

Jacob Secor  
Junior  
UNC-Asheville



After hearing that she could use a friendly face, I opened my sister's bedroom door to find her curled up in bed, pillow soaked with tears, binge watching re-runs of "Grey's Anatomy" with her dog. After getting past the fury she had with our mother for telling me to come check on her, my sister explained to me the source of her distress—she had failed a test. Not just *any* test, but that she had, for the third time, failed the TEAS; effectively delaying her admission to nursing school, extending her degree time, and keeping her at a local community college, at which she found herself quite unhappy.

Disoriented by her newfound lack of direction and confused as to what she should and should not be doing in life, she repeated "Maybe this just isn't right for me! I wasted all this time! I feel like I should just move back home to Raleigh and live with Mom and Dad." If nursing really was her passion in life and that's what she really wanted to do, I would have told her, "Keep at it! Who cares about another year at a school you hate if it means you get to do what you love for the rest of your life?" But I knew, in my brotherly capacity, that that wasn't the case. I had a very simple answer: Call UNC-Asheville tomorrow and apply to a public liberal arts school.

I would not have had such a reaction three years ago. Before I came to UNC-Asheville, a COPLAC institution; I, too, was on a very specific trajectory coming out of high school—to become a professional musician. When I was applying to schools, I exclusively looked at schools known for their jazz programs, and, in most cases, music conservatories. I was compelled to apply to three in-state schools in case I didn't get enough scholarships to go to the out-of-state conservatories I was looking at. Upon visiting, and ultimately attending UNC-Asheville, I fell in love with the city and the university community. Still, that's not what pushed me to recommend the school to my sister. Surprisingly, my recommendation was

based on the courses that I *wasn't* excited about, the courses I *wouldn't* have taken at a conservatory. Those experiences taught me the true rewards of the liberal arts program, cultivated a passion for it, and in turn, compelled me to confidently recommend it to my disoriented sister.

Upon enrolling, I found that I was required to take fifty credit hours of Liberal Arts Core (LAC) classes. At my intended conservatory, a private college of music in the Northeast, students take merely eighteen credit hours of “non-music” classes. I had anticipated this to be a burden, but as a result of my LAC requirements, I have been exposed to the beauty of perspective from ancient Eastern religions through medieval Christianity and unpacked highly controversial issues through study of modern philosophy and cultural imperialism through post-industrial trans-humanism. I have learned the scientific method and used it to examine the effects of industrial agriculture and debated the pros and cons of genetic modification of crops. I have studied music as a fundamental aspect of culture and learned to analyze it not only using conventional music theory but also from a historical, anthropological, and a sociological perspective.

I have used the interdisciplinary skills I acquired through the liberal arts program to study and publish on Contemporary Fusion music not only as an aspect of culture (as stated above) but also *as culture itself*. My study focused on the relationship between the performer and the listener, understanding this discursive relationship as a dynamic process which is constantly being cultivated from both perspectives. It has taken me to dozens of performances across the Southeast region to analyze the music ethnographically, and to forever change my understanding of what it means to listen, to enjoy, and to be inspired. This research project—inspired, advised, and funded by the liberal arts program—has shaped me both as a musician and as a scholar. After completing the ethnographic portion of the project, I then

analyzed the harmonic, rhythmic, and melodic ideas of Fusion artists and examined the historical roots of those musical ideas. Finally, I composed original music, drawing upon the concepts I developed over the course of writing the paper. This experience continues to impact my compositional practices, my performative practices, and my listening practices, and has become invaluable to my growth as a musician. Also as part of the project, I sociologically analyzed the reception of the audience to the music with specific attention to dance, voice, and groove and was exposed to and inspired by the scholarly literature on these topics. I was proud to submit a version of the final thesis to both the UNC-Asheville Undergraduate Research Journal as well as the National Conference for Undergraduate Research Proceedings. This project allowed me to integrate aspects of my education that I had not anticipated, and aspects of myself that I had not previously appreciated, through the linking of the intellectual, expressive, and social worlds I have found in abundance at UNC-Asheville.

In the political sphere, the public liberal arts education has been a highly contested topic, especially in recent years. Former governor Pat McCrory (NC) has criticized the public support of a liberal arts education on many occasions for its lack of functionality, claiming that it has “no [chance] of getting people jobs,” and explaining, “If you want to take gender studies that’s fine. Go to a private school and take it. But I [McCrory] don’t want to subsidize that if it’s not going to get someone a job.” McCrory’s financial concern is substantial; but this brings up a crucial point of contention—is higher education’s sole purpose to prepare students for the workforce? And, furthermore, should the government accept the existing job opportunities in the community as being the only ones we should prepare students for? For example, because there are currently few job opportunities for Gender Studies graduates, does that also mean there shouldn’t be?

Public intellectuals, entrepreneurs, and politicians on both sides of party lines disagree with McCrory. Fareed Zakaria stresses the importance of the cross-pollination of STEM and Liberal Arts fields in his book *In Defense of a Liberal Arts Education*. Even Steve Jobs said “It’s technology married with liberal arts, with humanities, that yields us the result.” And Scot Faulkner, former Newt Gingrich aide and Reagan administration official, responded directly to McCrory’s statements calling them “counterproductive” and criticizing the idea that individuals are valued not for their “knowledge and perception,” but for their “ability to perform tasks.”

As my sister’s tears dry, I hope that my strong suggestion echoes in her ear. Whether she ultimately decides to specialize in the medical field, my advice remains the same: pursue a public liberal arts education. This is not because I think specialization is bad, but because I know that the intersectionality of the liberal arts curriculum will inform her both as a professional in whatever field she settles on, and as a citizen of the world.