seeps in and this is frightening at times. The
unknown is always frightening. In thinking all of this through, I realize the best antidote for this condition of uncertainty is to think forward and arm myself with as much knowledge and information as possible now, as I am preparing myself about the possible options before me.

Pursuing a career with the CIA may seem like a far-fetched idea to many of my fellow classmates and future BA English Majors. My purpose is to prove, primarily through research, that a job with the CIA is an unconventional possibility. Readers may be wondering, why the CIA? The idea first sparked when my mother began to send me links of possible post-graduation job opportunities at the CIA. My mother is an intelligent woman who is constantly learning, researching and building her knowledge base. Even with an honors degree in Philosophy from UCLA (University of California: Los Angeles), she claims she is not done learning! I consider her a strong source of motivation and inspiration of what lies ahead for me. I am grateful that she has enlightened me about an unconventional and interesting possibility for my field of study. It did not take me long to realize the merit of her suggestion.

Each of us possesses special attributes that stem from foundational roots. Influence, experience, and education build our foundations from early childhood. A foundation is what supports and guides us through the hardships of becoming an adult. The most important aspect of a foundation is your relationship to the world around you. From the time we begin to talk, we start to absorb the world around us. Over the course of a lifetime, one is awarded certain skills that are either self-taught or coached by authorities. The strongest foundations are born earlier in life. At a young age, we are a sponge absorbing the world. Since early childhood, my parents have provided me with international and multi-cultural experiences. I am proud to say that I have been bilingual since birth and had the opportunity to travel abroad more than sixteen times, mainly to Croatia. My parents saw to it that I experienced the world fully. My childhood experiences and UH education have prepared me and given me a voice that may be of interest to the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency. I believe that I am a witty, intellectual, and honest young woman with a penchant for travel and foreign cultures. Majoring in English was definitely the right choice for me. It has strengthened me and given me skills that I now see I can use in ways I never imagined.
The United States, Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)

What is the CIA?

The CIA is an independent agency that gathers intelligence and provides valuable information for senior US policy makers. The Agency is divided into four sections, “the National Clandestine Service, the Directorate of Intelligence, the Directorate of Science & Technology, and the Directorate of Support” (“Today’s CIA”). The CIA’s main headquarters are located in McLean, although some say, Langley, Virginia. Headquarters are only a few miles from Washington D.C. The CIA offers an eye-opening experience for its workers.

What does the CIA do?

The official website for the CIA is informative, up to date, and answers many questions for potential career seekers and interested individuals. The CIA's primary mission is to “collect, evaluate and disseminate foreign intelligence to assist the President and senior U.S. government policymakers in making decisions related to national security” (“FAQs”). They fulfill their mission two ways. First, they are charged with reporting to the US President “accurate and timely intelligence on foreign threats to national security” (“What We Do”). Second, under the “direction of the US President and in accordance with applicable law” (“What We Do”), the CIA and its operatives are authorized to conduct counterintelligence (CI) or what may be known as espionage in the CIA world. The goal is to counteract opponents and keep them from acquiring secret information. According to the mission, at times, the CIA is authorized to engage in cover action propagating disinformation in order to confuse those who pose a potential threat.

What are some specific jobs at the CIA for an English Major?

There are many job positions offered at the CIA, which are not as exciting or glamorous as portrayed in films. Many jobs are behind a desk in a huge building, engaged in doing mountains of writing and research. Selections are made in every field
of study; for example, “scientists, engineers, economics, linguistics, mathematicians, secretaries, accountants, analysts, and computer sciences” (“FAQs”). The CIA works diligently to create effective teams with varied backgrounds to analyze situations and participate in assigned tasks. According to the website, “Much of the Agency’s work, like that done in academic institutions, requires research, careful evaluation, and writing of reports that end up on the desks of this nation’s policymakers” (“FAQs”). Specialists at the Office of Current Operations must prepare a daily report called the President’s Daily Brief (PDB) of current intelligence for the President and his national security team. The PDB may, at first sight, seem straightforward. However, when we stop to consider that the PDB must also be a well-written document that is comprehensive, offers information and analysis unavailable from any other source, and such that it is helpful rather than a source of frustration, it is clear that candidates with competent writing, research, and analytical skills are needed. It is said that President Regan “was a studious reader” who read over each item in the PDB “deliberately and with considerable concentration” (Kerr and Davis). Hence, the idea that an English major may be a viable candidate for a CIA job, particularly in the Office of Current Operations.

Yet another possibility is that of an Open Source Officer (OSO). Working for the Open Source Office is for people who love the news. As an English major at UH Manoa, I have been taught to critically read and analyze books, articles, and news and report my findings in various essays and term papers. An OSO collects, analyzes, researches, and manages available foreign information. They must write reports about their findings and make them available to government officials. They are also known as “Foreign Media Analysts.” They review and have access to a number of worldwide documents. Various resources can include websites, social media, magazines, newspapers, and various press sources. I am the CIA’s future critical thinker and Open Source Officer.

According to a job description for an OSO, most OSO’s specialize in a country or region of the world—or possibly a topic. In order to do their jobs efficiently, OSO’s must have proficiency in at least one foreign language. Coming from a Croatian background, I envision myself working closely with Eastern European Intelligence counterparts. Since early childhood, I have spent a considerable amount of time in Croatia and have developed fluency in the Croatian language as well as knowledge of the culture and
structure of the country. I also possess knowledge of sister Slavic languages like Serbian, Bosnian, and even Ukrainian and Russian to a degree. During college, I also studied Italian, and in high school I had several years of Spanish. I would be of aid in many of the Eastern European countries.

Along with the above, the job description for an OSO indicates that candidates need their baccalaureate or master’s degrees and no less than a 3.0 GPA. Interestingly, they are looking for people with a strong interest in foreign affairs “as demonstrated by previous life/work experience” (“Open Source”). An OSO needs to know what is going on in their particular area of expertise. They must be capable of projecting and predicting possible scenarios based on researched facts and information. My family has been rigorously involved with the politics of Croatia and former Yugoslavia; I visited there during the height of the War of Independence. I accompanied my parents to Washington DC twice, and learned firsthand what it takes to communicate with the US Government. With this as my background, I feel as though I am a plausible candidate to track potential alerts, patterns, and relationships that could aid the United States in making sound policy.

The most encouraging thing is that an OSO “needs strong writing and analytical skills” (“Open Source”). Internet research skills are a must as are communication and English language skills. In fact, as part of the application, OSO candidates must submit a “short analytical writing sample (no more than 5 pages in length)” (“Open Source”) on their claimed area of expertise. My research disclosed that the starting salary for an Open Resource Officer is $58,229 to as much as $116,901. I would be required to relocate to Washington D.C. with occasional trips abroad. This is considered a desk and in the background type of job. Yet, it is vital for informing government officials and giving them “unique insights” with accurate information so they may act responsibly.

What sort of individual does the CIA seek?

In researching what traits the ideal candidate must possess in order to be considered for a job at the CIA, I learned they need smart people with college degrees who are ambitious and ready to serve their country. They seek individuals who are
looking for a lifetime career and who are willing to work hard. The job requires a high degree of autonomy and a strong sense of responsibility. At the same time, CIA workers are supposed to be united and able to work as members of a team serving their country. Provided a candidate is a U.S. citizen, passes an extensive background check, and meets all criteria, they will be eligible to apply for a job at the CIA. If the prospective candidate is not “clean”, then they must reconsider applying. The process is competitive and the CIA can find many reasons to turn down an applicant.

Like any government job, the application process is long and tedious. Applicants must be prepared to endure and consent to a thorough and extensive background check. The process includes looking at a person’s “character, trustworthiness, reliability, and soundness of judgment” (“Application Instructions”). There can be no conflicts of allegiance, for example to another government. Candidates are also assessed on how well they can “handle and protect sensitive information” (“Application Process”). Once the background check is completed, candidates are called to Langley at which time they must respond to a series of detailed questions. Before the interview, it is smart for candidates to take a series of aptitude tests to determine their strengths and for which area of intelligence they are best suited. Doing so will better the candidate’s prospects for landing a specific job. Candidates are expected to have a cumulative college GPA of 3.0, and must be willing to relocate to the Washington D.C. area. Final interview phases include required polygraph testing, mental and physical medical examinations, and an entire criminal background check.

The Feasibility of an Internship Before a Full-Time CIA Career

A sixty to ninety day internship is essential and highly recommended before one applies for a full-time job as an Open Source Officer. The CIA hopes to find “motivated [full-time] undergraduate students…for paid internships” (“Undergraduate”). They openly state that potential interns must be creative, capable of reading in a foreign language, and possess knowledge of an area or country. According to the website, Internships, “working for the CIA will be both exciting and challenging.” Internships further states, “The CIA [also] offers a limited number of talented undergraduates the opportunity to support the NCS (National Clandestine Services) mission of collecting human
intelligence on critical international developments.” Created in 2005, NCS is a specific program designed for students and postgraduates before becoming an official agent of the CIA. NCS interns are permitted to tell only their parents about certain information, and discussions are done in person. According to Internships, teams are created for the NCS program. Teams are created with “impeccable integrity, outstanding interpersonal skills, excellent oral and written skills, and commitment to serving the interests of our country.” These are just a few of the many requirements for this respected program. Currently, the NCS is taking applicants for summer 2015.

The experience of an internship will help tremendously when interviewing for a full-time job with the CIA. It will be easy to show you have worked hard to become competent and efficient in your work. Confidence will show and the hard work will pay off as you interview for a high-end position with the CIA. Had I known of the internship program last year, I would have certainly applied for a summer internship.

**How to Ace an Interview with the CIA**

Having familiarized myself with the CIA and job opportunities that I am possibly suited for, it is time to figure out how I will go about getting an actual job. According to the website, Business Insider, if a candidate makes it past the application process and is invited to participate in an interview, they have already surpassed many other applicants. A rule of thumb for the interview is to know as much as you can about the CIA. They will be prepared with a series of questions from different categories. Business Insider provided many tips that could not only help me prepare for an interview with the CIA, but also aid in any other interview process. The main goal for anyone, including myself, is to be educated in as many things as possible.

According to Business Insider, one must be always filled with enthusiasm for whatever position they are being interviewed. “Show your enthusiasm and ability for collecting and evaluating information by studying the CIA’s history, accomplishments, departments, and leaders” (Aquino). In order to do this, I will start by reading articles and press releases from the official government website for the Central Intelligence Agency while making sure I am also up to date with current world events, particularly those affecting Eastern Europe. As a UH English major, it has been my job as an upper
division student, to read, analyze, engage, discuss, and understand complicated material; therefore, it stands to reason that an English major is, in fact, a viable choice for a job at the CIA.

A few important tips include being up to date with the duties of the job you are seeking, which in my case are the duties of an Open Source Officer. I must be able to picture myself doing the job, and that I can do, since the tasks are similar to the upper division work I have been doing for the past two years. Doing so will allow me to match my personal skills with the skills my interviewer is hoping to find. Thinking it through and doing plenty of advance research will enable me to have more to offer during the interview itself. Another tip would include thinking of questions the interviewer may ask. “If you are interviewing for a job as an Operations Officer”, for example, “be prepared to answer questions such as - describe a time when you manipulated another person to get what you wanted or describe a time when you lied” (Aquino).

**Testimonials of Successful Women in the CIA**

The CIA endorses “a variety of employee resource groups comprised of employees who share common affinity (gender, sexual orientation, disability, ethnic, and racial backgrounds) (“Diversity”). As a woman at the CIA, you are likely to be viewed as having a higher degree of intelligence. Like in any government job, a woman must prove herself to the agency. Although we have fought for our right to vote and our right to a career, we are still faced with gender equality issues. The CIA is considered a predominantly male gendered field. However, according to post WWII statistics, women made up about 39% of the workforce at the CIA and had a higher paying salary compared to other government jobs. After researching several historical accounts, I extracted some quotes that will perhaps aid in shedding a better light about the role of women in the CIA.

When I came in, in 1965 the first assumption was that any female you met in the hallway was a secretary or a clerk. And the other big difference was when I came on board was; we wore hats and white gloves every day. The gloves were inspected as you entered the office to be sure that your palms were white. I’m not sure what would’ve happened if they hadn’t been white because I was too petrified to change that.
During my career...I wore many faces. I was a tour director, a buyer, someone’s girlfriend, a photographer, and an art collector, even a young teenage boy. It helped to have an innocent-looking open face, a sense of humor, stamina, and the fearlessness of the very young.
—Elizabeth Swanek, Directorate of Operations” (Porter)

These are both statements from retired women who worked for the CIA post WWII. In order to recognize that these roles were often tweaked because of gender stereotypes, we must recognize what these women had to endure in the CIA. During this time in history, many women challenged the gender-based ideals in society. After many steps and a long climb, Carla and Elizabeth eventually became Operations Officers. Furthermore, on August 7, 2014 amid much controversy, Newsweek reported, “the CIA has promoted a veteran female operative into the number two slot.” This recent hire is an encouraging testament to the fact that the CIA has of late been more accepting of women in higher-ranking jobs.

The current average ratio between men and women in the CIA is 50/50, according to CNN. In an online article posted on November 21, 2012, CNN encourages women to join the CIA. “Choosing a woman is not just about narrowing the intelligence community gender gap. It is about drawing from the whole pool, responding to Americans’ apparent desire for women in government” (Maller). I want to note that author Tara Maller of the article posted on the CNN website titled “10 Reasons a Woman Should Join the CIA” is a former Military Analyst officer and an inspiration. If you have time, I invite you to read the entire article. Basically, what it boils down to is that women have proven their intelligence, skill and capability in matters of national security over several generations and are at long last becoming influential members of the U.S. Government.

**Summary of Thoughts**

This was an enlightening project that allowed me to explore a career idea, I would not have considered before. Preparing for a career in the CIA as an Open Source Officer appears to be within reach and blends well with the preparations I am in the
process of completing at UH by next spring. According to Brain Metrix, “intelligence is defined as general cognitive-problem solving skills, a mental ability involved in reasoning, perceiving relationships and analogies, calculating, [and] learning quickly.” I feel as though going to and completing college assures that I will ultimately be perceived as an intelligent young lady. During the 20th and into the 21st century, women continue to fight for their rightful place in positions traditionally reserved for men. The CIA is one such place where a woman may successfully fuse her intelligence with Intelligence (with a capital I). One of the most important things to remember is that if you dream a big dream, graduate with a bachelor’s degree, and give it your best shot, you may just land a job with the CIA. You will be on your way to serving the safety of your country in one of the best ways possible. Therefore, advice to self: Work hard, become proficient, and never give up on your goals.

Work Cited


