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A ~~Math Major's~~ View of a Liberal Arts Education

In high school I seemed to have equal strength in all subjects and had a difficult time choosing just one. Therefore, I chose a liberal arts education at Georgia College with a degree in math, a minor in French, and I picked up a second minor in computer science. Upon reading the past winning essays and their beautiful poetic quality of writing and literary and philosophical references I became extremely intimidated about writing this essay and considered hiding behind the "I am a math major" excuse and not even trying. However, I realized that giving up because I do not fit the perfect mold of those who have gone before is the opposite of what I have learned from my Liberal arts education and what I believe.

If my liberal arts education has taught me anything, it is to have confidence in myself. When we typecast people, we stick them in a box, lower our expectations, and rob them of their confidence to step outside this box. Not only do we typecast other people, we typecast ourselves as well. I am that shy girl whose friends in elementary school used to forget she was sitting at the lunch table because she never said a word; therefore, I am not a leader. I am a math major; therefore, I am not a writer. I am a woman; therefore, I am not strong. I am young; therefore, I am not wise. I attend a liberal arts school; therefore, I am not practical. Wait, I am a math major; therefore, I am logical. Does logical not imply practical? It does not take a math major to see that this equation does not add up. Well technically it would be two equations, but if we consider them a system of linear equations, we end up with no solution. In other math terms, we have an inconsistent system of equations.

An inconsistent system: that is the perfect explanation of the system of typecasting. The liberal arts do not stick people into this inconsistent system. They encourage everyone to use their talents, develop a few new ones, and even delve into areas that will always be difficult. My professors, whether teaching an introductory course or an advanced course, always expect the best from their students. My world literature professor did not expect my writing to be bad just because I am a math major. I thought I was not smart enough to understand current events. However, in my Global Challenges class we were required to read and discuss news articles, and I realized that my ability to be informed is much greater than I thought.

On the same thread, non-math people do not get to ignore math. Many probability and statistics professors fill their lectures with lessons about the true meaning of concepts versus simply having students memorize formulas. We even have a course called Intro to Mathematical Thought, which teaches “non-math” minded people some of the more interesting concepts of mathematics at a basic level. A student who took this course told me it was the first time she had ever found math interesting. I find this important because the response when I tell people that I am a math major is typically a look akin to horror paired with the phrase “I hate math.” I find this disappointing because to me basic math is as essential as our ability to read and a proof is as beautiful and impactful as a poem. Yes, I use math when budgeting or to avoid getting swindled when the car salesman tells me that 5.9 percent interest rate is not that different compared to a 3.2 rate. However, math is so much more: it is a lesson in perseverance, in accuracy, in patience. I can spend hours editing a French paper searching for conjugation errors because I first reworked an integral for hours in search of a missed negative. I can apply to multiple internships without becoming discouraged because working a proof for

eight hours just to be told I was wrong and try again is common. I can figure out how the weird shower in our apartment works because I am not afraid to try, be wrong, and try again.

After a presentation in an upper level French class, a French major asked me why I was in the class. Considering I had just spent twenty minutes speaking in French about a French author, the comment definitely implied that I was bad at French. Speaking is my most challenging part of learning a language, and I was thrown off by the question and embarrassed. When she saw my confused and hurt look, she tried to explain her question and asked if I wanted to be fluent. I answered with the first thought that came to mind: I am not sure if I have the talent for that. I wish I had said, I find French interesting. To me grammar is just a complex multivariable equation to which I am always trying to figure out the operations. Writing is a fun puzzle, listening is an obstacle with high rewards, and speaking is a challenge I am not sure I will ever conquer, but is there not merit in tackling something without knowing the outcome? My professor emailed me later with encouraging words, telling me that I did well with the presentation and to never let that kind of comment discourage me from what I was doing. This support from a professor is something I will always remember.

Support from professors and the attitude of “why not try” gives me the courage to do things that seem impossible or scary. It gave me the courage to do a Research Experience for Undergraduates (REU) as a sophomore and to apply for a Fulbright to do research in Budapest. At the REU I did not know if I would be able to keep up with the other students who had stronger math backgrounds, but I found that my willingness to be lost and just try allowed me to make key contributions to the project. I thought that I would not even have a chance with a Fulbright, but I tried and I am now a semi-finalist.

I have learned no matter who we are, we all have hidden talents and more potential than we can imagine. We are not our typecast. I am shy, and I am a leader. I am a math major and a decent writer. I am logical and I am practical. I chose to go to a liberal arts school because it has taught me to see the merit in attempting that for which I cannot foresee the outcome. This perspective gives me the courage to push my boundaries as well as to refuse to see anyone as merely their typecast.