

VIRGINIA TECH BUSINESS COLLEGE ALUMNI REFLECT ON LITERATURE IN  
THEIR LIVES

by

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## Virginia Tech Business College Alumni Reflect on Literature in their Lives

Susan Marie Gordon

(Abstract)

Some colleges and universities require their business majors to take literature classes; others do not. Some businesspeople, as well as many educators such as Donna M. Kish-Goodling (1999), William McCarron (1980), and Philip Vassallo (1991), support the need for business students to study literature in order to improve their communication skills and degree of human understanding. Over the past fifty years, however, Virginia Tech's literature requirements for business majors have gradually diminished to none.

The twelve participants who were interviewed in this qualitative study were all business majors who graduated from Virginia Tech before 1990, when the business school, and the university at large, still required students to take one or more literature courses. The vast majority of participants agreed that they had benefited from studying literature as part of their undergraduate business degree. Participants most often credited the classes with broadening their world view, developing their analytical skills, making them more well-rounded, improving their communication skills, and helping them better express themselves. Participants agreed with Vassallo's suggestion that reading literature helped students to put their own lives into perspective (1991) and with poet Billy Collins' argument that exposure to literature was the key to learning how to write well (Lenham 2001). Even in today's highly technological society, the skills and insights obtained through the humanities, especially those involving writing, are still considered quite relevant by the participants.

The research suggests that core curriculum could benefit from being more balanced, as suggested by Chester Finn, Dianne Ravitch, and Robert Fancher (1984), so that it includes literature and humanities to the same extent that it currently includes

math, science, and social sciences. Literature courses, however, need not be exclusively relegated to English Departments and could even be specially designed for Business Departments, such as Kish-Goodling's class that used Shakespeare to teach monetary economics (1999). Literature courses that stress analytical reading and writing could prove quite useful to business majors.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

I am concerned that many of today's college undergraduates tend to regard literature classes (English, American, World, and others) as avenues of learning that do not need to be explored because they are not relevant to "real life" as seen by the student. As one of my community college students commented to me, "I am not much on literature." He felt that literature added no instructional benefit to his life, and stated, "If I am putting forth the time to read something, it is going to tell me how to do something." His attitude seemed to value things which are directly practical. There is nothing wrong with that attitude except that in restricting himself to the directly practical, he is missing out on areas of education that are indirectly practical, such as keener understanding of human nature and culture. Even students who seem to shun areas of study associated with personal enhancement for their own right might become interested in these studies if they understood they were not really impractical after all.

#### Technology, Humanities and Business

What I find "human" in the humanities is the often overlooked need to study not only the obviously useful disciplines of math, science, and technology but the equally useful, yet often more elusive, disciplines of art and literature, studies that deal not with machines but with human nature. There is a real danger that students of the twenty-first century might easily become so dependent on machines that they would be lost without them. I have often encountered sales clerks who cannot figure correct change without their computer's assistance. Many students likewise cannot work simple math problems without the aid of a calculator. Word processors are now, unfortunately, producing the same results where writing is concerned. Many of my students rely on their machines to tell them if their spelling and grammar are correct and to suggest words to be used instead of relying on their own knowledge. These days, whenever a business's computer goes down, everything else seems to shut down as well. While I am not suggesting that studying literature will rectify this situation, it might help students to see that what is inside the human mind is still greater than what is found in mere technology. Literature helps people to visualize in their minds the greatness of humanity; it helps them to

improve not only their reading skills but, more importantly, their skills at reading between the lines. Not all important information is explicitly stated, which is why reading between the lines is important. Close reading of literature can enable students to better distinguish implied meaning; it can help them look for clues in the text that reveal meaning not directly stated.

There are still many small liberal arts colleges thriving in the United States dedicated to exposing their students to a liberal arts education, including humanities; however, many large universities do not ensure that all of their students study the humanities (McPherson and Schapiro, 1999). Of course, a few universities still require several hours of humanities in their undergraduate core curriculum. Auburn University, for example, requires six hours of World Literature beyond composition, six of history, and three of philosophy—a total of fifteen hours of humanities. The university also requires six hours of composition, three hours of fine arts, three hours of mathematics, eight hours of lab science, and six hours of social sciences ([www.auburn.edu/academic/provost/undergrad\\_studies/core.html](http://www.auburn.edu/academic/provost/undergrad_studies/core.html)). In contrast, Virginia Tech requires a much less balanced curriculum of a total of six hours of humanities and a total of eighteen to twenty hours of combined lab science, social science and math ([www.uaac.vt.edu/coreguides/2004-2005.pdf](http://www.uaac.vt.edu/coreguides/2004-2005.pdf)).

Ever since the race for space began over forty years ago, students have been encouraged to study more and more math, science and technology, often at the expense of the humanities, which are often regarded as “old-fashioned” and “frivolous.” In the decades before Sputnik, college undergraduates were more often encouraged to pursue a liberal arts education, which along with math and science also included such humanities as literature, Latin, history and philosophy. Even students enrolled in colleges that specialized in more scientific degrees were still required to study some humanities courses in order to strengthen their cultural foundation (Virginia Polytechnic Institute Catalog, 1950). Since Sputnik, however, college undergraduates have gradually been encouraged to shift their attention more toward sciences and technology and away from the arts and humanities, which are too often seen as impractical in our modern business age (Devitt, 1995; Marziali, 1995). If culture cannot be marketed or profited from directly, is it then to be viewed as worthless, or at best not worth the bother?

Fifty years ago all students at Virginia Polytechnic Institute, the university that evolved into Virginia Tech, were required to take literature courses. Today literature courses are not required by any of the university's colleges. The last college at Virginia Tech to drop its literature requirement was the Pamplin College of Business. It should not be surprising, however, that a college concentrating on such a practical subject as business should keep its literature requirement until 1993, for many people in business and business education still recognize the need for businesspeople to be well-rounded, articulate, and able to relate to their clients on various levels. Businesspeople need to know more than numbers and the jargon of their field because they need to communicate with clients from diverse backgrounds. Business majors need both the introspection and the knowledge of humanity that literature classes can bring them. Business majors need to know more than just business; they need to understand humanity, for they are especially in need of good people-skills if they wish to sell themselves and their products and to communicate with the clients they serve.

Although I admit that I am concerned that the majority of today's university students are not being adequately exposed to literature classes, I chose to concentrate only on business majors for this study in order to focus on how the needs of businesspeople can be addressed through the study of literature. In the two pilot studies I conducted in the past, concerning why students elect to study literature and what students like and dislike regarding the study of Shakespeare, I encountered students interested in literature from a variety of majors other than English and the performing arts. These majors included biology, math, engineering, psychology, communications, food science technology, and political science, but never business. Business majors have been conspicuous only through their absence. This experience of business majors' apparent lack of interest in non-business fields they view as unnecessary is, evidently, not unique to me, for David A. Cowan of Miami University writes that when he requires his business students to visit an art museum, business students, business professors, and museum tour guides are equally surprised for generally an "abyss" is perceived between business and arts (1992). Likewise Donna M. Kish-Goodling, who uses works by John Stuart Mill and Shakespeare in her economics classes at Muhlenberg College, writes that she has had students complain that they are taking economics because they do not want to

take English classes (1999). And Philip Vassallo, simultaneously employed as a marketing director and adjunct writing instructor, laments that encouraging his students to write in a more literary style “is indeed a hard sell” as is convincing business students “that expressiveness is in fact a crucial element of effective business writing” (1991, p. 281). Many business majors consider themselves practical people and tend to regard the study of literature as impractical and immaterial, yet many liberal arts colleges offer business as a major. It might seem a contradiction that while literature is often rejected by business majors as unimportant, college curriculum planners continue to recommend literature classes for their business majors. Many schools still require their business majors to study literature, but other schools have dropped their literature requirement.

I interviewed former Virginia Tech students for this study for two reasons. Firstly, alumni are already out in the business world and can, therefore, bring a perspective that current students can only anticipate. Secondly, since literature classes were required at Virginia Tech for business majors until 1993, all graduates before 1990 would have studied literature whereas current or more recent graduates may not. Do these business alumni feel that their study of literature has been useful to them in their post-college years, or do they feel it was a waste of time?

### Research Questions

In order to gather impressions concerning the effects of literature classes on practical-minded, former business majors, I was most interested in answering the following questions:

- How do alumni of Virginia Tech’s Business College view their previous undergraduate literature classes in relation to their lives and careers?
- What do Virginia Tech business alumni most remember concerning their literature studies, and how do they make meaning of these memories?

### Vanishing Literature Requirements at VT

It has been suggested that today's undergraduates are too specialized and graduate knowing a great deal about their chosen major but little else. It is said of specialists that they know more and more about less and less until they eventually know everything

about nothing. A society of clones, where everyone knows exactly the same information, is certainly not advisable, but a society where everyone knows only what is considered necessary for his or her field is no better.

A strict core curriculum that allows for no choice or individual variation would not serve to broaden students' perspectives. On the other hand, today's students are often simply allowed to bypass classes which were once considered vital. Diane Ravitch writes that "curricular reforms have broken down the coherence of the liberal arts curriculum, both in high school and in college, so that students have a wide degree of choice and few requirements" (1997, p.199). Even when a university's core curriculum requires students to take a variety of courses, it also allows the students to avoid taking many courses that used to be standard fare.

For example, all students attending Virginia Tech fifty years ago were required to study literature even though the school itself was certainly not a liberal arts college. In fact, fifty years ago the school, then called Virginia Polytechnic Institute, offered only the following majors: architecture, agricultural economics, agronomy, animal husbandry, biology, business administration, chemistry, dairy husbandry, engineering, forestry and wildlife conservation, general agriculture, general science, geology, home economics, horticulture, industrial arts education, industrial physics, poultry husbandry, rural sociology, and vocational education. Students attending the university were obviously interested in practical matters. Still, the curriculum committee in place in 1950 saw the need to include literature in the students' overall studies in varying degrees. Engineering majors, as well as those studying geology and architecture, were required to take not only a full year of English Composition but also an additional quarter of literature—usually English literature but occasionally Shakespeare or American literature. Students majoring in many agricultural subjects such as horticulture and dairy husbandry, among others, were required to take two quarters of literature classes beyond English Composition, while those majoring in general agriculture were required to take three quarters of English Composition, one quarter of American literature, one quarter of contemporary literature, one quarter of vocabulary building, and three quarters of French or German. Other majors, including biology, business administration, chemistry, industrial physics, agronomy, animal husbandry, forestry, and home economics, were

required to take a full year (three quarters) of literature classes, comprised of one quarter each of English literature from the eighteenth century onwards, American literature, and Shakespeare. Many of these majors required three to six quarters of German or French as well, and the rural sociology major, for reasons not made clear in the VPI catalog, also required a quarter of the works of Edgar Allan Poe. General science, however, topped the list as the major requiring the greatest number of humanities courses. Its majors took three quarters of English Composition, three quarters of English and American literature, two quarters of contemporary literature, one quarter of public speaking, one quarter of vocabulary building and six quarters of French (Virginia Polytechnic Institute Catalog, 1950).

My father attended this university in the 1950s, and he can still recount the numerous English classes he was required to take and what he studied in those classes. He remembers many of the works he read: *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, *The Sound and the Fury*, *Quo Vadis*, *Hamlet*, and *The Biography of Queen Victoria*. In fact, he claims that he remembers more from the parallel readings he read for literature and vocabulary building classes than he remembers of some of the material from the classes in his business major (A. J. Gordon, personal communication, October 17, 2001).

It should be noted that in 1950 the only humanities offered at the university were English, French, and German. Students were not given the wide variety of humanities choices they have today, but they were made to include in their plan of study those humanities the school offered.

In contrast, today's student at Virginia Tech is given a veritable smorgasbord of classes to choose from in order to meet his or her core curriculum requirements. Choice is good, but one can have too much of a good thing. The current core curriculum at Virginia Tech requires that students take twelve courses which at first glance seem to be somewhat balanced between science and humanities, but on closer inspection can easily sway towards science and technology and away from arts and humanities because many courses not generally associated with traditional humanities can, under this plan, be counted as humanities. Three courses in the arts and humanities beyond the required six credits of Freshman Writing are included in the twelve. Two of these courses must be

listed under the category “Ideas, Cultural Traditions, and Values” and one must be found under the listing of “Creativity and the Aesthetic Experience.” There are, however, 141 courses that fall under the category of “Ideas, Cultural Traditions, and Values”—more than all the seventeen math, nineteen science, fifty-seven social science and thirty-five fine art courses combined. And not only are traditional humanities disciplines such as English, foreign languages, history, philosophy and religion included in their number but so are classes in the following departments: Agricultural and Applied Economics; Apparel, Housing and Resource Management; Architecture; Art; Music; Forestry; Horticulture; Political Science; and Science and Technology in Society. Many of these classes would seem a better fit with the social sciences or the core curriculum’s separate category for fine arts (twenty are, in fact, cross-listed in the fine arts group) and seem to be merely masquerading as humanities in the interest of giving students more choice.

The goals listed in the core curriculum under the heading “Ideas, Cultural Traditions, and Values” are as follows:

1. Examine some of the formative ideas and cultural traditions that have shaped Western experience;
2. Study classic and contemporary texts that influenced or exemplify currents in Western thought and imagination;
3. Gain an understanding of some aspects of human achievement and experience that have been persistently overlooked in mainstream Western culture, including those of women, minorities, and nonwestern peoples;
4. Analyze creative works of various mediums both in the arts and technology from the viewpoints of cultural meanings and influence;
5. Gain acquaintance with historical traditions and humanistic methods of studying and interpreting them;
6. Consider the contributions of philosophical, ethical, or religious systems to human life;
7. Recognize how the interaction of tradition and innovation nourishes both individuality and community;
8. Gain critical and appreciative perspective upon one's own culture by studying other historical periods and other cultural traditions;

9. Study the life, thought, and creative activity of men and women of achievement in various fields of human endeavor.

([www.uaac.vt/edu/coreguides/2004-2005.pdf](http://www.uaac.vt/edu/coreguides/2004-2005.pdf)).

A great many goals, it seems, are to be accomplished in only two courses, especially considering that any two of 141 possible courses can be used to meet these goals.

Although students are also given choices in other areas within the core curriculum, these choices are more narrow and traditional. For example, students may choose any two of nineteen courses listed in the category “Scientific Reasoning and Discovery” and two of seventeen in the category “Quantitative and Symbolic Reasoning.” So there is a rather tight rein on math and science while there is vast liberty granted in choosing humanities courses. This looseness awarded the humanities allows important courses to be avoided in a way much less likely to happen in the more tightly structured math and science arena. The line between humanities and social sciences can at times be very fine and the disciplines might possibly even overlap occasionally, but there is a danger that the humanities category might be regarded as a catchall for any appealing course that does not clearly fit within the boundaries of math or science. And literature classes, once the primary means of humanities studies for most students at Virginia Tech, are now easy to totally avoid.

#### Why Literature?

“Ideas are to literature what light is to painting”

Paul Bourget *La Physiologie de l'Amour Moderne*, 1890

It is through literature that a society's ideas, traditions and values are primarily addressed. Other disciplines may cover some of these aspects in part, but literature covers them all. Perhaps that is why Virginia Tech's curriculum in past decades wisely chose literature to serve as students' main, and in many cases only, gateway to the humanities.

According to Ravitch "for several years college officials had reported a steady increase in the number of freshmen who read poorly and wrote atrociously" (1997, p. 202). All students are required to take Freshman English because it is generally agreed upon that the ability to write is important for all disciplines. What is often overlooked,

however, is the concept that the ability to write well is inseparable from the ability to read well. Although the issue is rarely, if ever, addressed where college students are concerned, the National Reading Panel stated that “literally hundreds of correlational studies” have been conducted concerning elementary students and these “studies suggest that the more that children read, the better their fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension” become (Williams, 2000). And while studies such as the one conducted by the Center for Children and Families in collaboration with Harvard University support the fact that it is important to begin good reading and writing habits in early elementary school, that does not mean that educators should later neglect these habits once the student reaches college (Dickinson and DiGisi, 1998). Billy Collins, former Poet Laureate of the United States, makes a case for literature that is both practical and idealistic. He said in a recent interview given to Fritz Lanham that, “You learn to write by reading” (2001).

I have noticed that among my students at the community college where I teach, those who are good readers are likewise good writers; while those who are poor readers are poor writers. This casual observation agrees with the National Reading Panel’s findings (Williams, 2000). It could, therefore, be argued that good readers make good writers. It is probably no coincidence that students who do not engage in reading beyond the minimum standards required for school produce papers full of awkward phrasing, misspelled words, incorrect Standard English usage, and punctuation problems. Students cannot be expected to construct well-written papers on their own without reading the well-constructed works of others. While it is true that literature is not the only source of well-constructed prose, it is certainly as good a starting place as any. Literature is more than fiction. It also includes nonfiction essays, biographies, histories, etc. Students who read only technical writing cannot be expected to understand or produce writing that is not technical in nature.

#### Utilitarian Fallacy

“Facts alone are wanted in life”

Charles Dickens, *Hard Times*, 1854

Dickens’ Utilitarianist Mr. Gradgrind haughtily begins the novel *Hard Times* by giving these orders to the school teacher, Mr. M’Choakumchild

Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of service to them. This is the principle on which I bring up my own children, and this is the principle on which I bring up these children. Stick to Facts, sir!

(1854, p. 1)

By the novel's conclusion, a much humbled and wiser Gradgrind has learned that there is indeed a great deal more to life than facts. His children, whom he so proudly raised on facts alone, have made all the wrong decisions throughout their miserable lives because they had never learned about human emotion, their own spiritual needs, or the needs of others.

It can be argued that today's college student does not know less than his or her counterpart of fifty years ago, but rather that he or she merely knows different things. Today's student knows much more about technology, much of which did not even exist fifty years ago. Computers, for instance, are now an essential part of daily life and need to be addressed in education, but fifty years ago few people ever encountered them. Today's student also knows more about current world issues, which are different, and perhaps even more complex, than world issues of the past. He or she might even know more about certain aspects of history and literature that were regularly overlooked in the past. Fifty years ago, much less attention would have been paid to studies dealing with women and ethnic minorities or with areas of the world outside the Western cultural realm.

Literature, however, can serve to introduce today's students to human joys, desires and disappointments. Literature encompasses the history that produced it, the men and women who wrote it, the "Everyman" it seeks to explore. To study literature is to study not only the sound and meaning of words but the history, psychology, and sociology behind those words. For, as Collins says, our literature "forms the history of human emotion. It's the only one we have, really" (Lanham, 2001).

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Ravitch maintains that “we must concern ourselves with the survival of history, philosophy, literature, and those other disciplines that may lack immediate utility because without them ours would be an intellectually impoverished and spiritually illiterate civilization” (1997, p. 205). It can be argued, however, that Americans are quite interested in utility. Some people maintain that for generations Americans have tended to view education simply as a means of making money. In his book *The Opening of the American Mind*, Lawrence Levine traces the history of the neoclassicist movement in higher education in the first half of the twentieth century. Nearly seventy years ago neoclassicist Robert Hutchins complained

The people love money and think that education is a way of getting it. They think too that democracy means that every child should be permitted to acquire the educational insignia that will be helpful in making money. They do not believe in cultivation of the intellect for its own sake. (Levine 1996, p. 48)

Education and intellect for their own sake is a rather Quixotic goal. It is natural for people to wish to improve their living conditions and that often requires making money. Utility should not, and in all likelihood cannot, be banned from higher education, but it should not be the sole goal of higher education either.

Novelist Fay Weldon in her book *Letters to Alice on First Reading Jane Austen* beautifully speaks of literature as the “City of Invention” (1984). Literature seems quite alive to her. She makes a strong and poetic case for the need for literature when she writes that in the City of Invention,

You will always hear a great deal of enlivening dissension and discussion. Should Madame Bovary have munched the arsenic? Would Anna Karenina have gone under the train had Tolstoy been a woman, would Darcy have married Elizabeth anywhere but in the City of Invention . . . And thus, by such discussion and such shared experience, do we understand ourselves and one another, and our pasts and our futures. It is in the literature, the novels, the fantasy, the fiction of the past, that you find *real* history, and not in textbooks. (1984, p. 18)

Novels of historical fiction are not always highly accurate. It can be argued that fiction does not paint a fair and truthful picture of history. At best it often paints a one-sided picture of history. Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*, for instance, could be accused of these faults. It should be remembered, however, that such books as Mitchell's, which was set in the mid 1800s but written in the 1930s, are really products of the time in which they were written rather than the time in which they are set. Novels, dramas, and short stories might not always impart to the reader any great universal human truths, but they do reflect the beliefs of the society that produces them, which can be quite enlightening in their own right.

Students who identify with characters in literature can use literary works to explore their own dreams and fantasies and in turn learn more about themselves (Jones, 1985). Philip Vassallo in his dual career as marketing director and adjunct college writing instructor had the opportunity to engage one of his business clients in a conversation regarding literature. The client, a prosperous man then in his early sixties, commented that he had "studied literature for years" and that it had "been a great help to [his] career." When asked by Vassallo "what connection he saw between literature and business, what powers did literature have in helping him plan and operate a successful corporation," the man replied that from Winston Churchill's accounts of indomitable spirit in the face of World War Two to the lust for power in Shakespeare's *Richard III* to Arthur Miller's warnings against unrealistic production schedules in *All My Sons* to the value of planning in Michael Shaara's *The Killer Angels* to the power of lyrical intensity found in Edmond Rostand's *Cyrano de Bergerac*, they all helped him "put things in perspective" in his own life (1991, pp. 278-279).

#### The Humanities in Education

Ravitch, in her essay "From History to Social Studies: Dilemmas and Problems," is directly addressing the need for teaching more history in schools; however, she acknowledges that history and literature are often interwoven. Ravitch says that in order to understand the present, students need to understand the past. Literature from the past can aid in fulfilling this need. She says she

frequently hears complaints about students who know next to nothing

about events that occurred before the 20th century, or who are ignorant of the Bible, Shakespeare, the Greek myths, or other material that was once common knowledge. As a Berkeley professor put it to me a few years ago, ‘They have no furniture in their minds. You could assume nothing in the way of prior knowledge. Skills, yes; but not knowledge.’

(1985, p. 82)

In 1893 the Committee of Ten, the committee chaired by Harvard University President Charles W. Eliot and appointed by the National Educational Association to “recommend a uniform high school curriculum” (Brendon), declared, Ravitch tells us, that although the rote-memorization style of teaching history was pointless and painful, history when “taught in conjunction with such studies as literature, geography, art and languages” served to “broaden and cultivate the mind” (1985, p. 85). Most importantly, she points out that both the Committee of Ten and the Committee of Seven that followed it in 1899 insisted that history, and other humanities, were intended for all students and not only for those going on to college. The Committee of Ten declared that American education existed “to prepare young people for ‘the duties of life’ for which the best preparation is what we would today call a liberal education” (Ravitch, 1995, p. 171).

However around the time of the First World War, the traditional curriculum was greatly disrupted by the Progressive movement, which sought to modernize schools and make all learning practical and utilitarian, thus spelling the beginning of the end for liberal education. The curriculum now began to focus on utility and students’ interests. The humanities, to the Progressives, did not seem to further social efficiency. This school of thought concerning the need for education to be practical is still with us. In the introduction to their book *Against Mediocrity*, Finn, Ravitch, and Fancher write that “there is always the danger that the current interest in science and mathematics might overwhelm the values of the less obviously useful, more contemplative disciplines of the humanities” (1984, p. 5). They warn that without the “shared understanding” that the humanities bring us,

we risk becoming a society that loses its balance, rather like a foolish athlete who builds up just one side his body on the false assumption that he only needs strength in the limbs and muscles that actually pass the

football or hurl the javelin. An educational system that only strengthens itself in math, science, and basic skills risks producing a generation of technopeasants: individuals who manipulate complex machines without knowing why, who depend on other machines for amusement and recreation, who have no real intellectual interest or cultural lives.

(1984, p. 6)

Marilyn K. Goldberg writes that she wants the literature classes she teaches to contribute to her students' education in many ways. Her goals include those most often mentioned by other educators in English: increased knowledge of cultural heritage, enjoyment of good literature, appreciation of aesthetic qualities of literature, and skill in analyzing literature, society and themselves. Goldberg, however, believes that the

most important contribution—one more likely to emerge from a class in literature than from most other classes—is a certain frame of mind, an attitude, a warm and welcoming search for the new experiences that continued reading promises [students], a receptive response to the kind of sharing and consequent enlarging of their own selves through the many selves and experiences available in works of literature. (1982, p. 1)

In short, she says the greatest contribution literature classes can make is to help students learn to “read and think for themselves” (1982).

There are educators in the field of college English who firmly believe that literature teaches students about the “eternal truths” of all human existence. Ann Forrester’s paper “Why Teach Shakespeare? (Or Any Other Dead White Male?),” presented at the Community Colleges Humanities Association Conference in Washington, D.C. in 1995, explains that Shakespeare is an important element of our culture and still very relevant to our own times despite the fact that these plays are now 400 years old. She says education is more than learning the skills needed for a high paying job. It is the training for a “lifetime of increased awareness” and that, she says, is what Shakespeare can bring students. Forrester feels that Shakespeare “deals with all the universal matters and any one of the Seven Deadly Sins you can think of.” He showcases human weaknesses and strengths—characteristics that have remained constant for over 5000 years (1995).

But as Levine points out the canon itself is not constant; perhaps the only thing constant about it is its “constant state of flux.” The accepted writers in the canon change from generation to generation. Even Shakespeare is a fairly recent addition to it. In the 1700s and early 1800s, the educated person studied Homer and Horace, not Shakespeare. And even the study of Homer was more concerned with grammar than grandeur (1996). It is probably unwise to suggest that any one writer, or group of writers, holds the key to life’s eternal truths, but literature on the whole does tend to reflect common human concerns.

### Reading at Risk

“Reading maketh a full man”

Francis Bacon, *Essays*, 1625

Unfortunately, reading in the United States seems to be on the decline. This is the conclusion of the National Endowment of the Arts 2004 report titled *Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America*. According to Dana Gioia, Chairman of the National Endowment of the Arts, “For the first time in modern history, less than half of the adult population now reads literature, and these trends reflect a larger decline in other sorts of reading.” He goes on to say that “literary reading in America is not only declining rapidly among all groups, but the rate of decline has accelerated, especially among the young . . . *Reading at Risk* merely documents and qualifies a huge cultural transformation that most Americans have already noted—our society’s massive shift toward electronic media for entertainment and information” (2004, p. vii).

The survey used a sample of 17,000 adults from a wide range of demographics and spanned twenty years of polling. The Survey of Public Participation in the Arts (SPPA)

asked respondents if, during the past twelve months, they had read any novels or short stories, plays, or poetry. A positive response to any of those three categories is counted as reading literature, including popular genres such as mysteries, as well as contemporary and classic literary fiction. No distinctions were drawn on the quality of literary works. In addition to the three questions pertaining to literature, the SPPA asked respondents if they had read any books, and, if so, how

many . . . Books can be of any type and cover a vast array of subjects, literary and non-literary alike, and for the purposes of the survey, the respondents need to have read as a leisure time activity, not for school or work. (2004, pp. 1-2)

The survey reported that in 1982, 56.9% of the adult population in America read literature; by 1992 that percentage had dropped to 54% and by 2002 it had fallen to only 46.7%. Even non-literary reading is declining. In 1992, 60.9% of those surveyed said they had read a book; ten years later that number had dropped to 56.6%. The study also found that reading has been declining among both men and women, and among Whites, African-Americans, and Hispanics. Reading among non-college graduates steadily declined, but it declined just as dramatically among college students and college graduates. In 1982, 82.1% of college students and graduates reported reading literature, by 1992 that number had fallen to 74.6%, and by 2002 it was a mere 66.7% (2004, pp. ix-xi).

“Reading is declining among all age groups” the survey tells us, but its “steepest decline in literary reading is in the youngest age groups.” From 1982 to 2002 the rate of decline in young adults age 18-24 was 28%. This rate is “55% greater than that of the total adult population.” Among those age 25-34, the decline was 23%, whereas the decline in older age groups was considerably less dramatic (2004, p. xi). Chapter three of the survey says that the statistical model, taking into account “differences in education, income, and other socioeconomic factors,” shows that people in the 18-24 age group are “about 15% less likely than others to read literature” (2004, p. 10). The NEA warns that “the trends among younger adults warrant special concern, suggesting that—unless some effective solution is found—literary culture, and literacy in general, will continue to worsen. Indeed, at the current rate of loss, literary reading as a leisure activity will virtually disappear in half a century,” (2004, p. xiii).

The survey suggests that TV, videogames, movies, and the Internet might be contributing factors to the decline in reading among young adults and suggests that the effects of mass media need to be further researched. However, it admits that even “frequent readers watch only slightly less TV per day than infrequent readers” (2004, p. 15). In 1982, personal computers were still rare, the Internet was a very small network, and video games, cable TV, and video rentals were fairly new phenomena, the survey

points out. In the course of the past two decades, it is feared by the NEA that the United States metamorphosed from a “nation of readers” to a “nation of watchers” (2004, p. 21). The survey concludes that although TV has not had much of an effect on the decline of literary reading, the Internet might play a role, for as the reading rate has dramatically dropped, Internet use has soared. The survey asks, but does not answer, how literary reading can “compete with the Internet, popular entertainment, and other increased demands on leisure time” (2004, p. 30). The concentration needed for reading books in general, and literary reading in particular, might also be in shorter supply among today’s young adults. For as Gioia points out, “Even interactive electronic media, such as video games and the Internet, foster shorter attention spans and accelerated gratification” (2004, p. vii).

The survey also compared the reading habits of Americans to the habits of their counterparts in other nations. It found that 67% of Canadians indicated they read at least one book each year (any type of book, not merely literary reading) compared to only 57% of Americans. Recent studies in Europe suggest that in some countries the percentage of people engaging in leisure reading is rather high, such as 72% in Sweden and 63% in the United Kingdom, while in other countries the numbers were much lower than those of the United States. The countries with the lowest rates were Portugal at 15% and Belgium at 23%. The European study also categorized readers who read eight or more books a year as “strong readers.” Thirty-seven percent of Europeans were strong readers. The United Kingdom has the highest percentage of strong readers at 52%, whereas the United States “falls in the bottom third of the 15 European countries surveyed” (2004, p. 7).

The NEA survey also warns that “the decline in literary reading foreshadows an erosion in cultural and civic participation” in general, for literary readers were over two and one half times more likely than non-literary readers to perform volunteer and charity work, almost three times more likely to attend performing arts events than non-literary readers, and even nearly one and three quarters more likely to attend sporting events (2004, p. xii). Readers, the surveys suggests, are highly social, active people. “In fact, people who read larger numbers of books tend to have the highest levels of participation in other activities” the survey reports (2004, p. 5).

### The Posthuman Future, the Human Factor, and the Liberal Arts

Much of modern technology is quite beneficial to humanity; however, too much reliance on it can perhaps hurt actual learning. As the *Reading at Risk* report shows, Americans are spending significantly more money on electronic media and consequently spending more time using these media. At the same time the survey also shows that college-age Americans are reading less than any other age group. Certainly there is nothing wrong in enjoying the benefits many new technologies bring society, but if these new interactive technologies do encourage more intellectually passive participation than traditional educational methods that rely heavily on intensive reading, as Gioia suggests (*Reading at Risk*, 2004, p. vii), then they might well be leading our society to become “slaves of the machine” in a world rapidly becoming “posthuman” (Brantlinger, 2001).

In his 1976 interview with Bill Moyers, Robert Penn Warren expressed his belief that young people were becoming increasingly illiterate, even at Yale where he taught. He complained that American society was “driving fairly straight for a purely technological society” and in doing so was losing its human identity. The self, he said, will cease to exist and simply become part of the machine. The antidote to this problem he said was “the proper kind of education. I mean education that has something of the humanistic about it.” He used Auden’s poem “The Unknown Citizen” to illustrate his point and when he had finished reading it, Moyers response was, “Chilling. Shades of George Orwell” (Watkins & Heirs, 1976, pp. 212-215). This interview occurred more than a quarter century ago. It would seem we are traveling down the path that Warren foresaw and could use the antidote of which he spoke.

The human interaction—human to human, not human to machine—so often found in literature courses, and not in the science and social science lecture halls that seat hundreds, can be a very important element in making these classes successful. Humanities, especially English and history, it can be argued, are intellectual necessities. College undergraduates need exposure to literature because if they manage to graduate without this exposure, they will probably never be exposed to it at any other time. The need today for literature classes is greater than ever. Students of the twenty-first century are in danger in our fast-paced, visually-oriented world of losing the firm command of both spoken and written language so necessary to business and personal success.

Ironically, though the need is great for today's students to have a solid understanding of the humanities, there are fewer liberal arts colleges in America today than there were fifty years ago, and fewer large universities are requiring the humanities courses they once did (Trombley, 2004).

Thomas Jefferson Classical Academy, a private secondary school in Mooresboro, North Carolina, suggests that a liberal education promotes “the love of learning.” This school's philosophy maintains that

throughout history, from Greek and Roman times down to the present, writers have made the case for what's called liberal education—not an education that's politically liberal, but a love of learning for its own sake, a learning that liberates the mind from ignorance and error, a learning that forms independent thinkers who can make great and original contributions to times in which they live. Such an education typically includes the liberal arts, history, literature, natural science, and philosophy (2005).

The very term “liberal education” originated in ancient Greece and Rome. The word “liberal” here refers to “liberty” because only free people, and not slaves, could study subjects that encouraged people to think for themselves (DiBiase, 2005; Taylor, 2003). In ancient Rome, slaves were allowed to study business, accounting, and even medicine, all of which were considered skills; only free citizens were allowed to study the liberal arts which were designed to educate people (McAnulty College, 2003). Likewise the term “liberal arts” literally means “the arts of a free person,” subjects designed to enable students “to distinguish truth from lies and creatively express” that truth to others (Weber, 2001). Gene Veith, dean of the School of Arts and Sciences at Concordia University in Wisconsin, believes that “a lot of today's education goes back to the education for slaves” who only received vocational training so that they would not “develop the capacity to think for themselves” (Taylor, 2003). Susan M. DiBiase, Phi Beta Kappa from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, states that most of today's college students, and their parents, want college to give them a practical education that will secure them a job. DiBiase, however, urges students to ask themselves if they are educating themselves not “only for work but also for life” (2005). Ironically technology changes so quickly in the twenty-first century, DiBiase maintains,

that “most facts college students learn” are already out of date by the time they enter the job market. “Most corporate executives,” she tells us, “value an education that prepares one for a lifetime of imaginative and productive work.” DiBiase further states that “business leaders know that survival in today’s unstable job market depends upon the intellectual discipline that only a liberal education can offer” (2005).

### What is Literature?

What is literature? People define literature in various ways. Some define literature broadly as any form of writing. Others see literature much more narrowly as only fiction. To some, “English literature” means simply works by British authors as opposed to American literature written by Americans. To others “English literature” includes all literature written in the English language, and includes works by writers from England, America, Canada, Australia, South Africa, etc. Still others would include literature originally written in a language other than English but presented in English translation as “English literature.” Under this model Anton Chekhov, Henrik Ibsen, Guy de Maupassant, and others are taught in English literature classes. And literature is not just fiction. Essays, transcribed orations, and sermons are all examples of non-fiction which are clearly literature even though they were not included as such in the *Reading at Risk* report. And literature is not exclusively the domain of the English Department. Nonfiction often associated with other disciplines should really be included when one refers to literature. Books about history, philosophy, religion and even science can be considered literature as long as they are more than a string of facts, statistics, theorems, and how-to instruction.

Freelance writer Ester Lombardi defines literature as “broadly speaking” any written work “from creative writing to more technical or scientific works, but,” she writes, “the term is most commonly used to refer to works of the creative imagination, including works of poetry, drama, fiction and nonfiction” (2005). Finding the definitive definition for the term “literature” proves to be a very challenging, if not impossible, task. Jim Meyer, of the University of North Dakota, admits that “understanding exactly what literature is has always been a challenge; pinning down a definition has proven to be quite difficult” (1997). Professor Barry Laga, of Mesa State College, also concedes that

although many have tried, “no one has successfully defined literature in such a way that it accounts for the complexities of language and a wide variety of written text” (2005). If literature is defined as fiction, then why are the non-fiction works, such as James Boswell’s *Biography of Samuel Johnson*, which Laga considers history, so often included on the reading lists of English classes? Allison Heisch, of California State University, asks if speeches are considered literature. She points out that the speeches of Sojourner Truth did not often appear “in conventional American literature anthologies” until recently because being oral in nature, they were often dismissed as nonliterature. Heisch argues that such speeches, however, are useful literary texts (2005).

Students using “Converse: The Literature Website,” a joint project between Cambridge University and schools and colleges across Britain, designed to help students and teachers of English literature, also questioned the definition of literature over a series of postings dating from November 2004 to January 2005. They asked if “literature is just writing that for some reason is highly regarded.” Does it include popular fiction? Does it have to be imaginative writing? One poster wrote that “literature is like humour—you can’t define it except in terms of itself, but we can all recognize it” (Anon-Converse, 2005).

Meyer tries to define literature as texts which are “marked by careful use of language, including features such as creative metaphors, well-turned phrases, elegant syntax, rhyme, alliteration, meter.” He explains that based on this definition “carefully-written personal essays are more likely to be considered literary than are, for example, encyclopedia articles.” Meyer compares a prototypical work of literature to a prototypical bird. “Birds that fly and sing” he tells us, “such as robins and canaries” might better fit the prototypical bird category than birds that do not fly or sing. None the less, penguins and ostriches are birds. Novels and poems best fit the prototypical literary work, but essays and histories may still be literary. He concludes that “prototypical literary works deal with human condition and experience in some way” (1997). With this criteria in mind, the elusive definition of literature might be summed up in a simple manner; works of both fiction and non-fiction that deal with significant intellectual, emotional, or cultural questions and issues fall within the scope of literature.

Reading is often considered *the* most important skill taught in school, the door to knowledge, since much knowledge in all subjects is obtained through reading (Bruce and Davidson, 1996). This attitude is probably the motivation behind the Reading and Writing Across the Curriculum movement. Students must be able to identify main ideas, distinguish fact from fiction, evaluate author's ideas, analyze issues, judge evidence, and draw conclusions from whatever they read (McDonald, 2001; Reading Across the Curriculum, 2003). Reading is important to all disciplines; however, reading the observations of scientific experiments, statistical data of economic developments, and mathematical proofs does not always, or even often, convey the human condition that is the necessary component of literary written works as opposed to non-literary written works.

So while literature, meaning all literary writing, is much more than mere fiction and includes much non-fiction, it is also more than a call for reading across the curriculum. *The 9/11 Commission Report* for example could be classified as literature because even though it is nonfiction, it reads like a novel. It employs many of the techniques used in novels. It begins in medias res, uses alliteration and irony, and contains what might be to many readers considered poetic word choice. All these literary devices can be found in the work's opening lines which set the scene much like a novel would.

Tuesday, September 11, 2001, dawned temperate and nearly cloudless in the eastern United States. Millions of men and women readied themselves for work. Some made their way to the Twin Towers, the signature structures of the World Trade Center complex in New York City. Others went to Arlington, Virginia, to the Pentagon. Across the Potomac River, the United States Congress was back in session. At the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue, people began to line up for a White House tour. In Sarasota, Florida, President George W. Bush went for an early morning run.

For those heading to the airport, weather conditions could not have been better for a safe and pleasant journey. Among the travelers were Mohamed Atta and Abdule Aziz al Omari, who arrived at the airport in Portland, Maine. (2004)

This book could be equally at home in a history class, a political science class, or a literature class studying current non-fiction or writings concerning social dilemmas. It could even be used in a literature class centered on writings regarding espionage. The book deals with facts, but it also deals with the human condition and uses well-written, moving prose to do so. It is more than a string of facts and statistics; it is a story, albeit a true story, which looks deeply into a very human-centered event. A White House memo or news briefing speech, although each carefully worded, would most likely not meet these literary requirements. Such documents might be used as support in writing a literary work, but they would not be considered literary themselves because they lack the style components which contribute to literature's emotional appeal. Literature that deals with the human condition is often difficult to regulate exclusively to certain disciplines; however, it is most likely found in classes centered on the humanities, classes in English, philosophy, religion and history.

The writings of nonagenarian interviewer-historian Studs Terkel also serve as examples of literary non-fiction. His best-selling prose collections dealing with the life experiences of both famous and non-famous people are certainly literature. His book *The Good War*, which chronicles the Second World War, won him the Pulitzer Prize in 1985. Terkel, whose earlier careers included law student, radio news commentator, disc jockey and actor, began collecting and penning people's oral histories back in the 1960s. His subject matter deals not only with major historical events but also with the everyday lives of ordinary people. One such work, one that could fit nicely into some class centered on business, is his 1974 book titled *Working* in which people from a variety of fields recount the stories of their working lives. His books speak through the various voices of the real-life human beings whose stories they tell (Albin, 1996; Anon-Studs, 2005). His books are non-fiction, and not the sort of material traditionally taught in most college English Departments, but they certainly deal with the "human condition" and deal with it quite eloquently. They therefore meet the requirements for Meyer's definition of literature.

### Reasons for Studying Literature

“Literature is the one place in any society where within the secrecy of our own heads, we can hear voices talking about everything in every possible way”

Salman Rushdie, *Is Nothing Sacred?*, 1990

The need to study literature is actually supported by both conservative and liberal educators for totally different reasons. Many conservatives support the study of British and American literature as a way of supporting Western culture. William Bennett is a fierce proponent of teaching a common curriculum which includes Western history, philosophy, and literature. He maintains that students in American colleges must first have a firm understanding of their own Western culture before they can begin to understand other cultures, and laments that at many colleges, students are not receiving this necessary common foundation (1984, 1988). E. D. Hirsch, Jr. likewise writes in his essay “Literacy and Formalism” that Americans should have a common base of cultural knowledge so that they can communicate with one another. “A reading or writing task,” he writes, “could be compared to an iceberg whose visible tip is arrangement, syntax, rhetoric, spelling, and the like, but whose much bigger submerged base is tacit cultural knowledge” (1985, p. 56). And Bloom, author of *The Closing of the American Mind*, feels some distinction should be made between a technical education and a liberal one. In fact, he feels that “a highly trained computer specialist need not have had any more learning about morals, politics or religion than the most ignorant of persons” (1987, p. 59).

While conservatives believe that literature reinforces the Western status quo, Levine correctly maintains that the student bodies of today’s universities are not as homogeneous as they were half a century ago and that it is “myopic” to think of only Western Civilization as what should be taught (1996). Non-Western literature classes also serve the purpose of developing better human understanding and communication skills. Literature classes that concentrate on non-Western literature can also help to further better understanding on a more global level (Juneja, 1993). Such understanding could actually be practical and beneficial to business majors who wish to do business in the new global market. And even traditional Western literature can cause students to

question some of its assumptions. Literature does not teach as much as it inspires. As Weldon writes, “Novelists provide an escape from reality: they take you to the City of Invention. When you return you know more about yourself. You do not read novels for information, but for enlightenment” (1984, p. 38). Through reading literature, she claims, you “discover you are changed, yet unchanged! To be able to visit the City of Invention at will, depart at will—that is all, really, education is about, should be about” (1984, p. 78). Literature, she maintains, is not the same thing as journalism. Journalists answer questions “briskly and informatively” while novelists see a “field of infinity” when they set out to answer questions (1984, p. 79). “Fiction,” she goes on to tell us, “stretches our sensibilities and our understanding, as mere information never can . . . You can practice the art of empathy very well in *Pride and Prejudice*, and in all the novels of Jane Austen, and it is this daily practice that we all need, or we will never be good at living, as without practice we will never be good at playing the piano” (1984, p. 94). Literature, she tells us, is vitally important to humanity for “hand in hand the human race abandons the shoddy, imperfect structures of reality, and surges over to the City of Invention” (1984, p. 112).

Patrick Brantlinger, English professor at Indiana University and author of *Who Killed Shakespeare?*, (2001), is much more liberal in his thinking than the highly conservative proponents of college literature. He is a proponent of “cultural studies” and not simply traditional Western culture and literature. He rightly insists that there has been no “bardicide” committed by college English professors during the past few decades. He admits that fewer and fewer English departments are requiring that their majors take Shakespeare classes, but maintains that the bard is as popular as ever and that students eagerly elect to take classes in Shakespeare. Brantlinger does admit, however, that English and other humanities are being “marginalized” as they compete with “such career-oriented fields as business, computer science, fashion design, sports medicine . . .” etc. which he refers to as the “corporatization of academia” (2001, p. 1). Brantlinger maintains that as times change so does culture, and colleges must keep pace with these changes, but he also seems to lament that we are becoming “slaves of the machine” in a new industry-driven world with a desire for “informatics,” a world that is becoming more and more “posthuman” (2001).

Employers, and the population at large, often see the need for good writing skills but sometimes argue that there is no direct connection between obtaining those skills and reading literature. Others, such as Charles Bazerman, who taught English at the City University of New York and co-chaired the CUNY Association of Writing Supervisors, believe there *is* a connection only “the connection between what a person reads and what the person then writes seems so obvious as to be truistic.” And since it is often considered a truism, no “serious attempt to define either mechanisms or consequences of the interplay between reading and writing” is often studied. One older view, largely rejected by current composition theory, saw the “neophyte writer” as “an apprentice to a tradition the writer became acquainted with through reading” (1980, p. 656). Bazerman views reading and writing as a “conversational model.” He reminds us that “conversation requires absorption of what prior speakers have said,” likewise, “writing occurs within the context of previous writing and advances the total sum of the discourse” (1980, pp. 657-658).

Lois Josephs Fowler, who taught English and women’s studies at Carnegie-Mellon University, pointed out that employers of English majors, according to Linwood Orange’s “widely-circulated questionnaire” that “investigated the range of working activities of English majors,” known informally as the Orange Report, valued them for their “flexibility in learning and using new skills, their ability to function especially well in interpersonal relationships with their colleagues, and, as one would expect, their skills in oral and written communication” (1979, p. 314). Although she was writing about English majors in particular, Fowler pointed out that literature classes helped improve communications skills by expanding the “exercise of both imagination and vocabulary” and enhancing “student’s command of adaptive and interpersonal skills.” This improvement was achieved because “literature concerned largely with the lives of individual human beings leads students to perceive the great range of human experience, the uniqueness of individuals, and the value of such uniqueness” (1979, p. 315).

She believes English classes should center “explicitly on interpersonal relations and human experience” so that students can relate their personal concerns to the literature covered. To illustrate her point she explained how a class she taught on eighteenth and nineteenth century novels used such works as *Fanny Hill*, *Frankenstein*, *Joseph Andrews*,

*Pride and Prejudice*, *Oliver Twist* and *Wuthering Heights* among others to cover such diverse issues as human loneliness, high-spirited femininity, destructive sexuality and masochistic martyrdom, etc. Using “group interaction within the classroom, in low-keyed but provocative discussions, students begin using literature as a point of departure to empathize with their peers, to understand differing values, and to enhance adaptive interpersonal skills” (1979, p. 319).

Fowler gave several examples of students devising practical solutions based on insights they had gained from literature to problems they encountered in the workplace. One employee who worked for a “small geriatric facility” and who had read John Steinbeck’s “Leader of the People” hit on the idea of creating an “out-of-school program” to bring together “young elementary students” and “lonely older people.” His concept proved beneficial to both (1979, p. 315).

William E. McCarron served as Director of Freshman English at the United States Air Force Academy and also served as a technical editor for the Air Force Test Center, helping pilots write reports on new weapon systems. While attending the 1979 Wyoming Conference on Freshman and Sophomore English, he heard Professor E. D. Hirsh, Jr. lecture on the problem of “keeping literature and composition separate,” which Hirsh deemed “artificial.” McCarron agreed that literature and composition did work together and that teachers need to “recognize that the teaching of composition and the lessons of literature are not separate concerns” but having just completed two years working with writing outside of academia, he saw the problem from a very practical point-of-view. Both academics and test pilots need to write clearly in order to express what needs to be said. Engineers, he learned through personal experience, needed to write so that misunderstandings could be avoided, and this could be accomplished by “applying classical logic and rhetoric,” he believed. “I know, as do we all,” he said, “that technology scientists advocate should be tempered with a humane awareness of its applications. The scientist, all too often, does not. Consequently, one of our charges as English teachers . . . is to inculcate humane values among scientists, engineers and technical workers” (1980, pp. 815-818).

McCarron said “culture and the humanities” were more than occasional trips to the symphony or an art museum. “As teachers of English, our challenge and charge is to

expose those humanistic ideas and how those ideas are made manifest through the form content of all modes of communication, from science fiction to the classics” (1980, p. 819). He concluded by saying that “literature and composition, then, are not two separate pursuits. They are one pursuit. I expect a knowledge of composition to underlie my literary teaching. Classical rhetoric is what allows me to get at the fusion of form and content in a finished literary text and at attempts to fuse form and content one undergoes in the process of expository writing” (1980, p. 821).

#### Intangible Necessities

“I am the only child of parents who weighed, measured, and priced everything; for whom what could not be weighed, measured, and priced had no existence”

Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit*, 1857

The world is still full of Gradgrinds who insist on practicality, but utilitarians need not shun humanities because humanities are practical in their own intangible fashion. Elliot W. Eisner, a former Fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford, writes that the “humanities have much to provide, both theoretical and practical, that can help us understand what goes on in the minds and hearts of men and women” (1997, p. 164). Harry S. Broudy, however, complains jokingly that although humanities are essential, it is rather impossible to prove this fact, especially to people who equate education with practical skills. We remember what is practical because we use it on an almost daily basis. Knowledge and skills must be used regularly in order to be remembered. Many people would argue that humanities are not practical. Ironically, Broudy asserts that while much of what is taught in school is forgotten soon after the class is finished, much of what is learned in the humanities we later recall and use without remembering the details. The allusionary base gained from studying literature and other humanities also provides us with greater communications skills long after the literature classes themselves are completed (1984).

John F. Schell, of the English Department of the University of Arkansas, speculates that humanities courses might be essential to a complete education. He studied a group of prisoners at the Tucker Unit of the Arkansas State Prison System.

What he discovered, he discussed in his paper presented at the Twelfth Annual Meeting of the College English Association, (1981), entitled *The Humanities "Behind the Walls."*

What surprised me was the total disregard most of the men had for what each of us would consider elementary humanistic principles. Unsettling was the fact that the men had not chosen to ignore these principles, nor had they rejected them outright. Unfortunately, they had never been introduced to them. For the most part, the men were ignorant of humanistic values; they lacked self-awareness as well as an awareness of other people, they failed to consider the consequences of their ideas and actions, and they were unused to extrapolate practical applications from theoretical ideas. (1981, p. 4)

He found that the "participants disclosed an inability to translate objective knowledge into personally relevant insight" (1981, p. 8). They lacked both humanistic values and perspectives. Schell says that the Romantic poet Percy Shelley best described the power of humanism when he wrote in his *Defense of Poetry* that "a man to be truly good, must imagine intensely." Schell found that the Tucker men could not "relate objective knowledge for subjective benefit" because "they had never learned to imagine" (1981, p. 9). Although Schell makes no promises that a liberal arts education complete with literature courses will keep people from a life of crime, he raises an interesting point that many convicts have not been exposed to the humanities.

Literature can also be used to introduce new ideas concerning history and politics and bring these ideas to life. (Forrester, 1995; Griffin, 1995; Juneja, 1993). Literature can even be used to teach courses in commerce. For example, Donna M. Kish-Goodling, associate professor of economics at Muhlenberg College, uses Shakespeare's play *The Merchant of Venice* as one of the texts for her undergraduate monetary economics class in order to teach the history and philosophy behind the concept of usury. She says that often literary works reflect our economic life more accurately than today's economic statistical techniques and mathematical models. This interdisciplinary approach of combining economics, literature and history often helps students better understand how economics is used in real life (Kish-Goodling, 1999).

### Business and the Humanities

“Business! . . . Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence, were, all, my business. The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business!”

Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*, 1843

Kish-Goodling is not the only educator in the field of business and economics who acknowledges that there is a need for businesspeople to be familiar with humanities as well as standard business practices. Charles Kaiser, Jr., chairperson of the board of directors at the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants in 1989, was himself the product of a liberal arts undergraduate background and “strongly advocates training in the arts and humanities for accountants” (Barrett, 1989). Likewise, Harold Q. Langenderfer, CPA, DBA and Professor Emeritus of Professional Accounting at University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, recommended while reviewing the 100-year history of American accountancy education in 1987 and proposing in what direction it should head in the future that “the profession should put more emphasis on the need for additional liberal arts . . . to provide a better foundation for the professional accountant” of the future (1987). For many years it has even been the goal of the accounting profession to require people who wish to become accountants to first obtain a liberal arts education and then proceed to a special professional school for accountancy, like the medical and law professions (Langenderfer, 1987).

Currently in order to sit for the national CPA exam in the Commonwealth of Virginia a candidate must hold a baccalaureate degree or its equivalent from an accredited college or university. In addition the candidate must complete certain classes. While a total of forty-two semester hours in business and accounting courses are required, and the required number of these classes is soon slated to rise, no humanities courses are included in the requirements ([www.vscpa.com](http://www.vscpa.com)). However, the CPA exam in 1994 began adding essay questions to the exam in order to make sure that accountants possess good writing skills (May and Menelaides, 1993). Professor Claire B. May, who is a member of the American Accounting Association, the Modern Language Association, and the Association for Business Communicators, and Susan L. Menelaides,

CPA, write that large accounting firms emphasize that accountants “must be able to present and defend their views in writing” and May and Menelaides further insist that since CPAs need to be able to communicate with their clients, “good writing skills are a relevant prerequisite for public practice” (1993).

It is not only in the field of accounting that business is recognizing that well-rounded people can be an asset and not a liability. The Phi Beta Lambda business society at Mount St. Clair College encourages students to “be part of the community and to be well-rounded people” ([www.clare.edu](http://www.clare.edu)). The Southern Ohio Growth Partnership seems to echo Charles Dickens’ sentiments when it reverses Gradgrind’s advice and writes “students should not only learn facts, but also learn to interact with each other, to be adaptable, and to recognize that change is inevitable. This education focus creates well-rounded people who become well-prepared employees” ([www.portsmouth.org/business.html](http://www.portsmouth.org/business.html)). And some businesses themselves recognize the need for business majors to know more than just business. Capital One Financial Corporation recruiter Calvin Schneider writes that he likes to hire people from liberal arts schools because “the type of responsibility that we give people requires well-rounded people.” He also encourages college graduates seeking careers in business to “look for culture in the workplace environment as well as an opportunity to learn and advance” (Rudenstein, 1997).

Some colleges and universities, both small and large, have successfully brought together business and the liberal arts. C. G. Chase writes in the *Information Management Journal* (2001) that “in an age of extreme specialization, there is still a need for enlightened generalists.” The Carl A. Gerstacker Liberal Arts Institute for Professional Management, a branch of Albion College, a small liberal arts college in Michigan, since 1973 has offered a program that “combines practical courses in accounting and management, substantive internships, and the benefits of liberal arts courses” in a quest to produce “ethical and humane leaders” ([www.albion.edu](http://www.albion.edu)). Indiana University likewise offers a program known as LAMP (Liberal Arts and Management Program) for students who wish to pursue both business and liberal arts. Students blend liberal arts classes from the school’s arts and sciences college with courses from the university’s Kelley School of Business. Professor of History Michael McGerr, who heads the program, says it strives to give the students “a concrete sense of what life in the business world is like,

as well as the kind of outlook, flexibility, and sophistication that a major in the liberal arts provides” (A. Kibbler, 1999).

Even professors in business colleges at universities that do not offer programs that combine business and liberal arts see the need to incorporate the arts into their business management classes. David A. Cowan of Miami University believes it is important for students to see the “real-world interdependencies” between business and the arts. He therefore includes projects in his management course which integrate “leadership, art, history and arts administration” and “the cultural medium of music . . . whose lyrics [contain] themes that . . . have a positive influence on society.” Although his particular methods involve the visual and musical aspects of human arts, much of what he proposes could easily be adapted to literature. Song lyrics are, in fact, a form of written literature. Cowan believes that an understanding of history and the arts enables students “to select decisions and behaviors in response to real-life situations and to communicate to others about them” (1992, p. 274). He maintains that all fields of education are actually interconnected and suggests that classes in organizational behavior might try “integrating physics and literature” in order to “address concepts such as interrelationship, structure, and forces for change” (1992, p. 288).

Timothy T. Serey of Northern Kentucky University also incorporates a form of literature into his management and organizational behavior classes. He uses the Oscar-nominated film *The Dead Poets Society* to teach a variety of organizational concepts from workplace stress to risk-taking to autonomy vs. status-quo maintenance to effective leadership. While film is an audio-visual medium of literature which does not involve the actual reading of written text, film is still a form of literature, for the film’s screenplay is a printed literary work and film, like written text, conveys human emotion which can produce human understanding. Serey writes that “nearly half of the class members who have seen [the film] have been moved to tears” by it (1992, p. 379). He reports that one student explained that the “entire film is a metaphor for organizations and their role in enforcing the status quo” and another student once told him, “I learned a lot about Management from you, but the things I’ll remember are from *The Dead Poets Society*” (1992, p. 379).

If English professors of the past have argued that literature teaches students about life, perhaps even more importantly from a businessperson's point-of-view, it also teaches them about business. Vassallo, who both serves as a marketing director and a college composition instructor, writes that an appreciation of such writers as James Baldwin, William Faulkner and Anton Chekov helps business students "better understand the human condition" which in turn betters their understanding of "the way people do business" (1991, p. 279). He supports the idea, proposed by George and Katherine Abraham, that less literature in the core curriculum is not a good idea because "only literature realistically addresses certain issues directly related to the workplace, which is where most students' interests lie" (Vassallo 1991, p. 279).

Even people in the business world are themselves turning to literature to address business skills. George Abraham left his job of many years as an English teacher at a two-year college to found "a training company that specializes in designing training packages and in conducting seminars" for people in the business world (Abraham 1990, p. 120). He reports that one of his "most requested" seminars is titled "Achieving Excellence as a Manager," which is based on the thematic literature courses he used to teach. This seminar is designed to "improve the management skills" of "front-line supervisors and store managers" and uses works of literature to "identify negative managerial attributes" and teach desirable traits while it remediates the undesirable ones (Abraham 1990, p. 120). Participants begin by reading selections from literature anthologies and then apply what they glean from these selections to workplace situations.

According to Abraham, such works as Niccolo Machiavelli's *The Prince*, Thomas Gray's "Elegy in a Country Churchyard" and William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* "speak aesthetically and practically to these businesspersons" (1990, p. 120) on such subjects as deception, notoriety, and betrayal (1990, p. 120). Likewise positive attributes such as fairness and loyalty are addressed through *The Merchant of Venice*, *Beowulf*, *Huckleberry Finn*, and *The Scarlet Letter*.

Classes such as these show business students that there is a connection between the works taught in literature classes and the skills needed for the business world. Works of literature might not give students the direct instruction that they receive from technical

writings, but they indirectly provide students with knowledge that can be used to make them better business people.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

I chose to use qualitative research methods for this study because the data I sought to collect concerned lived experiences which could not be replicated under controlled conditions. Life, like literature, can be viewed as a series of stories from which insight can be gained. Qualitative interviewing allows participants to share their stories and the knowledge that comes with them. Irving Seidman writes that “stories are a way of knowing” because “telling stories is essentially a meaning-making process” (1998, p. 1). In the interview process “people must reflect on their experience” and as they reflect on their experiences, they thereby make “sense of them” (Seidman, 1998, p. 1). One of the oldest paradigms of human inquiry, according to Seidman, is “two persons talking and asking questions of each other . . . recounting narratives of experience has been the major way throughout recorded history that humans have made sense of their experience” (1998, p. 2). Words are often the key to a person’s consciousness. As Seidman writes, Lev Vygotsky, noted social development theorist, believes that “every word that people use in telling their stories is a microcosm of their consciousness” and an “individual’s consciousness gives access to the most complicated social and educational issues, because social and educational issues are abstractions based on the concrete experience of people” (1998, p. 1).

Qualitative research employs its own methods which are painstaking and often time-consuming, but as E. W. Eisner writes

Unfortunately—or fortunately—in qualitative matters cookbooks ensure nothing . . . Flexibility, adjustment, and interactivity are three hallmarks of qualitative ‘method.’ Even aims may change in the course of inquiry, depending upon what happens in the situation. Such an attitude toward method is diametrically opposed to the aspiration to bring everything under control so that effects can be unambiguously explained.” (1998, pp. 169-170)

Qualitative research is ambiguous in nature, but this is not a bad thing. Qualitative research methods are constructive and interpretive. They attempt to understand what Sharan Merriam calls “lived experience” and gain knowledge from inductive inquiry, generating theory instead of deductively testing a theory. The qualitative researcher then

uses rich description in the form of words, not numbers, to convey what she has learned (Merriam, 1998).

Since my research dealt with understanding the lasting impressions of literature classes on practical-minded, former business majors, my two principal research questions were:

- How do alumni of Virginia Tech's Business College view their previous undergraduate literature classes in relation to their lives and careers?
- What do Virginia Tech business alumni most remember concerning their literature studies, and how do they make meaning of these memories

### Participants as Principal Data Source

I conducted formal, in-person, semi-structured interviews with one dozen Virginia Tech alumni residing in Virginia who majored in business and earned their undergraduate degrees at Virginia Tech prior to 1990, using open-ended questions to discover what their memories of college literature classes were and how, if at all, they felt in retrospect that these classes added to their overall education. The participants in this study came from graduating classes that spanned the period from 1957 to 1987 and included both men and women.

### Obtaining Participants

I used a recent Virginia Tech Alumni Directory to locate most of my participants. First I contacted them by letter or e-mail, explaining that I wished to interview business majors who graduated between the years of 1950 and 1990 for my dissertation research; I did not reveal the purpose of the research in the initial letter (see Appendix A), and if they responded that they would like to take part in this study, I wrote them a second time, or phoned them, to arrange a time and place for the interview. Every person who responded to my initial contact followed through with the interview after being sent a copy of the questions. Occasionally an initial participant would recommend another Virginia Tech Business College graduate he or she knew who might be interested in participating and I would then contact that person.

## Interviews

Interviews, as opposed to surveys, were my primary data collection technique because they allow for better communication, fewer misunderstandings, and more freedom of expression from the participant. It is “necessary to interview when we are interested in past events that are impossible to replicate,” and as L. A. Dexter writes “interviewing is the preferred tactic of data collection when . . . it will get better data” (Merriam, 1998, p. 72). Surveys are too constraining and often do not allow the participants to fully express themselves. Questions expressed in surveys can easily be misunderstood, resulting in incorrect data; however, misunderstandings that occur during an interview can be elaborated upon and, one hopes, corrected during the course of the interview. Often even the best-worded surveys are one-sided and do not allow for individuality on the part of the participant. The participants often cannot find the answer they would like to give listed among the selections from which they must choose. This problem also leads to incorrect data. When the researcher is after what phenomenologist Alfred Schutz termed “subjective understanding,” Seidman writes that “interviewing, in most cases, may be the best avenue of inquiry” (1998, p. 5).

I interviewed each participant only once and these interviews were comprised of semi-structured questions in order to allow focus yet give the respondent freedom to answer the question fully in his or her own fashion (see Appendix B), and they were conducted in locations where the participant felt comfortable and disturbances could be kept at a minimum, such as in the participant’s home or office whenever possible (Merriam, 1998). The participants all permitted me to audio-record the interviews so that I could transcribe them later and have the fullest account possible of what was said. Although I had only asked for a minimum of twenty minutes of the participant’s time for these interviews, most interviews actually lasted more than twice that long, due to the participants’ desire to share their stories with me. I also obtained a signed consent form from each of the participants before the interview and kept them for my records (see Appendix C). I also gave a copy of the form to the participant so that she or he understood that her or his real name would not be used in the study and that their cooperation was strictly voluntary (Seidman, 1998). Participants were sent copies of their interview transcriptions in order that they might review them for errors.

Generally the researcher continues to collect data until she reaches “a saturation point” when participants’ answers become redundant (Merriam, 1998). Given the nature of this study, however, a true saturation point might never be reached. Still, I found that after interviewing only a dozen people, from fairly diverse backgrounds, most answers were becoming somewhat redundant. Participants rarely answered in exactly the same words as their counterparts because each was an individual, but similar themes and attitudes became apparent.

### Documents and Artifacts

Although alumni interviews were my main data-collection technique, I also consulted information regarding curriculum policies from college and university catalogs, handbooks, professional business journals, and on-line sources. These written sources, many of which are mentioned in my introduction and literature review chapters, complimented the interviews and helped with triangulation. A few participants also assisted by locating their Virginia Tech transcripts in order to verify exactly what literature classes they took while at Virginia Tech.

### Participant Profiles

Twenty-five percent of the participants were female and seventy-five percent were male; this was reflective of the pool of possible participants since most graduates from the 1950s and 1960s tended to be male as few women attended Virginia Tech before the mid-1960s. More than ninety percent of the participants were long-time residents of southwestern Virginia; however, the occupational backgrounds of these participants were diverse. These participants included accountants, hotel managers and retired CEOs. Slightly more than fifty percent of the participants had been employed in educational settings either as secondary school teachers, college professors, administrators, administrative secretaries, or consultants at one point in their lives. Most interviews were roughly forty-five minutes in length; some were longer and a few shorter. This length allowed for more reflection and in-depth answers than had the interviews been simply short answers to a string of questions. Descriptions of the participants and interview conditions follow.

Jim Bennet. Jim Bennet graduated in 1958 with a degree in general business. He then spent the next thirty years teaching high school bookkeeping, math and science. Although he has been retired for many years now, he is still a very active man who enjoys canoeing and conducting archeological digs. Often his hobbies take him out of state to various nature preserves. Our interview took place in the living room of his small, attractive house in a quiet neighborhood. He was very gracious in his manner towards me, welcoming me into his house and carefully considering my questions. Bennet is a rather soft-spoken man but quite firm when it comes to expressing his beliefs.

Mary Brown. Mary Brown, a neatly attired woman in her mid-fifties, spent her freshman year at a small, Methodist college and then transferred to Virginia Tech. She graduated from Virginia Tech in 1970 with a degree in general business. Directly after graduation, she went to work for IBM, who, she told me, in the early 1970s was energetically recruiting young women. She worked for the technology giant as a marketing representative for eighteen years before leaving them to follow her ambition to become a CPA, a career move she feels was a good choice. Semi-retired, she still works part-time as a CPA. Our interview took place in Mary Brown's impressively immaculate suburban house, at the dining table in the kitchen.

Paul Cameron. Paul Cameron is a retired CPA and college business professor, now in his seventies, who spends much of his time at home these days but still prepares taxes and counsels a few clients. He received his undergraduate degree in business administration and business education in 1957 after graduating from business school and serving in the United States Army. In his nearly forty-year teaching career, he taught first at business colleges, then at a community college, and finally became an assistant professor in the business department of a private liberal arts college, a position he held for over twenty years. Cameron, a CPA, while teaching full-time also worked on the side as an accountant for a construction company and a CPA firm. Our interview took place in Cameron's den; he was seated on an old sofa and seemed quite relaxed.

Bill Conway. Bill Conway, an executive with the Norfolk Southern Railway, is a man in his mid-thirties. He is of sturdy build and speaks with great confidence in a deep bass voice. Our interview took place early on a Sunday morning. He had come up to

attend a football game and visit with his parents, who were still asleep, so we quietly passed through their formal living room into the family room, which is located as far from the bedrooms as is possible. The family room is extremely comfortable and nicely decorated in a country-living motif. Bill and I seated ourselves in recliners facing each other and began the interview. He graduated from Virginia Tech in 1987 with majors in finance and management and a minor in sociology. Since graduating, he has worked for Norfolk Southern Railway in various capacities in accounting, service design, revenue and capital, and market development. He is presently a market manager involved in the growing use of rail as a means of auto-part shipment.

Chip Fitzgerald. It was a cold and rainy afternoon when I interviewed hotel manager Chip Fitzgerald. Because it was the off season, the hotel was not bustling. I interviewed Mr. Fitzgerald in his office at the resort hotel. It was a rather small room packed with stacks and boxes of papers. The room was also cluttered with memorabilia about the hotel. Fitzgerald is an easy-going man in his sixties who seems rather casual and sports a neat gray beard. He graduated from Virginia Tech in December of 1960, but did not actually receive his degree until 1961. He majored in finance and upon graduation went to work for General Electric, first as an accountant and later as a trainer and adviser in sales-accounting. He later worked for American Biogenics as a corporate credit manager before settling into hotel management. He has now been in hotel management for more than thirty years.

Tom Howard. Tom Howard graduated in 1961 with a degree in business administration. After graduation he joined the United States Air Force, became a pilot, and held many leadership positions as he rose to the rank of colonel. After retiring from the military, he worked as a consultant for government defense contractors and as an administrator with local government. For a time he taught high school English and history. He is now the editor of a local newspaper. Howard is a very serious and reflective but friendly and relaxed man who welcomed me into his spacious, modern office at the newspaper where our interview took place.

Amy Jones. Mrs. Jones met me at my office at the community college. She is now a stay-at-home mom who lives in the same town where the college is located. She was casually but very neatly attired and quite young-looking for a woman in her forties.

She has a pleasant personality and seems very energetic and interested in the world around her. She was very prepared, having already read the interview questions and made notes. Jones graduated from Virginia Tech in 1980 with a degree in accounting. Since graduation she has worked as a staff accountant for a major accounting firm, in the controller's office at a major state university, and with a private CPA practice. She is now taking time off from the business world to raise her daughters.

Jeff Macmillan. Jeff Macmillan is a professor of business at a small private liberal arts college. He is in his early sixties and has been teaching for well over twenty years. He is a quiet man and his large office is very neat, conservatively and traditionally furnished with desk, bookshelves, additional tables and several arm-chairs. School was not currently in session and the campus was relatively quiet. Macmillan graduated from Virginia Tech with a degree in finance in 1963. Before becoming a college professor, he worked as a finance trainee at General Electric, an accounting assistant at American Electric Power, and an assistant general tax accountant at Norfolk Southern.

Connie Rogers. Connie Rogers received her bachelor's degree, with a concentration in marketing, from Virginia Tech in 1978. After graduation she worked as a research analyst for the Department of Planning and Budget at the State Budget Office. While there she worked on projections for the state. She then went to work for Virginia Power, where she is currently employed as a regulatory and pricing analyst. Before that her positions at Virginia Power included statistical analyst and business assistant specialist. Rogers lives with her husband in the greater-Richmond area and is the mother of two adolescents. Our interview took place at my home while she was visiting her family in the New River Valley. Ms. Rogers seems to be a very well-spoken woman, serious but with a nice sense of humor.

Richard Smith. We had decided to meet at a coffee house in the town in which he lives. It was quite busy, and a bit noisy, but Mr. Smith found a relatively quiet table in the back for us, and we therefore conducted the interview over coffee. Mr. Smith is an extremely neat, attractive, gentlemanly man in his early 60s, I would guess by his graduation date, but he seems younger. He graduated in 1963 with a degree in public administration and served in the United States Air Force for five years, rising to the rank of Captain. Smith has had a thirty-five year career in telecommunications. For over

three decades he worked for Bell Atlantic, now Verizon, retiring as President/CEO from one of their operations. He was active in all phases of operations at Bell Atlantic including government relations and public affairs in both local and overseas markets. After retiring from Bell Atlantic, he has continued to work for various communications and health industries as a consultant and has worked with development in such fields as wireless, local exchange businesses, and alliances between major corporations and universities. Smith has always been very active in community activities, especially in public education.

Harry Steele. Harry Steele finished most of his class work in general business at Virginia Tech in 1964 but did not actually graduate until 1969 because in his senior year he left to join the United States Air Force. When he returned from service, he finished his last semester of work and graduated. After graduation he went to work for General Motors where he worked first as a safety representative and then as a labor relations representative before becoming a supervisor for labor and an assistant director in labor relations. He also worked as a personnel director and an arbitration specialist. After leaving GM, he worked in labor relations for Delco Electronic Corp where he finished as Director of Industrial Relations Security. He is now retired. I interviewed Mr. Steele at his home—a large, beautiful, modern house located in a rural area with a superb view overlooking the mountains. He is a very dynamic, energetic, animated man.

Phil Tyrone. Phil Tyrone finished Virginia Tech in December of 1968 and attended the 1969 graduation ceremony. His undergraduate majors were in distributive education and marketing. Since graduation he has worked as a teacher, coordinator, supervisor, assistant director, director, and business liaison. At the time of our interview he was working for a public school system, with the distributive education division, helping to line up working partnerships with businesses where the students study. He is a neat, well-dressed and highly energetic man probably in his late fifties. He seemed quite relaxed in his chair, legs crossed. Even though it was summer, his office was busy. There was also a lot of redecorating/construction going on in his outer office which at times was fairly noisy, but despite the signs of chaos, the office seemed very efficient.

## Data Analysis

Data were analyzed through careful readings which sought to find patterns and themes in the participants' statements and observed actions. This process is called the constant comparative method. As its name implies, this method constantly compares all the data gathered as the research proceeds. One interview is compared to another and so on as new interviews are added to the data (Merriam, 1998; Dye, J. F., Schatz, I. M., Rosenberg, B. A., and Coleman, S. T., 2000). Merriam best defines this method when she writes that

Basically, the constant comparative method involves comparing one segment of data with another to determine similarities and differences . . . Data are grouped together on a similar dimension. This dimension is tentatively given a name; it then becomes a category. The overall object of this analysis is to seek patterns in the data. (1998, p. 18)

Units of data are any potentially meaningful segment of data which, according to Lincoln and Guba (1985), meet two criteria. They reveal information relevant to the study and are also the smallest bits of information that can stand on their own in absence of additional information (Merriam, 1998).

From the data, I created temporary categories, themes and patterns which constantly changed as I, the researcher, became more familiar with the data, categories and sub-categories were refined, and new patterns emerged (Dye et al, 2000).

“Comparisons are constantly made within and between levels of conceptualization until a theory can be formulated” (Merriam, 1998, p. 159).

Metaphors are also used in qualitative research, as they are in literary works, to clearly and concisely communicate findings. J. F. Dye and her collaborators use a kaleidoscope metaphor to explain the constant comparison method because both involve a variety of constantly changing patterns. The bits of data collected are like the bits of colored glass in a kaleidoscope, and the mirrors represent the categories. As the kaleidoscope is turned and data are refined and unified, clear patterns emerge from the many bits of glass (2000).

The transcriptions were labeled with notation in the following way: the participant's initials followed by an Arabic number indicating the page of the transcript.

This allowed me to go back and retrace the origins of the themes. The interview excerpts containing threads used in the themed categories were then filed, and cross-filed if necessary, to allow for more concentrated readings (Seidman, 1998).

I primarily addressed the issues of trustworthiness and credibility through the use of triangulation. In receiving similar answers to the same question from different participants, by seeing if participants' views and actions remained constant over the course of the interview, and through determining if the participants' actions and responses seemed to support the literature in the field, I triangulated my data. I also asked participants to member check their transcriptions by reading a copy of the transcript in order to see that what was written agreed with what they meant to say. This task was performed in order that there should be no misunderstanding on my part regarding the data obtained from the participant (Merriam, 1998; Feagin, 1991).

#### Limitations

There were, of course, as in any study, limitations to this work. One of the major limitations with any qualitative work that relies primarily on interviews is that all of my participants were self-selecting to some degree. This study did not use random selection to obtain participants; participants were a "non-probability sample" and chose of their own free will to become a part of this study. This study also used participants who, although belonging to a "purposeful sample" because they fit the specific business major and graduation dates requirements of the study, were also a "convenience sample" because they were located within a two-hour driving area of the interviewer (Merriam, 1998). The number of participants in this study is admittedly low, but their answers are generally consistent. Each decade from the 1950s through the 1980s is represented, although the 1960s is somewhat over-represented. This occurrence is because the participants were self-selected volunteers and more people from this decade responded to my requests for interviews than any other age group. This phenomenon might be due to the possibilities that as people mature, they are under less pressure in the business world to succeed, they have the time to step back and reflect, and they have more desire to share their experience with others. Participants were also asked to recall events in their lives that sometimes occurred forty or fifty years ago. The human memory can be faulty under

such conditions; however, the interview questions in general focused on lasting impressions and not specific details from decades past. Finally, as an English teacher, I was also biased towards seeing the study of literature in a positive light. I personally believe that literature should be an important component of any well-educated person's curriculum; however, this study focused not on my beliefs but on the beliefs of Virginia Tech's business college alumni.

## CHAPTER 4

### INTERVIEW THEMES

The participants interviewed in this study ranged in age from their mid-thirties to their mid-seventies. Some of them had retired, but most were still actively involved in the business world in such capacities as hotel manager, railway executive, certified public accountant, regulatory and pricing analyst, and communications consultant, among others. In our interviews, they recounted their days as undergraduates at Virginia Tech, their careers after graduating, their reading habits from childhood to present, and their concerns with Virginia Tech's current academic requirements. All of the participants had interesting stories to tell which enabled them to reflect on how the literature they had studied at Virginia Tech had later effected their careers and their lives in general.

#### Literature's Value

When asked what, if anything, they felt they had gained from studying literature in college, ten out of twelve of the participants in this study agreed that it aided them in one or more of the following ways: broadened their perspectives, gave them new cultural insight, expanded their appreciation of other disciplines, improved their analysis skills enabling them to better express their own ideas and better understand the ideas of others, improved their communication and writing skills.

#### Broadened View of the World

Seventy-five percent of the participants said that literature helped them better understand the world at large. Amy Jones said she gained a "broader picture of the world through literature" and that it broadened her "as a person." Likewise, Jeff Macmillan said it helped broaden his "perspectives of the world itself." And Connie Rogers saw the reading of literature as a means of intellectual travel. Reading "takes you places" and allows you "to see life from somebody else's perspective" she said.

Paul Cameron, the oldest participant interviewed, read not only English and American literature while at Virginia Tech but also studied French and German literature. Books, he said, are like "postage stamps" of other peoples' cultures; you learn to

Table 1

## English Literature Classes Helped Participants in the Following Ways

	broadened their world view	gave them better appreciation of other disciplines	helped them better understand and express themselves	helped their analysis skills	encouraged civic leadership skills	improved their communication skills
Cameron	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	yes
Bennet	no	no	no	no	yes	no
Fitzgerald	yes	yes	no	no	no	yes
Howard	yes	yes	no	no	yes	no
Macmillan	yes	yes	no	yes	no	no
Smith	yes	no	no	yes	yes	yes
Steele	yes	no	yes	yes	no	yes
Tyrone	yes	yes	yes	no	no	yes
Brown	no	no	no	no	no	no
Rogers	yes	no	no	yes	no	no
Jones	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	no
Conway	no	no	yes	yes	no	yes

Participants are listed in order from the earliest graduating class to the most recent class. These classes span from 1957 to 1987.

The primary purpose of this chart is to show when participants responded positively to a possible benefit of studying literature. Please note that a “no” response here, however, does not necessarily mean, in all cases, that the participant felt that reading literature did not help in this area; in some cases the participant did not respond positively or negatively in a particular area.

“understand other people’s cultures” through their literature which “actually stresses the ideas, the feelings, of people whose stories they relate through literature.”

Tom Howard said that literature gave him “more or less a foundation and a little bit of an appreciation for the fact that there were other cultures out there.” He further commented that literature “was probably the first place that put, more or less, a face to a culture” and made his actual travels to distant places much more enjoyable. He was able to directly link literature to his “appreciation, maybe even an understanding” as he put it “of other societies.” He explained that the reading he did made him “comfortable with other societies” and “piqued” his interest in them. Howard has lived “on every continent except Antarctica” and recalled his days serving in the United States Air Force in Vietnam. He told me that the cultures of southeast Asia were often quite different from that of the United States and that “ugly Americans” often tried “to force our values on the people”—values that were not part of their culture. And to him “that didn’t make a lot of sense.” So he “started to read and talk to the people there to have a better understanding and more of an appreciation” for their culture.

Harry Steele also served in the United States Air Force in Vietnam; he served in-between his class time and actual graduation from Virginia Tech. In the service he was part of intelligence operations and became a Chinese linguist. A country’s literature, he said, “really gives you a different balance” understanding the thought process of other cultures.

Reading also can help you understand other cultures within your own country, according to Jones. She said somewhat lightheartedly, yet in a serious manner, that she had always been a Southerner, but when she moved to upstate New York, her memories of reading Thoreau’s *Walden* in her American literature class at Virginia Tech helped her, in part, brace for the long, cold winters.

Richard Smith sees literature not only helping people understand cultures’ differences but also their similarities. As he put it, “certainly from a cultural standpoint reading literature from different cultures helped provide insight into how cultures approach, you might say, somewhat common issues.” He explained that religious literature from across cultures revealed common themes that are often approached in a

wide variety of ways. Literature, he said, helped him to “understand the priorities, the primary cultural anchors that exist” and are expressed through literature.

#### Better Appreciation of Other Disciplines

Participants also felt that in many cases their literature classes led to a better appreciation of other disciplines in general. Jeff Macmillan said that literature indirectly “helps you appreciate other people’s disciplines.” Phil Tyrone echoed this sentiment when he stated that a basic understanding of literature helps one to “talk intelligently with people” outside your own discipline. Paul Cameron was quite emphatic that reading made him a “well-rounded person” who was not “one-dimensional.” He lamented that Virginia Tech was becoming one-dimensional and producing one-dimensional people who were very proficient in their area of expertise but not well-rounded. “It’s nice to have a skill and be really proficient in one area or another,” he told me, “but you still need enough knowledge to compete in this world and have a well-rounded life.” Echoing H. Q. Langenderfer’s recommendation that more emphasis on liberal arts for future professional accountants was important (1987), Cameron explained that “the accounting profession has often been criticized for the lack of understanding of other people’s desires.” Mary Brown, also an accountant, when asked if she felt that business people were not creative, replied with a smile, “I feel more that accountants aren’t.” Accountants in general, Cameron lamented, were not known for being very well-rounded. They often have trouble participating “in a two-way conversation” he told me. They need a knowledge of more than just accounting, he maintained. “I hate to say this, but the accounting profession is looked on as milquetoast, introverted people, and that’s an image that they need to change.”

One particular discipline that was mentioned by seven of the participants in connection with literature was history. Using literature, including works of fiction, as supplemental readings, an idea that can be traced back to the Committee of Ten in 1892 (Ravitch 1985), seemed to complement and reinforce much of the factual material taught in history classes. This association between these two disciplines was often noted by Robert Penn Warren, the award-winning novelist and poet who was also an English professor at Yale. In a panel discussion in which he participated in 1968 at a meeting of

the Southern Historical Association in New Orleans, Warren commented that both the historian and the novelist were after truth. “They are both trying to say what life feels like to them,” he said (Watkins and Hiers, 1980, p. 95). A few years later, in 1976, in an interview he gave to Bill Moyers, Warren again linked history and literature with understanding what it is to be human when he said “literary history or political history or any other kind of history” was mainly about “man’s long effort to be human” and when “a student understands this or tries to penetrate this problem, he becomes human” (Watkins and Hiers, 1980, p. 199).

Howard remembered one history professor he had at Virginia Tech who required a lot of outside reading for his class, including mostly the reading of short stories. Howard explained that “in history you learn about events from the past; you learn about the Battle of Hastings and you learn about all the things that have gone on to shape our civilizations, but literature kind of puts a face on it with characters—characters talk to a time and a place—maybe in history—and it all started coming together and formed a context.” And as Conway noted, literature “provided [him] with the ability to learn a history” and likewise see “the possibilities of the future.”

Literature, it was speculated, could also be used to expand the limitations sometimes encountered in history classes by presenting more views than are often found in history texts. Jim Bennet agreed that it is bad to see and teach subjects from only one point of view—usually the predominant, accepted, Western point of view. “There are two sides of history,” he said. “The American side of American history; that’s only fifty percent of this history. Two sides of history—I’ll preach on that. Their side is just as good as our side.” In school, he lamented, students are usually not taught the Native American side, nor the Spanish side, nor the French side, etc. Looking at the literature from the other side might help to give more of a balanced view on the history of any one place.

Jones and Rogers particularly remembered their history classes, on the American Civil War and the History of Women respectively, as being alive and informative and ranked them among their favorite classes at Virginia Tech. Although not directly related to literature classes per se, these subjects easily lend themselves to a literary approach of study in addition to the facts covered in most classes. Steele, in fact, regards all well-

written history texts as a form of literature because, in his opinion, learning material through reading complex prose is really what literature boils down to in many ways. In such cases, literature is more than fiction and more than lists of facts; it is using words to convey complex ideas.

#### Intangible Gains: Self-Understanding, Analytical Skills, and Leadership

Participant Jim Bennet found it difficult to put into words just what he found valuable in studying literature. He admitted it didn't seem to have many practical applications on the surface; however, he felt he "got a lot out of literature in a way, not specific knowledge, maybe not knowledge that I was ever able to use in any way to make money, but an attitude, a feeling—I think that it has some value to it."

Perhaps the value to which Bennet was referring was the same value Warren placed on literature when he explained at the 1968 panel discussion in New Orleans that reading literature aided in human understanding. Speaking of Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part I* he said,

Now, I couldn't care less who won the battle at Shrewsbury, personally. It was a long time ago, and it isn't very important now . . . What I care about is the pattern of the human struggle there as we know it in relation to Hotspur on the one hand and to the cold calculators on the other hand, and to Hal, as a kind of Golden Mean, and then, at last, to Falstaff, with all of his great tummy and great wit, and his ironic view of history and morality—outside of all schematic views. We are seeing a pattern of human possibility that bears on all of our lives, a pattern there that we see every day. (Watkins and Hiers, 1980, p. 98)

In his 1976 interview with Moyers, he went on to say that this source of knowledge "may be in poetry or it may be in history or it may be in political science" but its primary purpose was to offer "a sense of what man is like inside" (Watkins and Hiers, 1980, p. 203).

Smith, following Warren's line of thinking, said that the literature he read helped him better understand himself and grow intellectually. "It gives you a basis on which to challenge your own cultural upbringing. And quite frankly it probably changed my

outlook on a lot of things because I was brought up in a fairly traditional conservative Protestant environment, with all the value systems that are inherent with that.”

Smith’s statement likewise supports what C. Bazerman wrote regarding how students react to what they read. Literature, he wrote, “gives students a sense of their own opinions and identity defined against the reading materials. As they reconcile what they read with what they already think, students begin to explore their assumptions and frame works of thought” (1980, p. 659). Smith also illustrates what Weldon maintains when she writes that novels help people better understand themselves by giving them not facts but enlightenment (1984). Lastly, Smith seems to support Goldberg’s thesis that reading literature helps people think for themselves (1982).

As the “Orange Report” said, English seemed to help students with “interpersonal relationships” (Fowler, 1979, p. 314). Macmillan found that having read literature helped him better interact with other people by giving him a common ground on which to meet. Fitzgerald said much the same thing when he told me that literature gave him a “working knowledge” that helped him better understand “things in general” when conversing with other people. To illustrate this point he told me that earlier that day an associate had mentioned that he had named his company, which dealt with historical matters, “Lot’s Wife” since she was “the first person who ever looked back.” Fitzgerald felt that the allusions learned from literature broadened his general knowledge in a positive way as suggested by Broudy who wrote that the allusionary bases gained from reading literature were useful for communication skills (1984).

Participants also found that literature sharpened their comprehension and analytical skills. Macmillan said the skills he acquired from reading literature in order to “see what the author was trying to portray” have helped him analyze problems. “Being very well read makes you a more analytical person,” was how Bill Conway put it. Or as Amy Jones said, literature helps her “look deeply into things” and “read between the lines.”

The subject was not directly covered in the interview questions, but three participants brought up the subject of civic leadership—another possible benefit of reading literature. The *Reading at Risk* report showed that readers were more likely than non-readers to be involved with volunteer and charity work (2004). This proved to be the

case for Bennet, who gave free lectures on archeology, one of his hobbies, or perhaps better termed one of his passions, at public schools during his lunch hour; for Howard, who worked closely with local schools, serving as a substitute teacher and working with county businesses and local planning districts to help bring young people into the workforce; and for Smith, who “throughout his career” was, he told me, “significantly involved in community activities with emphasis on education and economic development” on the state, national, and international levels. Although there is certainly no known direct link between reading literature and participating in public service, the fact that at least twenty-five percent of the participants engaged in the latter after doing the former seems to suggest, as the *Reading at Risk* report shows, that there might be a link here.

### Communication and Writing Skills

Half of the participants also credited literature classes with improving their communication skills. Richard Smith told me he was considered a good writer and communicator in the business field, and “without question” his early studies “particularly in literature and English were major contributors” to his success because they helped him to understand the “complexity of communication and the fact that it can take many forms” and “be direct or subtle.” He speculated that people who had “a good grounding in English literature” were more successful in business than the people who said they never really used what they learned in their English classes. He said the technical skills required for becoming a programmer and the communication skills required for becoming an assistant vice-president were quite different. “My hypothesis might be that the lack of appreciation of good communication skills was, in fact, an impediment to success that otherwise might have been available.” Like Bloom (1987), he drew a distinction between a technical education and a liberal one.

Paul Cameron echoed the idea that communication skills, which can be learned by reading literature, are more important than mere technical skills. He said as a CPA he had to communicate with a wide variety of clients, and in order to do this he needed more than the technical knowledge of accounting. He needed the variety of communication skills he felt reading literature gave him. Tyrone did not directly link literature with

communication skills, but did say that in business, communication problems often arose with written communication because the wording was not clearly written and was difficult to interpret, an idea which harkens back to McCarron's position that rhetoric learned from literature reduced misunderstanding found in all forms of writing (1980).

Conway also thinks that the literature courses he took through the English Department helped his written communication skills even more than did his business writing class. "Exposure to literature" he said was the key to learning to write. "That's how I taught myself to write," he said with great conviction. "I don't think there was ever a program at Tech that taught me to write well, whether it's personal or business." Being exposed to different authors and different types of literature, he said, allowed him to glean from "literature courses the ability to read better" and consequently write better. "I don't know if you could ever take enough literature courses," he concluded. Conway is not alone in this attitude. When asked by Bill Moyers in 1976 if writing could be taught, Robert Penn Warren answered that he did not think it could although he admitted that you could "open [students] eyes to certain things" a little bit by teaching how literature works (Watkins & Hiers, 1980, p. 212). Likewise Smith said his literature classes did not *teach* him communication skills but rather gave him an "appreciation" and a "good foundation on which to build [his] communication skills."

A third of the participants commented that today's students and recent graduates seem to lack good communication skills in general. Chip Fitzgerald, who works with recent graduates, lamented that many were "pathetic at speaking the English language" and said, "And you know I almost feel sorry for them." The point was also often raised that they particularly lack written communication skills, even though they have very good technical skills. Richard Smith told me, "I've done a lot of hiring over my career and in recent years, disappointingly, a lot of young college graduates with otherwise good academic credentials did not have good communication skills, particularly in writing." He went on to say that he found today's young college graduates to be "very worldly and very technical but somewhat deficient in basic interpersonal skills." Expectations have changed in recent years, he believes. "The ability to write coherent sentences is not taken for granted any more. It was taken for granted, I think, in my day. You had to be able to write a coherent sentence and that doesn't seem to be true today."

It is not only participants over the age of fifty who expressed this opinion. Bill Conway, who, in his thirties, was the study's youngest participant, also complained that the undergrads and graduate students who work for him as interns cannot write well. He admits that he is not a perfect writer himself but says the interns often have trouble writing web pages and reports. "They're overly verbose, or the syntax is incorrect, or the grammar is poor," he told me. He said that although he does not consider himself old, his interns' writing skills make him feel old.

#### Other Dominant Themes

Participants discussed their leisure reading, past and present. They also commented on the importance of teachers in connection with education, and shared their perception of changing times and a growing reliance on technology.

#### Pre-college Literature Experiences

Five of the twelve participants had been introduced to reading at an early age by their parents or grandparents. Connie Rogers said her parents subscribed to two daily newspapers and numerous magazines. As a child, in addition to the periodicals she found in her home, she also enjoyed reading mysteries, biographies and novels. Richard Smith, whose parents were teachers, described himself as a "reasonably avid reader" as a child. And Paul Cameron credits his first interest in reading to the children's classic novels his grandmother would give him for Christmas. "She gave me *Robin Hood*, *Treasure Island*, *Little Women*, you know, they were classics but that kids would like, and I think that probably started me on good literature. And literature, if you're never exposed to it, you're never going to appreciate it," Cameron said. It is interesting to note that he still has these old volumes in the bookcase in his living room. They are well preserved but show signs of having been read and reread over the years.

Seven of the participants, however, said that before their arrival at college, they did not read beyond what was required of them for school. Macmillan said that as a child he did not do much leisure reading. Mary Brown had negative experiences with reading in elementary and high school. "It just wasn't fun. I don't remember it being fun at all. It was almost like it was something that had to be done and it wasn't made interesting," she

Table 2

When Participants Reported that they Began to Read Heavily

participants who said they began reading heavily before they entered college	participants who said they began reading more heavily during college
Cameron	Fitzgerald
Bennet	Macmillan
Howard	Steele
Smith	Jones
Rogers	Conway

told me. Rogers, Howard and Cameron, did say that they had positive experiences with high school English, but six other participants seemed to feel that they were more intellectually ready for the subject in college. Phil Tyrone admits he didn't study much in high school; he was still somewhat immature. In college he began to take his studies more seriously. Harry Steele explained that in high school he had other things on his mind, like girls and playing football. He was most likely not alone in that respect. Jeff Macmillan added that in college, the courses looked at the literature in more depth than they had in high school. And as Bill Conway put it, "In high school, I enjoyed reading magazines, *Sports Illustrated* or something like that. But then the literature at Tech got me into really enjoying books."

Perhaps that is why Amy Jones reasoned if college students had already studied literature in depth in the high school English classes, they might not need to take more literature classes in college. Conversely, though, she said, "I would just hope that they had very good high school training, otherwise I would feel like if they just had mediocre high school English, then they would come out of college lacking in skills that you want for life as a well-educated person."

#### Current Literature Experiences

A couple of participants said they did not consider themselves pleasure readers. Mary Brown described herself as "not a big reader" and said she probably only reads "two or three books a year." When she does read for pleasure, she enjoys popular fiction such as the novels of Mary Higgins Clark; she has also read *The Left Behind* series. Jones said that when she was caught up in the hectic business rush, she never felt she had the time for pleasure reading. Her husband works in marketing, she explained, and "there's so much stress and pressure [in that field] that even though he has always loved to read, he doesn't get to do much of it on his own." She reads the Bible every day, and now that she has gotten out of the daily business world grind in order to home-school her youngest daughter, she admits that she is reading more fiction, albeit on a middle school level, in connection with her daughter's curriculum. She now sees "the value to some of that digging deeper" and "spending an hour" on a short poem in order to try to carefully interpret it.

Two other participants said they seldom read novels but considered themselves somewhat heavy readers of periodicals and non-fiction. Fitzgerald said that while his “wife reads all the time—one book after another,” he only occasionally reads a novel when he finds the topic exceptionally interesting. On the other hand, he said he read the newspaper cover to cover each morning and each night would read through numerous magazines. He told me that on the night before our interview, he had read ten magazines. He said when a topic was “interesting and different,” he really enjoyed reading about it. In addition to periodicals, he also told me he enjoys reading non-fiction books that deal with “how to get along with people.” He does not regard it as required reading for his job but admits that is where his interests lie. Macmillan also mainly reads newspapers and business magazines today, such as *Business Week* and *The Wall Street Journal*. His wife, he told me, reads a lot of mysteries and recently he picked one up—*The Tin Collector* by Stephen King—and found it very interesting. “I read it and got interested and so maybe I’ll do some more leisure reading again,” he said.

None of the participants claimed to spend a great deal of time, if any time at all, reading literary classics, or what have been termed “the great books.” Cameron said “most of the stuff I read now is like Louis Lamour.” He admits he doesn’t get around to doing all the reading he would like to when it comes to covering the “library of classical novels” he’s collected, a library which includes shelves of Charles Dickens, Dante Alighieri, Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Theodore Dreiser, Lord Byron, Geoffrey Chaucer, Omar Khayyam, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, etc.

Tyrone considers himself to be an active person who prefers sports and hunting and fishing to reading most of the time. He says, “It takes something really gripping to get me to read for pleasure.” His wife, he also tells me, reads “ten or fifteen books over the course of the summer. She loves to read. I’m more of an outdoorsy person.” He states he is absolutely not a big reader but admits he does on occasion enjoy adventure stories, especially about animals and the wild, such as the works of Jack London, that tend to relate to the outdoor activities he enjoys. He also said he will “read sometimes about the Civil War.” He rarely reads for pleasure but when he does start a book he enjoys, he doesn’t “want to put it down” he told me. He likes books where he can “immerse [himself] and visualize and feel” what’s going on in the story. He says when

this happens, the book, for him, is “painting a word picture” with which he can “identify and immerse” himself in the world of the story.

When asked what she liked to read outside of work, Rogers laughed that her friends tell her she reads “tortured family stuff”—novels usually written by women and set in the South. She especially likes novels which are set in nearby locales because she likes to relate them to stories of real life experiences passed down to her by her parents and grandparents. She said she likes to read books which allow her “to see life from somebody else’s perspectives.” She likes to try to relate to the actions of the people in books, and commented that sometimes relating to people in books made you realize “how well you have it” yourself.

After college, when Bennet was in his twenties, he liked to read a lot of poetry but now he reads a variety of factual writings. Mostly he enjoys reading about archeology, geology, paleontology, and history—especially the history of the native peoples of southwest Virginia. He also reads a great deal about biology, especially concerning the current work being done with the creation of life from single cells. “I just wouldn’t consider reading fiction anymore” because, he says, “you can take any piece of fiction [and] you can find some factual stuff that’s far more interesting and far more unbelievable.”

Steele likes historical novels, fantasy, and spy novels when it comes to fiction; but, like Bennet, prefers non-fiction when it comes to pleasure reading. He likes research-related works that can expand his knowledge in various fields and raised the point that literature need not be restricted to fiction. As he put it, “You take Shakespeare and you take Churchill. Both of them, you know, in very different ways, could turn a phrase. They played with language, but that is analytical.” Steele, when preparing for our interview, included his history courses as part of the literature he had studied because as he put it, “that is to me literature of a time or a reflection of that time in literature of the present.”

Aside from reading periodicals, Smith enjoys reading non-fiction such as Tom Brokaw’s *The Greatest Generation* and autobiographies in general. Conway also enjoys non-fiction as well as fiction. Today Conway says he enjoys reading mostly biographies. He says he used to enjoy writers such as Tom Clancy and John Grisham but finds they

now are not as “satisfying as they used to be” because he looks for things “with a bit more depth.”

### Importance of Teachers

Eighty-three percent of the participants commented that they fondly remembered their instructors. This phenomenon was not only true of English instructors but for all disciplines. Two participants complained about graduate teaching assistants, who, they said, were not interesting and therefore failed to make the subject seem inspiring, and one of these participants also complained of the inconsistency among the English classes taught by graduate teaching assistants. Participants praised their instructors for demonstrating how exciting the subject could be and recalled that the level of enthusiasm shown by their instructors was very important to the overall experience. Five participants used the word “fun” to describe the atmosphere created by the instructor. Others said the instructors helped to make the class material seem “real,” “exciting,” “entertaining,” “interesting,” and “enjoyable.”

Early in his undergraduate days at Virginia Tech, Phil Tyrone decided that college was not for him. He began cutting most of his classes; however, he continued to attend his literature class because he “really enjoyed it.” He furthermore confided that surprisingly enough it was an early morning class. “I liked the professor. I can’t tell you who the professor was, but I liked the professor and it was one of the few classes that I continued to go to that semester.” Although his decision to stay in school was mostly influenced by his family, it is interesting to note that he stuck with his English class, perhaps because of the teacher, even after he had decided to quit college in general.

Smith shared with me an experience he’d had not long ago when at a club meeting he ran into one of his English teachers from Virginia Tech whom he had not seen in forty years. . He walked over and spoke to her and to his surprise she greeted him by name and asked where he had been. Not only did he remember her; she remembered him. “She created an enthusiasm and a sincerity that stuck with me over forty years and apparently I with her also.”

Table 3

Aside from their English Classes, Participants Also Mentioned that they Found the Following Areas of Education Highly Important

	mentioned they valued their teachers	mentioned they valued foreign language classes	mentioned they valued history classes	mentioned they valued math and science classes
Cameron	yes	yes	no	no
Bennet	no	no	yes	no*
Fitzgerald	yes	no	yes	no
Howard	yes	no	yes	no
Macmillan	yes	no	no	no
Smith	yes	no	no	yes
Steele	yes	no	yes	yes
Tyrone	yes	no	no	no
Brown	no	yes	no	yes
Rogers	yes	no	yes	no
Jones	yes	no	yes	yes
Conway	yes	no	yes	no

Participants are listed in order from the earliest graduating class to the most recent graduating class. These classes span from 1957 to 1987.

\* Interestingly, Bennet taught high school math and science for many years.

Chip Fitzgerald, recalling one of his English classes, said that “I can remember I never cut the class because it was just enjoyable.” Interaction between students and teachers seemed to be a key component to engaging the student in the material. Remembering his English classes at Virginia Tech, Fitzgerald said, “the people got involved in the class.” The professor would “go around class and asked them [the students] questions.” One third of the participants echoed his sentiments that literature classes in the English Department, which often employed discussion, were more memorable and more enjoyable than classes, mostly in other departments, that were mere lecture. Or as Steele said of one of his professors in the History Department, which he considers a form of literature, the teacher “had a whole lot of interplay in his class—he was fun. He made it fun. That was interesting, I think.”

#### Perception of Changing Times

Half of the participants fear that American institutions of higher learning are lowering their standards and that today’s students do not want to work as hard as past generations. Jeff Macmillan, a college professor in his early sixties who teaches in the Business Department of a private college, said with a touch of both sadness and frustration that “the standards are, in many cases, adjusted to meet the students instead of the students adjusted to meet the standards.” He went on to say that although he was sure today’s students would disagree, he thinks “a lot of people that went to college even ten, twenty years ago, much less thirty or forty, think things are easier now.” Fitzgerald said that back in the early 1960s getting into Virginia Tech was easy; getting out was hard. These days it seems to him like it is the other way around. Phil Tyrone and his wife both attended Virginia Tech in the mid-1960s; he had this to say about his son, who recently graduated from his alma mater. “A lot of the time we felt like he wasn’t studying, and of course again you weigh what he tells you, you know, and how much he’s studying, and we both came to the conclusion that graduating from college right now is a whole lot easier than it was when we were there.” Seventy-five percent of the participants in this study were over the age of fifty. This generation gap may account for the perception that today’s students want all aspects of their lives to be fast and easy; however, even the youngest participants echoed their elders’ concern that standards might be slipping.

A quarter of the participants suspect that today's students lack the work ethic of past generations. Macmillan lamented, "I'm not so sure if computers aren't somewhat at fault." He was not the only participant to suspect this. Paul Cameron, a man in his mid-seventies, who like Macmillan had been a Business Department professor, seems to worry that as Finn, Ravitch and Fancher suggest we are becoming a society of "technopeasants" who are too dependent on machines (1984). He blames not only computers but television as well for today's students' lack of interest in reading. He explained that when he was an undergraduate, in the days before most people owned televisions, people had to learn from reading or listening to the radio instead of "sitting in front of the television screen or all day long watching a computer." In fact, four other participants, all considerably younger than Cameron, commented that learning in their day centered on reading while today it seems to center more around moving images on screens, as Gioia suggested in the *Reading at Risk* report when he wrote that American society is experiencing a "massive shift toward electronic media for entertainment and information." Gioia suggests that "reading a book requires a degree of active attention and engagement" and "by contrast, most electronic media make fewer demands on their audiences, and indeed often require no more than passive participation." He notes that "even interactive electronic media" including the Internet "foster shorter attention spans and accelerated gratification" (2004, p. vii). The survey found that today's Internet user was likely to have a bachelor's degree and belong to the age group "whose reading rates show the greatest percentage drop" (2004, p. 30).

Even one of my youngest participants admitted that as a child she read more when visiting her grandmother since the television reception was very poor at her grandmother's house. There is nothing inherently wrong in watching television, and it can be a very useful educational tool according to a report authored by Chia-Hui Lin (2003); however, if people choose to engage predominantly in mediums where images take precedent over words, this might well lead to declining reading and writing skills. As participant Richard Smith said, when he was younger, "reading was the primary vehicle for getting in touch with the world around you." However, the participants mentioned in this study feel this may no longer be the case.

Even in this electronic age, books are not yet an endangered species. As Harry Steele firmly pointed out, not only are books still being printed, they continue to sell well. Many people are still reading the printed page, but the majority of those book buyers might well be from generations who came of age before the Internet. The *Reading at Risk* survey notes that “in 1990, book buying constituted 5.7 percent of total recreational spending, while spending on audio, video, computers, and software was 6 percent. By 2002, electronic spending had soared to 24 percent, while spending on books declined slightly to 5.6 percent” (200, p. xii). The survey did not break down this spending according to age groups; it only noted the dramatic shift in spending. Where fiction reading was concerned, however, the survey did state that “accounting for differences in education, income, and other socioeconomic factors,” people in the 18-24 age group “were about 15 percent less likely than others to read literature” (2004, p. 10). The survey also found that Americans between the ages of 45-74 tended “to read the most books a year.” It found that one in five people age 45-74 were frequent readers “compared to only one in ten people under 25” (2004, p. 16). These results are quite different from the findings of the 1982 survey which concluded that “reading literature peaked between ages 18-34, gradually falling off as readers aged” (2004, p. 26).

### Technology and Writing

For years English teachers, such as C. Bazerman (1980), have speculated that people learn to become good writers by reading other good writers. Although the rules of writing can be taught separately from the practice of extensive reading, learning writing skills by modeling one’s own writing on what one reads would seem to be a natural process. As novelist and poet Robert Penn Warren suggested, writing comes naturally in response to reading literature (Vassallo 1991). Participant Bill Conway also endorsed this theory when he suggested that the exposure to literature which he received at Virginia Tech helped develop his writing ability much more than any of his actual writing classes had. If today’s students are mostly reading the abbreviated forms of writing that stream across the bottom of CNN or are found on their computer screens at various websites and in instant Messages and e-mails, they might have difficulty composing the more formal English of the printed page. Richard Smith and I shared stories about the e-

mails we receive. I explained how the majority of mine were cryptically written without regard to the rules of English. When I asked him if he thought people were losing their writing skills because they do not use writing as much, he replied, “Absolutely. I mean I’ve had the same experience. I still write; I do a lot of e-mail but I do it as I would have written a letter twenty years ago, and with my peer group, I often get responses that way. At the same time I have a daughter who’s a Hokie and who’s in medical school, and I get back from her a twenty-first-century response which is not capitalized and not punctuated, and you know it gets the Message to me but the feeling that often goes with writing as we used to do it is a little bit absent, I think.” On the subject of using non-standard English in written communication, Phil Tyrone put it even more directly when he said, “I mean if you’re corresponding, that’s a form of correspondence. You don’t want to look like an idiot when you’re sending a person an e-mail.”

#### Beneficial Disciplines

When asked what classes they felt had benefited them the most in their post-college lives, participants most often mentioned the following: English, history, math and science, and foreign language. Two participants saw their foreign language classes as helpful supplements to their English classes. Mary Brown explained how her foreign language courses helped her to better understand the English language. “I never understood how to conjugate a verb until I took French,” she said. “I mean, I don’t ever remember that concept ever being presented . . . I felt like I learned far more about English by taking French.” Cameron raised another point concerning foreign language. “I had some German and some French,” he told me. “They give you French literature and German literature, and one of the things you had to do was to translate, and therefore you understood how the French feel or how the Germans feel through their literature, not just their grammar.”

Seven participants mentioned how they had enjoyed their history classes and later found them helpful. Richard Smith felt his literature classes, business classes, and math and science classes were the most important courses he had at Virginia Tech. He credits math and science with being good “mental discipline.” “Math,” he said, “is very logical; sciences are logical. They taught you to think logically.” Harry Steele echoed this idea

saying, “Any math-based science is going to give you some analytical ability” and that literature and history classes, which required substantial amounts of reading, gave him “the ability to use the language to my advantage.”

### Reactions to Dropping the Literature Requirement

When asked how they felt about the literature requirement being dropped from both the university-wide and business major curriculums, participants responded in various ways. Mary Brown was “surprised” but did not regard it as a problem. All of the other participants, however, did not think the change was for the better. A couple of participants were neutral on the subject, but three quarters, to varying degrees, were upset by the change in requirements. Jeff Macmillan was a bit tentative. “I’m not sure that it’s good,” he said. “I know that today’s world’s changing so much, but you know they don’t have a year of literature. It seems like it ought to be some exposure for a semester or something anyway even still required even if it wasn’t a year.” Bennet said, “I don’t see anything wrong with requiring English literature; I don’t see anything wrong with requiring a certain amount of it.” His reasoning for requiring it was that “everybody should be introduced to” literature classes to see if they liked it and wanted to “pursue it a little further” on their own. “I’m glad that I had some literature courses; there’s just something inside of me that enjoyed it when I took it” and added “I think some literature would be worthwhile for anybody. I really do.”

Others were even more adamant. Richard Smith said, “It’s a mistake.” Bill Conway called it a “shame” and added “I’m disappointed to see them drop literature.” He explained, “the literature at Tech got me into really enjoying books which I’ve carried with me. I think that’s more important than what I actually learned in those classes.” Chip Fitzgerald lamented that if you no longer had to take such courses as literature and history, then “well you might as well go to trade school.” And Tom Howard said in his “personal view” dropping it was not only a mistake but “a catastrophic mistake.” “Doing something like that just doesn’t make any sense,” in his opinion, because the skill of writing “is something that has to be developed and it’s not being developed. Very few people have any writing skills and that’s very disappointing.” He admitted that he didn’t “know whether literature, that subject in and of itself at the college level in particular, is

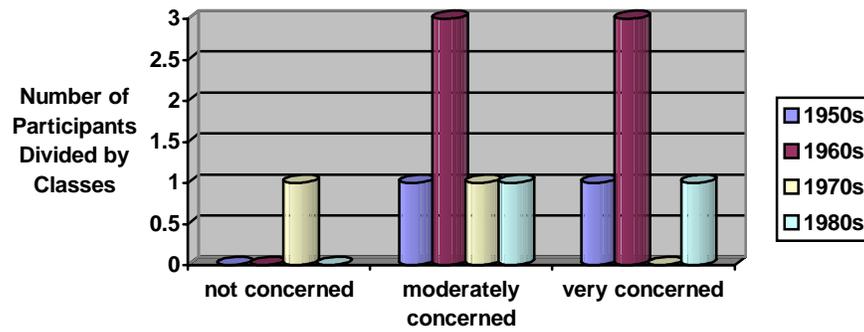


Figure 1. Reactions to dropping literature requirement.

going to address that issue,” but he feels “that any time you start taking something out of the learning experience that provides an outlet to get away from whatever your world might be” then “it takes away from the rounding of and making of that person.” He believes that “a person that doesn’t have to read, probably is not going to read simply for enjoyment” and that looking at the students he now sees coming out of high school, the curriculum needs to add more literature requirements rather than drop them.

A few participants admitted that had they been able to avoid taking literature classes as undergraduates, they would have, but would have regretted it later. “If I could have opted out, I probably would have,” Phil Tyrone told me, “but they were required courses, so I took them.” He remembers that his English classes were not always his favorites and that he considered them “hurdles” but thinks that today’s curriculum still needs “some control, especially more so in writing skills.” Amy Jones, likewise, said she would not like to have been given the choice as an undergraduate to take or not take a literature class “because I probably wouldn’t take it if it wasn’t required, but I can see now that I would have missed a lot.”

### Summary

Participants, in general, seemed to agree that their undergraduate classes at Virginia Tech had not been a waste of time. There was no unanimous consensus that these classes unequivocally benefited the student in any particular way. For example, it cannot be said that studying literature always helped students broaden their world view. Still, a majority of participants felt their study of literature had been a contributing factor to their better appreciation of the world, and they likewise felt these classes had contributed to their abilities to better express themselves and communicate with others.

Participants recalled their undergraduate literature classes with a general fondness. In particular, they warmly remembered their teachers and the interactive teaching style employed in these classes. About half of the participants felt that they had not been intellectually mature enough to appreciate literature before reaching college and were more intellectually ready for it as a college student.

Participants also worried that today’s college students do not possess the reading and writing skills needed for good business communication. Participants, especially

participants over the age of fifty-five, felt that today's college students and recent college graduates do not read as much as past generations and, consequently, often produce sloppy writing. These participants speculated that technology might be a contributing factor to this perceived problem.

When asked for their opinion concerning literature classes no longer being required in either the university core curriculum or business major core curriculum, participants overwhelmingly felt that students should be required to study a minimum amount of literature of some type as part of their undergraduate education.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

This qualitative study was designed to gather impressions from former Virginia Tech business majors regarding how they perceive their undergraduate literature classes effected their lives and careers. Formal, in-person, semi-structured, open-ended, qualitative interviews were conducted with one dozen participants in order to reconstruct the participants' memories of their literature classes. Participants were also asked how they felt in retrospection these classes had or had not contributed to their overall education. These participants all earned their undergraduate degrees in business from Virginia Tech between the years of 1957 and 1987. Each decade from the 1950s through the 1980s was represented by two or more participants. Interviews were used as the main data collection technique because past events would be impossible to replicate (Merriam, 1998). All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed for the fullest account possible of what was said. This study supports the idea that requiring more literature classes in both the university-wide core curriculum and the business major might prove beneficial to undergraduates.

#### First Research Question

- How do alumni of Virginia Tech's Business College view their previous undergraduate literature classes in relation to their lives and careers?

The business college alumni who participated in this study overwhelmingly agreed that the literature classes they took in their undergraduate years at Virginia Tech left their mark on their lives in numerous ways. Eleven of the twelve participants felt that the literature classes they took proved to be beneficial, in varying degrees, to their post-college lives and careers. They agreed that literature helped to open their minds to the possibilities of new ideas and cultures in ways that their business classes and other non-humanities classes did not. As Philip Vassallo suggested, reading literature helped students to put their own lives into perspective (1991). According to the participants, the act of reading literature helped them better understand themselves, question their beliefs, and grow intellectually. As Marilyn Goldberg wrote, students in literature classes learned

to “read and think for themselves” (1982). They agreed that these classes broadened their view of the world. The literature they read introduced them to other cultures and allowed them to compare their own culture to these other cultures, an idea supported by Renu Juneja who teaches post-colonial literature to undergraduates (1993). According to novelist Faye Weldon, you “do not read novels for information, but for enlightenment” because literature aides in better self understanding (1984). As suggested by Weldon, not only did their literature class experiences expand their perspective of the world at large, they also helped to broaden the participants’ views of themselves as individuals and allowed them to begin to challenge their own opinions and cultural upbringings.

The participants also stated that studying literature added to their appreciation of other disciplines, gave them an appreciation for other people’s disciplines, and helped them better interact with other people by giving them common ground on which to meet. Lois Fowler supports these statements noting that literature students seem “to function well in interpersonal relationships with the colleagues” (1979). Participants also saw a connection between studying literature and studying history, a point echoed by Diane Ravitch (1985). The two disciplines often complemented each other with supplementary literary works helping to bring history texts to life, giving history a more human face.

In addition, studying literature helped to sharpen participants’ comprehension and analytical skills, which according to Goldberg is one of the main goals of literature classes (1985). Their undergraduate literature classes may also have had a positive effect on their careers as half of the participants credited their undergraduate literature classes with greatly improving their writing and communication skills needed for business. Fowler suggested that literature classes improved communication skills by expanding and exercising the student’s imagination and vocabulary (1979). William McCarron also agreed that teaching composition and studying literature were “not separate concerns” (1980). As former Poet Laureate Billy Collins said, people “learn to write by reading” (Lanham 2001). The participants noted that reading literature helped them to better appreciate the complexities and subtleties of language. One participant stated that “exposure to literature” was the key to learning how to write. He felt that his literature classes were more useful than his composition classes when it came to improving his own prose writing. Charles Bazerman, of City University of New York,

likewise believes that there is a “connection between what a person reads and what that person then writes” and raises the idea that apprentice writers become acquainted with writing through reading (1980).

Participants also shared the concern that recent graduates with whom they had come in contact often seemed to lack necessary writing skills. They worried that standards were slipping and that young people were spending more time engaging in electronic mediums and less time engaging in substantial reading, supporting the findings of *The Reading at Risk* survey (2004). The participants who considered themselves to be highly literate likewise considered themselves to be highly successful in their chosen fields. Eleven of the participants when told that undergrads at Virginia Tech no longer were required to take any literature classes, expressed the opinion that such a change in curriculum was not in the student’s best interest.

#### Second Research Question

- What do Virginia Tech business alumni most remember concerning their literature studies, and how do they make meaning of these memories?

Although it had been between fifteen and forty-five years since the participants had taken part in undergraduate literature classes, they still remembered many aspects of those classes. They overwhelmingly recalled their undergraduate English professors, usually in very positive ways. Thanks in part to enthusiastic professors, and in part to the material studied, most participants remembered their literature classes as being enjoyable and interesting. They also noted that their literature classes were often highly interactive, with teachers engaging the students in the material instead of merely lecturing or assigning written work. Fowler explains that English Literature classes often use “low-keyed but provocative discussions” to bring human interaction to the class (1979). Discussion often played a key role in these classes and this aspect of the classes seemed to make them more memorable. Some participants recalled the actual titles of works they read in these classes, but most did not. What nearly all remembered about their literature classes, however, was the feeling of interplay they encouraged and the fresh perspectives they introduced.

Over half of the participants recalled that they really only began to read for their own enjoyment and edification once they arrived at college. Seven of the participants I interviewed agreed that they were too immature in high school to fully appreciate literature and were much more intellectually capable of comprehending it by the time they reached college. In high school, they had only read the minimum that was required of them, and they had not read as deeply as they later learned to read in college. These participants could only appreciate literature once they were intellectually ready.

The comments from these participants regarding reading and maturity support Mortimer J. Adler's position, expressed in his work titled *Paideia Proposal*, that "no one can be an educated person while immature." It is only with maturity and "range and depth of experience" that students become educated people. "The mature may not be as trainable as the immature, but they are more educable by virtue of their maturity," (1982, pp. 9-10). Participants agreed that it made sense for students to study literature once they had reached college instead of simply relegating it to high school. While it can be argued that college students have not yet reached full maturity, they are usually much more mature and experienced than their counterparts in high school.

Presumably many colleges and universities rest assured that students while still in high school study all the literature they need for acquiring the knowledge of how language works and are now ready to progress to using these skills in composition classes. According to the College Board, a non-profit association whose members include over five thousand schools, colleges, and universities, Freshman College Composition examinations, such as the SAT, assume students entering the course already know "the fundamental principles of rhetoric and can apply the principles of standard written English" (2005). This was the case as far as participant Bill Conway (pseudonym used) was concerned; he told me that his freshman composition class worked on the assumption that students had learned the basics of good writing in high school. Composition class, as he remembers it, "would just talk you through writing different types of essays." In contrast, "literature classes were more discussion." He remembers them as being unlike his English classes in high school because his college literature classes, as noted by Fowler, required considerable reading and analysis (1979).

## Implications for the Core Curriculum and Business Department

### A Balanced Curriculum

A curriculum should be balanced between sciences and humanities. Courses which are humanisticly-centered as opposed to being centered on science or technology should be required in the core curriculum. Science and technology are important areas of study for students in the twenty-first century, but these classes are already well represented in the core curriculum at most major universities, including Virginia Tech. Humanities should not be under-represented in return. Finn, Ravitch, and Fancher eloquently express this idea comparing an education which stresses only math and science to an athlete who only builds strength on one side of his body (1984). The current core curriculum at Virginia Tech requires two math classes, two science classes, two social science classes, two freshman writing classes, two humanities classes, one fine arts class, and one international studies class.

This curriculum at first appears balanced, but if one considers that the freshman writing classes often do not deal heavily with analytical reading and that fine arts classes often require more visual learning skills than ones involving analytical reading and writing, and when one also realizes that twenty fine arts classes are cross listed as humanities allowing students to virtually substitute fine arts classes for more literature based humanities classes, and when one also notices that many of the classes offered as humanities are found in departments traditionally regarded as sciences and social sciences, one begins to see that the current curriculum is not all that balanced ([www.uaac.vt.edu/coreguides/2004-2005.pdf](http://www.uaac.vt.edu/coreguides/2004-2005.pdf)). Humanities involving substantial analytical reading and writing skills should also be required in equal measure in the core. Humanities should not be optional. And humanities classes should be clearly defined and limited in scope, as math and science classes are already clearly defined and limited. Virginia Tech's current core curriculum asks students to choose two of seventeen math classes and two of nineteen science classes. Although the choices need not be quite as limited when it comes to the two required humanities classes, the more than one hundred currently offered classes in this division should be carefully inspected to see if they

involve the necessary level of substantial analytical readings which are, as Meyer suggests, “marked by careful use of language” and deal with the human condition (1997).

#### Exposure to People with Different Interests

There is a danger that students who spend more and more time studying within their major field will have less ability to interact well with people outside their field. The core curriculum is supposed to expose undergraduates to a variety of disciplines in order to broaden them. Allowing students to choose courses already within their major field to satisfy their core curriculum classes weakens the attempt to broaden their exposure to other fields. Students majoring in science or technology, for example, who take such courses as “Humanities, Technology, and Life Sciences” and “Science and Technology in Modern Society” to fulfill their humanities core requirements are not being fully exposed to the various disciplines for which the core was designed. Participants in this study credited their literature classes with making them more well-rounded people.

Today’s students who limit themselves to staying within their major run the risk of becoming “one-dimensional,” as one participant put it. Brooklyn College’s core curriculum seems to try to guard against this danger. It claims it is “designed for nonspecialists” and aims “to broaden awareness, cultivate the intellect, and stimulate the imagination.” Students in Brooklyn College’s baccalaureate degree program must take the following classes: The Classical Origins of Western Culture; Introduction to Art; Introduction to Music; People, Power, and Politics; The Shaping of the Modern World; Introduction to Computer Science; Thinking Mathematically; Landmarks of Literature; Science in Modern Life I and II; Comparative Studies in African, Asian, Middle Eastern, and Latin American Cultures; and Knowledge, Existence, and Values.

([www.brooklyn.cuny.edu](http://www.brooklyn.cuny.edu)). Likewise many miles west of Brooklyn, Montana State University, a land grant school dating back to 1862, has of 2004 revised its core curriculum in order to “ensure a wide-ranging general education” designed to “emphasize communication and techniques of creative inquiry in a variety of disciplines.” This core requires courses from all the following categories: University Seminar; College Writing; Quantitative Reasoning; Diversity; Contemporary Issues in Science; Arts; Humanities; Natural Science; Social Science; Additional Research; and Creative Experience

([www.montana.edu/www](http://www.montana.edu/www)). Unlike Virginia Tech's core curriculum, all the classes listed under Humanities at Montana State University are found in the following traditionally accepted departments: English, History, Humanities, Modern Language, Philosophy, and Religion. Students at these schools are not allowed to substitute science for humanities.

Students who are allowed to only take classes within their major fields are also not being exposed to students in other areas of study. Literature classes in the core curriculum are designed to be taken by students from all majors. In these classes students majoring in such diverse fields as business, biology, political science, history, economics, engineering, agriculture, psychology, music, computer science, and others intermingle and create a community of cross-majors. Students from all majors are encouraged to speak out and share their opinions in predominantly discussion-based literature classes, and this arrangement allows them to better understand each other and explore each other's disciplines and beliefs. Students in their first and second years of undergraduate studies especially need to be exposed to people of varied interests. First year students are generally required to take a freshman composition class; however, freshman writing classes designed to simply teach composition do not often encourage the sharing of ideas in the same discussion-based manner that most literature classes do. The core curriculums at such schools as Brooklyn College and Montana State University, on the other hand, strive to encourage students to interact and communicate with students outside their own major.

### Communication and Writing Skills

The idea that good readers make good writers is not new. Readers who voraciously read the works of others improve their own command of the language and consequently improve their own writing skills. The National Reading Panel maintained that hundreds of correlational studies suggested that "the more children read, the better their fluency, vocabulary and comprehension" grew (Williams, 2000). This belief was strongly echoed by participants in this study. Business executives interviewed speculated that their grounding in English and World Literature greatly contributed to their good communication skills which in turn contributed to their success in their careers. These same people were concerned that recent undergraduates with whom they worked seemed

to often lack a grounding in literature. Echoing Robert Penn Warren's prophecy that our society was becoming both purely technological and increasingly illiterate (Watkins & Heirs, 1976), participants said recent undergraduates were worldly and possessed fine technical skills but were particularly weak where written communication skills were concerned. Participants who believe that today's recent college undergraduates are reading less than undergraduates of the past might argue that the *Reading at Risk* report supports this idea (2004). And students who do not engage in reading prose of a certain level of literary complexity could run the risk of not being able to successfully write at the level expected of them. Literature classes should once more be encouraged as a means of helping all students improve their own writing by exposing them to the well-written works of others. As participants and professional writers have stated, "You learn to write by reading" (Lanham, 2001).

#### Literature and Business

Although a grounding in literature studies could prove beneficial to students of all disciplines in so much as it might serve to improve writing skills, broaden cultural understanding, and bridge communication problems between people of different disciplines, the participants in this study suggested that it might prove especially beneficial to business students. Most business involves some form of dealing with people outside of the business itself. Businesspeople design and produce products for customers, market ideas to people, and serve their clients in numerous other ways. In all cases they must be able to relate to and communicate with people of diverse backgrounds. As writing instructor and marketing director Philip Vassallo states, there is a connection between appreciating literature and operating a successful business (1991).

#### Questions for Further Research

One path for further research would be to investigate whether today's recent business graduates agree or disagree with the opinions of the participants in this study, all of whom are their seniors, in regard to the usefulness of literature in their lives and careers. Since Virginia Tech business majors no longer are required to take any literature courses, it is impossible to see if the university's recent graduates agree or disagree with

the opinions expressed by the participants in this study. However, a similar study to gauge the opinions of more recent graduates majoring in business could be developed for and conducted at another university, such as Auburn University, where literature classes are still required in order to see if the new data matches the data found in this study. Auburn's core curriculum, unlike the core curriculum at Virginia Tech, requires all students to take six hours of World Literature in addition to their six hours of composition classes. Auburn's students must also take six hours of history, three hours of philosophy, and three hours of fine arts along with a total of seventeen hours of math, science and social science classes. Auburn's tightly structured core curriculum, which allows only a few choices, if any, within each category of study, closely mirrors the core curriculum Virginia Tech had when most of the participants involved in this study attended the university thus providing a possible modern parallel.

Another path for further research would be to use the findings gathered from the participants in this qualitative study to develop a survey concerning the usefulness of college literature classes on the lives and careers of business alumni. This survey could then be given to a much larger number of participants to see if the findings from a larger sampling of Virginia Tech business alumni echoed the findings of the smaller sample.

One participant suggested an appreciation of good communication skills and a good grounding in English or World Literature would lead to higher positions in the business world, and likewise a lack of these skills and grounding would serve as "an impediment to success that otherwise might have been available." With this hypothesis in mind, a third path of research could involve conducting another qualitative study of CEOs in order to see how much literature each of the new study's participants had taken as undergraduates and if their responses were similar to those of the CEO in this study who suggested the hitherto mentioned correlation between a person's grounding in literature and his or her perceived level of success achieved in business. Likewise, in order to even more closely gauge the connection between studying literature and succeeding in business, a long-term study of ten years or more could be conducted which followed the careers of five recently graduated Virginia Tech business majors who did not take any literature classes and five recent Virginia Tech graduates who double majored in business and English. Such a study would eliminate the problem of memory

distortion which might have been a contributing factor to the findings in this study. This idea was suggested to me by Dr. Terry Wildman.

Lastly, a qualitative study could be conducted involving faculty members of the business college at Virginia Tech in order to find their views concerning the need for business students to once again be required to take some literature-centered courses as part of their undergraduate degree program. Such a study, which could include both faculty members who taught at the college when literature classes were required and faculty members who came to the college since the requirement was dropped, could find if faculty members agreed with the alumni participants' views found in this study.

### Final Reflections

All but one of the participants in this study felt the literature they read in college had been helpful to them in their lives and careers and that literature classes should be required, or at least encouraged, in undergraduate degree programs. The benefits of English and World Literature seemed to transcend the actual texts taught in literature classes. It was not the literary canon that was important; no particular group of texts or authors needed to be taught. What was important was the insight students gained through reading literature that later helped them to better understand themselves and their world and also helped them communicate more effectively through writing. Participants often credited their college literature classes with broadening their perspectives and giving them what one participant called "a working knowledge" of life in general, or as Robert Penn Warren put it, "the pattern of human struggle" and "human possibility" (Watkins and Heirs, 1980, p.98). In short, literature courses that dealt with the human condition and required ample amounts of analytical reading and writing often formed a foundation for future lifelong understanding and good communication skills necessary for most walks of life.

Literature courses need not be found exclusively in college English Departments, however. Literature courses could even be tailored to the business major and taught within the Business Department as part of the business core curriculum, such as Kish-Goodling's classes which used Shakespeare to teach economics (1999). This practice

would assure that business students obtain the benefits reading literature provides even if literature classes were not required as part of the university-wide core.

Universities should recognize that literature classes are an important component of any good college education, education designed to go beyond the mere technical education once given to slaves. Academic advisors should certainly encourage students to take classes centered on literature as electives if such classes are not included in the university core or business core curriculum and explain to business students how beneficial humanities, and literature classes in particular, can be to their future success in business, as well as their future success in life.

Most students will probably have to work with other people in some capacity in their careers; this possibility is assuredly so for people in business even if they might not have direct contact with their customers. If the purpose of the humanities is to study what makes humans inherently human—literature, language, and history (McAnulty College, 2003)—then studying the humanities would seem to be quite beneficial to people who, among other things, need to understand humans in order to create products for them and sell products to them. It is true that social sciences, such as sociology, also aid in understanding human nature, but humanities, and literature in particular, often bring a personal and humanizing quality to the process.

The cliché says the business of business is business, but the business people who participated in this study seemed to think business involved more than knowing numbers and bottom lines. In order to be successful, they needed more. They needed the wide-ranging insights into life and humanity that literature brought them. They needed the interpersonal skills combined with the intrinsic knowledge literature steered them towards achieving in order to lead richer, fuller lives both on the job and off. As participant Richard Smith (pseudonym used), a retired CEO, speculated, business people who achieve a high level of success probably have a better grounding in English literature than those who do not. Perhaps he is correct in assuming that is what makes the difference between a programmer and an assistant vice-president.

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Appendix A

## Participant Recruitment Letter

Dear \*\*\*\*,

My name is Susan Gordon and my dissertation research involves interviewing Virginia Tech alumni who majored in business and graduated between the years of 1950 and 1990. I would very much appreciate being able to conduct a 20-30 minute interview with you this summer at your convenience. I can mail you a copy of the questions in advance if you wish.

I may be phoning you later to see if you would like to participate, or you may simply write or phone me at the address below in order to set-up an interview if you like.

Thank-you in advance for your help.

Sincerely,

Susan Gordon

205 Gale Road

Pearisburg, VA

921-3880

Appendix B

## Interview Guide

### I) Protocol

#### *The Purpose of this Study*

*The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences and memories of Virginia Tech undergraduate business major alumni regarding their study of literature.*

#### *Procedures*

*Participants will be volunteers living in Virginia who received their undergraduate degree in business from VT between the years of 1950 and 1990. Participants will be asked to participate in face-to-face interviews with the researcher. The interviews will each last approximately one half hour to one hour and consist mostly of open ended questions about their experiences concerning undergraduate literature classes.*

*Interviews will be scheduled at the convenience of the participant.*

#### *Risks*

*There are no foreseeable physical or emotional risks to the participant in this study beyond those faced in everyday life.*

#### *Benefits of this Project*

*By participating in this study, the participant will be contributing to a body of knowledge that may serve to give insight to college curriculum planners, and others, regarding the need for business majors to study literature as part of their undergraduate curriculum.*

#### *Extent of Anonymity and Confidentiality*

*Only I will know the identity of the participants. Each transcribed interview will be coded numerically, and a pseudonym will be used when referring to the participant.*

#### *Compensation*

*The participants will not receive any form of compensation for their participation in the study.*

#### *Freedom to Withdraw*

*Participation in this study is strictly voluntary; therefore, the participants are free to withdraw from this study at any time. The interview participants are also free not to respond to any questions asked during the interview.*

## II) Demographic Information

- 1) Year you graduated from VT
- 2) Degree and major/concentration earned at VT
- 3) What positions have you held since graduating VT?

## III) Questions regarding work

- 1) What sort of reading and writing skills are required for your present job?
- 2) Do you feel that the literature you read has in any way helped you with these skills? If so, how?
- 3) In what ways, if any, do you believe the literature you've read has helped you to understand other people and cultures? Can you think of a specific instance?
- 4) In what ways, if any, do you feel that the literature you've read has helped you to better understand yourself, your world, your creativity, and your own limitations or lack of limitations?

## IV Questions regarding memories of undergraduate studies

- 1) What did you study at Tech? Which classes do you remember the most? Why do you remember them?
- 2) What literature classes did you take at VT?
- 3) Were these classes mandatory, electives, or a mix of both? If they were electives, why did you take them?
- 4) What do you remember about how your literature classes were taught?  
 [prompts if needed: Was it all lecture? Did you memorize passages? Did you read passages out loud as a class? Did you discuss as a class? Did you write essays?]
- 5) What stories, poems, or plays do you remember reading from the English classes you took at Tech, if any, and what is it that you remember most about them?
- 6) Which particular authors do you remember?
- 7) Why do you think that these memories of the literature you read have remained with you?

8) How do you feel about the business major, as well as the core curriculum, dropping its literature requirements?

V) Questions regarding prior contact with literature

1) What were your childhood and teenage experiences with reading?

2) How much reading did you do before entering college? What sort of things did you read and why did you read them?

[prompts if needed: newspapers? magazines? books? poems? non-fiction?]

VI) Questions regarding enjoyment of literature today

1) What sorts of things do you read on your own outside of work? Why do you read them?

2) Compared to other classes you took, how do you feel that studying literature has in any way helped you in your life as a whole?

3) Compared to other non-business classes you took, how do you feel that studying literature has in any way helped you in your career?

4) Can you make any connection between your former literature classes and who you are today?

## Appendix C

## Informed Consent Form

VIRGINIA POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE AND STATE UNIVERSITY

Title of Project: VT Business College Alumni Reflect on Literature in their Lives

Investigator: Susan M. Gordon

The Purpose of this Study: The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences and memories of Virginia Tech undergraduate business major alumni regarding their study of literature.

Procedures: Participants will be volunteers living in Virginia who received their undergraduate degree in business from VT between the years of 1950 and 1990. Participants will be asked to participate in face-to-face interviews with the researcher. The interviews will each last approximately one half hour to one hour and consist mostly of open ended questions about their experiences concerning undergraduate literature classes. Interviews will be scheduled at the convenience of the participant.

Risks: There are no foreseeable physical or emotional risks to the participant in this study beyond those faced in everyday life.

Benefits of this Project: By participating in this study, the participant will be contributing to a body of knowledge that may serve to give insight to college curriculum planners, and others, regarding the need for business majors to study literature as part of their undergraduate curriculum.

Extent of Anonymity and Confidentiality: Only I will know the identity of the participants. Each transcribed interview will be coded numerically, and a pseudonym will be used when referring to the participant.

Compensation: The participants will not receive any form of compensation for their participation in the study.

Freedom to Withdraw: Participation in this study is strictly voluntary; therefore, the participants are free to withdraw from this study at any time. The interview participants are also free not to respond to any questions asked during the interview.

Participant's Responsibilities: If the participant voluntarily agrees to participate in this study, it will be asked that this person participate in semi-structured interviews at his/her convenience. The participant is asked to contact the researcher or the researcher's supervising faculty member if a problem or concern arises during any stage of the research process.

Participant's Permission: I have read and understand the Informed Consent requirement and the conditions of this research project. I have had all my questions answered, and hereby acknowledge the above information and give my consent voluntarily for participation in this project. If I decide to participate in this project, I fully understand that I may withdraw at any time without penalty. I agree to accept and adhere to all the rules and responsibilities of this research project as outlined in this consent form.

---

Signature

Date

Should you have any questions about this research project, you should contact:

Susan Gordon, Investigator/Researcher 540 921-3880

Dr. Patricia Kelly, Committee Chair,

College of Human Resources and Education, Virginia Tech

David M. Moore, IRB Chair, 540-231-4991

CVM Phase II, Virginia Tech

BIOGRAPHICAL PROFILE: The doctoral student conducting the research study is:

Susan Gordon

Graduate Student

College of Human Resources and Education

I am a doctoral student in English Education in Education Curriculum and Instruction (EDCI) at Virginia Tech. I currently teach Oral Interpretation (SPD 137) and Collage Composition II (ENG 112) part-time at New River Community College and my past educational experiences include being employed full-time as an English and Drama teacher at Randolph-Macon Academy for three years and the same position at Southern Virginia College for two years before that. Prior to teaching English full-time, I served as a graduate teaching assistant in the English department at Radford University, and worked for Cave Spring High School as a Drama Coach. My future goals include pursuing a professorship at a university or college within the next five years.

## Vita

SUSAN MARIE GORDON

205 Gale Road, Pearisburg, Virginia

Education:

PhD (2006) Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, Virginia

Major: Education, Curriculum and Instruction

M.A. (1994) Radford University, Radford, Virginia

Major: English

- Thesis—Roses Red and White: The Women of Shakespeare's *Richard III*

B.A. (1987) Roanoke College, Salem, Virginia

Major: Fine Arts/Theatre

Minor: British Literature

- magna cum laude
- Virginia Program at Oxford (1986) Saint Anne's College, Oxford University  
studied Elizabethan/Jacobean literature and history

Professional Licensure:

Virginia Teacher Licensure (1991)

Teaching Experience:

English Instructor (2000—Present)

New River Community College, Dublin, Virginia

- taught English Composition I
- taught English Composition II
- taught Oral Interpretation

English Teacher (1996-1999)

Randolph-Macon Academy, Front Royal, Virginia

- taught College English
- taught English 12
- taught English 10
- served as Drama Coach

English Instructor (1994-1996)

Southern Virginia College for Women, Buena Vista, Virginia

- taught English Composition I
- taught English Composition II
- taught English Literature to 1800
- taught English Literature since 1800
- taught Fundamentals of Speech
- served as Drama Coach
- served as Academic Advisor

Graduate Teaching Assistant (1992-1994)

Radford University, Radford, Virginia

- taught (as instructor on record) English 101: Expository Writing
- taught (as instructor on record) English 102: Reading, Writing, and Research

Drama Coach (1989-1991)

Cave Spring High School, Roanoke, Virginia

Other Work Experience:

Professional and Amateur Actress and Director (1987-1996) various theaters

Radio Announcer (1988-1990) WPVR, Roanoke, Virginia

Publications:

Gordon, Susan Marie. “ ‘The actors are come hither’: Celluloid Shakespeare in the Classroom and Beyond.” Virginia English Bulletin 50 (2000):4-7.

Gordon, Susan Marie. “Cary Grant Film Quiz” Hollywood Studio Magazine Feb. 1988:32-33.

Presentations:

Gordon, Susan Marie. (1995) The British Comedy of Manners Short Story Tradition: What It Says and How It Says It. Madison Conference on English Studies, James Madison University