

Double majors: When interests intersect in unexpected ways

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On the first Monday of summer, I couldn't find my sunglasses, but I found two pairs of lab goggles in between my field journals. In summer school, I explained to two classmates that the plant gene FAMA was named after a terrifying thousand-eyed, thousand-eared goddess in Vergil's *Aeneid*. And, in the first week of the semester, I used my physics homework as a bookmark for Best American Magazine Writing.

Some people would call being a journalism-biology double major crazy, but I call it being well-rounded.

I'm a junior at Colorado State University, and to date, I've only met one other science-journalism double major, Deanna Cox. Like me, she's found that the double major both merges interests and creates ambiguity. Students who choose to double major do so out of desire and necessity: the desire to pursue two interests and the lack of obvious options that incorporate aspects of both. "So, I was thinking of what careers blend both writing and environmental science, and I came up with none," Cox said with a laugh, "So I thought, 'Well, why don't I just create my own?' And I didn't really have an idea about what that would be, but when I applied to CSU, I knew that I wanted to do something with the environment and I knew I wanted to do something with writing."

Being a double major involves having two separate peer groups that often don't share your other interests, as Cox puts it. "I'm passionate about natural resources, and when I go into a journalism class, I'm the only one passionate about that." CSU's journalism program equips its students well, so much so that Cox and I feel, in some ways, more prepared to be a journalist than a scientist. However, Cox wants journalism to be her secondary skill set. "I didn't want to be a journalist. I've never wanted to be a journalist. What I wanted was to have good communication skills to integrate with the rest of my life, which is being a scientist."

Perhaps this is why CSU added a Science and Technical Communication minor to complement science majors. But there are two kinds of science writing: pieces directed towards academia and pieces directed towards a general audience, writing directed at scientists and writing directed toward science education. Both are critical, but serve different purposes, depending on which is the pri-

mary skill set. Whereas Cox wants to be a scientist with the media-oriented skill set, I want to be a journalist who pursues scientific literacy and conversation.

I came to my double major as Cox did, through interests in two different subjects, and an interest in improving scientific literacy. My classical education from elementary to high school was also largely responsible for my decision.

"The classical education provides a very thorough education, in the sense that it's liberal arts," explained Derek Anderson, principal of Ridgeview Classical Schools, the Fort Collins charter school I graduated from. "It's going to give attention to math and to music and to literature and to poetry, and to science and to emerging technologies and things like that. There isn't going to be much that's left undiscovered, unexamined." Ridgeview wasn't only where I found my desire to pursue both subjects. It's also where I decided that the combination was valuable.

In moral philosophy my junior year, I read Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. The novel, depicts a world that hails consumerism, efficiency, eugenics, and science. The world becomes, though created by humans, inhuman; it's cold, sterile, and amoral. One question echoed in my mind: "How could the world become like this?" Ultimately, my answer was that an ignorance of science, as well as putting scientific principles above morality, could create such a future. Even though Huxley's world was a dystopian exaggeration, it revealed a strong need to spread scientific awareness through conversation.

My college education, therefore, has become about acquiring the skills necessary to have an intelligent conversation about science, but the more I look at my experiences, the more I find that college is not primarily about education; it's mostly about vocation. Anderson says that he doesn't understand programs that are narrowly tailored early in a student's education, but that college's vocational nature makes sense. He does not see the value in high school STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) programs. "I don't know why you would narrow your focus at such a young age to say these things because they will provide a financial remuneration later on in life. The [goal] at this point in education, at this stage in life, is to provide an actual education... [University]

used to be about education, but I don't believe it is anymore. I think that it's about vocation. And actually, I don't know that that's as bad as it's sometimes derided as being, because at some point people have to acquire skills by which they can earn a living."

Although the realistic part of me hopes I can earn a living with my degree, the intellectual side of me still focuses on the need for conversation. This, too, seems linked to my classical education. "[Ridgeview graduates] know how to have conversations," Anderson said. "Most people don't have conversations. They simply rattle off one story after another, or repeat lines of movies or gossip or something else. But a Ridgeview student is one of the few out there who knows how to have a conversation. People, employers, especially if they're a little bit older, find that endearing because they encounter it so rarely." This resonates with me because Mr. Anderson's point about the scarcity of conversation is the same warning from *Brave New World*.

Conversation about serious topics, and a desire to pursue those conversations, requires that I combine my interests in biology and journalism. These desires and goals stem from not only a diverse background, but also from an understanding of various intelligence types.

Howard Gardner, a developmental psychologist, has redefined the traditional view of intelligence, concluding that there aren't just one or two types, but seven: linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesesthetic, musical, interpersonal, and intrapersonal intelligence. The classical education model nurtures all of these intelligences in primary and secondary school. Indeed, a truly "liberal" education does. At the university level, these intelligences start to diverge more. Scientists are logical-mathematic, English majors are linguistic, music majors are musical, etc.

Frances Glycener is an honors professor at CSU who both possesses and recognizes multiple intelligences. She received a bachelor's degree in economics and a master's in dance. To her, "Dance is pretty much the same way [as economics] because you have to be technical and specific but when you're creating and everything. A lot of times you're looking at the big picture. So...in terms of how you learn about them and how you

view the world, the viewpoint is very much the same,”

Students at the university level tend to think in a linear fashion, adhering to a single topic. “I think it has to do with the educational system they’ve been in up until there and I think it’s also just a part of the whole development thing,” Glycenfer said. She has studied some developmental psychology and believes that some undergraduates’ fixation of their given subject area is because they know their own skill sets, goals, and talents. Sometimes, she said, their choices reflect a lack of development and maturity in the brain’s frontal lobe.

People who can combine majors or interests generally see overlap where maybe others do not. “I think there are probably a lot of connections between [journalism and biology], aside from the obvious [parts] where they intertwine. That’s what I found with economics and dance,” Glycenfer said. “That’s why I was surprised how much I would approach dance more in a technical sort of way.” Glycenfer’s use of certain words seems to reflect this flexibility. When she explained how she helped rearrange the honors office to make it more functional, she said, “I choreographed the desks.” Her loose use of the word “choreograph” comes from an understanding that the intelligences are fluid, and with this fluidity comes ease of conversation.

So maybe choosing a double major isn’t about pursuing two areas of study. Maybe it’s about blending multiple intelligence types and using them in conjunction with one another to approach one discipline or the other in a unique and exciting way. In my case, it’s about being a scientist who thinks like a journalist, a journalist who thinks like a scientist, and allowing those two perspectives to contribute to the larger conversation.