

Early College Folio

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An Early College Account of the STEM Experience

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As I sit here working on an object detection algorithm for a deep learning course, I am reminded of the stark contrast between my undergraduate and graduate school experiences. The latter is an entirely remote and asynchronous Master's in Data Science, where connections with classmates and professors are severely limited. The former, however, was one of enriched community-based learning in the middle of the Berkshire highlands, where knowing everyone on campus was very much the norm. I'll preface this account by saying that in no way do I speak to a generalized early college experience, but solely my own. In fact, the core of the Bard College at Simon's Rock experience is so innately varied, it's often difficult to find a fellow student with a similar journey.

Perhaps one of the more common elements of students who choose to enter the early college experience is the sense of autonomy they possess. There's something quite revolutionary about deciding to start your post-secondary education early, and you sense the pervasiveness of this energy throughout the entire student body. Every Simon's Rocker has experienced a sense of friction with the traditional mold of the education system that is adopted so unanimously across societies. When my sixteen year old self went through that same experience, there was a strong undertone of liberation from societal expectations when I came to Simon's Rock.

The deviation from norms doesn't quite stop there. In fact, it's so ingrained into the very fabric of Simon's Rock culture that it may often seem unrecognizable to students who have pursued traditional education paths. Your professors are referred to by their first name in conversation, humanizing your interactions and greatly reducing the power dynamic in the classroom. Office hours are held directly with your professors in a one-to-few setting, where there is no loss of information. You engage with your professors not only in the context of the classroom, but via informal conversations in the dining hall and elsewhere, building camaraderie and trust. In my experience, all of this and more fosters a strong learning environment that goes much farther than the content of the material you engage with. You're not only deepening your knowledge, but simultaneously building a robust community.

The modern path to pursuing a STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) degree is rigid and inflexible. You take prerequisite courses, acquire skills and experience that builds on this knowledge and finally apply these skills after

graduating. Although I may not have fully internalized this prior to starting at Simon's Rock, it's a path that I have little interest for as I find it too mechanical. It stifles curiosity and innovation, and presents a one-dimensional outlook on the applicability of STEM. I'm a firm believer that a post-secondary education should primarily enhance critical thinking skills. Students should learn to practice the expression of opinion, listen critically, and orient their moral compasses to the values they hold.

The liberal arts approach to STEM fields gave me both of these worlds. Required coursework in languages, cultural perspectives, and philosophy-based seminar courses allowed me to engage with my right-brain oriented skills. I learnt to trust my intuition, develop my ideas, and maintain authenticity. Simultaneously, STEM coursework in Math, Physics, Biology, and more allowed me to develop and nurture the knowledge I needed in these fields.

While at Simon's Rock, I changed my major twice. I entered with a drive to pursue Physics, but quickly changed paths and moderated into a joint program in Biomedical Engineering with Columbia University. Unfortunately, this plan fizzled out for me well into my junior year. I had dedicated a lot of time, energy, and my sense of self into this program, and the entire experience left me fazed and unsettled. Looking back, I chuckle to myself as I think about how silly it was for my identity to be so interwoven with this program. Nonetheless, I spent my senior year studying higher-level life sciences and more to graduate with a BA in Biology and a minor in Math.

I obtained such a breadth of experience during my time at Simon's Rock, and this would not have been possible at many other institutions. When you're exposed to such an array of material across different disciplines, your mind naturally occupies the space between those studies. This is what speaks to the core element of the Simon's Rock STEM experience for me, in that it is intersectional by design. You're not treated like a student that must obtain a predefined list of skills to earn your degree. Rather, you are given a canvas, and the colors, textures, and shapes of your interdisciplinary painting are entirely your choosing. In fact, it was a Neurobiology class my senior year that sent me on a journey towards better understanding neural networks, a technology whose origin lies very much in the intersection of neuropsychology and mathematics. As I reflect on my current day to day, I realize that it would not have been possible if not for the sense agency that was developed at Simon's Rock. I feel very much at the helm of my ship.

The early college experience at Simon's Rock is unique, and hence the STEM education you will receive is just as much so. When I think about what the environment did for me, the actual knowledge of subject material I obtained is very secondary to how the space morphed me into the person that I am. I think about the connections that I formed, three of which I am grateful to call my roommates four years after graduating. I think about the fall foliage, and the nauseating smell of thyme on the soccer field. I think about the endless curiosity instilled into me. I don't say this lightly, as peers from different universities have corroborated my view, but I truly believe that the Simon's Rock education is one of the most holistic ones you can receive.