

Opinion: Stop the math, science obsession

By Emily Eckart, Washington Post

When I was a child, I wanted to be a scientist. For a school project, I grew my own bread mold and dressed up as Alexander Fleming. I read about Marie Curie's travails with the enthusiastic fandom that most girls dedicate to movie stars or singers. Microbiology, entomology, neuroscience, medicine—all beckoned with promises of discoveries to be made, fundamental truth hiding behind a microscope or a tricky equation.

Then, it all came to an end.

In seventh grade, I read Lawrence Krauss's book "Atom". The book followed a single atom from the days of the Big Bang to present. Krauss concluded by saying that he was composed entirely of atoms, and that upon his death, these atoms would be recombined into other objects. This passage was apparently intended to uplift, but I found it troubling. What was the purpose of everything if it all came down to mechanical interactions of particles and cells – what was the point of living, of doing anything at all?

Those of us who cherish the humanities know well the disappointment our math and science teachers express when we choose to "squander" our bright young minds. In high school, when I confessed to a former science teacher that I had decided to major in music, her face fell. "Emily," she said, distraught, "what happened to science?"

It is commonly claimed that STEM majors are the "most valuable" – value being defined as immediate job offers and high earnings. Articles promoting STEM have a clear focus: jobs and money. College is increasingly viewed as a form of vocational training, useful only for teaching the quantitative

skills that our data-obsessed society demands.

But defenders of the humanities have long recognized that the study of history, literature, art and language develop other skills that are critical for students' success. With their focus on careful reading and analysis of texts, humanities foster clear communication, both in speaking and in writing.

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