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Don't Stop Believing: My Academic Journey (So Far!)

Pursuing this degree was not a choice I came to right away. When I applied, I was in the middle of a rut. I knew that I liked school, I had a Master's in history to prove it in fact, but I didn't know if going for another Master's degree was the right move. Or if it would make me sound too pretentious. Or both! While I knew I loved how the ASU Online programs structured themselves I wasn't sure about how an English degree would further me towards my goals that, at the time, were more like just fun things to daydream about. After talking to my parents I decided to apply for the English program. Coming from an English background, I figured it made enough sense. It wasn't a complete 180 from something I'd studied before jumping into something I knew nothing about. The rest of that process is history, but the beginning of this next academic chapter excited me, and reflecting on it now I can trace how the things I learned and developed here will be with me as I move ahead.

I'm not used to writing personal essays (I tend to be very formal in academic writing!) so looking at this narrative as an evolutionary study mixed with an op-ed piece challenged me in a fun way. From my first semester in the program last year, I walked in ready to expand my horizons. I think that the further I progress in academia the more my world opens up. That might sound cliché or obvious to the overall goals of an education but I find that the person I am at the start of every degree is enhanced by the end of it by at least *something* I picked up and added to

my toolbox. Whether ideas, a change in writing style, or shifting values I can pinpoint at least one thing and attribute it to the degree I'm earning. During my time in the English Studies program, I can confidently say there were a few overarching lessons. For starters, the idea that sometimes the best things are a mix of many different things. Sometimes, the best solution is to include two ideas that might not work well together on the surface but as you fit them into a paper or project there's a great surprise that they fit better than expected. Or, the equally important lesson is that in academia, you have to be open to flexibility. Generally, as a very type A person in my life, I'm set in my ways of doing things whether it's the topic for a paper I want to write or how I like to clean my house. I thought, for example, this Capstone project would consist of revising a previous paper from a class previously in the program and preparing for a presentation on that. Alternatively, I could develop another paper as my submission. I had my heart set on composing a paper examining the enduring relevance of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, so much so that I already began the rough outline over spring break. I'd already told multiple family members and friends who asked about my upcoming thesis that was the topic. It wasn't until reading the class syllabus that I realized this project instead centered on me and my academic past, present, and future. I don't like talking about myself in writing. I feel it comes off pretentious and that's the last thing I want. Throughout my schooling in previous English classes, I've been drilled *not* to use the first person when sharing my views in formal academic writing. This project will be a fun challenge, an opportunity to step out of that very comfortable box of my academic writing and explore how this program challenged and prepared me for my next steps. Though this academic worldview isn't just an academic one at all, I see how it has popped up multiple times in my classroom experience this past year or so and reminded me to keep an open mind that academics implore students to have if they wish to succeed,

I've always placed academic success as a marker of who I am. Is that a good thing? I think for the most part it is, although sometimes it leads to pressure placed on the image of myself. Yet, I come from a family that encourages academic pursuits and I'm very fortunate to have opportunities to explore the academic world. Valuing the role of academics in my life teaches me lessons I can't learn in the classroom but have to learn by navigating changes, setbacks, or any bumps along the way. Of course, those are unexpected, so it tests my ability to adapt and ultimately grow as a student and a person. As much as I value my role in academia, I am someone who prides myself on perseverance. I always have. In every personal essay I write, that seems to be brought up in one way or another eventually. Here it relates so well to the reflections I'm engaging with composing this narrative as an evolutionary piece rather than hashing out details from every class I took in this program and what I learned in that class specifically. If I did that it would loop back to the same lesson but in different contexts zooming out to look at a bigger picture. Smaller lessons I learned, more focused lessons, like how to strengthen a thesis statement or what the greater symbolism means in the context of comparing and contrasting Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* with Bram Stoker's *Dracula* in the context of the evolving feminist heroine of Gothic horror stories, would take up too much time if examined in depth but found their way back to strengthening the belief that to progress sometimes new avenues are the best route to the destination.

Taking that tenacity and creative thinking outside of the classroom is something I've done whether I want to or not. In a professional setting, I think tenacity is required for anyone who wishes to do their job effectively. With tenacity must come flexibility. Often in the professional world, people are expected to rise to the occasion on short notice to solve problems or deal with unforeseen circumstances while maintaining a levelheadedness. Even more so than

academia, the working environments I've been in require the adaptability and willingness to learn life skills at short notice by stepping up when needed. This necessitates the skill of adaptability and the characteristic tenacity that this program helped sharpen my focus. With my working experience in museums, online tutoring services, and legal offices, thinking on my feet is a commonality I noticed whether it was giving a last-minute tour of a historic site, refreshing myself on sixth-grade reading concepts to tutor a student, or needing to learn how to file a case to the courts. These are vastly different tasks, but the common requirement is that I rise to the challenge. The highlights of my working life involve these challenges. Overcoming them, I do what I love most: learning. Although learning in a corporate setting is a different structure than the classroom, the skills I've learned are just as valuable and useful. I'm a big proponent of the idea that learning extends well beyond the classroom and that life is a treasure trove of learning opportunities that challenge people to better themselves. In school, we teach students *how* to learn and acquire the skills needed for good learning. Outside of it, the lesson becomes *why* we learned how to learn. Real-world application is the most important thing for teachers to emphasize to students. No matter the subject material there is a chance for the core emphasis on how these foundational skills factor into daily life. Many teachers see students complain that the material will not be useful in their lives, but as teachers, we know that while that might be true the foundation laid in the classroom is what they take home with them. While every concept might not appear in day-to-day life, the foundational need to learn to adapt and approach every challenge with an open mind and the readiness to learn and grow is arguably the most important classroom lesson, and teaching it across the board.

With all that to say, all of these experiences have prepared me for my next big academic jump. Along with my previous M.A. (also awarded by ASU) in Global History, I've set my

sights on continuing my education at the doctoral level overseas in the British Isles or Ireland. With these two degrees working in tandem, I've devised a research proposal over the last few months I am presenting in my application. This proposal melds the need for literacy skills this degree has emphasized in its curriculum with my love of historic preservation. The proposal outlines a working relationship within the fields of academia and public history that the core of the English Studies program at ASU influenced greatly. Without the knowledge of creating effective and engaging writing, such as understanding the target audience or accessibility of the word choice, the project would lack an appeal to the common people it hopes to engage through the creation and use of digital content to increase online and foot traffic to institutions like museums or libraries. Though the proposal is targeted toward an academic board, the practical study portion of the project needs the understanding of people who are themselves not involved in academia. Writing the proposal as a balance between a technical analysis of current research and a proposal to involve the community outside academia requires a delicate balance of those distinct writing styles. Looking at how much of the written proposal is embedded with ideas I learned throughout this program, I don't believe it would be as strong without these key foundational pillars. The knowledge acquired through this program pairs well with my previous academic experiences and work experiences. Every course in this program played a role in preparing me to face this next great challenge. I walk into it aware that this will be my greatest challenge yet but I'm excited to start putting the pieces together of this project proposal that has bits of everywhere I've been in where it hopes to go.

Throughout this past year and a half, looking back, it brought with it a whirlwind I never expected. In thinking about how I wanted to continue my academic life I knew at this time a year and a half ago I was nowhere near ready to pursue a Ph.D and enrolling in English Studies was a

logical thing to do to buy me time as I waited for the next cycle of Ph.D applications to roll out. Instead, it gave me the missing pieces I need to submit something that one of the schools sees merit in and takes me on. This process bridged the gaps I never knew existed until now, by reflecting on the personal and academic progress I've made. Inside the online classroom and outside in the real world I've evolved in my views of concepts and my views of myself and my abilities. I think that's a hallmark of the right step in life. If I came away with just another degree and no marked change in my views or no additional knowledge that I use in years to come, then there was no gain. That is not the case here. I'm glad I decided to reinforce my history degree with this program and expand on my reading, writing, technical comprehension, and composition skills throughout the classes in this program. Moving forward, I know this enhancement and enrichment will be pivotal in my academic career. I believe the English Studies program took me on a natural progression of my constant desire to learn, grow, and become who I'm meant to be at the start of my next steps. I will always hold a special place in my heart for my time as a Sun Devil and the English department that helped me, through challenges and triumphs too, prepare for the next great adventure I'm about to set off on.