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FILA 450

24 January 2021

**Introduction**

The experiences I’ve had and work I have done during my four years of undergraduate education have been multifaceted and diverse but have also revealed common patterns amongst disciplines. I have taken a wide variety of courses in both the natural sciences and humanities, as well as studied abroad. Along the way, I have grown personally and academically--which are not mutually exclusive ideas. Here I will explain various ways in which I have engaged with key areas of development.

**Integration, Experiential Learning and Personalized Educational Program**

One of the biggest lessons that my undergraduate education at a liberal arts college has taught me is that one topic can be viewed through multiple lenses depending on which discipline you are engaging with. Furthermore, the disciplines themselves can be viewed through the lens of other disciplines at times. For example, from a sociological perspective, the disciplines are clearly social constructs. Indeed, the idea of a degree and what is or is not “college” are also social constructs. Phenomenology, which is a philosophical lens, would then go further to say that calling these experiences “social constructs” is a conceptualization of something that exists pre-conceptually, and we could call these experiences any number of other things. My sociology and philosophy courses have been freeing in the sense that they encourage us to look through more than one lens and remind us that various perspectives offer value.

Since freshman year of college, I have been interested in the connections between mental health and physical health. This has since expanded to include the interactions between health and social factors too. When I took General Chemistry II my first semester of college, we were asked to write about how we could apply science to our professional goals. As you can see in [Artifact 1](https://wp.bridgewater.edu/rpetterson/artifact-1/), I chose to write about the effects of magnesium supplementation on people with depression and the social/psychological elements that impact health behavior. My sophomore year of college, I took two classes that expanded upon this biopsychosocial understanding of health: Health & Exercise Psychology and Spanish Conversation for Social Justice.

The Health Psychology course gave me the terminology of the “biopsychosocial model of health” and showed me the numerous ways in which exercise impacts mental health, along with the way social factors greatly influence health behaviors. I had never felt so motivated to promote exercise: the mental health effects of movement give it a deeper meaning. Then, in Spanish Conversation for Social Justice, we talked about healthcare systems around the world and paid maternity/paternity leave. For one of my video essays in that course (the outline to this video essay is [Artifact 2](https://wp.bridgewater.edu/rpetterson/artifact-2/)), I talked about paid family leave, and not just how it is socially beneficial but also how it benefits the health of parents and children.

This oral essay was also useful when I took an Oral and Written Communication course during my semester abroad in Vigo, Spain. We had to do a final speech in the form of a video on any topic, and I repurposed my essay on family leave for the assignment, adding in more details about paid family leave in Spain. This speech is [Artifact 3](https://wp.bridgewater.edu/rpetterson/artifact-3/), and I share it not for the content, because much of it is the same as [Artifact 2](https://wp.bridgewater.edu/rpetterson/artifact-2/), but rather to exemplify the ways in which my Spanish speaking level increased through my experiences abroad. My education has been further personalized to support my goal of becoming proficient as Spanish. While my presentation skills in general are not ideal in [Artifact 3](https://wp.bridgewater.edu/rpetterson/artifact-3/) (i.e. I was often monotone), this was the first speech of that length I had given in Spanish with such a high level of fluency. I was also using the pronunciation of “c’s” and “z’s” and the *vosotros* conjugation of verbs that they use in Spain and not in Latin America, which I had only begun practicing in the months prior. I had to focus intensely on the words I was saying themselves, so that is why my other presentation skills suffered. You can see in the [Oral Communication](https://wp.bridgewater.edu/rpetterson/oral-communication/) section of this website that my presentation skills are much more animated in English. Instead of exemplifying my all-around presentation skills, this artifact illustrates a different major achievement that came from being abroad—increased Spanish language skills—along with exemplifying how I connected a societal element of the country I studied in with what I was already learning America.

Via these courses and presentations, it was clear to me that physical and mental health were inextricably connected. I continued to make these connections in my philosophy course, too. When I took Ancient and Medieval Philosophy, I wrote my final essay on the ways in which sexual activity fit into Epicurean ethics, using modern-day scientific studies to exemplify some of the ways in which sex promotes well-being. This essay is [Artifact 4](https://wp.bridgewater.edu/rpetterson/artifact-4/), and as you can see, I read texts both in the discipline of philosophy and human sciences in order to back up my claims. This points to another benefit of an interdisciplinary education: practice in reading documents from various disciplines, and engaging with both qualitative and quantitative information. Doing this kind of diverse research transferred directly to my most major integrative project: my honors research.

My honors project consisted of survey-based research on transgender and gender non-conforming college students’ experiences at campus fitness centers. The paper detailing my research is [Artifact 5](https://wp.bridgewater.edu/rpetterson/artifact-5/). The document also includes my data analysis, some of which I completed by doing a bivariate correlation in SPSS. I used knowledge from my General Sociology, Health & Exercise Psychology, Spanish Conversation for Social Justice, Principles of Health and Physical Fitness, and Contemporary Philosophy courses, as well as my experience as the vice president of BC Allies and personal involvement with the LGBTQ+ community, in order to complete this final paper, which includes a literature review and discussions of ideas fundamental to the study design, such as intersectionality. Social and psychological factors that impact health and health behavior were integral to this research, and I was able to approach the topic with a fairly holistic view due to my diverse coursework and extracurricular involvement. Doing the project itself has only deepened my appreciation for just how impactful social factors are.

**Engage Diverse Perspectives**

The diverse perspectives I have grappled with in college have often centered on gender, race, and cultures. I think back to my freshman year, when I wasn’t involved in many clubs and was able to attend several campus events, such as discussions about diversity, a spoken poetry event with presentations on race, stand-up comedy nights, and a speech by the former president of Costa Rica, Oscar Arias Sanchez. There were two major realizations I came to from going to these events as a white person: 1) at times, American Black culture operates as a truly distinct culture, to be treated with the respect that we treat, say, Italian culture, and 2) lots of people had lives drastically different than mine, and it was not my place to automatically jump to whether I agreed with them or not but rather to listen and to take in that this had been their reality.

The same goes for feminism and gender theory. Through various courses, I have been exposed to different forms of feminism and its core ideas, as well as different ideas about gender itself. My Spanish literature and social justice classes often had a gender theory component, as did my sociology class and contemporary philosophy course. In contrast, my Health and Exercise Science courses often operated within the gender binary with little discussion of identities and nuances that exist outside of this traditional view, which was sometimes jarring to me when I had grown accustomed to a broader way of talking about gender in my other courses.

To reflect the recurring theme of gender issues in my coursework, [Artifact 6](https://wp.bridgewater.edu/rpetterson/artifact-6/) is an essay I wrote about female Latin American authors and gender roles, and [Artifact 7](https://wp.bridgewater.edu/rpetterson/artifact-7/) is an essay I wrote after reading *Feminism is for Everybody* by bell hooks in my Contemporary Philosophy course. The philosophy essay especially reflects my grappling with the various facets of feminism.

**Public Discourse: Citizenship & Community Responsibility**

My time at Bridgewater has involved engaging with several community issues, some of which I have already mentioned. Another issue that I have not mentioned yet is environmental responsibility. When I came to Bridgewater, I was already interested in sustainability. I sought out information regarding recycling and went to EcoAction meetings. I talked to people who had worked in Bridgewater’s recycling program, and I learned that you could no longer recycle glass on Bridgewater’s campus. I knew that there were a lot of ways that Bridgewater could generally be more eco-friendly from first-hand observation, too. For example, it bothered me that the Take 5, which was still in operation at the time, gave out plastic bags all of the time, to hold food wrapped in plastic and plastic eating utensils.

When I took Sociological Imagination (General Sociology), I decided to write one of my essays on the issues of plastic, using a sociological perspective ([Artifact 8](https://wp.bridgewater.edu/rpetterson/artifact-8/)). I addressed how plastic had come to be so embedded in our lives and its problems on both a global and local level. I then went on to suggest systems-level changes that Bridgewater could take to promote sustainability and cut down on plastic use. My sociology class helped me to understand that, while individual choices are important and can be made, larger changes in the world require systems-level shifts so that the, for example, sustainable choice is the default, not the exception. Therefore, in addition to encouraging individual action, I need to make sure to turn my attention to the bigger picture too when faced with community issues. While I have not personally brought up the changes I proposed in my essay on plastic to the administration at Bridgewater, I know that I would be equipped to defend my stance because I now understand the importance of these upper-level changes.

**Global Citizenship & Intercultural Competencies**

When I wrote the aforementioned essay on plastic use, that also had global implications: I learned that the plastic we are consuming at such high rates in America is collecting in other parts of the world. This is not the only time that I learned about issues that American companies are exacerbating but that we do not usually see the consequences of. In my Spanish Conversation for Social Justice class, we learned about clothing manufacturing and sweatshops, and I did a video essay on the economic issues that such systems cause. Those who support so-called “sweatshops” argue that these companies are giving people in developing countries jobs and, without them, those people would not have employment. If those companies leave, then there is a hole in those job markets. To grapple with this issue while also acknowledging that clothing factories are often horrible places to work, I explored alternatives to them that would still provide employment ([Artifact 9](https://wp.bridgewater.edu/rpetterson/artifact-9/)). In that class, we also talked about specific alternatives to buying from “fast fashion” brands that use sweatshops and also contribute to environmental issues. These discussions have helped to inform my buying choices.

A broad topic that spans all global issues is that of white/Western saviorism. I learned about this in my Spanish Conversation for Social Justice Class and then again in my Latin American Science Fiction course. This was a difficult issue for me to approach at first because it felt like I was being told that humanitarian aid from privileged people to less-privileged people was wrong. I have since further understood the nuances and complexities of this issue, and I feel that I can go forward equipped to avoid white saviorism in my own efforts to benefit the world. This applies both to local and global interactions, and a similar concept can be applies to more than race or intercultural interactions. For example, when I did my honors project on transgender and gender non-conforming (TGNC) students’ experiences at campus fitness centers, a purpose of the research was to understand how TGNC people wanted campus fitness centers to be more inclusive. They understand their needs best and their suggestions will be more beneficial than what I assume is needed as a cisgender person.

**Ethical Reasoning**

Another issue with a lot of social implications that I explored during my college experience was the legalization of marijuana. This is an ethical issue in the moral sense because marijuana and other drug use has taken on an element of “right” and “wrong” in the U.S. It is also related to both mental and physical health because of the medicinal potential and the risks associated with marijuana use.

During my FILA-150 freshman seminar, in which we surveyed several major social issues and their representation in media, I made a website on the legalization of marijuana in Colorado and the debate on its legalization in general. I read about the pros and cons of legalization and documented the articles I had read. Based on this research, I made a podcast episode with my classmate, Hannah, where we discussed the different sides of the debate and explained why we supported the legalization of marijuana. The contents of the website we made and the podcast can be found under “[FILA 150 Project](https://wp.bridgewater.edu/rpetterson/sample-page/)” and serve as my artifact for this section.

This project exposed me to the complexities of a major debate in the United States and equipped me with background knowledge in order to decide my stance, which has stayed the same since. I had to weigh factors against each other and decide which risks were worth it to me and which weren’t. I can see how my upbringing and personal attitudes influenced my perspectives on marijuana: I had grown up with very negative associations with drugs at large but with a more cautious, not out-right negative, view of marijuana specifically. I also knew people who used marijuana recreationally and could see that they were not dangerous or necessarily irresponsible.

Sometimes, when it comes to ethical reasoning, I am able to see both sides of the debate because I am aware of the social and emotional factors that could lead someone to choose one side or another. Abortion is a good example of this. I am pro-choice, and I believe that this is largely because I have a more negative emotional response to the prospect of someone having to have a baby despite not being able to care for them or putting their own life at risk than I do to killing a fetus. Wile the media surrounding this issue, especially on the side of anti-abortion campaigns, tend to be particularly emotionally charged, any major debate I can think of has an emotional element, and I believe it is important in these cases to be aware of our own emotional responses and those of others in order to better understand why we are prone to seek out evidence for or against an argument and to also have empathy for the other side, leading to more productive conversation.

**Conclusion**

The impact of social factors is a common thread throughout this reflection of my college experience. Indeed, it is a theme that has repeated over and over. Through my coursework and extracurricular experiences, I have come to deeply appreciate the higher level questions regarding how and why systems are formed. It is like a consistent zooming in and out: taking classes with specific names in different disciplines but also remembering that all of these subjects are intertwined; studying health from a physical, psychological, and social standpoint, and remembering that these factors influence each other constantly. In this way, college has offered me much more than discrete knowledge. It has offered me frameworks and lenses. I now understand that when I am presented with a claim there are likely more perspectives of that issue than initially meet the eye. This is a valuable tool as I step into less and less structured learning environments in which I am pushed to make my own judgment calls. In reality, the discrete knowledge I now have is still the tip of the ice burg. This awareness of how vast knowledge can be is one of the most prominent gifts of my undergraduate education.