

***The Most Valuable Things That I Learned During My Freshman Year in ACES***  
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***<http://www.aces.uiuc.edu/Students/HaynesSophomoreAward.shtml>***

*I admit that on my first day in microeconomics class, I didn't have much of an idea about what economics was. I stumbled upon economics because I noticed that the Agricultural and Consumer Economics Department had a concentration called "Environmental and Natural Resource Management." This seemed to involve the word "environment" without any of the chemistry classes that I dreaded. In high school, chemistry class had been my foil. I had broken expensive beakers and forgotten all the electron models that I was supposed to have memorized. Science had been my passion since I was a child, and I loved to spend my summers cataloguing plants in prairies and snorkeling with stingrays. However, I was afraid that I simply could not conquer chemistry, and all science majors seemed to involve more chemistry than I ever wanted to take again.*

*However, the "much easier than chemistry" major that I chose turned out to be more than I bargained for. In the first few weeks of class, I was perplexed by the crisscrossed lines on the overhead, and I received a dismal grade on the first test. I was afraid that I was going to have to switch to a new major, but I was stuck in economics for at least one semester. Reluctantly, I studied my economics book for hours, and soon I found my grades improving. The biggest surprise was that I found out that economics was far more interesting than I ever expected. **I realized that this was what college is all about – extending yourself into new and unexpected realms of thought.***

*Once I had become interested in the mysteries of economics, I set out to talk to professors and graduate students. From them, I learned that economics is more than just graphs and equations. These were people from all over the world, who had spent time solving diverse and challenging problems everywhere from Mongolia to Kenya. The most appealing characteristic that I learned about economics was that it could interact with nearly every other academic discipline. **To my surprise, my advisor suggested that I try chemistry again.***

*That is why I ended up taking chemistry in the spring of my freshman year. Economics made me realize that I didn't have to limit myself, and some part of me felt that conquering chemistry would help me regain confidence in my own abilities. Juggling chemistry with several economics classes was hard, but it was worth it. In the beginning of the semester, I had to repeat chemistry labs because of shaky hands, but when it came to the final lab, I found that I was confident in even the most delicate titrations. I'm shocked to say this, but chemistry ended up being one of my favorite classes. **I agonized over switching to a science major, but to my surprise, I found myself happily applying my scientific knowledge to problems in my economics classes.***

*I'm not sure that I would have loved chemistry so much if it weren't for the environmental and development economics classes that I took at the same time. They pulled everything together for me and strengthened my resolve to accumulate knowledge in order to be able to analyze and solve economic problems. My James Scholar [HCLA] project with Professor Winter-Nelson was a culmination of all that I had learned. I perused papers on everything from soil science to traditional*

*African religions in order to come up with a thesis about land conservation in Zimbabwe. Economics had gone from being confusing to being a way for me to bring together all of my own interests in a coherent way.*

*In interactions outside of class, I found that economics gave me the ability to bridge interdisciplinary divides. Not limiting myself didn't mean just taking unexpected classes, but also interacting and working on projects with students and professors in every field from soil science to food science. One of the biggest challenges I tackled was helping to start a student-run organic garden. Each person that I worked with had different interests, and tying them together was a struggle. I learned that if you want interdisciplinary work to succeed, then you have to be patient and willing to confront unfamiliar problems with the understanding of how other people think. Working with them gave me the chance to apply what I was learning as I learned it, which is a valuable experience for undergrads used to being cramped in the classroom. I discovered that many problems facing the world today encompass so many fields that interdisciplinary thought is vital, and I was glad that economics had provided me with a way to appreciate other people's thoughts.*

*If I could give freshmen in ACES one piece of advice, it would be to immerse yourself in academics. ACES has a rich community of professors and students willing to engage in the academic discourse as long as you seek them out. During my freshman year, I learned not only to push myself in new directions, but also to reach out to others for guidance.*

