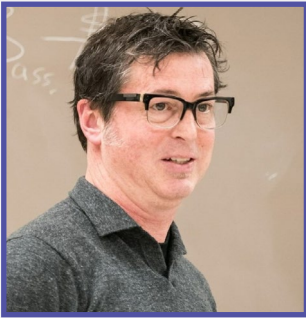




THE NEIU English DEPARTMENT BRINGING IT ALL BACK HOME!

NEIU ENGLISH DEPARTMENT ALUMNI NEWS

Spring 2025



From the Chair

BRADLEY GREENBURG

Since the previous newsletter, a lot has happened in the world. Last time I noted that NEIU has “lurched from crisis to crisis.” Now it seems that, as a nation, we are doing much the same. National politics have only mildly impacted NEIU so far, and the NEIU administration has done a solid job of protecting our most vulnerable students. While fear and stress have marked the year so far, we’ve been pushing ahead with recruiting new majors, offering professional development seminars to area HS teachers, gathering faculty and majors for The 82 reading series and the Writing & Literature Collective. Our new dedicated classroom space—LWH 2005—which is becoming more and more a center for department activities, has given our little corner of campus a more welcoming, cohesive feel. We appreciate your support as we navigate these challenging times. We sincerely hope you’re thriving, despite it all.

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Student Feature: An interview with senior Zachariah Simmons

Every year, our senior class of English majors boasts any number of stand-outs we can all tell are destined to make their mark in whatever field they end up pursuing, so it’s difficult when it comes time to put this feature together every spring to choose the one to profile. This year, it’s a larger-than-life activist and scholar whose voice was suddenly everywhere in English, and everywhere on campus—and thanks to our new Accelerated MA, will still be with us next year.

Ed: Tell us about why you chose NEIU, and the English major in particular.

Simmons: I had never really envisioned myself as needing

or wanting a degree—I had some silly idea that education wasn’t for me and I could succeed without it. But, after coming to Chicago and working a slew of unfulfilling jobs, I was prompted by a friend and fellow NEIU student, Zac Rodgers, to apply here. I was accepted and provided enough financial aid to sustain me, so here I am. As for English, I was always drawn to the subject as it was easiest to exercise creativity within; but the longer I have been in this English department specifically, it has allowed me to refine my critical thinking and communication skills, as well.

Cont’d on page 10



ALUMNI NOTES...



Remember those weird UFOs floating over New Jersey back in January and February? Who better to contact about them than the dude we know at the FAA, **Manny Cruz (BA '09)**. As it ends up, that was a non-story, but in as diplomatic a way as he could, Manny described the new environment he's navigating under an administration skeptical of things like, well, "safety" (our words, not his).

When we mentioned the odd trend toward the sciences despite the fact that AI is replacing more jobs there than in the Humanities today, Manny was on-point as usual:

"I couldn't agree more about the perception of English as a field of study. It's frustrating but not surprising in a world where conspiracies seem to hold more value

than critical thinking. "I've always seen English as both an art and a science. The "archaeology" of English allows us to analyze how language reflects social values across different points in history. The psychology of English lets us explore the minds of writers through their literature. And, of course, there's the emotional power of language -- the ability to shape thoughts, trigger reactions, and convey meaning beyond the literal.

"The thing is, the science of English will eventually be what excavates today's social values. If it endures, it will document the pitfalls of our time and serve as a warning for the future."

"Selling yourself as an 'English major' may not always be easy, but selling the skills sharpened by an English



Emmanuel Murillo (BA '24) returned to NEIU last fall to complete his degree—and in what we think is a classic NEIU tale, recounted his journey this way to us:

"I've been working at the Shedd Aquarium in a customer service role; selling tickets, wayfinding, answering questions, etc, but I felt stuck in that role with no real interest in going upwards within that role. I mentioned my interest in writing to my management and they put in touch with the person who leads the team that designs our

exhibits. I was skeptical, as I thought that such a field was more art and graphic design oriented, but that meeting with the department head reminded me of something very important: Every exhibit in every aquarium, museum, zoo and everything in between has information that needs to be conveyed in a succinct manner, and someone has to write that information. So I was offered a spot on a project to help update the information of some our displays in the summer of 2023, in both English and Spanish, and they finally went up for all the public to see at the beginning of this summer. This project and the possibility of a more permanent role doing this job galvanized me to return to school and finish my degree."



Elias Cepeda (MA '20) texted with big news on April 14 as he walked out of his Comprehensive Exam room—having officially **PASSED** his Comps at SIUC (with one of his four areas directed by former NEIU Philosophy professor Al Frankowski). Now proudly "ABD," Elias is breathing for only a moment before tackling a dissertation directed by working-class studies professor Joe Shapiro that he hopes is done in a year's time.

education -- critical thinking, analysis, communication, adaptability-- that's where the real value is. And it's something AI, for all its capabilities, can't replicate with any real nuance."

Before he signed off, Manny expressed his willingness to help us reach our goal for the Student Assistance Endowment fund (featured on page 12) with a matching campaign. As usual, the "Godfather of Giving" is coming through for NEIU English majors.

ALUMNI NOTES...

Yasmeen Schuller (BA '94) also emailed us in April to announce the recent opening of her new Lincoln Park Independent Bookstore, **LILLIPUT BOOKS**, at 2150 North Halsted. "After a long career as a digital marketing executive," she explained, "it was time for a change. Having a passion for literature, opening a bookstore felt like a wonderful logical next step for me. The bookstore will be a place for monthly book clubs, author and poetry readings, and community."



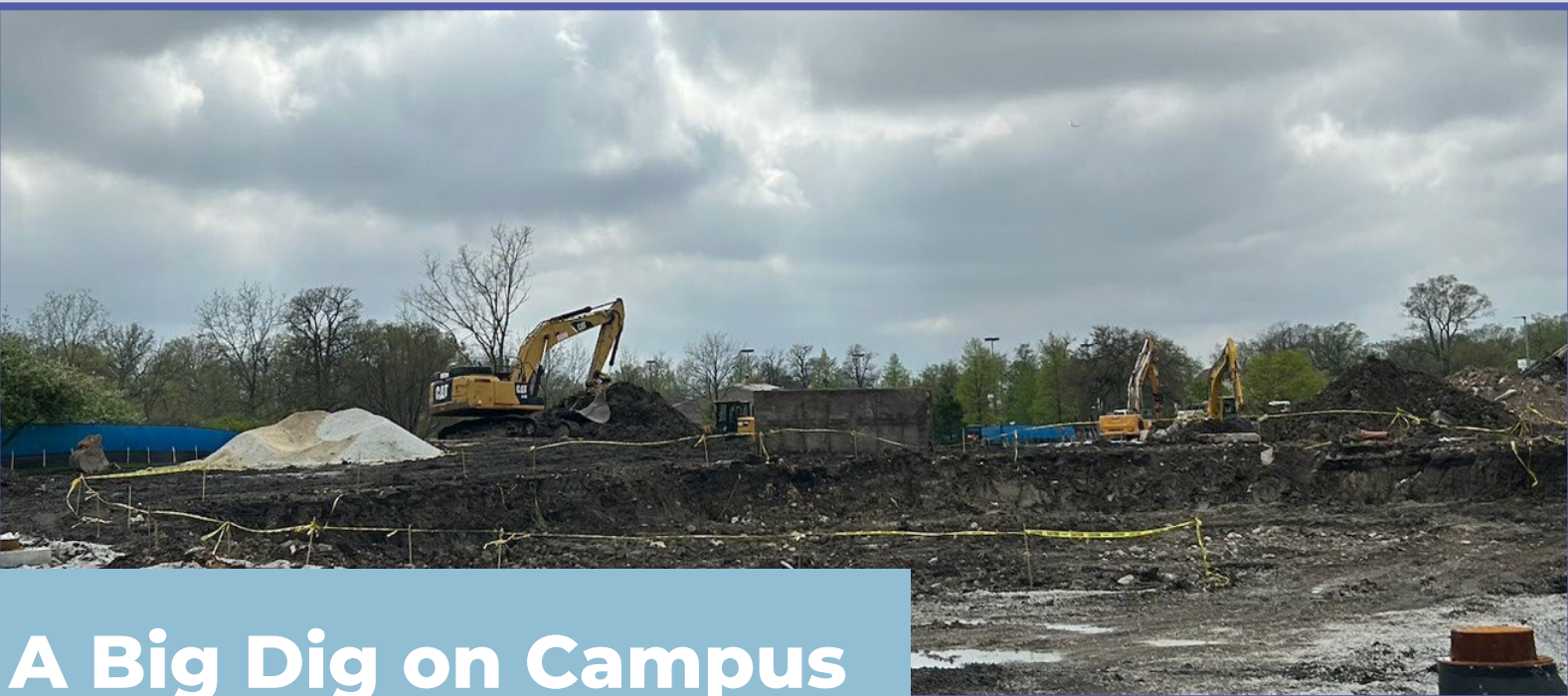
On the April 26th **Independent Book Store Crawl** in Chicago more than 1400 patrons stopped in, with 400 making purchases.



We paid a visit to see Yasmeen's new digs, and to meet the store's general toy manager and mascot, Lilly the Maltese (or is it a Maltipoo?). The atmosphere is completely open (no bumping butts with folks in narrow shelf-ways), with plenty of comfortable seating. For a moment, it appears the offerings must be thin, or else specialized, but then seek and ye shall immediately find!



Book club enthusiasts, readers of the classics, parents of young readers, the LGBTQ+ audience—even the Swifties have a corner of beautifully curated selections to choose from. "I just wanted to offer the sort of books I'd want to find in a bookstore," she told me. "For a minute I was scared that wasn't what some other people might like, but so far, actually, people seemed pleased with what I've put on the shelves."



A Big Dig on Campus

Eleven years ago, in August 2014, the NEIU Board of Trustees announced the approval by the Illinois Capital Development Board of a new \$73 million Education Building at Northeastern Illinois University, to be designed by national architecture and engineering firm SmithGroupJJR.

“At 160,000 gross-square-feet,” the announcement read, “the new building will accommodate the span of teaching, learning, service and research needs of the Northeastern College of Education users.”

Those of you who attended NEIU in the decade(s) before this announcement may recall earlier plans, applications, and even approvals for this building, which in the years preceding 2014, was a dire need. When enrollment stood at 12,000 and even higher, classroom and office space were indeed at a premium.

Then, of course, came the Rauner years. Not only were such capital investments put on hold—all State Universities in Illinois lost state funding for operations for roughly two years—thrusting any idea of our new building here on the back burner.

NEIU survived Rauner, but our enrollment numbers did not, and after some rough years and a pandemic, folks had all but forgotten about The New Education Building...until lo and behold, the fence went up earlier this spring, and the dozers rolled in. Once one is approved by the Capital Development Board, one builds a building—no matter how many years have passed since your plan called for it!

Site-watchers can just begin to see the contours of the building’s basement here in the spring of 2025, with completion scheduled for Summer 2027.

It’s been a long time coming.

Alumni Paying it Forward

Luke Kwasny (BA ‘17) contacted the department last fall with an idea we wish every teacher out of NEIU might think about:

Why not bring 50 of my best students on a fieldtrip to NEIU—get a tour, see some classes, and get an idea of what “university might be like”?

Logistics were handled, and on a fair February day this spring, two busloads of Kankakee High School students with six chaperones pulled into the NEIU parking area. Their day consisted of greetings by the administration, a tour of campus and rotations attending classes by Larry Dean (both the Intro to Poetry and a GenEd poetry course) Amanda Goldblatt (Elements of Style), Chris Castillo (Research Writing) and Mary Thill, who hosted Tim Scherman’s Research Writing section in the Library.

Student reactions were evidently unmixed, as Luke wrote to us that afternoon:

“On behalf of all the KHS students and staff who participated in today’s field trip, I just want to say --- THANK YOU! Every student whom I spoke with on the bus ride home said that they loved the classes they attended, and that the tour and presentations were informative looks into what they can expect in college. This valuable experience wouldn’t have been possible without everyone’s hard work and cooperation (shoutout to everyone who played email tag with me), so, again, thank you. Same time next year?”

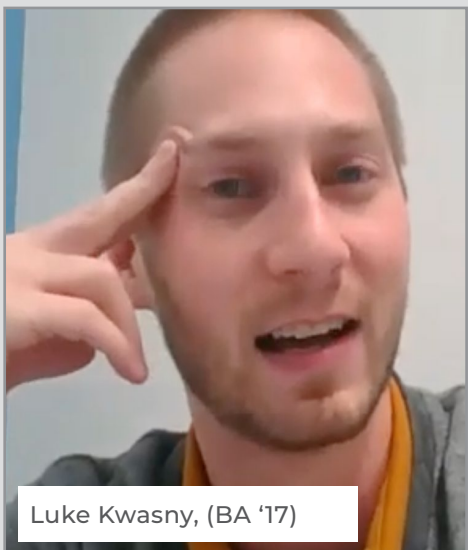
We hope so, Luke, and we’re ready for more. Any and all interested alums teaching in the area should contact Chair Greenburg at b-greenburg@neiu.edu for details!

Sonia Hussain (BA ‘20) spills the tea on AI to ENGL 210 students

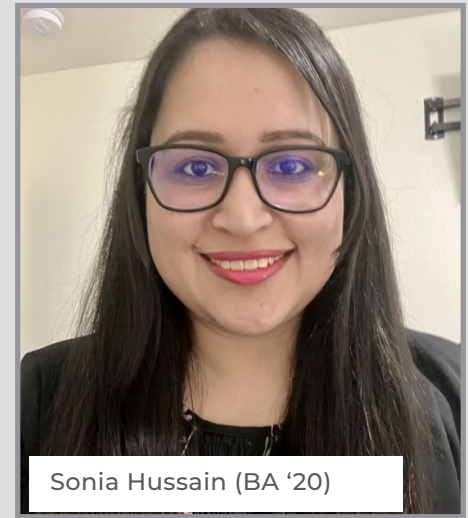
We haven’t had an official Alumni talk-back in some time (please contact us if you’d like to appear on a ZOOM soon!), but late during the fall term, Sonia Hussain was kind enough to appear virtually in Dr. Scherman’s ENGL 210 class to share her expertise. While yes, 210 is generally the first English class for majors, Scherman was already giving students a sense of what to expect as they take their English skills beyond NEIU.

As a now senior staff member working in the Advising Office

at Northwestern, Sonia offered students a unique perspective—especially with respect to the new AI environment. Specifically, she let students know that many companies now suspect candidates are using AI to produce their application or writing sample, so they actually invite prospective employees in for a sit-down writing exercise during the interview process. Sonia’s reality-check drew some chills and several great questions from the class. THANKS Sonia!



Luke Kwasny, (BA ‘17)



Sonia Hussain (BA ‘20)

Alumni Paying it Forward



Margarita with Anto



Ryan Poll with Anto

Margarita Olmos (BA '24) returned to us late this term, but with just one potential student—perhaps the class of 2046? It was wonderful to meet the beautiful four month-old, Antonella Felicitas Olmos (Anto) at one of our April meetings of the Literature Collective! And while we hardly expected a visit from such a young Golden Eagle, we were even more pleased that Margarita—who's been working in a variety of roles for the State

of Illinois—brought with her, as well, a full-time **internship opportunity** for our students at the **ILLCF's Diversity Inclusion Program**, with a stipend of \$2700 per month of work. This sort of contact and opportunity through our Alumni network is just what our students need in a job market that promises to get tough in the coming months—so THANK YOU Margarita!



NOW OPEN

THE ILLCF IS PARTNERING WITH CMS AND SEEKING NOMINATIONS TO PARTICIPATE IN THE SUMMER 2025 CMS DIVERSITY & INCLUSION INTERNSHIP PROGRAM.

Open host sites are located in Chicago & Springfield!

Interns will:

- Receive prorated compensation totaling \$2,700 per month for full-time work
- Intern requested time off at a prorated hourly rate
- 7.5 hours per day x 5 days/week = 37.5 hours/week

For more details, please visit the application which features the host site descriptions!

Due by April 25th, at 5 pm!

Apply Here:



On May 23, Prof. Marcia Buell, MA graduate students **Eve Anzalone** (not pictured), **Jasmine Rodriguez**, and sophomore **Jiaming Lou** presented “Data Visualization as a Critical and Creative Process” at the 60th Annual Allerton English Articulation Conference. Their presentation showcased arguments on fast fashion pollution (Anzalone), calorie needs for incarcerated men (Rodriguez) and climate change research through creative visual formats. They gave a similar presentation in January at the Writing Innovation Symposium in Milwaukee.

At Allerton, they met long term alum **Tim Twohill (BA '87)**, who served as a guide around the beautiful but mysterious Allerton grounds. One destination - the joyful statue of the Sun Singer.



You are invited to attend

Dwelling in Unwellness: A Study on Asian American Racialization

Presentations by Dr. Kristen Over's Spring 2025 English 410 students

Join us in **Student Union 215** at **6pm** on

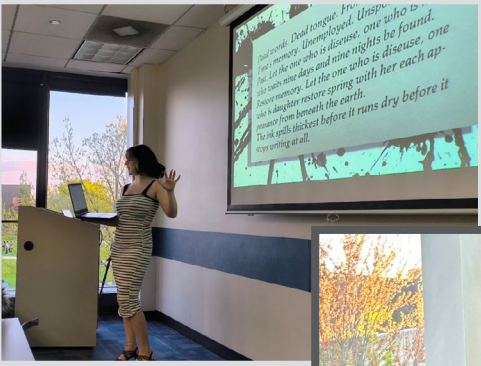
<u>April 29, 2025</u>	&	<u>May 6, 2025</u>
Israel Lawton "The Curse of Dictée"		Josh Piper "Dwelling in Unwellness Together"
Doug Strifolino "Fragmented Selves"		Callie Fragoso "Speaking Our Unwellness"
Jen Pepsnik "Minor Feelings Disrupted"		Serena Fritz "Experimental Art Forms and Magical Care"
Kirsten Tabernilla "Dismantling Proper English"		Rachel Malakh "Communal Creativity as Healing"
Zachariah Simmons "The Unwellness of Not Knowing Oneself"		Holli Van Zandt "The Power of Radical Acceptance"
Ben Soper "You Are Not Alone in Your Suffering. Look into the Abyss"		Clarissa Consoli "Differential Creative Care and the Importance of Dipping in Ink"

The 410 Symposium



This spring the English department and other interested students across the campus enjoyed the annual symposium featuring and organized by students in Dr. Over's **ENGL 410: Methods** class.

Readings for the course this term aligned with our celebration of NEIU's designation as an ANNAPI serving institution, among them the literary work of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Cathy Park Hong, and Monica Youn, and the theory of Mimi Kúic and Lawrence-Minh Bùi Davis.



Twelve presentations, “written to be heard,” revealed a critically informed classroom community working towards a better understanding of oppressive structures and expectations for the Asian community and others along with creative solutions for our “dwelling in unwellness.”

Writing & Literature

Collective Spring '25 Schedule

- ❖ January 30: Introduction, ideas, current schedule, AANAPISI, new funding campaign
- ❖ February 13
- ❖ February 27: THE 82: Jami Nakamura Lin
- ❖ March 13
- ❖ March 27
- ❖ April 10: THE 82: Student Edition
- ❖ April 24
- ❖ May 8

All meetings are on Thursdays, in LVH 2005 3:00 – 4:00 pm

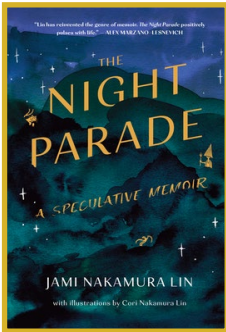
Refreshments will be served!



The Collective Always Welcomes Future Students!

Writing and Literature Collective

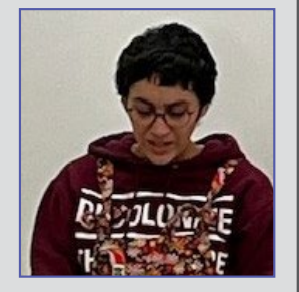
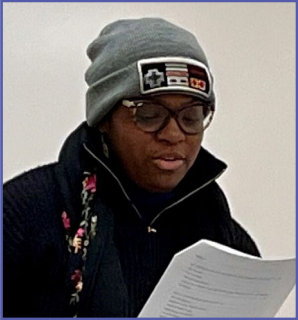
Our regular gathering of English faculty and students to discuss what we collectively love: (literature, creative writing, and culture) keeps on going strong in our dedicated classroom home. This is a fun, friendly, open, and invigorating place to hang out, make friends, and nerd out.



One of the highlights of the early Spring term was welcoming award-winning author **Jami Nakamura Lin** to read from her book *The Night Parade: A Speculative Memoir* on February 17. Collective members also presented their work at Fall and Spring gatherings of *The 82* and so much more.



Also: no one ever goes hungry at the Collective--all are welcome, and all will have refreshments!

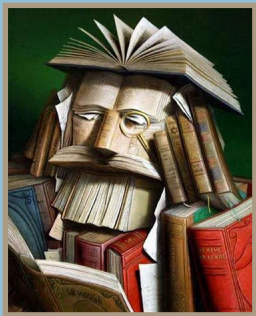
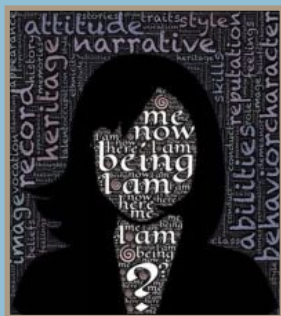




RETURNING TO CONTINUE LEARNING...

Thanks to the following alums still working with our department as teachers in the field who attended our **Pro Dev** seminars this year!

- **Jody Weatherington** (MA '02), **Jason Schmitt** (MA '06) and **Zach Franks** (MA '17), now at Glenbrook North, who attended "Shakespeare, Othello, and Race;"
- **Michelle Harris** from Niles West and **Leslie Hiben** (BA '21) from Glenbrook North, who attended "The Possibilities of Digital Humanities in the Classroom;"
- **Michele Hettinger** from Niles West, who joined us for "The Protest Poster and Risograph Printing;"
- **Julia Schaefer** from Glenbrook South, who attended "Composition, Feedback, and Identity: Teachers as Writers and Responders;"
- **Laura Marsh** at Fremd HS, who joined us for "Epistemic Injustices in the Classroom;"
- **Michele Lewis** (MA '03) from Niles West, who came for "Believing in Literature: Articulating the Value and Purpose of Literary Study;" and
- **Jane Schumacher** and **Mindy Rotman** from New Trier HS, along with **Erin Walsh** from Argo Community HS, who came to "AI or Not to AI: Using AI to Boost Creativity and Writing Proficiency in the Classroom"



Interview: Zachariah Simmons cont'd

Ed: When did you become involved with WZRD? What's your role there? Do you plan on continuing this work after NEIU, in radio or other media?

Simmons: I got involved as a DJ at WZRD 3 semesters back. I have always loved and romanticized radio, but assumed it was a dead or dying medium given the rise of podcasts, etc. But, I was proven wrong and I was ultimately asked if I would be interested in taking over the Program Director role by Dennis Sagel a year ago, when the formed PD had graduated. I would be thrilled to continue to work in radio after graduation and definitely will, in an alumni capacity as is possible. In terms of obtaining gainful employment, if any readers of this newsletter would like to give me a job in radio, I would be greatly appreciative!

Ed: You've been a leader getting students involved with the Equity in Education initiative. Tell us how you got involved with that and what you've been working on this term with UPI.

Simmons: Last semester, I and several other students/alumni were asked by Olivia Cronk to participate in advocating for equitable funding for Chicago public universities. Initially we were asked to share our experience via testimony, so I wrote up a piece detailing my past struggles to find fulfillment in the labor market and meaning in my own life, and how NEIU has massively improved the trajectory of my life. I took this and shared it first at the Illinois Board of Higher Education's opening meeting this past January and then later at the office of Senator Laura Fine. After doing this lobbying work, I was asked by NEIU UPI President Dr. Brandon Bisbey to assist in campus organization around the somewhat confusingly named Creates the Adequate and Equitable Public University Funding Act (SB13/HB1581). I have thus become the Campus Lead for the NEIU UPI Organizing Fellowship, wherein I have primarily been focused on drumming up campus support in the form of post cards to be sent to Senators, Representatives, and the Governor that show NEIU's collective desire for better funding. We were also able to organize the Fund Our Future Rally earlier in April, that coalesced students, faculty, and staff around this same funding need, and which was covered by WBEZ, Fox, and Telemundo. The event was a resounding success and showed that the NEIU community is aware of the funding they are missing and are willing to agitate for this.

Ed: You're also one of the first wave of students taking advantage of our Accelerated MA in Lit program. What are your thoughts on this opportunity? What courses do you look forward to or hope might be offered next year at the MA level?

Simmons: I am absolutely stoked to be a part of this Accelerated MA Program! If you would have told me 2 years ago that I was on the verge of graduating with my Master's degree, I flat out would not have believed you. For so long, education felt at once unattainable and unnecessary, but NEIU has given me one opportunity after another, and this MA Program is just one of the many. At a university that primarily serves students in some sort of need, to be able to take classes that progress both my BA and MA simultaneously, is an incredible time and money and time-saving proposition. I'm also pleased to be able to stay for a year longer at this school with so many peers and mentors that mean so much to me. For classes, I'll be taking Dr. Over's **Land, Labor, and Literature** and Dr. Greenburg's **Screenwriting** course, both of which I'm immensely excited for. Our English Department does a wonderful job offering classes that look at the intersection of language, culture, and oppression, and I just hope to be lucky enough to continue taking them!

Ed: OK, last question. There was an article written a couple weeks ago by Michael Oppenheimer at the Wall Street Journal about nicknames. Nicknames, he said, are going away. You know, like "Smitty" for a guy blending in with all the other "Smiths" in the phonebook, or "Crazy Legs" for someone who's an awesome breaker...

Simmons (stopping me): OK man, you're worrying me there with "Wall Street Journal" and then the thing about the "phonebook"...

Ed: Hear me out, man. What he was saying was, nick-names used to be a sign of affection, and they're disappearing from



our culture—not just because of the ways they were often used aggressively and insensitively, but because we're losing our sense of community. Hey—in this department, before the Collective, we had "The Werd Nerds," and the leader of that group, now Associate Vice President Kristina Garcia at Elgin CC, went by "Mama Bear"...

Simmons: Oh I know where you're going with this...

Ed: They called me "Tank"—you know, like the Sherman Tank in WWI, or the "Fish" tank cuz I was always quoting Stanley Fish...

Simmons: They called you "Tank."

Ed: OK. No,...no one called me that, really. What I'm getting at is... what if we...

Simmons: My name is not gonna be Goldilocks, Scherman.

Ed: What about just 'Locks?

Simmons: Sorry, no.

Ed: Ok fine.

Help Us Help Our Students!

GIVING

It's easy to earmark your give to the English Department at neiu.edu/englishfunds. You can donate to our general fund to help across the board; to our **Writers Reading Series**, the **82**; or to our **Student Support Fund**, toward an endowment that would help our Majors in the most need.

INTERNSHIPS

You can contact us about offering an internship--paid or unpaid--where you currently work. What skills do you need, and what skills might our students gain? Give that some thought!

To give, go to neiu.edu/englishfunds or to our website neiu.edu/English and click on "Giving"

AND KEEP IN TOUCH!

New JOB? News in your LIFE? Change your email? **Let us know!**

Send an email to **Associate Chair Tim Scherman** at: T-Scherman@neiu.edu OR

Office Admin Hilary Jirka at: h-jirka2@neiu.edu

Investment Advice from the English Department

If you have a 401(k):

you've probably been riding a real rollercoaster these days, wondering if your hard-earned investments will always be at the mercy of the President's next Tweet.

Our advice to Alumni right now?

Make an investment (tax-deductible at that) in an absolute sure thing: an endowment fund that, in perpetuity, will help deserving English students continue their education, open their minds, build their expertise, graduate with a degree, and improve their lives.

- **As an endowment, this will fund will never be depleted.** Once we reach our goal of \$25,000, this fund will throw off an annual return used to benefit a deserving student every year, in perpetuity.
- **Again, you will not be investing in just any student. Not only are the students who choose an English major usually those who are already creative, already hard-working, and *already motivated to succeed*—eligibility criteria for the scholarship you fund will ensure you are investing in a student whose success is only limited by their need of financial support.**

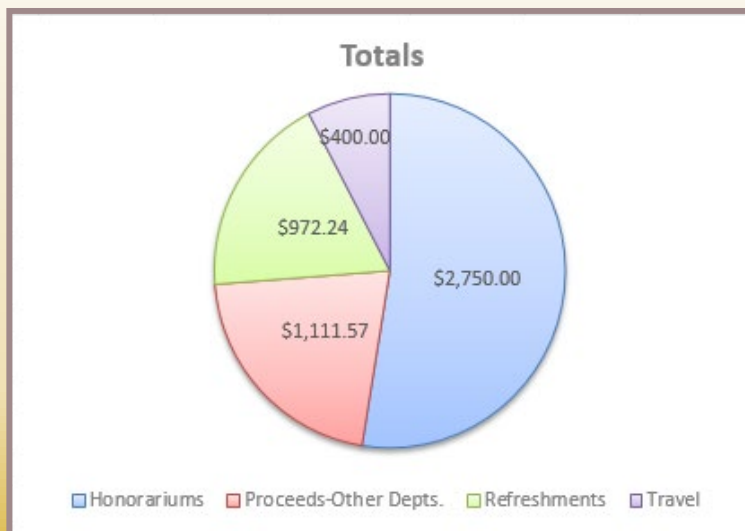
As you can see from the pie-chart below,

the English Department today has normalized its operational budget to balance the income from our own efforts, offering Professional Development seminars to area high school teachers, with our expenditures—for student and faculty travel, for social activities, invited speakers and the like.

Maybe you don't teach at a local high school, allowing you to bring 50 students to see NEIU (see Luke story, page 5). Or maybe you don't work for an company or organization or institution that offers internships for

undergraduates (see Margarita's story, page 6). That's OK! Here's another big way to help our students out: *help us complete our funding of this important endowment.*

HELP MATCH the \$3000 pledged by Emmanuel Cruz and other generous alumni, along with faculty members Julie Kim, Tim Scherman, Kris Over, Tim Scherman and others in this important funding drive. We're getting close. With your help, this fund can go live and start helping students this coming fall!



English Department Giving: Student Assistance Endowment
(Number 2 on the dropdown list)