The Medial Caesura

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A Sense of Place ... 

Long before people associated the Central Coast with Highway 101 or Hearst Castle, San Luis Obispo was inhabited solely by the Native American Chumash tribe. During the Mission period in the late 1700s, Spanish explorers came across a beautiful and rugged landscape named “The Valley of the Bears.” The Cal Poly campus is tamer now, and the threat of wild animals is limited to occasional email alerts about rogue mountain lions, but the sense of unbridled individuality still pervades the university.

Widely renowned for its engineering and agricultural programs, Cal Poly also supports an equally impressive College of Liberal Arts. The English Department is full of experienced and helpful professors who allow students to expand their own intellectual boundaries. Within this department, there is a strong focus on the Master of Arts program. Small cohorts and engagement with a wide range of material help prepare students for careers in academia and the private sector.

There are many things that bring students and professionals alike to Cal Poly’s English Department, but one of the most important overarching threads is the distinct sense of place offered in San Luis Obispo and its environs. This connection to the environment is a special aspect of Cal Poly that is not easily replicated.

-Michael Galvan
There is a moment after you have crossed the vast moon-like desert riddled with steep canyons, rocky red arches and stalagmite-shaped pillars; after you have pulled into Green River and had a pair of old women tell you that your total for two candy bars and a soda is $67.88, laughing at their only entertainment for the day; there is a moment after all of that, after the endless rising and falling highway with signs that read “No Services” and after your ears have popped a million times; there is a moment when you emerge from the windy geographical jungle that is southern Utah, and you see a small collection of dirty gas stations, chain auto shops, an oasis of business-class hotels and fast food restaurants, and a giant sign that triumphantly reads: “You made it!”

And this is just one of many small sections of the snaking road trip from Illinois to the Central Coast of California, a trip of approximately 2,140 miles and change. In between points A and B, there is an aging small town advertising the world’s largest armadillo, Mark Twain Caves, high plateaus, and places where the Colorado River froths over boulders. There were times in my green Toyota Camry when I looked over and saw my mom asleep, holding tightly onto a pillow, and I wondered if there really was an end to this long road. It had seemed like an interminable drive where miles melted into miles. My dozing mother looked the way I felt.

I was headed toward Cal Poly, sight unseen, to pursue my master’s in English. I had no idea what to expect when I finally arrived in San Luis Obispo after days of driving. The only previous connection I had to the university was through a high school friend who received his undergraduate degree from Cal Poly. He told me the area was beautiful, the people were friendly, and that it was a great place to go to school. The rest of the important details were left for me to figure out on my own.

It was a little unnerving to officially leave my support network of friends and family behind. There is a note of finality when you officially change your mailing address and start to unpack the boxes full of clothing, knickknacks and toiletries.

All these burgeoning sensations constantly ran through my head my first few days in California. I’d been away from home before, but this was far away from home. There was also the fact that I really had no idea
what graduate school entailed, but it seemed like a different animal entirely: a place, perhaps, where hastily written papers at 3 a.m. might not cut it.

I was lucky. Within days of my arrival, the English Department hosted a mixer and introduction. It was a great way to learn some of the basics and get to know lots of other graduate students. Things have continued to improve over my first year as a graduate student.

Together, my peers and I have taken scenic hikes, bonded over late night study sessions, and indulged in memorable shenanigans in the famed “bubble gum alley.” It’s been a big comfort to go through the unfamiliar environment of grad school with a group of people who can relate and sympathize. But, students are not the only important people in the Cal Poly Master of Arts in English program.

Cal Poly is known for its Learn by Doing motto. The professors in the English Department epitomize this philosophy by taking the time to help students both in and outside the classroom. The Cal Poly Graduate Education Office and English faculty set undergraduates and graduates alike on the path to success.

One of the most attractive aspects of San Luis Obispo so far has been the gorgeous landscape. As someone who grew up on the open prairie, the emerald mountains and bordering ocean continually provide me with inspiration. I have had numerous opportunities to hike all around the Central Coast. There is also something gratifying about being able to go to the beach in December, especially when all my friends back home are sending me pictures of a snow-covered Wrigleyville.

Most worthwhile things take time to gestate, but in my short time here, I have already begun to see positive personal changes. My research skills have improved immensely, and I feel far more prepared to either pursue a doctoral program or head into the job market. This program has given me a better sense of what the academic field looks like and other very practical ways in which my communication and analytical skills could be utilized.

The principal goal of my time here has been to immerse myself — in the graduate program and in friendships with my peers. San Luis Obispo is what has tied it all together. It’s no secret: somewhere under Bishop Peak and Cerro San Luis, something magical is happening.

-Michael Galvan
Head Spaces

While we certainly nurture our minds by way of our immediate surroundings on the Central Coast, as graduate students the bulk of our intellectual work takes place in the classroom. The mental space we create through dialogue and open discussions is the space we ultimately inhabit throughout our careers at Cal Poly. It is a space that we are able to take with us, wherever we go.

Last year’s issue of The Medial Caesura looked at the prospects of pursuing a doctorate upon completion of the graduate program. While the English program at Cal Poly indeed places an emphasis on producing successful doctoral candidates, there are recent examples of graduates who have gone on to find jobs outside of academia.

Mariko Fujii Kriege (‘12) and Leticia Velez Ericson (‘13) were fortunate to find non-academic jobs on the Central Coast upon graduation. Kriege and Ericson reflected on their good fortune but were adamant about the applicability of their “English” skills to their new workspaces. For Kriege and Ericson, the head space inhabited while in the program was not abandoned, but rather transmuted and reapplied to new responsibilities and new demands.

Kriege works at Tapestry Solutions, a logistics and asset management company in San Luis Obispo. As a technical writer, she employs her improved writing and communication skills: “I’m still taking this complex process of organizing and expressing arguments to a specific audience.”

What’s more, Kriege manages the assimilation of research material in a similar fashion as when she was a student: “You have to pull on all the resources you can to produce a piece of writing.” Further, Kriege makes use of her strict time management, “predicting how much time [she] will need for a task,” to hit particular due dates.

“We are expert communicators,” Ericson adds. “Our degree is transferable in the real business world.” At Hogue Inc., in Paso Robles, Ericson works in human resources. “We know how to make arguments, how to persuade,” she says. “That makes you a marketable asset that can benefit a potential employer.”

Both Kriege and Ericson were teaching associates at Cal Poly, which helped develop their the abilities to communicate, transfer an important idea, and deliver effectively in the workplace. While Kriege and Ericson
miss some aspects of being graduate students, they have not left behind the acuity graduate school nurtured: they’ve taken it with them.

As graduate students, we need space that we can take with us. We become expert at compartmentalizing, and in so doing, we furnish our own minds — our head spaces. We refine these spaces in the classroom to be sure, as we share ideas and broaden our understanding through communal thinking. The head spaces we create are portable yet boundless, continuously growing in response to the places we take them.

In graduate school, *the mind* becomes ever more the playground for the intellect. It is the place we grow the most. This growth is critical for our future professions as well as our adaptability to wherever we choose to live. The head space we create, we daily move through, and it is the one thing we can be sure to take with us.

-Justin Swanson
Getting to Know Dr. Ryan Hatch

New to the Cal Poly English Department as a modern and contemporary drama professor, Dr. Ryan Hatch moved to San Luis Obispo in July 2014, accompanied by his husband Ryan and their dog, Jack. When asked what his initial impressions of the town were, Hatch recalls: “SLO is very friendly — like, non-passive-aggressively friendly.” Having come from New York (“an exhilarating, attention-filled place”), Hatch observed, “The pace in SLO, at first, made me nervous. But I feel like a different dimension of work will unfold here, at a slower pace, that will change things — and for the better.” So far, Hatch is finding that his experience and expertise are unfolding right in time.

While at SUNY Buffalo, Hatch studied drama within the English Department. Being in an English department allowed Hatch to draw on an “amalgamation of things within the discipline” to bolster his theoretically oriented approach. Studying drama “at the margins” under the aegis of English studies places him, as he puts it, “at the margin of the margins.”

Though he had completed his coursework at SUNY Buffalo, he was able to spend four years (2010-14) working on his dissertation in Manhattan. “Contemporary experimental theatre only happens in a few places,” Hatch explains, referring to his main area of study. The opportunity to be at the forefront of that art demanded his presence. “New York brought me closer to what I was writing about.”

As far as his modus operandi, Hatch says of his work, “I’m trying to address questions in a way that is legible and interesting, both within and outside of the academic community. I wanted my writing subjects to recognize themselves.”

Ahead of his move to San Luis Obispo, Hatch worked on a collaborative article with a group of fellow theater scholars. Together, they saw 35 plays during the 2013-14 season, focusing on off- and off-off-Broadway plays. “We tried to figure out what happened in a season, what is going on in contemporary theater.” After each performance, the group would gather at an apartment. Over wine, they would take notes and discuss their impressions and analyses of a given performance. At the conclusion of the season, they reviewed what they’d already gone over and had the final summit — a recorded conversation lasting three-and-a-half hours, totaling more than 70 pages of manuscript. From there, they whittled down their conversation to the length of a journal article titled “Community Theatre: The New York Season 2013-14,” which was later published in the authoritative PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art.

During his winter 2015 English class, Hatch explored works he considers “more traditional than ever. I’m testing myself on this classical period of Western drama from 1839-1953.”
In his class, Hatch hopes to teach his students how to develop their own arguments. “I want to get them to see that form makes meaning. That’s my mission: what signifies is form, not content. I want them to rethink fundamental categories — what is a form, what is an event? These are things modern drama makes possible for them.”

Hatch is passionate throughout the interview. He understands a vast history of worldwide drama; his erudition manifests by way of his explaining when and where dramatic works fit in the progress of theatrical performance and production. He sees his new class as an opportunity to make relevant the roots of contemporary drama. “I want to get students to see that the modern era is an era of rupture — of constant, sometimes violent, change — to see that this violence forms the foundations of our own period.”

Hatch has begun to implement a micro-curriculum in the English Department. Students will be able to focus on drama through a series of two to three courses in rotation every two years. Hatch recently taught the first of these, a 400-level course covering Contemporary American Drama and Postdramatic Theater.

Remaining ever busy, Hatch goes to the campus gym four to five times a week. “I can’t think without it.” He and Ryan take their dog to Avila Beach. They continue to explore the Central Coast by hiking Bishop Peak, spending time in Big Sur, and hanging out in Cayucos. Sometimes they make weekend trips to Los Angeles, where they meet up with their actor friends and “eat delicious vegan food.” Hatch admits they’re “city people in the last analysis,” as he finds these weekend trips to be cleansing. For now, though, Hatch has access to such cleansing in his immediate and not-too-distant new environs — a new dimension unfolding at just the right pace.

Hatch will teach a seminar in contemporary theory at the graduate level this fall.

-Justin Swanson
Dr. Chelsea Milbourne, one of two new faculty members, is the English Department’s director of technical and professional communications, tasked with revitalizing the program. She calls the field of technical writing not necessarily “new,” but rather “newly invigorated,” for as long as there has been engineering (dating back to the 18th century), there have been technical communication programs. Based on market demands and subsequent educative attempts to answer them, today’s new invigoration stems from an emphasis on technically-driven argumentation, formatting and communication. At the intersection of science and language, there is an increasingly practical application of language skills.

Growing up on Travis Air Force Base in Fairfield, Calif. (not far from UC Davis), Milbourne excelled in mathematics in high school. Despite taking multivariate calculus, Milbourne found herself gravitating toward English, particularly American literature. Ultimately, she decided to go with her passion and pursued English. When it came down to more specialized and advanced work, technical writing emerged as the perfect marriage of her interests, though she maintains, “Language and communication are where I want to spend most of my time.”

After finishing her thesis in late June 2014, Milbourne earned her doctorate from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and moved, gratefully, to San Luis Obispo. Her first visit to the Central Coast had been in February 2014, during “a horrible winter back East.” She found her soon-to-be new home “72 degrees and sunny.” Not only that, but Milbourne picked up on the positive moods of the locals, whom she noted were outside every day. “Maybe it’s something chemical,” Milbourne remarks, accounting for the town’s sunny disposition.

Milbourne is already taken with the town. “I love how walkable it is here,” she says, explaining how she can walk to campus and downtown. “It reminds me of British cities, where there’s a town center or a hub. There’s less suburban sprawl.

“I’m trying to meet and get to know people,” she continues. “Getting coffee and having conversations have been my priority.” She pauses and thinks. “Well … that and finding chairs for my house.”
Being on a polytechnic campus has been a new experience for Milbourne. She’s excited to see Learn by Doing readily employed on campus. “It’s nice to experience aspects of that, especially when buying my lunch.” Milbourne marvels at the extent of Cal Poly’s Learn by Doing motto in action, as she is able to pick out a pear from the campus market that was grown by students on campus property.

As for her good fortune in landing a job at Cal Poly while she was in the midst of completing her doctoral program, she admits, “I’m not going to sugarcoat it: the job market is intense.” She says she “went big in one year,” sending out countless applications, which may have made the process more intense than necessary.

“It worked out,” she exults, laughing, “I’m so happy to be on the other side.” But her timing wasn’t entirely perfect. Milbourne was working on her dissertation during the height of her job search. “I wouldn’t recommend it,” she says.

Milbourne’s focus of study is public science in the 18th century and women’s participation in scientific spectacles, particularly in the domestic sphere. Her engagement with her research is twofold: historical and rhetorical. For instance, Milbourne explores the phenomenon of microscope parties. In the 18th century, British women would gather in their homes to look at objects under microscopes, then a fascinatingly new domestic appliance. These microscope parties had a parlor-game feel to them, as women explored natural phenomena in a social setting.

Similarly, Milbourne extends such instances of phenomenal observation. “I like to incorporate spectacle in the classroom,” she goes on, explaining how she shows Ted Talks and YouTube clips that “blow [her] students’ minds.” She asks students, “Did anything surprise you?” and has them express their responses to the visual texts. The basis of these responses proves to be the foundation for more prosaic interactions with scientific findings. Milbourne explains, “How the British engaged with science — how they incorporated it into their lives — determined public policy, which in turn shaped interest and funding in science.” What’s more, she sees these historical studies as applicable to the modern day. Milbourne’s work looks at how people made sense out of changing scientific perspectives.

Teaching has convinced Milbourne that good writers make for good thinkers. In English 149: Technical Writing for Engineers, she teaches her students that their writing skills have a broad application, such as holding public office or working for a nonprofit organization. “In a variety of situations,” she explains, “it’s not just about writing well, it’s also about getting to the kernel of an important idea.”

Since she was hired, Milbourne has begun to take on administrative roles, though her primary focus is her field of study. She professes, “I’m excited about developing the technical communication classes and revitalizing the program.”

-Justin Swanson
Even in California, a state known for its economic, cultural and geographical diversity, San Luis Obispo stands out as a unique place. Located on the Central Coast between the Nine Sisters volcanic range and the Santa Lucia Mountains, San Luis Obispo is just minutes from the Pacific Ocean. The temperature ranges between 60-85 degrees most of the year. One of the most notable aspects of San Luis Obispo is its immense variety of native and non-native plant life. The sunny hills and valleys here are adorned with massive white oaks, Italian cypresses, cacti, weeping willows, grapevines, fruit trees and eucalyptus groves.

SLO (pronounced slow), as it’s lovingly called by local residents who enjoy the down-to-earth pace of the Central Coast, is a combination of the historical and emergent, active and passive, pastoral and technological. Located halfway between Los Angeles and San Francisco on Highway 101, SLO is a beautiful mid-sized city that consciously embodies a small-town vibe; there are dozens of family restaurants, the landmark Madonna Inn, scores of live outdoor performances, a variety of bars, strings of bike lanes, and not a single drive-through restaurant. It may come as no surprise to learn that SLO was recently named America’s Happiest City by National Geographic magazine.

With a population roughly half that of the town of San Luis Obispo, Cal Poly is a university noted for its hands-on educational experiences. It is also the largest landholding university in California and offers a variety of majors from engineering to viticulture to the liberal arts. Cal Poly’s status as the single largest landholding university in California makes Learn by Doing all the more possible.

Deciding to pursue a graduate education can be a rewarding but tricky endeavor. What is it about SLO and specifically the Cal Poly English program that continually attracts so many writers, editors, scholars, teachers and students? Two alumni, Brinn Strange (fall ’11) and Erika Pruett (spring ’13), were each kind enough to talk about their decision and experiences.
Where are you originally from and what made you decide to pursue a master’s in English literature?

Strange: I grew up in Southern California and graduated from Cal Poly in 2007 with a degree in communications. The communications train took me in kind of a public relations route. I was doing public relations for the local blood bank for a while. I really enjoyed it, so I kept looking for more ways to get writing assignments. I would go to my boss and offer to write profiles on people for the Facebook page, spotlight community partnerships, or anything that involved writing. Soon, I was offered a job in Grover Beach for Central Coast Magazine and enrolled in the Master of Arts in English program.

I started purely with the intention of improving my own writing. I felt like I accomplished that while enrolled. Over time, though, the experience changed my career path. While working as a teaching assistant, I was drawn to helping others to write better, and after graduation I decided to continue teaching writing.

Pruett: I’m originally from San Luis Obispo. I grew up near the Avila Beach area and received my bachelor’s from UC Santa Barbara. My undergraduate degree was in literature.

Why did you decide to attend Cal Poly?

Strange: Before undergrad, I visited a few different schools to check out the vibe. Cal Poly was definitely the most friendly. I remember a funny comparison between Cal Poly and another private school I visited. At the other university there were kids everywhere hopping out of shiny, new Mustangs and the whole atmosphere felt a little pretentious. When I got to Cal Poly, a mustang was the mascot, and there was a much more agricultural-based feel to everything. There were actually horses running around outside! It was just a more down-to-earth place, and I felt way more at home.

I’m also a super outdoorsy person. I love that at Cal Poly you can go from hiking to the beach within 10 minutes. That’s probably my favorite part.

Pruett: I love the small classroom environment that Cal Poly offers. I also definitely liked the Learn by Doing model, and being able to teach in our second year was really appealing to me. The teachers are also really involved and care about their graduate students.
How would you describe the pace of San Luis Obispo life? How did the local area influence your time as a graduate student?

**Strange**: I would take my dog to Avila Beach and hike around the area. I also loved all the wineries. It was a fun part of the weekends to go tasting. The small family atmosphere was something else that I really enjoyed. Compared to where I live now, San Luis Obispo is much more progressive and bike-friendly. San Luis Obispo is also very eco-conscious, which is important to me. I also miss the farmers market. There is one in the town where I live now, but it’s a lot smaller and happens much less frequently; there is none of the spectacular produce and it’s mostly things like ice cream and homemade soaps.

**Pruett**: I love being outdoors and the fact that you can go to the beach in January! That’s a huge part of the lifestyle here. Everybody wants to be outside and active in some way. [San Luis Obispo] really provides a space where you can do that literally year-round. I think because of that people are very friendly.

Any favorite spots around town?

**Strange**: My husband and I love Ciopinot. We would bring a bottle of wine from our favorite local winery, Wolff Winery, just because they let you bring your dog there. We got married at the Valley Vineyard, so we like that place, too. I also love all the delis and giant grinders.

**Pruett**: The outdoor patio at Novo. They serve an American-Asian fusion menu. It’s right on the creek and has twinkle lights. They have great food, but also cocktails and Moscow mules, if you’re into that. It’s also really fun to go the Avila Family Barn in October. They have a lot of produce and it’s a very family-themed place. I also love hiking Bishop Peak, and you also get a great view from the ridge trail in Avila where you can see out onto the ocean. Sidecar is also a great place to hang out.

Where do you live now and what do you do? How does your graduate experience factor into that?

**Strange**: Right now I live in Hattiesburg, Miss. The town is pretty close to New Orleans, so I’ve gotten to eat a lot of Creole food I would probably never have tried and listen to some fantastic jazz. I recently stopped teaching English to focus on my writing, and in doing so, I’ve come full circle. I’ve been very active in the fitness community and recently opened my own gym. My writing experience underpins the blog I’m developing for the gym and informs all the writing I do for exercise magazines and websites.

In January, my husband and I will be moving to Gainesville, Fla., where he will be working at the University of Florida. They have an excellent composition program that I may try to be a part of, but things are still a little bit up in the air right now.

**Pruett**: I work in Web design and graphic design. It started because I have a minor in professional editing, and I was helping one of the departments by editing a lot of their website content. I love art, and there’s a lot of overlap between art, design and writing. So it led me to designing a website for them, which led me to helping departments at Cal Poly design their own websites while I was getting my master’s.
Right now, I serve as an art director at a new design agency in town. In doing that, I feel like I can see the latent content from the perspective of a person who is going to read it and visually take the whole thing in. My experience in the English graduate program helps me to not only generate content but to also expertly edit the work of others.

Strange and Pruett both provided insightful comments about what makes San Luis Obispo and Cal Poly such unique places to live, work and study. The sense of community, beautiful weather, diversely structured English program, and wealth of outdoor activities are integral to the lifestyle here. The Central Coast is continually taking steps to ensure that the local population minimizes their ecological impact. Those who settle in San Luis Obispo appreciate the absence of drive-throughs, a celebrated farmers market, and endless opportunities to make a direct impact on the local population.

Whatever your passion is, San Luis Obispo provides the perfect opportunity to chase it. The qualified students who come here to enroll in the Master of Arts program often find themselves making just as many personal discoveries as they do career-oriented insights. Maybe it’s because the juxtaposition of mountains and sea creates ample opportunities for self-reflection. Or maybe it’s because the course material constantly encourages you to challenge your working perception of the world. Whatever it may be, one thing seems to ring true: from the twisted mass of plants that covers the hills like green stubble, to the internal progress of the people that live here, San Luis Obispo is truly a place where there is always room for growth.

-Michael Galvan
Since graduation, Leticia Velez Ericson (’13) has been able to get back to the lifestyle that nurtured her on the periphery while she was a graduate student. She remembers studying on the top floor of Kennedy Library and looking over the mountains at the sunrise or the sunset; she found peace just knowing she was surrounded by nature. Now, Ericson has returned to an even more intimate appreciation of the outdoors, hiking 9 to 14 miles every weekend with her husband — out in the dunes, on the peaks, at Avila Beach and Shell Beach, and all around the Central Coast.

While Ericson is grateful for being able to stay in the area post-graduation, her passion for the area involves more than its beautiful scenery. All through her time at Cal Poly, Ericson directed local theater productions and was involved with community theater. Ericson discovered an interest in theater when she was in high school. An English teacher of hers also worked as a drama coach. Ericson explains that her teacher demonstrated that while the words on the page have life, they gain additional color and profundity when performed.

“As grad students, we’re not only fortunate to be working toward higher degrees,” she says. “The fringe benefit to our studies is realizing that the arts are alive.”

Ericson continues to direct plays at the San Luis Obispo Little Theatre, including reader’s theater performances. Most recently, Ericson directed Tom Stoppard’s “Rock ‘n’ Roll” in March 2015. Indeed, the local connection with the arts through Cal Poly, the community, and Pacific Conservatory of the Performing Arts (PCPA) provided Ericson a “spiritual” space both during her time as a student and since she earned her graduate degree.

But her path to vocational balance was not so rosy.

After the unthinkable came to pass for Ericson, the unimaginable befell her. Following Ericson’s failure to pass the M.A. Comprehensive Exam, her colleagues found it uncomfortable to talk to her: they were as surprised as she at the outcome of her first attempt at the rigorous capstone experience. “I mapped out the major steps of grieving on the white board in the T.A. office,” Leticia recalls. She would daily indicate which emotional stage she was in, and after some time passed, people started to ask her about her experience. “It was a kick in the gut not to pass,” she says.

For Ericson, the six months between her two exam attempts began with reconciling her disappointment and ended with an emotional and physical trial that served to focus her mind all the more. Ericson needed to revamp her approach to studying. Though she had completed her coursework after her first attempt, she started to audit classes. Furthermore, she sought feedback from her graders and discovered that while her content was fine, her writing strategy in a timed situation required additional attention.

“I had already accumulated considerable knowledge, but what I realized was that I didn’t have to make all possible arguments on the exam,” she says, offering sound advice for those who have yet to take the test. “I just have to make one argument.”

Unfortunately, Ericson and her daughter were involved in a serious car accident only two weeks before her second scheduled attempt at the exam. A prodigious high school swimmer, Ericson’s daughter saw her career come to an abrupt halt.

Ericson herself underwent five...
months of physical therapy following the accident. A less determined student of English might have been derailed, but not Ericson.

Born in Puerto Rico, Ericson was raised by two parents who disallowed the use of Spanish in the household. “I was taught that the way to be successful in the U.S. was to master English,” she reflects and realizes her pun. “I suppose that had some bearing on why I had decided to pursue a master’s in English, and why I didn’t give up.”

Her perseverance knows no bounds. Ericson boldly decided that she wasn’t going to let things that were out of her control stop her from passing the second time. Instead of panicking, Ericson found her concentration sharper. And, somehow, she was calmer. “Okay, I have to get it,” she simply said.

As she adopted increasingly rigorous study habits, Ericson’s preparation for the exam took a toll on her family life. Ericson’s husband in particular raised the alarm, citing the stress their relationship was bearing. “When you take on the M.A. exam, you’re married to that,” Ericson explains. “When you’re in the mix of it, it’s very hard to balance family, a partnership, and a social life. My family was vying for my time. You need a supportive family and partner, which I had.”

Between the accident, the pressure of a new job, and the burden placed on her family, finally passing the exam was the culminating relief Ericson had been seeking since she started the master’s program. She found she could get through anything. Contingent on her graduation, Ericson was hired at Hogue Inc. (Paso Robles). Though she looks back on her graduate life fondly, getting through it has allowed her to get back to herself and her family.

-Justin Swanson
Wherever you were, one finds, becomes a part of whoever you are. Whatever you’ve done in the past inevitably informs whatever you’re doing in the present. I’ve groped with language to find the outer reaches of my mind, and there is no end there. When there’s rain, we celebrate. And when there’s sun, we celebrate. Language does not fail those who live here, yet it cannot contain the beauty that surrounds us. Those who are here will smile and nod. They know. You’re here, and you’re an amateur connoisseur of the land. You’re meant to express your impressions of the land as you would a sip of wine born from that land. And it’s not just the fruit itself, or the oak. It’s not the weather alone, or the hills. These impressions we carry forward flow from an internal response to and a caring for this place. We inhabit and learn to cultivate.

We study language here, yet we are the most precise we can be when we say, “There’s something about this place.”

-Justin Swanson
Alumni Roundup

Elizabeth Chamberlain (’10) / I’m currently in the third year of a doctoral program in rhetoric and composition at the University of Louisville. This year, I’ve been the assistant director of composition, passed my qualifying exams, and begun work on my dissertation. I hope to enter the job market in fall and defend my dissertation in April 2016.

Steve Cohen (’09) / This past year, I read for and passed qualifying exams for the doctoral program at the University of Louisville. I was privileged to work with some very smart people on a collaborative project that was published in Kairos, a Journal of Rhetoric, Technology and Pedagogy. I’ve spent a great deal of time working on creating a publication of student writing that looks a bit like “Fresh Voices,” which we’re calling “Cardinal Compositions.” The first issue is set for publication over the summer for use in the fall semester, and we’re really excited about a digital component that will allow us to feature students’ multimodal work on our own website. Finally, I’ve just changed positions from the assistant director of composition to the assistant director of the Writing Center, where I will work closely with students on the Health Sciences Campus writing in healthcare-related genres, which will align more closely with my own work in the rhetorics of HIV/AIDS.

Beth Currie (’12) / As an instructor at New Mexico Tech (NMT) in Socorro, N.M., I have been teaching future scientists and engineers how to write. This includes teaching both freshman composition and a junior-senior technical writing course. While teaching part time, I have also been working as a coordinator for a Title III Department of Education grant at NMT, but am looking forward to moving to a full-time teaching position at NMT in fall 2015.

Zach Drew (’11) / I am currently living in San Jose, where I teach at a small charter high school serving a diverse student population. I am on the verge of wrapping up my second year teaching AP English Language and Composition. In addition to teaching, I also serve as a mentor to a small group of 11th-grade students. I am excited to continue working with these students next year as they enter their senior year and begin the college application process.

Leticia Velez Ericson (’13) / Having completed five months of physical therapy following a severe car accident, I adapted to the therapeutic pattern of strenuous activity by flinging myself into a fitness frenzy with the idea of further healing and strengthening my body. I am now training to complete the San Francisco Marathon this summer. I’m also studying the exam material for the Society of Human Resources Management Senior Certified Professional (SHRM-SCP) credential. I currently work for Hogue Inc., an international sporting goods manufacturer, and I have been managing its human resource needs for two years.

Erin Escobar (’14) / Two weeks after graduation, I got married in my home state of Washington and then went to Oslo and Trysil, Norway, to honeymoon. Since then, I’ve been teaching composition at the community college level in San Diego. I currently teach English 101: Reading and Composition at Mesa College and English 114: Introduction to Composition at Southwestern College. In addition, I just finished writing my first screenplay — it’s only taken three years to finish it! — and am entering it into the The Academy Nicholl Fellowship in Screenwriting Competition.
Alicia Freeman ('14) / I’m living in Chico now, and I’ve been looking for work for a while. I intend to complete the Single-Subject Credential program at CSU Chico next year — we’ll see how that works out.

Erin Galeria ('12) / My husband and I are enjoying home ownership in Rocklin, Calif. I am currently teaching AP Language and Composition as well as 10th-grade English at Antelope High School and am loving it! I’m already looking forward to the next school year when I’ll take over as English Department coordinator. We recently added a new addition to our family — our puppy Poly. She is named after our favorite college!

Elizabeth Gilbert ('10) / I am currently teaching English at different companies in Baden-Württemberg, Germany, primarily in the picturesque city of Heidelberg. My teaching experience in the graduate program helped prepare me for this, and though I am not teaching literature, I try to incorporate some of my favorite professors’ teaching styles into my own lessons.

Helen Hunt ('09) / I am about to finish my doctorate at Purdue, thanks to a research fellowship from the Purdue Research Foundation. In the last year, I’ve presented about Rebecca Rush’s “Kelroy” at the East Coast/American Society for Eighteenth Century Studies conference, and I’ve been discussing alternatives to seduction in Susanna Rowson’s “Rebecca” at the Society of Early Americanists in June. I currently volunteer with 826 Michigan and the Warrior Scholar project.

Kyle Kamaiopoli ('11) / I am finishing my third year in the Tufts English doctoral program. My dissertation project, in its infant stages, investigates indigenous and black literatures in relation to sovereignty and self-determination movements. This upcoming summer I will be researching black and native whaling communities by way of a funded fellowship, and in the fall I will be chairing our graduate humanities conference.

Kirsten Kensinger ('14) / I really don’t have much to report at the moment. I have been living and working in Anchorage since January, teaching classes at the University of Alaska. I spend my free time writing, exploring and hanging out with friends. That’s about it!

Megan Lancaster ('12) / Over the past year, I have had the pleasure of teaching freshman composition and technical writing at Cal Poly. I also served as a faculty judge for Byzantium, Cal Poly's literary annual. When I’m not reading student work, I’m reading board books with my one-year-old daughter.

Jack Lindgren ('12) / I am working as the marketing and communications coordinator for SpeedGauge, a software company in San Francisco, and attempting to stage a production of Rossum’s “Universal Robots.”

Morgan Livingston ('13) / I am teaching Writing and Rhetoric (English 134) and Reasoning, Argumentation and Writing (English 145) as a lecturer at Cal Poly. I’ve been doing lots of traveling, reading, hiking, running and breathing since I graduated with my master’s degree. I would love to chat with any prospective or current students!
Emily Olson (’13) / I currently am teaching a composition course at Cuesta College as well as a critical reading and writing skills class at Allan Hancock College in Santa Maria! I am also excited to report I am teaching an introductory course to fiction, drama and poetry at Cuesta College come fall! At the time I write this, I am 11-days married, happy spring has arrived, and I am looking forward to exciting new classes for the fall semester.

Erika (Pederson) Pruett (’14) / In the last year, I have continued to grow my graphic and Web design business in San Luis Obispo. Within the next couple months, my husband and I will be relocating to the Santa Barbara area, where I will be joining the UC Education Abroad Program as a multimedia designer.

Carli Sinclair (’12) / I am currently finishing up my coursework at the University of Missouri, where I enjoy teaching American literature, and am getting ready for my comprehensive exams next year.

Brinn Strange (’11) / I have recently moved to Gainesville, Fla., where I am opening the town’s first Barre fitness studio, Barre Forte. When not teaching exercise classes at my studio and on the University of Florida campus, I enjoy conducting interviews and spotlighting community events as a freelance writer for several local magazines. Check out some of my recent work at brinn-strange.squarespace.com. Those interested in my studio’s progress can track it at www.facebook.com/barrefortegainesville.

Ed Turner (’11) / For the last few years I’ve been living in Seattle while my wife, Amber, gets her master’s degree in urban planning from the University of Washington. The most notable event of the last few years would probably be having a baby, Miles, who was born in September 2014. He keeps me pretty busy, but when I can find time, I’ve been writing tabletop games for Evil Hat Productions and Laboratory Games.