

## Director's Column by Ted Ownby

Over the holidays, a new acquaintance who hadn't heard of the Southern Studies program asked what someone could do (to be specific, the person added an unnecessary adverb to ask "what could someone *possibly* do") with a Southern Studies degree. I used to get defensive about questions like that, but the program is forty years old, so maybe it's time to prepare a more thorough answer.

I'm sure the questioner was asking about the jobs, and one obvious way to start answering is that a good number of Southern Studies alumni teach. The striking thing is how many types of teaching they are doing. They teach kindergarten and grammar school, middle school, and high school. They teach all sorts of topics, sometimes clearly related to Southern Studies, sometimes far from the field. They teach English as a second language and teach English and American studies throughout the world, run programs to recruit teachers to areas that need them, and serve as principals and counsellors. They go into PhD and MFA programs in these areas and probably more: English, history, African American studies, American studies, cultural studies, gender studies, sociology, religion, ESL, ethnomusicology, education, cinema, creative nonfiction, and anthropology. They teach in universities and colleges, and sometimes they send students back to the Southern Studies program. At colleges and universities, alums also serve as administrators and raise funds and do communications work, explaining what educators and researchers do and why people should support them.

At the University of Mississippi alone, former students work in the offices of the College of Liberal Arts, Student Disability Services, Leadership and Advocacy, Academic Mentoring, the Intensive English Program, the William Winter Institute, the university attorney, in the Department of Writing and Rhetoric, in journalism, as well as here in Southern Studies, for the Southern Foodways Alliance, and for *Living Blues*. As part of their assistantships, Southern Studies students work not just with the Center but at the University Museums, the Department of Writing and Rhetoric, Public Policy and Leadership, and the J. D. Williams Library, and internships take them all sorts of places.

Southern Studies alums work at and sometimes run departments of archives and history, historical societies, endowments for the humanities, arts and humanities agencies, music museums, history museums, and interpretive centers. They lead scholarly organizations and work in nonprofits, raising funds, mobilizing action, addressing problems. They work in art museums and art galleries and interview artists on the radio. A few are architects, and more do preservation work.

Alumni make visual arts, paintings and sculpture and pottery and drawings and jewelry, and they show it, market it, and share their skills and inspiration with students and other artists. They make music in stadiums, clubs, coffee shops, churches, and people's homes, on recordings and on television, and some of them get paid for it. They are disc jockeys, music collectors, and lots are serious music listeners. Alums make films, sometimes as directors and actors of narrative films and more frequently as documentary filmmakers and oral historians. They do photography and audio recordings and blur any assumptions about lines dividing art and documentary work.

Alumni are involved in writing, editing and publishing. They write scholarly works, publish novels, poetry, and short stories, work as literary agents, create and write for magazines, edit scholarly journals and school publications, and blog about all sorts of

things. Many teach about writing. About 150 of them contributed entries for *The Mississippi Encyclopedia*. Alums work in libraries, archives, library associations, and bookstores.

A few Southern Studies alumni hold political office, and others lobby and campaign and define problems and try to solve them. They vote, march, write letters, organize, give advice, and volunteer, and some hold government jobs from parks to the state department. They work in the media as news journalists and commentators, sports reporters and travel writers, and a few teach journalism. Sometimes people are surprised to learn that a good number of Southern Studies alums are attorneys in a wide range of legal fields. Some teach legal research, and a couple are judges.

They are involved in the world of food as chefs and cooks, restaurateurs, bartenders, and wait staff, in writing and teaching through foodways, and in foodways photography, blogging, and advertising. They work in tourism and sports, and they start and work in businesses of all sorts. Several work in technology industries and finance, and one evaluates banks (a skill not learned in Southern Studies).

Several alumni are in the ministry, with the range of pleasures and responsibilities that entails, some have jobs in religious organizations, and many do unpaid work in religious institutions. As far as I know, only one Southern Studies alum is a medical doctor. Several are nurses, more do counseling of various kinds, and others write about or do museum work involving health issues. A current student is analyzing regional issues in breastfeeding, and at least one alum is, among other things, an undertaker, so it's almost accurate to say that Southern Studies alums can take care of anything from the cradle to the grave.

Alumni in the Southern Studies program create things no one had ever imagined. And they do all sorts of extraordinary and more-or-less ordinary things that don't make any money or attract attention. Many hold multiple jobs, and most would be at least a little irked to be defined only by their jobs. They ask questions, keep learning, try new things, and in their own ways a lot of them challenge authority and reject conventional wisdoms. I doubt that the person raising that question really wanted an answer, but thanks for asking.

Southern Register Winter 2018