Reflecting on the Liberal Arts

-By Anh Nguyen ’16

Earlier this month, I had the unbelievable chance to host my best friend from high school, who attends business school in Finland and was on an exchange program to a different school in Canada. Amidst the joy of seeing her again, I soon realized something was amiss. Her eyes would subtly glaze over whenever I’d start talking about the complexities of game theory or Post-Structuralist and feminist schools of thought in my literary theory class. My best friend, with her coursework in global business strategy and supply chains, was utterly unfamiliar with all the drastically foreign knowledge I’m absorbing in college.

Being an Economics and English double major has given me access to two supposedly very different disciplines and the chance to see that they may not be that different after all. Introduction to Economic Perspectives (ECO103) was my first-year writing seminar and the primary reason I became interested in economics. It is a unique course to the economics department at F&M—I haven’t heard of other colleges having a course exclusively to introduce the multiple schools of thought, or “perspectives,” in economics.

Economics as a discipline has a “mainstream” view, neoclassical thought, but ECO103 makes it known that this mainstream theory is highly objectionable and there are other theories. Most ECO103 classes will cover classical political economy, Marxist theory, neoclassical theory, institutionalist views, Keynesian economics, feminist critique of mainstream economics, and alternative monetary theories. For someone like me, who’d only known economics as that dry subject of supply and demand, and who’d been taught various falsehoods on Marx and his views, this class was both fascinating and eye opening. The best part is that you don’t have to subscribe to any particular theories—the point is to introduce you to the danger of subscribing to only one.

Those “first” classes tend to stick with me the most. Engaging Texts Intro (ENG226)—an introduction to literary studies class—is an excellent choice if you’re considering becoming an English major or minor or just wondering what people study in English. Here, you get to read and analyze a wide range of material, from John Keats’ poems and some Shakespearean sonnets to 18th-century British novels and 19th-century American short stories. You also read some brief introductions to literary theory to understand the ideologies at work behind various ways of reading literature. In this class, I learned for the first time how to identify rhyme and meter, what sonnets and sestinas are, and how to read critically and write literary analyses.

All really interesting, potentially useful stuff, I know. But a liberal arts education is an amazing, enriching thing: Why not take the chance to explore philosophies and ideologies while you still can? You’ll have time to learn about supply chains and business strategy later.