

Nothing is Written: The Transformative Power of a Liberal Arts Education

Corey McClintock

Over the past five years of college, I've lived in eight different locations, and packed and unpacked the contents of eight different desks. But through these transitions, my desk in the chemistry research lab has remained continuously occupied, submerged by a steadily growing collection of the byproducts of my education. The sediments that appear as wild clutter to any person strolling by are actually the geological record of my personal and academic evolution.

My desk is wide, but no space is unoccupied by a notebook, textbook, flashcard, or stack of papers. Some notecards prompt me to determine what product will be produced by a certain reactant subjected to a specific condition, remnants of the many syntheses learned during organic chemistry. Another notecard prompts me to define *metonymy*, one of the almost two hundred terms I studied as part of the preparation for my literature competencies. Excavation of a stack of papers that appears homogenous reveals a heterogeneous composition: An inventory list of laboratory chemicals has infiltrated drafts of humanities essays, a partially decomposed physics syllabus clings to a stained abstract for an Appalachian Studies conference. Even the walls around my desk testify to the sprawling health of my education: diagrams displaying the molecules involved in my research are taped alongside the Calvin and Hobbes quote "Some days, even my lucky rocket ship underpants don't help."

And on a tiny, torn scrap of paper, in my thin, tidy cursive is the *Lawrence of Arabia* quote "Nothing is written." *Lawrence of Arabia* is famous for its extensive desert scenes, where viewers are treated to stunning displays of sand. While sand appears to be

homogenous, especially when viewed from afar in a cinematographic setting, it is actually composed of various grains of different sizes and origins, creating a material that is able to continually transform and rearrange. A liberal arts education is like sand, composed of various aspects including courses in humanities, language, arts, music, writing, science, along with cultural experiences and community involvement. The combination of all these components fosters critical cross-curricular thinking that enables the student to continually transform. The sediments of my desk in the research lab represent the diversity of my education, undertaken due to the curricular requirements of liberal arts. My first year classes included chemistry, language, writing, and humanities. While I had been interested in physical therapy in high school, I found myself enjoying my chemistry and literature courses. My professors encouraged me to become involved in the departments, by declaring those subjects as my majors and joining research groups. Rather than dichotomize my strong interests in chemistry and literature, I augmented the diverse composition of my liberal arts curriculum by seeking degrees in both disciplines.

Aside from fostering academic development, my classes and extracurricular activities presented new opportunities for me to become involved in my immediate community. My humanities courses emphasized outreach, such as my senior honors seminar, where we tutored local middle school students in math and reading once a week. But my science courses also emphasized outreach, such as my Inorganic Chemistry course, where we developed and administered activities that were part of Science Olympiad. I also played the French horn in the university brass quintet, where we performed at least twice a semester on and off campus, and have competed on the track and field team all five years of college, where I've developed as an athlete, a teammate and a leader. This past summer I

volunteered with a local track club, where I coached young athletes in skill development in the javelin and hammer throws. My service as a coach and peer tutor taught me that when I teach, I reinforce my understanding of material while benefitting members of my community.

My education also challenged me to consider how I relate to communities beyond the setting of my university. Before I came to college, I knew little about the culture of the Asheville area where I grew up. But when I took a Southern Appalachian Literature course, I learned about the complex heritage of my native community, and I became connected to an environmental movement that inspired me to take my education outside of the state. The following summer, I joined a fifty-mile march in West Virginia where Appalachian citizens and organizations collaborated and protested mountaintop removal, celebrated Appalachian culture, and most importantly commemorated the union victories of the original March on Blair Mountain, which I learned about in my literature course. My education further transformed my perspective when I studied abroad and discovered community in Edinburgh, Scotland. I took classes in romantic poetry and literary theory, played old time on my banjo with Scottish musicians, and explored the country, taking field trips to Glasgow camping on the banks of Loch Lomond. I recently shared this experience with my community through presentations I gave at local elementary school for their international day, as part of my university's Global Ambassador Program.

The best aspect of liberal arts is the community of like-minded peers and professors where cross-curricular connections are the norm. The small class environment fosters creativity and academic growth through the easy engagement with professors and peers. This engagement enables the success of undergraduate research, which I have conducted in

both chemistry and literature. Undergraduate research developed my knowledge in each discipline, but more importantly it encouraged teamwork and creativity, developed my independence and presentation skills, and increased my problem solving capacity. Additionally, research helped me find parallels between my disciplines. I always found breaking a reaction down to its components in order to understand the mechanism similar to analyzing a piece of literature. My interests in these connections sparked an undergraduate research project in creative writing, which ultimately led to my interest in science writing as a career. Science writers focus on presenting scientific information to the public in an accessible style, in order to increase public understanding and awareness of scientific trends and discoveries. My liberal arts education has prepared me for this career through the curricular emphasis of creativity and community involvement that will be important to the goal of communicating science to the public.

Had I written my future when I was eighteen and a freshman, wandering through orientation activities on the quad on a hot August day, I would have scrawled the story of a physical therapist, even though I had little clinical experience. I had yet to understand how my liberal arts experience was going to empower me to transform my future. Packing up my desk in the research lab will be a difficult endeavor, not because of the vast amount of material, but because of the experience that is signified by each item. When I graduate this spring, I will leave my university with the knowledge that every seemingly insignificant scrap represents one of the many invaluable grains of sand I have collected: grit from the March on Blair Mountain, grains from the banks of Loch Lomond, towering dunes of miniscule invisible molecules, piles of letters from creative compositions, mounds of music

notes. But nothing is written in this sand, because my education itself is the currency of my experience. I gathered each grain so that I may build.