# Women’s Studies and Astrophysics?

Dialogue has been edited for clarity.

Stephanie Nawyn (SN): Hi! This is Professor Stephanie Nawyn, the Co-Director of Academic Programs at the Center for Gender in Global Context, and I’m here with Sara Denbo, who is one of our alumni. Sara just graduated in May 2017 with a dual degree in Women and Gender Studies & Astrophysics. Tell me why you decided to major in two fields that a lot of people would think are very disparate?

Sara Denbo (SD): For me, when I started at MSU in 2012 I was doing a double major in mathematics and physics and I ended up switching to astrophysics and all things happened along the way. I did several different research projects in astronomy and astrophysics and not only learned about computer programming and physics but also learned I don’t want to be a career astronomer. When I figured that out, I wondered if there was something else I could do here at MSU to give me another avenue to go with things. If you sat me down with the course catalogue and told me to take whatever I wanted with no regard to how practical my parents would think it was, then a lot of the women’s studies courses stood out to me. So, I decided to go for it! I added the Women and Gender Studies degree my junior year, so I took and extra year to finish it all up. That last year was great because I’d already finished my astronomy and physics classes and was just taking WS classes which was pretty fun. Women’s Studies was a great fit for me because I really wanted another way of thinking and something to show prospective employers that I’m not just a physicist.

SN: You mentioned that you chose Women and Gender Studies without concern about it being a practical field, but you some of pretty practical experiences?

SD: Yeah! That’s one thing I think is really cool about the program at MSU is that an internship is required in the curriculum. This is a great way to show anyone who’s doubting what you can do with a Women and Gender Studies degree well look I did this internship *because* I’m a Women’s Studies major. I did my internship this past January to May with Planned Parenthood Advocates of Michigan, or PPAM, which is the policy branch of Planned Parenthood here in Michigan. With Planned Parenthood you have the healthcare side and the policy and legislative side, and I was on the policy side. That was in Lansing and one of the advantages of going to school in East Lansing is that you’re right by the capital!

SN: Right! Very good access to all the policymakers

SD: Yeah. For me that was a really cool experience because it was taking women’s studies stuff and going and doing something practical in the real world with it. I’m really interested in career in policy and law, so it was interesting to see how healthcare policy gets shaped here in the state of Michigan. I worked primarily under PPAM’s Director of Government Relations, Amanda West, and it was crazy to see the amount of stuff she does by herself plus like an intern. For example, she keeps up with and goes to many different healthcare committees just to make sure that the people of Michigan have access to the reproductive healthcare they need. That experience inspired me to be part of policy in that way.

SN: You got really excited about policy and legal world, so what are you doing right now? You’ve graduated…

SD: Right now, I’m preparing to take the LSAT which is like the SAT to get into law school. I’m not taking it this Saturday but the next.

SN: Well good luck!

SD: After that, I’m planning on going to law school. I’m not exactly sure the route I want to take with that. Healthcare policy and law is one part of it, but I’m also interested in science and technology law. One of the cool things with my dual degree in Astrophysics and Women and Gender Studies and my minor in Science Policy is you see all of the ways these things interact. Women and gender studies really does interact with science and technology. For example, early voice recognition technology didn’t work for women’s voices because women weren’t on the team that created it. That’s just one small example but there are all kinds of small examples, and I’m really excited to study more into them in the future.

SN: You feel lie your Women and Gender Studies major is shaping the direction you’re going?

SD: Definitely. The most valuable part of the degree, for me, is that it’s shaped the way I think about things. If I hear a new proposal for a policy or law, my first instinct is to think about whose voices aren’t being heard in the discussion about whatever new policy we’re considering. Like who aren’t we thinking about and who doesn’t have the ability to speak up about this. In this situation, most people think about well what does the average person think about this, but we need to think about the voices that aren’t being heard. This perspective, that I learned from my women’s studies classes, is definitely something I take with me every day and something I want to be a central component in my career moving forward.

SN: So, what you’re talking about isn’t just a focus on women but a focus on inequality more broadly?

SD: Yeah because intersectionality is very important!

SN: Oh! Well can you tell us what you mean by intersectionality?

SD: Yeah! The Women’s Studies program at MSU focuses on intersectionality which is recognizing that each of us has a number of different identities. I, for example, am a straight, white, cis gendered woman who’s middle-class and all of those things interact to shape how I see the world. I’m not just a woman, I’m a middle-class, white woman that those things together shape my interactions. A Black woman’s experience with the world is very different from mine and it’s important to recognize that and listen to how those experiences are different. Saying that all women are like this or this is what all women experience isn’t accurate or helpful and silences other voices who share a marginalized identity with you.

SN: What would you say to a prospective student to MSU or someone at MSU who is in their first or second year and considering a major or minor in Women and Gender Studies?

SD: Definitely take a class! One of the benefits of a lot of women’s studies classes is that there aren’t too many prerequisites so you can pick a class that may pair up with your main degree or your interests. Definitely take one though. Not only do you have electives to fill but Women and Gender Studies relates to all fields and is not just a field on its own. That’s why GenCen is a center, not a department, because we have faculty in James Madison College and History and Physics and people doing all kinds of work that come together because they all relate to gender studies in some way. Showing, whatever your major is, you can benefit from a class in Women and Gender Studies. So, if you’re interested, definitely take one!

SN: If you want to take Sara’s advice, send an email to our undergraduate advisor at [gencenad@msu.edu](mailto:gencenad@msu.edu). And thank you for listening!