Get Outside Yourself
English & Humanities at Chadron State College

As a potential English Major, I’m sure you like a good short story. I’d like to tell you about English and Humanities at Chadron State College, but in this story, you are the protagonist.
The Outsider

First, you arrive. From the south you speed past miles of flatlands until you cross the “table” and descend into a beautiful landscape of pine-studded ridges surrounding Chadron State Park. Or maybe you come from the East, following the northern contours of the great Sandhills, the largest formation of grass-covered dunes in the Western hemisphere, crossing the Niobrara National Scenic River on Highway 20 near Valentine, or, if you are more adventurous, you cut across the heart of the Sandhills on Highway 2, a starkly-beautiful drive through one of the most unique landscapes in the country. From the West, perhaps, you descend from the ragged buttes of Fort Robinson State Park, or the pristine and vast backcountry of the Soldier Creek Wilderness. Or, more likely, you head down from Rapid City, the second largest city in South Dakota and the gateway to the gorgeous Black Hills, with its mix of sublime natural beauty and popular tourist destinations such as Custer State Park, Mt. Rushmore, Deadwood, Wind Cave National Park, Angostura reservoir—all within a two-hour drive of your destination: Chadron State College.

Regardless from which direction you come, eventually you find yourself in this quiet college town. The pace? Slow. The space? Open. You are shocked by how small and isolated the town is. And yet looks can be deceiving. The campus itself is pretty, with a nice backdrop of grass-covered hills just beyond the athletic fields to the south. You notice that the buildings on the western edge are stately and historic brick affairs—all newly-renovated inside. Your smartphone picks up the wireless signal just fine, and you text your anxious parents that you have arrived safely on campus. You walk the wide green spaces between these classic structures: Memorial Hall, home to performing and visual arts; the Mari Sandoz High Plains Heritage Center, named after the famous Western Nebraska writer and historian, housing materials related to her career and the study of the region; Edna Work Hall, the newest and nicest dorm suites on campus, and, of course, “Old Administration,” fresh from its million dollar renovation. One of the oldest buildings at CSC, here
you will be spending much of your time taking classes in writing, literature, education, communication, history and the social sciences. You are impressed to see so much has been invested in the humanities at Chadron State, rather than just in the business or science programs, as you have noticed on other campuses.

You take a long walk past the gorgeous sunlit atrium of the Sandoz Center and encounter a paved trail into the hills behind campus. You soon pass through a leafy canopy of cottonwoods, elms and lindens lining a watershed, cool and damp with little “Brigs Pond” gurgling beyond the tangled trees. You emerge from the shade and trek further up the trail to get a view of campus from above—the town laid out below you and the prairie beyond stretching all the way towards South Dakota. Against this picturesque high plains backdrop you settle in with the most recent Cormac McCarthy book, or your laptop open to the latest chapter of that novel you have been working on, or a final stanza for a poem you are trying to get just right. It’s a beautiful August day—a little hot, but with a pleasant breeze up here in the hills—and you suddenly feel at peace. It brings to mind the slogan you had seen on an English and Humanities brochure: “Get Outside Yourself.” You had regretted at first not choosing a school in a busy city or a crowded suburb, but you couldn’t really afford those anyway, and now you feel confident, certain this quaint village is yours to conquer.

And then you start to attend your classes. On Monday you discover that you Humanities professor has recently published a book on the films of Terrence Malick (director of one of your favorite classics, Badlands). Your writing teacher has just returned from a major poetry reading on the eastern end of the state. In Tuesday’s Elements of Literature class your professor discusses an article comparing the writings of J.D. Salinger and Willa Cather, which you will be reading that semester. (Only later do you find out that he is the author). Later that day another professor shares a funny story about a scholarly panel on Victorian Literature that he chaired at a major conference in Hawaii the previous year. The classrooms are small—sometimes you sit in a circle around a single “seminar” table.
Your teachers know your name and recognize you. One of them says hello to you in the hallway of Old Administration as you sit waiting for class, chatting with some students who have been in the program a while. One is excited about his upcoming teaching-internship at a local High School in the Spring—eager to complete his “methods” course with a professor who spent a number of years teaching High School herself. Another introduces herself to you and asks if you are going to the “open mic” at the Bean Broker coffee house that Friday—the first one of the year (when you later attend you are amazed at the packed space, filled with over fifty people all gathered to hear poetry, music and spoken word performances). You learn that Sigma Tau Delta, the English Honorary and Student Club on campus, sponsors these wild events. Another student rushes down the hallway, waving a the latest copy of 10th Street Miscellany, the campus literary journal. She’s thrilled to see her story has been published. Sitting across from you is a student lamenting the fact that he has to attend a production of a controversial play that the theater department is staging in “M. Hall.” It just so happens to be the same play you have been assigned in your Elements of Literature class (he later admits that actually “seeing the words performed” gave him a whole new appreciation for the material they had covered in class). You overhear a conversation between two students leaving their “Literature and Gender” class; one had just returned from a year-long study abroad in Italy, and the other was getting ready to spend a year teaching English in Poland. They talk about a former student who just posted a Facebook update about her new apartment not far from the campus of San Diego State, where she got accepted into the MFA program. This “quaint village” of college and community suddenly seems intimidating in its achievements and expectations. You wonder if you can compete.

You stick with it. The courses are challenging. All of your professors have Ph.D.s with diverse specializations from major universities across the country, and they are keeping current and active in their fields of expertise, publishing in major journals, presenting at important conferences, and trying to bring those experiences into their classrooms. Above all, they love to teach, and they push you to
your limits. You have more books piled on your desk in your dorm room than you think is even possible to read, and every day you are composing posts for discussion boards, writing analysis and research papers in your literature classes and sweating over difficult essay exams. But you keep moving forward, semester after semester. You make the Dean’s list several times, and in the Spring of your Junior year you land on the “President’s List” with perfect grades. You even make it through Shakespeare, somehow. You’ve decided to do a senior thesis, thinking that maybe graduate school is in the cards—or you have taken the plunge into English Education and are getting ready to go try your hand at student teaching. Along the way you have made great friends (everybody knows each other here). You frequently go camping with one of the leaders of the Outdoor Adventure Club—he’s also an English major and knows all the great local spots to hike, bike or do maneuvers (he’s also in ROTC). Last spring you both read some passages from Henry David Thoreau at the annual “Spring Read,” a day of hiking in the local wilderness followed by some readings and a cookout, all sponsored by the English Department. He tells you about writing a story for his “Literature of the Great Plains” class and then having the professor ask him and two other students in that class to present their work in a student panel at the Sandoz Conference on campus that following Spring. He wistfully recounts being invited to the conference banquet in that big sunlit atrium and sitting at the table with his profs, drinking wine and eating fancy food and talking big ideas. He met several conference attendees who patted him on the back and encouraged him to keep writing.

It reminds you of your Junior year when you finally joined Sigma Tau Delta, and several of the members traveled with a faculty advisor to the Nebraska Book Festival on the eastern end of the state in downtown Lincoln. You listened to a keynote presentation from some famous author in the Capital Rotunda, and then had a wild time on the town before your own panel presentation on “Nebraska’s Literary Landscape” the next day. The Department paid for the hotel rooms and all your meals, and the long ride there in a CSC van was in some ways the highlight of your trip, swapping lots
of great stories with your professors and fellow students. Of course, being in Sigma Tau Delta had also involved a lot of work and responsibility, such as helping to organize the open mic events and the Halloween “Scream Slam,” and the February “Love Slam.” Busy as it has been, you realize how much it has helped to bring you out of your shell.

Now a college senior, you have come to appreciate the social life of this otherwise sedate college town. You’ve taken as an elective a class in film theory, and you look forward to Thursday nights when your Humanities professor screens these wild, eclectic—often foreign—films at the local coffee house. You started reading a few pieces at the open mic events, getting more and more into the “performance” aspect of your poetry. One of these pieces developed out of a inspirational reading assignment you had in a class on Chinese Philosophy, of all things. One of your roommates, also an English major, plays guitar in a local band, along with a drummer—a graduate from the English program—and they have staged some wild concerts at various local venues. A time or two they have called you up on stage to riff on one of your performance pieces; you are starting to get a reputation as quite the local rapper. You’ve even agreed to help lead a session in performance poetry in the upcoming Summer Writers Workshop that the department has been organizing with the Sandoz Society.

Your latest poem didn’t make the cut for the recent 10th Street, but you are asked to read one of your research papers at a public colloquium that the department is hosting in the Sandoz Atrium at the beginning of the new Fall term. After the presentation you are introduced to a former Lit. Major who has gone on to get his M.A. at the University of South Dakota, and is working on his Ph.D. at the State University of New York in Buffalo. He tells you how fondly he remembers his time at CSC, how much he learned and what great friends he made. He still keeps in touch with his professors, he says, explaining that they were the ones who urged him to come check out the colloquium and revisit his old stomping grounds. He asks you about your course of study, and is amazed to learn all the new
classes being offered in the program. How he wishes he could have had a chance to take some of the courses you tell him about, on such diverse subjects as Great Plains and Borderlands literature, the Environment, Philosophy, Gender, Race and Class, Contemporary Writers, even the Bible. You exchange emails, and he promises to put in a good word at USD if you decide to go to apply there.

After the colloquium, you find yourself outside the atrium, retracing your steps down the paved trail you encountered on the first day on campus, past the dark pond humming with insects, up into the hills behind campus. You sit on that same bench and look down at the twinkling buildings. At the end of this year—your final year in the program—you will be walking across the commencement stage. What does the future hold for you? You will have one of the great multi-purpose, liberal arts degrees out there. You’ve had great experiences at CSC—worked hard and suffered at times, it is true, trying to keep your grades up and meet the expectations of the department—but now you feel prepared for anything. Best of all, you’ve had good scholarships and financial aid, and the costs of attending CSC have been considerably less than what you have heard from many of your frustrated friends attending larger institutions.

The breeze stirs around you up in those heights above campus, and you are swept back to the “spring read” two years earlier and the last lines from Thoreau’s Walden that you had read: “Only that day dawns to which we are awake.” For the first time you feel like you understand what it truly means to get outside yourself, having found those passions and insights that only you could awaken. This sleepy college town, you have to admit, has given you room to grow, and with the knowledge and skills you have developed in your hard work in English and Humanities, you are ready to fully embrace whatever rises over that horizon.

END
Could this be you? Every one of the scenarios outlined in the story above is based upon actual events and experiences that I have witnessed in my ten years of teaching here at Chadron State College. We do offer a very unique, challenging, yet accessible, course of study that will position you to achieve great things: teaching in Middle or High School, going to graduate school, becoming a writer (or getting involved in a career with an emphasis on reading and writing) or one of the many occupations in the private and public sector that seek out well-versed, competent, worldly people who have a great liberal-arts background.

But education researchers all agree, one of the most important factors in your success at college is how engaged you become in your educational environment by immersing yourself in the intellectual and social opportunities available to you. As “The Outsider” dramatizes, and I have seen repeatedly in my time here, our students become very involved in their academic careers at every level: academic, social, civic. Our graduates are well-rounded and well-prepared to face the world of tomorrow.

If you have any questions about what we can offer you at Chadron State, please don’t hesitate to contact me. We hope to see you writing your own unique story with us this Fall!

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