

Correspondence: Diving Deep Into My Liberal Arts Education As A First-Gen Yellow Headed Jawfish

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Yellow headed jawfish vertically floated in and out of their habitats beneath the ocean floor. I distinctly remember trying to remain still so the fish acclimated to my presence. I wanted to watch the fish interact normally without the fear of being attacked by potential prey. I stayed there for about fifteen minutes, patiently waiting for my opportunity to dive deeper to get a closer look. Yellow headed jawfish swim vertically; up and down as if they are functioning drop rides at carnivals. Upon diving deeper, I examined the minutiae of the fish and noticed it was a male. In INT 277, my professor told me that male fish hold black eggs that shine in their mouth against their vibrant yellow and blue bodies. This indelible image, and its corresponding experience, exemplifies how incredible it has been to receive a truly experiential, liberal arts education.

I had never travelled, never snorkeled, let alone alongside experts that could teach me infinite details about miniscule but important beings like yellow headed jawfish. Yet, experiential learning is what works for me as a kinesthetic learner. This type of liberal arts education is ultimately what teaches us—the students—the value of saying yes to new opportunities that allows us to grow into the people we never believed we could become. Even if those opportunities involve obscure aquatic life alongside academics who were strangers to me merely four short years and 132 credits ago.

Before four years and many credits toward a liberal arts degree, I asked myself, “Where will a small liberal arts college take me?”: The answer was the world. A liberal arts education

transported me around the globe, prepared me for a variety of potential careers, and empowered me to take control of my own journey. This sense of self-determinism was so fostered by a liberal arts curricula that I designed my own major: Inclusive Educational Policy with a concentration in Leadership and the Creative Arts. With this degree, I know now that I will be able to pursue a career that fits within my best interests and abilities. I have developed the confidence to try new experiences, say yes to things that are out of my comfort zone, and further my education with every chance I get. Public liberal arts education is what makes this possible for me.

Liberal arts education changed my life and propelled my confidence in knowing what I want for myself and for the world. Competing on a Collegiate Leadership Competition team taught me about the value of practicing excellent leadership and self-awareness. Spending my spring break on a service trip in Puerto Rico, tiling the floors of a home destroyed by Hurricane Maria, showed me how much we can learn from one another when we ask others about their experiences. Flying out to Indiana University for a financial wellness conference, working in the Office of Admissions, being a Community Residential Assistant, teaching my peers about financial literacy, and attending the Maine National Education for Women in Leadership Institute, have all taught me about professional development, and how your life can change in a single moment if you carry around a business card, a welcoming handshake, and a warm and enthusiastic, “Hi, my name is McKayla, I’d love to chat!” And of course, combining special education courses with my summer job as a Behavioral Health Professional taught me that just because we all learn at different paces, does not mean that we should be excluded from general education experiences.

All of these experiences led me to a different path than the one I was on at eighteen years old. I thought I would go to college, get a degree in Secondary Education, and teach English for the rest of my life. I did not know at 18 years old that everything I said yes to, every person I met, and every opportunity that came my way would alter my path so incredibly. My individualized liberal arts educational experiences and community engagements culminated in self-designing my own interdisciplinary major. I know that without my liberal arts education, I would be living a cookie cutter life, so far removed from those yellow headed jawfish. I wouldn't wake up every morning passionate and hungry to find education in everyday experiences; seeing excitement and learning opportunities among the mundane.

My name is McKayla Marois, and I am the Senior Class President at a public liberal arts university. Four years ago, I truly had no idea what my future would look like; I questioned where a small liberal arts college could take me. As a first generation college student, the idea of going to college was scary. The fact that I am at the end of my undergraduate experience seems unbelievable. There were many times where I felt like I wouldn't make it through to graduation. But I do have faith that without my liberal arts education, I would not have made it to the end. Four years ago, I would not have been pushed into becoming the best version of myself. Four years ago, I would not be who I am today. Four years ago, I would not have witnessed such diverse yet mundane aquatic life floating above the ocean floor.

Four years later, I am someone who is excited to learn, lead, explore, and live the liberal arts curriculum I have been so fortunate to receive.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "McKayla Marois". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a light grey shadow effect underneath the text.