Abstract

In this paper, my primary goals were twofold: Both to compile information as to what the first steps of a graduate student’s career entailed, and to extrapolate a conclusion given my own historical circumstances as to if and how I ought to pursue such a career. I delve at length into many anxieties that those at the end of their undergraduate career might experience: Do I belong in the ivory tower, or am I merely hiding within it? Is it wise for me to continue my education? Is it ethical? While the document is a personal journey in many respects, it has, perhaps, a comforting degree of insight for those in a similar position that the worries they might feel unique to themselves – and as such, might feel worthy of concealment – are in fact shared by others, and can perhaps even be worked past. If nothing else, it is a brief look into the realities of considering the pursuit of a graduate career.
I. Motivations

It seems less and less important to me to have a motivation behind any particular action. Causality, marching onward through its script uncaring as to the human narrative and the importance we place upon it, has soured somewhat the presumption of karmic cause-and-effect in me. I’ve borne witness to much ill befalling the good. Still, the invention of motivation’s necessity as related to human action is comforting, and helps bring a sense of security and context to things, two ideas necessary to have any hope of guessing at the future. Thus, I have attempted to put together some brief thoughts as to what brought me here and induced me to expend so much of the family treasury. To them, at least, if not causality, I owe an explanation.

From the earliest, what little I can remember of my experience with being a student was defined by a mixture of disdain, shame, and frustration. Scholarship was – is – difficult for me, due to a terrible proclivity toward forgetting things, which has plagued both my private and professional life. What few things I seemed to remember often lacked context, orphaned factoids and trivia departed from the greater lesson. I cannot account for having progressed from the level of an only marginally effectual student – a drifter through the system, as were so many of my acquaintances – to the level of an occasionally clever and engaging one to anything other than having amassed such a midden-heap of disparate parts that they provide a general enough frame of reference so as to imitate what might be mistaken for true comprehension of a given subject. As with a ransom-note, perhaps having so many snipped-out “letters” from various places ended up granting me some semblance of a coherent whole.

I had early and enduring difficulties with language and spelling, the latter of which continues even now, occasionally resulting in laughably unintelligible meshes of letters which might otherwise have formed a word but are instead arranged nonsensically, out of order. This generally poor showmanship in houses of learning was offset, however, by a number of experiences with educators who seemed somehow fundamentally different from those to whom I had thus far become accustomed. It is difficult to account for, in their entirety, the body of factors that contributed to my setting aside these particular instructors as being peculiar – but I would venture that the main factor was fundamentally one of how they approached their students. I would not go so far as to
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accuse many instructors of simply “phoning it in,” as it were, but being addressed as an equal as opposed to being somehow less-sentient due to my age and hierarchical relationship, whilst having no magical effect on my ability to comprehend material or hold it captive in my brain for any greater length of time, did induce me to actually begin trying again, as opposed to the passivity of merely accepting my lot as a student who got poor grades and was therefore not worthy of much note save remembering a name for calling attendance. Even now, looking back, I cannot summon up any hint of disdain for what may have seemed at the time as subpar treatment as a student, for though I felt no sense of attempted empathy in many of my instructors, I, disturbed as I was with my own issues, arguably made no attempt to empathize with their positions, either. Granted, some may have indeed been jaded, choosing to read verbatim from textbooks as opposed to arranging an actual lesson, discouraging questions, and engaging in favoritism – but even these behaviors may have very well been products of my own imagination. What I will take pains to acknowledge is that those instructors occupied an unenviable position. Occupying such a position, while not necessarily justifying the aforementioned behaviors, seems, at the very least, to shed light upon their motivations. Underpaid, saddled with oversized classes of ungrateful beings at an age where body chemistry tended to put them at their least studious and often most rude, they perhaps either consciously or otherwise opted for a strategy of expending their sorely taxed emotional resources only on those who seemed to be putting forth a genuine effort.

On the subject of those aforementioned instructors who moved me to actually put forth effort, I feel I owe them much. It was a strange concept to me, especially earlier on in my career as a student, that I might be capable of excelling. The impressions that these encounters left on me likely began my fascination with teaching as a career. I did not encounter such individuals until relatively late – at the conclusion of my middle school career, almost – but they shaped an interest in learning and a curiosity in a number of subjects, which served to punctuate what was otherwise a life of dread and self-loathing. Often, these instructors were not involved with the field of English, but with the fields of History, Sociology, Philosophy, or even those of other languages. In a way, perhaps, these fields with which these particular instructors tended to be involved shaped my decision to specialize in the pursuit of English and literature as a field, for it
gradually began to strike me – especially after departing high school for a higher learning institution – as a nexus within which my curiosity with these fields could be satisfied; One cannot help but to pick up vast tracts of history while engaged in the study of English, as it is a language which – while certainly not dominating history – has ostensibly come to influence quite a fair bit of it, considering the high mortality rate of languages in general. Much of the study of English, owing in large part to the inclusion of rhetoric under its auspices, necessarily involves a measure of delving into the philosophical, either as a means to understand rhetoric, as a background to that goal, or otherwise simply due to the eloquence with which a given philosopher's presentation has employed the language. Often, considering the gap in both time and language between major thinkers and English as we know it, my awe at the work of these philosophers was twofold, both at the beauty and simplicity of their presentation and also at the concept that ideas could have such vitality so as to endure translation from ancient Greek or Latin and yet maintain their ability to capture the mind. Studies in English regularly touch on the sociological, as evinced by the myriad courses that focus on Hawaiian literature, Asian literature, feminist literature, and any number of other subjects of intersectional interest. Even the study of foreign languages, however brief in its scope, fostered in me the etymologist’s appreciation and awe at the complexity, beauty, and dysfunctionality of a Frankenstein language haphazardly sewn together with words and syntax as disparate in their origins as they are in the consistency and reliability of their governing rule-sets. English, for me, served as a juncture which brought together these fields with which I had become enamored. It returned to me, in some ways, the sort of uninhibited and thoughtless awe and delight in discovery that I had forgotten was possible over the course of a troubling childhood and adolescence.

II. Initial Thoughts: Research and Experience
In the past, I had had a smattering of brief stints as a short-leashed instructor as a matter of course in high school, involved, as I was, as an officer with its JROTC program. My enrollment in JROTC seemed an uncharacteristic step, even to myself, and it was not an action that I undertook lightly, doing so only under the intense urgings of one of the few friends I possessed. Perhaps the most important friend I possessed,
considering that his constant attempts to thrust me into social contexts I had until then
avoided, though painful to me at the time, admittedly helped to acclimatize me to
speaking with others. It was he who taught me how to talk to clerks, cashiers, strangers,
and teachers, and it was he who more or less leveraged his influence on me in this
capacity to enter what was initially a personal hell for someone who so seldom spoke. I
would liken it to something akin to shock therapy, brutally exposing one to that which
they fear so as to acclimatize them to it. Though I fervently wished to leave – and
considered doing so, on many occasions – the system of relationship between recruiter
and recruit meant that shortcomings (such as departure) on my part would reflect poorly
on him. Loyalty kept me trapped, and by the time he departed the program, I was
already involved in such an intimate capacity as adjutant that I could not bear to leave;
they had no one else at hand with the requisite knowledge to maintain their databases,
and I could not bear engaging in such a betrayal of people with whom I had spent most
of high school. I never grew to enjoy the harsh bark of orders, either given or received,
nor the ten mile runs, nor the smart clicking of heels, nor the ominous weight of a rifle in
my hands – ultima ratio regnum, given form in iron and wood, where reason ends and
force begins. My often left-leaning intellectualism and politics, however carefully
concealed, often served to alienate me from other students in the program, and
occasionally, instructors; I felt too strongly that patriotism must be tempered with
skepticism, that one ought to love one’s country, but not necessarily one’s government.
However, I was good at my job, by the time I left. Though we may not have seen eye to
eye, I had earned a modicum of respect. Looking back, as strange as it is, it is one of
the few occasions where I can cite a genuine, well-placed pride. I taught them, and they
taught me.

As a teacher – for even an officer devoted to such a specialized capacity such as
myself was required to teach, due to a lack of warm bodies if nothing else – the
paralyzing fear that at the outset rendered me completely ineffectual before a class
gradually subsided to a dull roar in the back of my mind, though it never did subside
completely. I was not the best, but I was certainly not the worst, either. Though the
material was numbing and mundane – regulations for the sake of regulations – it was
easy to discern that many others had a much more relaxed demeanor before a crowd,
and that the crowd tended to be more receptive to someone who seemed sure of their lesson. Even recently, occasions whereupon I have been called before a class in the capacity of a student to relate the details of an assignment or report have usually been so fearful so as to defy much recollection on my part after the fact save general impressions and that which has been related to me by other students.

What, then, could I possibly do instead? Writing freelance ensured that I would be able to study and write what I pleased, but it also ensured that I would likely starve to death, and I felt that I had nothing of particular interest nor merit to write about. Writing in the private sector, though slightly less gloomy in terms of career prospects, seemed odious in that it would require me to essentially write only that which others espoused and/or approved of, living at the mercy, in essence, of a patron to whom I must necessarily kowtow to the demands of. (I acknowledge this is, perhaps, uncharitable on my part – even a professor may not, ostensibly, speak or write whatever they please.) Thus far, I do not think I have much enjoyed the experience of teaching, and I do not conceive of this changing save in the face of some wild shift in outlook or mentality – I much prefer being taught. Working at a higher-learning institution, however, seems to be unique in its attractiveness in that it allows one to study what thou wilt, and, even thrust into the uncomfortable position of having to teach others, it is with a begrudged and reluctant heart that I must admit teaching a subject to often be the best practice by which one’s memory of said subject can continually be reinforced and expanded. It is my hope that I might come to love it, as I have come to love things I once hated before. It is my fear that I delude myself with this hope.

It is worth mentioning that much of my career as a student has been defined by a willful ignorance as to the future on my part. Even as being a student came to be tolerable – and even enjoyable, as, gradually, those subjects requisite to a general education became fewer and fewer, replaced, instead, by those within my major – the future continued to daunt me, for reasons only exacerbated by the often philosophical nature of my studies. Adding to an extant fear of failure and of death, the very process by which time elapsed began to frighten me, as the concreteness of its mechanisms, breadth, and irreversibleness gradually ceased in being abstracts as opposed to fully acknowledged truths. Time, and the future, were profane things. Because of this, much
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of my higher education bore a distinct semblance to blind stumbling – because of my reluctance to think ahead, I often registered very late, preoccupied with exam-season exhaustion. Because of this bad habit, I seldom recalled the basis of logic behind my course selections by the time I came to actually attend them. While initially unnerving, this guessing game eventually became something to which I became accustomed, and even took mild amusement in – trying to surmise what a former-me of which my frail memory could recall nothing had seen in a particular course with which present-me had become involved. Little is certain of our former selves save that we share a body, and the fact that we but once share a time puts all burden of recollection as to this stranger we once were upon memory, which is highly fallible; rendered suspect due to our own narcissistic proclivities – as with Smith and Watson’s account in their book, Getting a Life, people tend to “remake their understanding of the ‘truth’ of the past” (14), a point of great anxiety for me, and I expect for many, as human nature compels us to conflate memory and history, whereas in reality, the latter is written, and the former, mutable. Conversely, as they come to question years later in another publication, “What difference would it make to learn that the narrative is a fabrication?” (Smith & Watson, “Reading” 242) What difference, indeed?

I often worried as to the future, and what I might be called upon to do in order to move forward a career beyond these delightful (if exhausting) days of endless study, but (un)luckily I was never called upon in any official capacity to be forced to confront these concerns, a fact that I have been recently informed was due to a clerical error that resulted in a lengthy period of time wherein I was not involved in the mandatory advising sessions normally afforded to students. Brought finally thither to one such appointment, my session was a brief one, perhaps made so by my discomfort and confusion as to what to ask, and what was appropriate to ask. It was frightful to put forth any assertion as to where I would like to go in light of how little effort I had put into researching such things; paradoxically, a lack of having asked questions left me afraid to ask questions. In light of this, I was advised to, perhaps, “Take a semester or two off, maybe find a job, and maybe think about what you really want to do in life. It would be unwise to put yourself in debt for life pursuing something you’re not sure about. Study for the GRE, research some colleges, at least find a position which might grant you a stipend. The
deadlines are too close if you’re having difficulty with your studies at the moment.”

Subsequent research for this project has reinforced the practicality of this advice; even if
I were to continue my studies at the University of Hawaii, it would require the readying
of a lengthy application by the first of January, in addition to a GRE assessment which,
ostensibly, would be best studied for as opposed to diving in blind. Even then,
admissions are accepted only for the Fall semester – raising the question as to what I
would do for half a year, and to what degree this unwonted freedom would blunt my
intellect, denied exercise through the frantic and desperate necessity of regular courses.
More than that, the admonition as to ascertaining the surety of my conviction to pursue
my education at a higher level haunts me, for I still truly am not certain if education is
best suited to me, given a general anxiety around other human beings and what feels to
be a level of intellectual prowess – and, perhaps, potential – insufficient to adequately
fulfill an instructor’s role without necessarily robbing any student under my tutelage of
the quality of education with which they ought to be provided. It would, in essence,
constitute a theft from society on the whole and a detriment to human progress. I had no
desire to become the very sort of instructor that had soured education for me in my
younger years. Further, I already knew I hadn’t the emotional fortitude to be the sort of
unflappable, reliable rock which all educators of merit seemed to be – in the past, I had
almost flunked out completely of college due to the closely-grouped implosion of my first
relationship and the subsequent suicide of my closest friend; as it stood, it left a years-
long decline in the quality of my studies from which I was extremely slow to recover in
any sense, taking every opportunity to hide in the recesses of a bottle and the
dreamless sleep it brought, or to contemplate joining him. Only letters warning of the
immediacy of my dismissal spurred me to put in any semblance of work, and then only
until another invariable decline and subsequent letter would begin the cycle anew. I
cannot say that such experiences have strengthened me against any particular future
travails – rather, I feel it has at most honed the skill of projecting a façade so as not to
disquiet those around me. Someone beholden to the education of others oughtn’t to be
so frail, and this is why questions as to my suitability and conviction for pursuing such a
profession gave me such pause.
III. Further Research – Graduate School

Over the course of doing research for this project, I’ve had the opportunity to peruse a number of papers dealing both with the life of an English graduate student and more generalist works dealing with suggestions chosen for their applicability to most graduate students. A variety of consistent themes emerged: The life of a graduate student is one defined by a lack of structure and lack of information as to how one’s time should be properly utilized, as they operate under the supposition on their institution’s part that they have absorbed the fundamentals of responsibility and self-direction requisite to this end. Building on this, another prevalent theme shared by most of the documents which I came across was the absolute necessity of developing a social network within the department with which one was to become involved, not only during one’s time as a graduate student, but even beforehand; one author suggested attending or auditing the professors under which one hoped to work semesters beforehand (Jardins). Getting to know professors, other students in the program, and advisors was suggested – the presumption being that, in the absence of clear direction, it would become of paramount importance to have a network of individuals to consult as to the minutiae of “what comes next” (Advice). This concept went hand in hand with an admonition ubiquitous in its presence in the articles I consulted: Graduate students needed to be intensely motivated in order to survive. The massive workload and lack of clear direction would not only present a technical challenge, but a mental one, as the psychologically deleterious effects of such a pursuit was evidently so prevalent as to merit mention by several different authors, each in turn offering up cautionary warnings as to the importance of maintaining one’s psychological health – on one occasion, even providing a concrete figure as to the abnormally high levels of depression among graduate students, a daunting half in comparison to the baseline population’s one in ten (Rothman). On a technical level, many made mention of the importance of a high GRE score, “if needed,” a point of anxiety for someone who was only recently enlightened as to the existence of such an examination (Runge). The importance of research and possible participation as assistants in the research projects of others was mentioned, as well as an admonition as to the necessity of conducting research in a rather brusque fashion due to the sheer amount of information which usually needed to be parsed; the
importance of learning how to judge a document by its abstract was emphasized. Of paramount importance seemed to be the eventuality of having to compile a master’s thesis – apparently an endeavor which would span years. Many of the previous suggestions played newly into sections involved with the discussion of such theses, in particular those dedicated to networking, this time pointing toward the necessity of bouncing your work off of anyone in the department who had the time to listen, a rather comic-seeming, frenetic expansion of the peer reviews with which we are often involved in 300- and 400-level classes. This more involved role with one’s department also played heavily into the necessity of knowing that which one would like to specialize in – a daunting suggestion in and of itself, terrifying in its implications of finality, of choosing a fork in the road to take. Another prevalent theme was financial in nature, the necessity of seeking a position as a TA or RA, which might grant one a stipend off of which to live – but I felt this was, perhaps, directed more toward students pursuing their doctorate as opposed to their master’s. Likewise of a financial cast was cautionary advice that a desirable position on the job market was not only uncertain, but perhaps even unlikely.

On a lighter note, at least one interviewee as part of a larger document I was perusing recommended taking time off between one’s undergraduate and graduate careers – comforting, given the likelihood of my doing so (Golde 32).

On a more academic-community centered scale, I was given the opportunity to briefly investigate some of the organizations with which graduate students and professors might seek membership; in particular, the Conference on College Composition and Communication and the National Council of Teachers of English. Reviewing the program detailing the itinerary of the former’s conference in 2011 was, at least, heartening; Many of the subjects of the workshops and sessions detailed therein were already of marginal interest to me, or, else, certainly seemed worth attending: The subject of how to ascertain that the work of educators within institutions of higher learning was ethical, for instance, or the changing mechanics of intellectual property as we pass as a society further into the digital age. The relationship of rhetoric to geopolitics and activism was the subject of one lecture, and another appeared to deal with the ongoing debate as to the merits of retaining the current tenure system. One dealt with the place of passion in learning, featuring what I thought was an impressively
neutral description which seemed not to espouse the jingoistic mantra of passion’s necessity so much as a level-headed attempt to weigh the merits of passion against the detriments of being potentially blinded by it. I say these things are heartening due to the intimidation with which I have regarded the prospect of being involved with extensive amounts of research as a matter of course – if the subject matter can at least be of potential interest, then perhaps there is yet hope in the margins of my thus-far grim assessment (Conference).

IV. Conclusions

Making choices in life is a subject that I approach with only the utmost trepidation. Seldom can they be gone back on in anything but a partial capacity, for the time committed is always lost. My studies have taught me as a matter of course to be unsure of everything, for to commit wholly to any truth being necessarily eternally valid is to blind oneself against the possibility of that idea being overturned or subverted in favor of a more valid truth later on. However, any movement forward seems reliant on at least some degree of certainty, however injurious to my philosophy of non-commitment it may be – and I must begrudgingly consent to the potential validity of such a necessity. If the extension of human knowledge is necessarily reliant on the reiterative amassing of knowledge – such that, with each subsequent generation, the past’s quantified knowledge must be absorbed, “caught up with”, and then built upon – then there must necessarily be a point at which this process becomes prohibitively difficult given the limitations of the human machine, necessitating either a change in methods of education so as to expedite this process, or else a change in the machine itself. Thus, we specialize and compartmentalize, following one path and foregoing others in the hopes that, banded together in institutions, one might cover the blind spots of another. Many of the advisory articles I pursued emphasized the necessity of justifying in no uncertain terms to the institution one sought to attend the reasons as to why they should accept you, in particular, above other applicants, as well as perhaps necessitating some quantity of sample writing to peruse. I would suppose from the ongoing emphasis on finding one’s particular field in which one might specialize in all mentions of graduate
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school I have seen likely extends to these pieces of work, and that, were I to pursue such a career, I would need to do so as an individual who knows which field in particular I would like to pursue, as opposed to approaching my application as a generalist. It’s a heavy question, and one I am not sure I can bring myself to answer in so short a time; yet, I fear that in temporizing, I might severely curtail my education in waiting for an entire year for the January 1st deadline to come around again, at least if I intend to continue my education in my current institution. A year out of classes seems bizarre and repugnant to one who has known naught but of them, but in the larger perspective it might be for the best, given my utter unpreparedness to tackle a task which has gradually illuminated itself as being one which ought to have been prepared for long before I had even begun to draw close to matriculation. Choice is frightening, yes, but in this particular case it would seem that, in my refusal to even contemplate the choices available to me in an appropriately timely manner, one has been made for me. It is tempting to view a hiatus of a year – momentous, for one who has lived but four and twenty – as a point of failure, a stain on my honor to agonize over, to feel guilt about. But I’m here. As obligatory as such a reaction feels, taken logically, it would only rob me of further time to plan, to work, to remedy my situation insofar as I am able – hating myself over my shortcomings won’t change the past, and it very well may change the future for the worse. It’s a lesson I’ve learned before, perhaps more than once, but forgotten – I can only hope that this is the time I shall retain it for good. Memory is difficult for me. It is a mess of notes, written on hands, on pages, on groves of post-its wreathing the bookshelves and reflective surfaces of my workspace that wax and wane with the semester’s tides. It is this document. If nothing else, I have this to remind me.

In addition, I have a year. A year to tackle who or what I wish to be, to remember or forget, to move forward or otherwise. Even were I to have gained nothing else of meaning from this assignment, I have gained an invaluable space wherein I have been forced to collect my thoughts and assess my situation, despite my urges to will the future away by ignoring it – an outcome, perhaps, more valuable than any grade.
Works Cited


