What skills do English graduates bring to the table in an increasingly competitive and polarizing world? Students in English—and anyone pursing a degree more generally—answer this question regularly. Of course, studies in the humanities help students learn how to learn (and sometimes relearn), read, write, and adapt. While these skills are indispensable for a career, they are also far-reaching. Through training in the humanities, students find space necessary to work through important social dilemmas confronting our world today. They use these skills to secure a vast array of careers while also working to transform their communities into spaces where social change is important and relevant. English is increasingly central to shifting social and public discourses for the betterment of our world.

It can be difficult to parse out how certain social issues have become what they are today. Especially when those issues are polarizing, understanding how to ask questions and where to find answers is indispensable in participating in discussions. Director of the Oregon Humanities Center and English Professor Paul Peppis shows us where to find the most cutting-edge responses to these urgent questions: “If you want to have hope in the world, be in a room with students a couple of times a week.” English students are drivers and shapers of political and social discussions, discussions they often enter into and master during the course of their degrees.

Despite gaining such important skills, student graduates in the humanities are especially concerned with their futures as jobs relevant to an English degree have become increasingly competitive. Many students graduate with degrees under the immense burden of debt. At the beginning of college careers, students often look to the best degree for securing post-graduate career and financial success.

The inevitability of student debt has not always been the case. Peppis explains that higher education has transformed since he was a student in college. He notes that while he was in college, students were able to experience liberal education for “personal and social enrichment,” growing holistically in chosen areas of interest. “But,” Peppis continues, “given the fact that students are leaving higher education with very onerous debt loads, it makes perfect sense that they would be thinking more pragmatically about what the job of education is.”

Peppis urges us to think deeper about education as a process for reflecting what is most important in our world: “[The humanities and the humanistic social sciences] have to contribute to addressing these problems in our society and we have important tools...[that] have real, tangible, pragmatic benefits in the world we live in.” Peppis explains that one of the most important skills students obtain with an English degree is the ability to shift social and public discourses for the betterment of our world. English graduates can make a major difference while also enhancing their own employability and engaging with their lived experience.

English students bring social contexts with them everywhere they go. Every day we see new events that force us to respond to the historical changes faced by our world. Events like #BlackLivesMatter protests, queer rights activism, and new situations resulting from the global pandemic require specific skills to analyze them. Now more than ever, social issues urgently weigh on our minds, and we need English students to help grapple with how to respond to the shifting issues in our world even when the answers are unclear.