

# Dumpster Diving for Nerds

By: Cameron Watts

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Racoons, bears, and I are just a few of the mammals you can find rummaging through mounds of garbage bags in the early morning light. No, I'm not a cool, edgy dumpster diver, but I am a nerdy college student eager to perform this truly disgusting task in the name of science, sustainability, and community improvement. My strange new morning ritual is a product of the behavioral economics nudge unit I helped create my Sophomore year and is just the latest stop in my collegiate adventure that has taken me across academic disciplines, community organizations, career paths and even oceans.

Like many bright eyed and bushy tailed freshman, I began my journey with little understanding of the liberal arts apart from a "T" visual representation provided on my campus tour. It described a liberal arts education as a broad base of core knowledge (the top of the T) and a deep understanding of your major (the stem). The superficiality of that perception quickly shifted when my first class at Georgia College assigned me an essay on the global challenges of climate change written through the eyes of a teenage boy living in Shanghai. I was surprised by the unconventional proposal but stunned by the insights I gathered from this simple exercise in empathy. This wasn't an atypical class either, in fact that same semester I explored the surrealist art movement through the original writings of Freud and Marx, I interpreted the stories of Flannery O'Conner by physically walking around the farm she wrote them in and I vigorously debated my economics professor on the potential impact of automation on the future of jobs. These engaging and thought provoking courses were just an introduction to what my liberal arts education would become.

However, it wasn't until my second year that I began to realize the external implications of the liberal arts mission when I enrolled into the most transformative course of my academic

career entitled, *The Engaged University*. Right away, my professor laid out the numerous ethical responsibilities a university has to their host communities including the necessity for professors and students alike to share their intellectual abilities with those in need. I fell back in my seat, dumbfounded by the moral epiphany that I wanted to spend the rest of my college career investing my time, energy and ideas into the community I now called home.

I challenged myself to think boldly about what I could personally contribute to our rural Georgian town and I eventually developed the concept of a behavioral economics consulting group. I discovered this unique subfield of economics in my *Principles of Microeconomics* course and it quickly captivated my attention by challenging the principle neoclassical assumption of rationality. Essentially, psychology and economics partnered to identify a multitude of seemingly irrelevant factors influencing people's decision making and spawned organizations that could use these behavioral insights to help people make better decisions. These interventions, commonly referred to as "nudges", are relatively costless leaving their benefits accessible to anyone who is willing to learn how to use them. I was willing.

Late in the Spring, I invited my microeconomics professor to the local coffee shop with my proposal in mind. Drinking our cold brew beverages, we hatched a plan to bring my idea to fruition by leveraging the research and consulting experience gained by involved students as incentive to offer our services free of charge to the community. Since then, the "Georgia College Nudge Unit" has blossomed into an academic partnership between the economics and psychology departments, allowing nine students to actively apply and mold the lofty concepts of nudge theory into concrete solutions to community problems.

Our current client is the campus Office of Sustainability, who has tasked our Nudge Unit to improve recycling on campus and we have responded by designing an experiment testing the

validity of three separate nudges simultaneously. As you can probably guess, this is where the trash comes back into play as my team and I sort through the school's waste, collecting data every Monday and Thursday. The Georgia College Nudge Unit epitomizes the liberal arts, exemplifying its fundamental values of interdisciplinary collaboration, community engagement, active learning, ethical decision making, and critical reflection.

As I come to the close of my time at Georgia College, I now view the mission of a public liberal arts education as the essential training for engaged leaders looking to tackle the grand challenges of the future. We will need the ability to decipher climate change through economics, chemistry, meteorology and every discipline in-between. Global poverty won't be solved without grassroots engagement from local leaders and an engaged citizenry. Active and critical reflection will be required for political polarization and inequality to reverse course. I am now confident I can join the ranks of these leaders performing this work as I transition into my new job in community development right here in Milledgeville. I just hope I can stay out of the trash.