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Growth and Transformation at Bridgewater College

How have I grown? This is a question I tend to ask myself every day. Honestly, until I entered my senior year, I would have written that I had not changed at all, not because it was true, but because I kept comparing myself to the person I was the day before, which made my progress feel invisible. However, this project has forced me to take a step back and look at the bigger picture. I now write this not by comparing myself to yesterday, but to the girl I was in fall 2022.

Coming to Bridgewater College, I had tunnel vision. I started off as a biology major, and all I saw was a path to medical school, a path I decided to pursue with every fiber of my body. I was supported by my family and friends, and the vision felt very clear. During my sophomore year, I realized that biology focused more on environmental topics, so I switched to biochemistry to gain more hands-on experience with lab work and chemistry. I had a strong identity rooted in medicine, and I associated my worth with becoming a doctor.

One of the most radical decisions I made in my college career was applying to become a resident assistant. Nervous about the responsibility I was about to take on but excited for the experience ahead, I applied for the role and was selected during the spring semester of my first year. It was through this role that I met Keon Nesmith, soon-to-be Dr. Keon Nesmith, Director of Residential Life and Community Standards. When I was chosen for this position, I saw myself as a mature, calm, organized, and professional student. However, everything I believed about myself was challenged.

This role placed me in an environment where different backgrounds were not just something discussed on paper or in class with someone you complete one assignment with and never speak to again, but people you work with, disagree with, and befriend. The role came with multiple training sessions that encouraged deep self-reflection and growth. I was fortunate to participate in trainings that challenged my self-perception and gave me the opportunity to become better. Through this experience, I was introduced to a wonderful staff and to the kind of professional I aspire to be, ambitious, dedicated, and deeply committed, like Keon Nesmith. He is not only a pillar of Residence Life at Bridgewater College, but a mentor whom many look up to. It was a privilege to work in his presence and learn from him. ([Artifact #1: RA training completion](#))

This role showed me that I may be mature, but I rush. I may be calm, but not when facing an angry resident being reported for alcohol. I may be organized, but not always when balancing work and school. I may be professional, but not when emotions run high. The identity I was once so certain of went through intense training, questioning, and reflection. Watching how the Residence Life staff carried themselves inspired me to be better, to advocate for others, and to create space for those around me. I was challenged to grow and given the perfect opportunity to do so. My role as an RA may have lasted two years and my role as an SRA only one, but the person this staff helped shape will carry these lessons into the professional world and embody the dedication of everyone I worked with.

Another defining moment in my college career was taking the Biochemistry Honors Capstone with Dr. Ken Overway. He has been one of my most influential mentors and a professor who truly teaches to make a difference. Dr. Overway refers to a student's unhealthy obsession with medical school as "med school blindness," which described me perfectly. Through this course, my belief that medicine was the only path to fulfillment was challenged. I met former students of Dr. Overway who are now doctors and had the opportunity to speak with them. I was given honest answers, not the glorified version of medical school seen on social media, but the reality.

I was encouraged to reflect on why I truly wanted to become a doctor, and I was pushed beyond the simple answer of wanting to help others. I was given the opportunity to question the direction I wanted to grow in. I slowly began to explore fields outside of medicine. Truthfully, I felt ashamed, as though I was giving up on a dream I had held for so long. For as long as I could remember, Saron in my mind was a future doctor and nothing else. Now I was taking a break from that dream, and that left me asking, who is Saron?

During this tiring and disappointing journey of reinventing myself in my junior year, one of my greatest supporters was my advisor, Dr. Ian McNeil. He was also instrumental in my decision to switch to biochemistry due to the structure of his Chemistry 161 and 162 courses and his guidance as my advisor. Through him, I began attending college to learn, not just to pass. He encouraged his students not to define themselves by grades, but by understanding. He gave me the courage to stop feeling ashamed of stepping away from medical school and supported me through every career change I explored.

Through his guidance, I began taking courses outside my major, including business and music classes. I became interested in learning for its own sake, not simply earning a grade. These experiences taught me not to confine my identity to a single career path. I may not become a doctor, but I can become many other things. Even though Dr. McNeil had been telling me this for four years, I believe I finally understand what it truly means.

Another influential decision I made was running for president of the Tri Beta Honor Society chapter at Bridgewater College. As a new member, I feared I would not be elected. However, I was privileged to join a team of dedicated students and work under the guidance of our advisor, Dr. Ed Lickey, who serves as both a mentor and an exceptional professor. His dedication to his students and commitment to inclusion make him a crucial role model within the Bridgewater community.

Through his advising, I attended the national Association of Southeastern Biologists (ASB) Conference in Myrtle Beach. Since I was not presenting research, I did not expect anything significant to come from the experience. However, as I connected with others and asked questions, I was encouraged to run for president of the Southeastern region and was honored to be elected. This experience helped me realize that my passion lies in connecting with people. I did not want to pursue medicine solely for healing, but for the one-on-one human connection. This led me to ask an important question, how can I help people and work closely with them without entering the medical field? That question opened the door to life science consulting. ([Artifact #2: Tri Beta Election](#))

In one of my most adventurous learning opportunities, I discovered a course on the Boston Consulting Group (BCG) website titled *BCG – Introduction to Strategy Consulting Job Simulation*. Through this simulation, I worked as a consultant for a fictional company seeking to improve its sales. I took the experience seriously, treating it as a real professional responsibility. The process of connecting data, analyzing information, and translating it into actionable insights stood out to me.

I realized that opportunities to help others exist in many forms. The idea of using data for decision-making and presenting solutions to clients resonated with me in an unexpected way. Though it was a one-day course, I earned a certification and gained clarity about my future goals. This experience directly relates to my journey into consulting, where I will apply the problem-solving, crisis management, communication, and leadership skills I have developed throughout my college career.

Today, I imagine myself having tea with the first-year Saron who just arrived from Ethiopia. I would tell her about the woman she has become. I would explain that, thanks to Dr. Overway, I found the courage to question my path in medicine and recognize that my passion lies in connection and analysis rather than healing. I would tell her that I made countless mistakes as an RA but was given the space to grow, making me more patient, receptive, and professional. I would say that my failures in the research lab taught me resilience and perseverance.

I would tell her that working with faculty from different cultures, such as Dr. Otoo, taught me how to incorporate my own culture into my professional life. I would tell her that my friends challenged me to become a better communicator and listener, making me a better friend. I would tell her that working alongside mentors like Dr. Overway, Dr. McNeil, and Keon Nesmith made me more dedicated and ambitious.

Most importantly, I would tell her that I am grateful, grateful for both the good and difficult memories, for the moments when I doubted myself, and for the people who believed in me when I could not. I am grateful for the friends and faculty who turned Bridgewater College from an institution into my home.

Engaging Diverse Perspectives: Lessons in Teamwork and Leadership Through Music

Ever since I started elementary school, my main focus has been science. I was fascinated by everything about it. I loved the constant questions, the work that goes into answering them, and the fact that it has no ending. I was not interested in anything else, and my country's school system allowed me to follow the academic route of natural sciences and study only the subjects I wanted to learn. I was never passionate about art or music. However, with a little convincing from my friend to join a concert choir class my senior year, I had one of the most meaningful experiences. I loved it so much that I wrote a reflection paper on our final performance of Sunrise Mass by Ola Gjeilo for my MUS110 class.

I have always loved music, especially anything with a beat. I had a genre I always gravitated toward, and I listened to music both from my culture and beyond, but I never imagined myself as a performer. Before joining the class Concert Choir, I had never performed and did not know

how to read music. And to my wonderful surprise, all of our pieces were in Latin, a language I do not understand. If I am being honest, I felt extremely lost. I was in a choir with music majors and people who had been performing since they were seven, and I did not even know the difference between sopranos and altos.

I felt uncomfortable and far behind, but if there is one thing I do not do, it is quit because something is hard. It was not easy at all, and it pushed me far outside my comfort zone, not only because I did not understand the terminology, but because it required vulnerability, trust in others, confidence, and most importantly, passion. As the days went by, I slowly began to understand where to stay on a word for one beat and where to stay for two. Slowly but surely, I grew to understand the terms commonly used in the music department.

When I finally stopped feeling like I was always confused, I started to listen. I listened to the other singers, and it was beautiful. Seeing how much passion people had and how much they wanted to improve inspired me to not just read the music, but to feel it, connect with it, and sing it with the depth it deserved. Performing Sunrise Mass introduced me to a sacred Latin text and a genre I had never engaged with. Singing in a language I did not understand forced me to approach music differently. It was no longer science, I could not memorize the passion it deserved, I could only express it from the inside out. Although our wonderful professor, Dr. Keebaugh, translated some of the phrases, I still had little understanding of what I was singing, and that was perfect. It was perfect because I learned that music is not communicated through language, but through tone, dynamics, and expression.

I began to connect deeply with the piece, and even though I was confused about what all the parts meant, some stood out to me more than others. I took the initiative to search for translations of those texts, and that is when I began to understand the piece not just as something to perform, but as an expression of worship. I did not understand Latin, but I understood the story it was telling.

This experience shifted my perspective on what it means to engage with art rather than simply consume it. I realized that performance is not just talent, but discipline and teamwork. I was amazed by how very different voices could blend together so beautifully and create a powerful piece. I remember listening to the sopranos and simply consuming their work in awe, and then slowly all the other voices would join, making each section sound even stronger. This was not just singing, it was teamwork. It was trusting that those next to you would do their part just as you were doing yours. It was trusting that when you needed to take a breath, the section would continue and you could blend back in. It was knowing that when your section was singing, others were listening and appreciating your contribution. It involved more giving and taking than I had ever imagined.

This experience is a perfect example of collaboration, and how when collaboration is respected and used effectively, it creates something beautiful. As a biochemistry major pursuing life science consulting, I will be placed in situations that require teamwork. The skills I learned through this course taught me the importance of collaboration. I plan to promote equality and teamwork, not as something threatening because others may be better than me, but as an opportunity to work together and help each other shine through our different contributions. Although I worked hard, none of my efforts would have mattered without working alongside Dr.

Keebaugh and Amy. They not only showed me the value of teamwork, but more importantly, the value of exceptional leadership. I was never judged for being lost, but celebrated for asking questions. They always made an effort to listen, provide feedback, and foster collaboration. In the life sciences field I plan to enter, I hope to become as great a leader as they are. ([Artifact #3: Sunrise Mass reflection](#))

Public Discourse: the RA training

During my years at Bridgewater College, I have participated in a wide range of discussions that required empathy and the ability to respectfully disagree with opposing views. While many of my courses incorporated discussion-based learning, one of the most formative experiences shaping my understanding of public discourse came from my role as a Resident Advisor, specifically during a training titled *Confrontation and De-escalation*. This experience challenged me to reflect on my own confrontation and communication styles, encouraged me to examine my emotional awareness, and pushed me to consider the leadership approach I wanted to pursue. This training was fundamental not only because my role as an RA exposed me to a wide range of confrontation styles, but also because of its importance in preparing me to work with people from different communication cultures in my future career as a life science consultant.

As a Resident Advisor, I was placed in situations where professionalism and emotional intelligence were essential. I engaged in difficult conversations, mediated conflicts, and supported distressed residents. During my RA training on conflict and de-escalation, I participated in a meaningful discussion that helped many of us identify and challenge our own confrontation and communication styles. Throughout the conversation, there were several attempts to explain and defend our individual methods. However, I learned that every leader in the room shared one core belief, effective communication is not about asserting power, but about building trust and listening with intention.

We explored multiple confrontation techniques, which proved extremely helpful as I entered challenging situations. I learned how to take completely opposing viewpoints and guide the conversation toward a more constructive and solution-oriented dialogue.

What stood out to me most during this training was the emphasis on self-awareness. Coming into the role, I believed that confrontation was about me versus someone else, or about guiding two opposing sides through conflict. However, I learned that much of conflict management begins internally. How we perceive a situation and the people involved shapes our response, often unconsciously. Being calm and listening intentionally is not only a mindset, but something expressed through body language, tone, word choice, and even eye contact. These factors influence how others feel in our presence and whether a situation escalates or de-escalates. I learned an important lesson, not only what I say, but how I say it and how I carry myself all play a role in making others feel heard, safe, and understood.

The strategies we practiced required slowing down and responding thoughtfully, even when emotions were high. This was especially meaningful to me because I want to be passionate about my work and my opinions while also making others feel comfortable expressing theirs.

While serving as an RA, I quickly realized how important these skills were. I encountered residents who were angry, defensive, overwhelmed, or emotional, and each situation required a different approach. However, because of this training, I learned how to meet people where they were and acknowledge their feelings, even when I did not agree with them. Through these practices, trust was built between my residents and me, allowing them to lower their guard and engage more openly. I will admit that it was difficult at first. Trust did not come easily, especially when I was helping two individuals learn to trust and listen to each other. Over time, however, I became more confident in my ability to manage conflict, remain composed under pressure, and communicate clearly when emotions were strong.

These experiences significantly shaped how I now approach public discourse. I learned that “winning” an argument often means losing if it does not come from a place of understanding both sides. This realization made me more comfortable in uncomfortable conversations and more intentional about listening before responding. I was no longer there to win, but to understand. This growth strengthened my ability to contribute meaningfully to diverse group discussions, both inside and outside the classroom.

The skills I developed through RA training directly translate to my career goal of pursuing life science consulting. In consulting, professionals engage with diverse teams and clients from different backgrounds while communicating complex scientific information in clear and accessible ways. Consultants are often tasked with solving problems, managing interests, and delivering difficult recommendations, all while maintaining strong client relationships. In a field that relies heavily on human interaction, the ability to listen carefully, and navigate disagreement professionally is essential. My RA training taught me how to communicate with confidence, lead with empathy, and remain composed in high-pressure situations. These skills will allow me to contribute meaningfully to consulting teams and client engagements.

Overall, my experiences in public discourse through RA training have shaped me into a more intentional listener, a thoughtful communicator, and a stronger leader. I now approach difficult discussions with confidence, emotional intelligence, and respect for opposing perspectives. ([Artifact #4: Training slides](#))

Global citizenship and Intercultural Competencies: My Journey with AFSA

Coming to Bridgewater College as an international student, I was prepared to be exposed to cultures and traditions different from my own. Although I expected this experience, it was beyond anything I had imagined. The first time I ever stepped on a plane was at nineteen, traveling to the United States to attend college. I arrived with a strong sense of identity and held my culture very close to my heart. While my coursework in World Cultures and Global Dynamics exposed me to new perspectives, my involvement in BC AFSA (African Student Association) provided me with a home in people I would never have met if it were not for Bridgewater College.

Being part of AFSA played a major role in shaping my cultural understanding. Although small, it created a space where students from across Africa could share their traditions, histories, and

experiences while finding a sense of home in one another. Although I grew up learning about the diversity and beauty of African countries, meeting students from nations I had only known through textbooks helped me truly understand both our similarities and our differences.

As an Ethiopian, I grew up in a culture where food is central to connection. We eat not only for nutrition, but for the love we share with those who eat with us. It is not simply a healthy habit, but a necessity for belonging and bonding. If I am being honest, as I arrived on campus, I was already homesick thinking about eating alone, and I did not expect this value to be shared across other cultures. However, to my fortunate surprise, I learned that communal dining is also a tradition in many West African cultures. Me and students from countries such as Nigeria, Ghana, and Cameroon made it a priority to eat together. This not only gave us a sense of community, but also created an opportunity to learn about one another and appreciate the diversity of our cultures.

One of the most meaningful cultural values we shared was respect for elders. In my country, elders are highly respected. We use different greetings and even different pronouns when addressing them. We seek advice and mentorship from elders, and I found this to be true across many African cultures. This respect extended to college professors regardless of their age, which initially made it difficult for me to connect with my professors on a personal level because I did not want to appear disrespectful. I avoided office hours, while observing that American students interacted freely with their advisors and professors. I felt confused and afraid of being misunderstood.

However, other students I met through AFSA helped guide me through this experience. I did not need to explain my fears because they shared them. Together, we supported one another in navigating relationships with supervisors and professors. This community allowed me to feel heard, respected, and encouraged to grow. I am close with my professors today because I had a community that understood my fear of being perceived as rude or disrespectful and pushed me to grow out of that fear. My culture was respected while also giving me the opportunity to be challenged and grow.

Language is another beautiful way cultures differ. I was surprised to discover how many similarities my language, Amharic, shares with Arabic dialects through friendships with students from Morocco and Palestine. I also had the opportunity to learn words and phrases from languages spoken in Nigeria and Cameroon. Although I did not become fluent, I was supported and encouraged in my efforts to learn the languages spoken by members of AFSA and other international students.

This intercultural knowledge will be a major asset in my professional life after graduation. In today's diverse workforce, where collaboration across cultures is common, understanding the privilege and responsibility of working with people from different backgrounds is essential. Culture is not only traditions, food, and clothing, it is a way of thinking, a communication style, and a way of life. The more ways of life we are exposed to, the more opportunities we have to grow and improve.

Different cultures bring great beauty, but also challenges, as the same actions and words can carry different meanings. Being exposed to these differences has equipped me with the skills

necessary to navigate work in diverse environments. Not only has this experience taught me the importance of accepting others, but also the importance of being an active advocate for those who feel they do not belong.

My relationships with my professors directly impacted how well I understood their material and how comfortable I felt asking questions, which contributed to my academic success. I would not be as confident with my professors today if they had not been open to learning about my culture and understanding why I approached situations differently. They listened, accepted, and challenged my norms, which pushed me to grow into the best version of myself.

I believe that strong performance comes from loving what you do, because learning never stops. It is impossible to give your best to something that does not accept you. In my professional life, I will make a continuous and intentional effort to ensure that people feel seen, valued, and accepted so they can grow within themselves and within their field.([Artifact # 5: AFSA member picture taken during Afro Fest](#))

Ethical Reasoning and Critical Thinking: Insights from Political Philosophy

During my junior year at Bridgewater College, I had the privilege of taking Dr. Josefson's Political Philosophy (PSCI 220) course. This class not only challenged me to engage more deeply with my own faith and beliefs, but also encouraged me to seek evidence for the beliefs of others. The course required extensive reading and writing, but more importantly, it demanded that we develop opinions about the texts we studied. Engaging with concepts of religion, politics, and ideology made this one of the most intellectually liberating, though at times slightly uncomfortable, experiences I have had. This ethical reasoning course played a crucial role in shaping how I think about responsibility, justice, and decision-making within complex social and professional systems. It pushed me to think beyond my prior understanding of freedom and individual choice and encouraged me to engage deeply with political theory.

One of the most meaningful experiences that contributed to my growth in ethical reasoning was my paper on Jim Josefson's critique of liberalism and the concept of "being in the momentary." In this paper, I examined Josefson's argument that liberalism promotes a shallow version of freedom by encouraging people to focus on immediate personal satisfaction rather than long-term political engagement. According to Josefson, liberal societies do not offer true freedom, but rather an illusion of it, while still operating within rigid political and economic structures. These structures, he argues, deprive individuals of meaningful influence, a condition he describes as "being in the momentary."

Analyzing Josefson's argument pushed me to question my understanding of justice, autonomy, and social obligation. I found myself asking whether individuals in liberal societies are truly empowered, or whether that sense of empowerment is an illusion designed to discourage challenges to existing power structures. At the same time, I explored counterarguments to Josefson's position by analyzing texts that defend liberalism's protection of individual rights and point to voting, protest, and public discourse as evidence of political agency. These opposing perspectives allowed me to evaluate multiple viewpoints without allowing my personal beliefs to

cloud my judgment. Through exposure to diverse political theories, I learned that ethical reasoning requires recognizing that real-world decisions are rarely clear-cut and must be evaluated by carefully weighing both their benefits and consequences.

This experience strengthened my critical thinking, analytical reasoning, and argumentation skills. It equipped me with essential tools to approach ethical dilemmas with careful questioning, reflection, and accountability. Through the course's emphasis on connecting classroom theory with personal belief, I shifted my understanding of ethics from a set of theories to an essential framework for evaluating real-life situations and decision-making.

These skills are especially relevant to my future career in life science consulting, a field that operates at the intersection of business, technology, and healthcare, where decisions directly affect companies, patients, and the environment. Life science consultants advise pharmaceutical companies, biotechnology firms, and healthcare organizations on scientific innovation, clinical development, regulatory compliance, and market access.

This coursework expanded my understanding of ethical decision-making by teaching me the importance of recognizing broader systems when making responsible choices. It also gave me the confidence and habit of questioning long-standing beliefs, regardless of how widely accepted or intimidating they may seem. In life science consulting, I will be expected to evaluate complex problems and recommend effective and ethically responsible solutions. I was introduced to the practice of normative thinking and challenged to continuously reflect on whether I am engaging meaningfully with the systems around me in order to make the impact I am capable of. I was taught to look beyond pre-existing systems and challenge them in pursuit of growth and improvement. I look forward to bringing integrity, accountability, and a commitment to ethical decision making into the consulting profession. ([Artifact #6: PSCI 220 paper](#))