

Thank you to LSC —and to Dominique—for inviting me here, and congratulations to all scholarship recipients on your well deserved awards. I'm really grateful for this opportunity to reflect on my path since graduating and to share about how my time here has shaped both my work and the way I move through the world.

When I applied to the Master's program here, it was 2017, I was halfway through a PhD in molecular biology, feeling worn out by lab work and disillusioned with how pointlessly academic my research felt - and, along with much of the country, I was trying to make sense of a presidential election that had caught a lot of us off guard. I'd started to find meaning in teaching—helping students understand biology, seeing their lightbulb moments—and all of this led me to the realization that I wanted to do work that was closer to people, that was directly aligned with my values.

Studying science communication allowed me to do that.

In the almost six years since I graduated, I've been working as a STEM education researcher at Oregon State University. My work spans science learning of all kinds - in formal and informal spaces, and across the lifespan. I use quantitative and qualitative methods to answer research and evaluation questions centered on increasing access, inclusion, and equity in STEM education. It goes without saying that the training I received here—especially my introduction to social science theories and methods—laid the foundation for the work I do now.

But truthfully, that's not really what I want to talk about today.

I struggled a bit to figure out what I wanted to say. I was asked to share an inspirational talk about how my sci comm degree has helped me and/or is making the world a better place.

The obvious answer would be, of course, that I am a working social scientist studying phenomena related to how the public understands science, and that I rely on the methods and theories I learned here every day. The work I do is important, and I believe it is making the world a better place. But when I really think about the most valuable things I derived from my time here, it doesn't really have anything to do with the work I do or how I do it.

What I have carried with me are the less tangible things that have changed how I interact with the world and the people around me. I am better at listening. I am better at explaining myself. I am a more thoughtful consumer of information. I hope that all of you can say the same.

One of the first things I learned when I started in LSC was that people don't care about facts. As someone who had already staked 19 years of education on the premise that facts are both useful and necessary for understanding the world, this was a little dismaying. But as I learned more, I began to understand that when people reject scientific information, or interpret it in ways we might not expect, it's not because they're uninformed or irrational. It's because they're human. They're filtering information through their values, their identities, their lived experiences, the people they know and trust.

And the thing that really affected me was the realization that I am not exempt from this either. I may be a researcher but I don't arrive at every belief I hold by running it through a rigorous, evidence-based decision tree.

For example, my son got his MMR vaccine when he turned one - not because I read all the papers about the safety and efficacy of the MMR vaccine and the dangers of measles and did a risk analysis comparing the two. He got his shot because CDC scientists said he should and I am a scientist and therefore I trust that other scientists know what they're doing. He got his shot because I identify as the sort of person who abides by mainstream medical advice, and I value the expertise of medical professionals. He got his shot because I love him very much, and it scares me to think about him getting terribly sick.

And you know, strangely enough, recognizing my own human foibles has made me a better researcher. Because when I acknowledge my own fallibility—when I'm willing to look at the ways my own experiences and values shape how I see the world—I become more open to how other people make sense of things. I'm more open to sources of knowledge from outside of academia. I'm better at forming hypotheses, at interpreting findings, at approaching my data through my participants' eyes, rather than my own.

But most importantly, it has made me a more compassionate person. It allows me to empathize with the people I disagree with, and even those who spread misinformation or believe things I find troubling. Because I understand that their choices often make sense to *them*, given the life they've lived, the fears they carry, and the people they love.

This reality isn't always easy to sit with. The stakes feel high these days. The world feels more polarized than ever. Trust in institutions is low. And even the basic facts of reality seem like they are up for debate. Our jobs as science communicators would be far easier if we could just present the facts until people came to whatever conclusions we need them to.

Still, the work we need to do in order to understand our audiences and meet them where they are is good work. It's work that asks us to be open to the full spectrum of human experience - all the beautiful, ugly, complicated bits of it.

During a time when it's so easy to focus on the differences between us and the ideologies that divide us, it can be a big lift to quiet the noise and look for the things we share. But being trained in science communication is its own kind of superpower - we can see through media framing and agenda setting. We understand how culture, context, identity, and emotion shape what people see and believe. And that understanding, when paired with some humility and a little bit of care, can help connect people, build trust, and strengthen communities.

And so, if I could offer just one piece of advice to those of you currently working on your degrees - and those of you helping them do it - it would be this: let your education shape not only your skills, but who you are as a person.

Let it encourage you to be curious about the people you talk to and respectful of their stories. Let it remind you that even the people whose views seem the most incomprehensible are still making sense of the world in ways that are deeply connected to their own lived experiences. That doesn't mean all ideas are equally valid, or that we have to tolerate harm. But it does mean that understanding where people are coming from can help us respond more effectively—and with more kindness.

We need researchers and communicators who are thoughtful, informed, and engaged. And we also need people who can navigate messy conversations with humility. Who can sit with discomfort, and choose to respond with care.

So yes—use your training to do quality research. Use it to design better messaging and create policies that benefit people's lives.

And also - use it in your everyday life. In your communities. In your relationships. Use it at Thanksgiving when you're talking to relatives who don't agree with you. Use it when you read the news (or, let's be real - watch TikTok videos about the news). Use it when you feel the urge jump into the comments to tell someone their opinion is uninformed.

Remember that your job isn't always to correct or convince. Sometimes, it's more effective to listen and try to understand.

Because that's the most important thing I learned in LSC. That science communication isn't just about broadcasting information. It's about connecting with people. And connection is hard. It takes effort and practice and a willingness to see people as more than their beliefs. But it's also where some of the most meaningful change can happen. And I truly believe this is the kind of change that we *need* from people like you right now. It's not radical or revolutionary, but it's what will rebuild the foundation of trust in our society so we can actually talk to each other again, instead of just yelling things into the void.

So as you continue your education and find jobs and do good things in the world, I hope you'll all take some time to reflect on your own humanity - your flaws, your biases, your values. And the next time you meet somebody you disagree with, think about that. And look for the things you share with that person. I bet it'll be easier to find than you expect.

Thank you.