

The Intersection of Science and Ceramics

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Throughout my academic career, I have made deliberate choices to shape myself into a well-rounded scientist and to prepare for my future goal of becoming an infectious disease researcher. Before joining the doctoral program, I was working as a fellow in the Virginia State Public Health Laboratory. The Covid-19 pandemic started the fall of my fellowship year, and after only working there for a few months, I was recruited to help with patient sample testing and surveillance. I ended up working on my fellowship project during the week and helping with sample testing on the weekends. From that experience, I learned the hard way that part of being a well-rounded scientist is striking a good work-life balance. When living in Virginia, I started doing ceramics at a local studio and have continued that hobby while earning my doctoral degree. My art has made me a better scientist, and vice versa.

I recently started a volunteer assistantship at a studio in my neighborhood where I'm learning how to help with studio operations, including mixing recycled clay. There is no exact recipe and achieving the right clay consistency is a matter of experience and troubleshooting, something I'm accustomed to from working in a research laboratory. As part of my assistantship, I also help with some of the wheel-throwing classes offered at the studio. This requires me to coach students through the process of wheel throwing and explain the reasons why their piece might not have turned out as they planned, which has in turn strengthened my mentoring skills in the laboratory. Most importantly, ceramics has helped me make connections to my community and other local artists. Having moved here from the Midwest to attend graduate school, the studio community has felt like a surrogate family to me, and their support has been invaluable during the first few years of my degree program.

I have also found that ceramics affords me peace of mind when work is stressful. Science can be very rigid and sterile, and the messiness of ceramics is very cathartic. For me, it is a meditative and grounding experience to work with mud. I find that going to the studio regularly helps clear my mind and makes me better able to perform my job. Overall, ceramics helps me achieve a work-life balance that makes me a more resilient and well-rounded scientist.