

Alumni Spotlight: Brent Coughenour

M.A. in English - Creative Writing



Why did you choose UofL English?

I am a Louisvillian myself, so coming to UofL was like a homecoming, of sorts. Additionally, I was impressed by UofL's robust creative writing faculty, and the option of getting a master's degree specifically in the field of creative writing.

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

My two creative writing courses (taught by Prof. Kiki Petrosino and Dr. Ian Stansel) were my two favorite courses, and both gave me the option to hone my craft through portfolios, each of which included three original stories that I had written for the class. Having such a high volume of work after only two courses felt like an incredible feat, and it was, bringing me fully into the field of creative writing in the most wonderful trial by fire I've ever experienced. Additionally, my culminating project was a story that I wrote under the mentorship of Dr. Stansel; to this day, it's still the story of which I am most proud.

Share your best memory of being an English student.

I was incredibly lucky to be chosen as the Assistant Director of Creative Writing for the 2018-2019 academic year, which allowed me to teach an intro to creative writing and work directly with Prof. Kiki Petrosino and a variety of other incredibly talented visiting writers. My time as the Assistant Director culminated in my first public reading, where I read excerpts from my culminating project. I still pinch myself sometimes thinking about how honored I was to assist the English department in that way.

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

The most important thing I learned as an English student was how to be an English teacher. Modeling myself after the wonderful instructors I had during my time in the program, as well as cutting my teeth on my own pedagogical skills in introduction and intermediate English classes, I was able to establish myself as instructor.

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

I am currently serving as the Dean of Academics for Mid-America College of Funeral Service in Jeffersonville, IN, where I also teach their English courses. Aside from the obvious benefit of using what I learned at UofL in my English instruction, I rely every day on the interpersonal skills that I adopted as an MA student when speaking to students and faculty who look to me for guidance. Without the mentorship that I received from instructors like Dr. Sarah Strickley and Dr. Bronwyn Williams, I would not be able to manage the dozens of faculty members that Mid-America employs; by observing firsthand how they managed the staff of Miracle Monocle and the University Writing Center, respectively, I am (hopefully) able to lead as empathetically and expertly as they led me. In small group interactions with students and faculty I depend on my experiences in the Writing Center, focusing on how I can help any given situation while also granting the student or instructor the agency and guidance they need to effectively deal with the issue.

What is one of the most fascinating aspects of your job?

The population of students at Mid-America is vastly different than any other student body I've worked with--they all want to be funeral directors, and I have no chance (or desire) to convince them to be English majors as I was. I learn from my students everyday. Many of them are non-traditional students or students obtaining another degree after working an entire career in a separate field, and I am constantly fascinated by the stories and insights that they have to share.

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

Openness to new experiences is vital, especially since I didn't apply to my job at Mid-America with the intention of becoming the dean! Embrace the flexibility that an English degree gives you, and keep your eyes open for unique positions in which you can use your training.

What advice do you have for current students to make the most out of their English experience?

Listen to your instructors and the experiences that they share. Write a bunch, creative or otherwise. Attend as many English Department events as possible, because you'll miss the option to attend them after you've graduated.