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Professor Morales

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To Find or not to Find Passion

From the ripe age of eight years old, I learned how successful my parents were in the tech industry. For example, my mom is CEO of her own media company. She always discussed “My mom [my grandma] sent me and my sister to America when I was fourteen. If I can be successful by working hard and with the little opportunities I had, you should be able to as well.” My parents’ success made me want to do work in this industry, so I can appear successful. I just wanted to not suck, not to look like a failure. However, one lecture during Spring quarter of my first year of UCSD, everything changed. My whole life, despite my parents, I have always wanted to make a difference in the world. I discovered that I could with data science and artificial intelligence, and this passion did not originate from being in my parents’ shadows.

I originally enrolled at UCSD as a Cognitive Science Design and Interaction major. I got rejected from the computer science department so I decided this was the next best major. During one session of Introductory to Cognitive Science, a guest lecturer came. It was Brad Voytek, head of the UCSD Halicioglu Data Science Institute, and to say that his hour long talk changed my life would be an understatement. This lecture was different, dare I say, special.

Professor Voytek started off the lecture asking “I just have one question for you guys, do you know what data science is?” I did not know, what is data science? No one knew the answer. But did I care about what data science is? I continued to listen. He asserted, “Data science is the support pillar to the world. It provides information, creates ideas, and gives you evidence.” I wanted to be a part of that. He said, “All these things that you love, that you depend on, data science has played a huge role in its development.” My eyes were wide open.

“All of Doordash for example depends on data science and algorithms. All of your favorite videogames were made the way they were due to data analytics.” He continued, “All your fantasy sports, all the stats and analyzation of your favorite players, are all brought to you through the POWER of data.”. He talked about a many more topics of interest, and data science has made an impact on them all.

He transitioned into talking about machine learning applications for data science and how these two things go hand in hand. Professor Voytek described, “Data analytics provides the foundation for smart learning and artificial intelligence. It is applied in many small ways, such as in medical machines, facial recognition on your phones, and even your McDonald’s order”. Even in bigger ways, examples he gave were “all your smart home systems such as Amazon Alexa, or

A.I even runs some small businesses for people. He discussed how machines learn from “data mining”, and how humans can learn from extracted meta data and from the algorithms they develop. I have never been so interested in something in my life.

I went up to the professor after class, inspired. I asked, “Professor, what made you decide you wanted to be in this field in the first place.”

“I wanted to be a part of the ever-changing world. We are coming to times where digital media and devices are running our lives. We are switching to where we need digital data to give us information, not our books.”

“Do you think this is the future? Will it change the world?” I asked.

“Absolutely!”

I walked out of that lecture hall, went back to my dorm, and immediately switched my major to Cognitive Science with a specialization in Machine Learning, and declared a minor in data science.

My whole life, I kept changing what I wanted to study, what I wanted to do when I grew up. I always thought that everything new and exciting I found was my new passion. Truthfully, I always struggled finding my true passion for something. That being said, after my talk with Professor Brad Voytek, I was sure. I was certain this was what I wanted to do. I knew this was the way I can be a part of something that would change the world, and it was through technology as well. This was the way I can make myself successful, make my parents proud, make myself proud, and make a difference in a world that so desperately needs it.