

# Alumni Spotlight: Cynthia Williams

## M.A. English (1988)



### **Why did you choose UofL English?**

I'd been living and working in Louisville for a couple of years, and I signed up for an English class as a special student. Quite honestly, I needed the intellectual stimulation! The class was titled something like "The History of Science in Literature," taught in seminar style by Dale Billingsley. With an undergraduate degree in the history of ideas, I found the content enormously appealing, and Dr. Billingsley was immediately welcoming. Shortly thereafter, I applied to the master's program in English, and it was a great fit for me. I look back at my four years in Louisville as a magical time.

**Please share a little bit about a favorite class or project you developed in English about which you are particularly proud.**

I'm really proud of my master's thesis, which I wrote under the direction of Lucy Freibert. It helped me accomplish the turn from history to literature, and it led to my first publication.

**Share your best memory of being an English student.**

That would be when I realized I had hit upon a thesis topic with great potential. I'd been doing research in the Filson Club (as it was known then), and although I had a broad area of interest—women on the prairies—I hadn't really formulated a specific question. But I was still in coursework, and for Dr. Freibert's class on nineteenth-century U.S. women writers, I read Susan Warner's second novel, *Queenie*. It had received very little critical attention, and what few references there were always dismissed it as a reread of Warner's earlier bestseller, *The Wide, Wide World*. But when I started reading *Queenie* for my seminar paper, I was struck by how very different it was. Immediately, I realized that not only did I have some in store writing the paper, I had my thesis topic as well. As soon as I read the last line of the novel, I could imagine how I'd organize my chapters. It's that moment of clarity that remains such a strong memory. And while I might approach aspects of the novel differently now (it's been a long time, and my scholarship has evolved), I still regard that project as very exciting.

**What is the most important thing learned while you were an English student?**

What the master's program at Louisville taught me was how to converse comfortably about critical investments. I was developmentally ready at that point for a freer exchange of ideas about theoretical perspectives and their consequences. The faculty were very generous in this way.

**Describe your career path. How did your English education prepare you for what you are doing today?**

Shortly after defending my master's thesis—within a matter of days, as I recall—I made a geographic move. It was my spouse's turn for graduate school, and this required a relocation to the east coast. I then stepped off the academic path for several years, and when I resumed my studies it was at Tufts University, where I earned a PhD in English Literature. I've taught at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and now am Associate Professor in the School of Sciences and Humanities at Wentworth Institute of Technology in Boston.

Even during the years that I was not in academia, my education in English came to the fore. Working at non-profits and volunteering in my community, I could do the deep dive into research. I could synthesize information that I encountered in various formats and media. I could pose the useful question. I could apply my reading skills as listening skills.

I was equipped to understand and to characterize context. So while vocationally my current work aligns beautifully with my education in English, it is also the case that my education honed skills that are highly valued in many different settings.

**What is one of your favorite professional accomplishments and/or most fascinating aspects of your job?**

I teach at a polytechnic university, so the most fascinating part of my job is activating a humanities perspective in perhaps unexpected ways. How can we spark synergy between the technical fields and the arts? This question was renewed on a daily basis during the term I served as the Director of the Center for Sustainability and the Environment for our five-college consortium, which is known as The Colleges of the Fenway. And at Wentworth, I am part of a small team that has just developed a major in Climate Resilience, which draws on many fields within the School of Sciences and Humanities. At a school that does not offer a bachelor's degree in English, this kind of multidisciplinary endeavor taps into our creativity.

**What advice would you give current students or recent graduates interested in pursuing a career in your professional field?**

Stay open. Remain true to your values, to be sure. But also stay open about career opportunities.

**What advice do you have for current students who want to make the most out of their experience in the Department of English?**

Cross train. We value cross-training in athletics but sometimes forget that flexing lots of different kinds of muscles increases our capacity overall. So even if you can't immediately match your prof's enthusiasm for, say, the rhetoric of early modern poetry (I use this example because Dr. Billingsley's class had such an impact on me), you may well be growing in ways you have yet to detect.

**Is there anything else you would like to share about your time with UofL's English program?**

I'm deeply indebted to the faculty who were at U of L during my time there, especially Dr. Billingsley, Dr. Freibert, Susan Griffin, and Tom Byers. Lucy Freibert was a marvelous mentor and thesis adviser, and she set an example I still aspire to live up to: generous, sharp, and continuously productive.