

Reflections on Growth at a Liberal Arts College

Sumaiya Muhammad
Ramapo College of New Jersey

Reflections on Growth at a Liberal Arts College

If I were to come up with one word to describe my liberal arts education experience at Ramapo College, it would be *growth*. When I arrived in the U.S. from Nepal over three years ago, I was an anxious and confused teenager, suddenly petrified about my decision to move thousands of miles away from the comfort of home — tightly clutching on to nothing but curiosity. I had little idea about where I was going in life, and the only way to find out was to keep stumbling ahead. Now, in my last semester, I am still clutching on to curiosity to guide me to the future, but I have learned to remold fear into motivation, and my confusion has evolved into clear aspirations for the future. I have grown and transformed through the experiences provided at my liberal arts college.

I only vaguely understood what a liberal arts education meant when I started college. My last two years of high-school concentrated heavily on the natural sciences. I spent most of it memorizing the laws of physics, molecular formulae in chemistry, physiological mechanisms in biology, and math. Barring biology, I dragged myself through other classes and somewhere along those two years, lost my inquisitive nature to confusion and detachment from myself. I actually started looking into what could be wrong with me. In doing so, my old sense of curiosity returned as I came across a field focused on learning about the hows and the whys of the mind; it was even more interesting than biology. I announced to my family that I wanted to go to college to study psychology — a degree colleges didn't offer on an undergraduate level in Nepal. I still wasn't sure about whether it was merely a phase or I really wanted to dedicate my future to studying something I never had before. My brother then jokingly said, "Go to a liberal arts school and just change your major if you don't like it." I immediately googled *liberal arts school* and decided it would be fun to finally study a variety of topics that interest me. However, a liberal arts education was a continent away from home and I had never stepped out of my city by myself.

A few months later, I found myself at Ramapo, and the decision I took “for fun” ended up being a key element that nurtured my academic and personal growth. Due to the interdisciplinary nature of the education here, I regularly engaged in discussions that were on diverse topics and perceptions. These conversations fed my curiosity while decreasing my confusion about where I was headed. What is perhaps most surprising is how taking classes from various fields strengthened my penchant for psychology and understanding humans. Looking at the world through the lenses of electrical signals through neurons in Neuropsychology, population patterns in Statistics, breaths in Yoga, philosophies in the History of Social Thought, and so much more, a myriad of seemingly unrelated classes enriched my learning of the human mind in ways I wouldn't have had otherwise. In my Introduction to Astronomy course, Dr. Russo said, “You are essentially made up of a star,” as he explained the formation of heavy elements after a supernova explosion. This phrase is a reminder I have used to push myself when faced with obstacles and I am certain I will rely on them in the future. The exposure to such unique perspectives of looking at the world has expanded my learning and opened my mind to embracing what isn't familiar and easy.

While the classroom learning environment unlocked my ability to think critically by taking on various perspectives, the opportunity of experiential learning has helped me solidify my goals for the future. At the end of my sophomore year, I started working as a Research Assistant in the Palestroni Neuroscience Lab on campus. I had taken a total of one Neuroscience course on Cognitive Psychology before entering the lab. Yet, the thrill of testing and visualizing the processes involved in perception through electroencephalograms piqued my interest in understanding perception on a much deeper level. Beginning my junior year, I spent most of my non-classroom time in the lab. I learned the intricacies of research through observations and practice and expanded my thought processes and ways of thinking through reading journal articles. Additionally, I learned first hand about the importance of patience and grit to find answers, and built memories of teamwork and collaborative effort to cherish in the future. My

research experiences at the lab helped shape my aspirations of becoming a research scientist. Last semester, I sent in my applications for Ph.D. programs in Clinical Psychology which is in contrast to the end of high school when I couldn't wait to graduate, earn money, and never have to study again.

Besides my academic growth, my liberal arts experience allowed me to engage in fulfilling ways with the community. I have contributed to celebrating diversity on campus by organizing several club events through the International Student Organization. As an E-board member of the Ramapo Chapter of The National Society of Leadership and Success, I have actively engaged in helping members build leadership and self-improvement skills to succeed in college. I also had the joy of spending my weekends working on a local farm with my friends to learn about sustainability. As a psychology major, I had the opportunity to work as a Peer Mentor for the ENHANCE Program at Ramapo— a therapeutic support group for students on the Autism Spectrum. As a peer mentor, I work one-on-one with students to help them navigate college by providing them with academic and emotional support. I also work in group settings with other peer mentors and supervisors to increase connections and socialization among the program members. Here, I have learned how far effort and support can go despite differences. I don't completely understand how the students perceive the world, and they likely don't know how I do so. Nevertheless, the beauty of it is when my peer student, a history enthusiast, talks about the Vikings with the most contagious eagerness, he is pleasantly surprised when I comment thanks to my World Civilizations course. While I am helping the students understand academic and social nuances, they in turn teach me the joy of being persistent towards learning and growth.

In the last four years, every word of encouragement from my professors, every connection I made on the campus community, and every opportunity to explore ideas beyond my comfort zone enabled me to thrive at my small liberal arts school nestled at the lap of the Ramapo Mountains. Four years ago in the Fall of 2017, we were asked to write a letter to our

future graduating selves in my First-Year Seminar class. I wrote, "I hope I have given you a reason to smile for this crazy journey when you look back to me." A couple of months away from graduation, I am certainly smiling wide as I look back at her and think of how much she has grown.