12. Professionalization

Vanderbilt’s doctoral program in English recognizes the challenges facing graduate students and devotes considerable attention to preparing them to enter the profession. Vanderbilt's Ph.D. Program in English offers professionalization training and sessions aimed at the job market from the student's first year in our program.

For a good overview of debates about professionalization in relation to the job market, see the Modern Language Association's (MLA’s) online article: "Professionalization in Perspective" The article offers suggestions for both students and departments. The recommendations for departments fall into five headings:

1. Providing a comprehensive sense of the profession
2. Providing directed information and guidance
3. Establishing or formalizing professional development programs
4. Career mentoring
5. Making teaching important

Our graduate program aims to provide support in each of these areas.

1. Providing a Comprehensive Sense of the Profession:

Each year, the DGS arranges a series of events designed to help students with different aspects of the profession. Over the past few years, for instance, we have had sessions on the hiring process, featuring a panel of discussants composed of members of Vanderbilt's most recent hiring committee; on collegiality; grant writing; and on the transition from graduate student to departmental colleague. We also devote considerable attention to research and publication (see
Project Publish); to undergraduate teaching and broad humanistic education; and to new developments and changes in the field. In addition to the programs discussed below, all first-year students enroll in a Proseminar designed to help them grasp various aspects of our rapidly changing profession.

2. Providing Directed Information and Guidance

Our graduate program provides extensive guidance along the way, in part through regular cohort meetings with the DGS to discuss everything from the first-year M.A. thesis to preparing for comprehensive exams; assembling dissertation committees; applying for inside and outside fellowships and grants; to going on the job market.

- Departmental Job Placement Committee

The English Department's Job Placement Committee helps guide students through the application process, from the drafting of application letters and *curriculum vitae* to conducting practice interviews and practice job talks. This process begins during the summer preceding the fifth year and picks up in intensity in the early fall before the first job listings are advertised. Students have the opportunity to have their letter and CV read by a number of faculty before they are mailed out, and everyone is invited to participate in a practice MLA interview, regardless of whether they already have one scheduled. Students who receive campus call-backs have the opportunity to practice the talk, Q & A, and receive extensive feedback on their performance.

- Some Nuts and Bolts

Dossiers are typically handled electronically these days (most through Interfolio). The dossier should include a CV and at least three letters of recommendation. Other documents, such as award citations, may also be included. Students should update their dossier periodically. Committee members and the DGS are happy to work with students on the format and content of
their CVs. Graduate students are encouraged to participate in the various workshops and practice sessions. Students should also discuss their job search with as many members of the faculty as possible. Most English Departments require a completed and approved dissertation from each job applicant; moreover, publications have become increasingly important for successful applicants. It is, therefore, advisable to consider each seminar paper as an opportunity to contribute to an ongoing conversation in hopes, ideally, of publishing a revised version before entering the job market. Students should also apply for post-doctoral fellowships simultaneously with the job search.

- **Alternative careers**

Increasingly the MLA and graduate programs have come to acknowledge that, given the shortage of tenure-track jobs nation-wide, doctoral students also need counsel regarding alternative academic careers and non-academic options for employment. To this end, Vanderbilt's Graduate School has an Assistant Dean for [Career Development](#), Ruth Schemmer. The English Department is also continually gathering information about the variety of paths our own Ph.D.s have taken over the years. Additionally, the [MLA website](#) also contains some useful links for those seeking non-academic careers.

3. **Establishing or Formalizing Professional Development Programs**

One English Department program stands out here: Project Publish (PP). PP is a year-long, non-credit, required program designed to prepare students to submit an article for publication by May of their fourth year. All students in their fourth year are required to participate. Students in their third year may participate if (a) a faculty member has told them that one of their seminar papers
is potentially publishable, or (b) they receive permission from their comprehensive exam committee and from the DGS.

The following is an outline of PP:

**Fall Semester:** three workshops with coordinated assignments.

- *Introduction and Editorial Survey:* The main focus is on how editors think about article submissions.
- *Journal Review:* Discussion of targeted journals. Students come in having devoted from attention to one or two journals that seem appropriate for their article. Each reports on what they have found.
- *Getting Started:* Discussion of openings of published article distributed in advance. Students come in prepared to discuss ways of engaging the reader, setting up arguments, and distributed openings. They will submit their own openings (3-4 pages) by early November.

**Spring Semester:** Peer reading groups, deadlines for drafts, and consultation with dissertation committees. The focus of the work shifts to peer reading groups and dissertation committees. Deadlines are set over the course of the semester for meeting with peer reading groups to discuss initial drafts of entire articles and for meeting with dissertation committees to discuss revised drafts. Then the process repeats with the goal of submitting the article in May of the fourth year.

4. **Career Mentoring**

In addition to the programs noted above, our Graduate Program supplies several layers of mentoring for beginning students. First-year students have the benefit of two mentors: (a) a current graduate student mentor assigned by the Vanderbilt English Graduate Student
Association (EGSA) and (b) a faculty mentor assigned by the DGS. Once a student selects a committee for comprehensive exams and dissertations with the guidance of the DGS, committee members take on the role of mentors.

EGSA hosts a conference for the first year students that gives them a valuable opportunity to practice their conference skills, with feedback from fellow students and faculty across the College. EGSA also hosts an array of events for graduate students aimed at developing research, pedagogical, grant application, and paper performance skills every year, and keeps an up-to-date database of job application materials – from CVs and application letters to teaching philosophy statements – to support students as they begin to prepare for the job market.

5. Making Teaching Important

In the spring of their third year, each student is required to attend the departmental Pedagogy course, while also shadowing a faculty member who teaches a course they will later teach themselves. This combination will prepare them for teaching as instructors of record in their fourth year.

New fourth-year graduate instructors have full instructional responsibility for their courses, from course design to grading. These are not discussion sections, but independent writing-intensive seminars. All graduate instructors are assigned faculty teaching mentors for at least one term. These mentors observed classes and provide written feedback at the end of each term. That feedback is made available to the graduate instructor.

Graduate instructors are encouraged to make use of the various services provided by the Center for Teaching.
The English Department annually awards the Thomas Daniel Young Award for Excellence in classroom teaching by a graduate student. The University also makes an annual award for excellence in graduate teaching by a graduate student.