

Mariah Knowles, M.A. English Rhetoric & Composition & M.S. Computer Science, 2018

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“English and Computer Science are endeavors towards the same human flourishing. There’s no need to separate them.”

Mariah Knowles graduated from WKU in 2018 with her Masters in English, after previously earning her Masters in Computer Science and her bachelor’s degree in Computer Science with a minor in professional writing. She’s now moved on to even higher education, currently pursuing her PhD in Library and Information Science with a minor in Education Policy at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

During her time at WKU, Knowles admitted that studying in two different disciplines was hard at first, as English presented its own set of new challenges.

“Math is easy. There’s an answer, you’re done. I had to challenge a lot of demons to do anything interesting in English. And just working through all that and having a place where I could do that, overall, that was a good process,” Knowles stated.

Although the transition into this new field wasn’t always easy, it did open new doors for Knowles, who stated, “I kind of felt like an outsider a lot of the time moving from Computer Science into English. I had imposter syndrome get to me really bad, not knowing what [it was] we’re doing in discussion, but everyone’s just winging it...but [I liked] being able to just be that outsider and be weird, to just go into really niche stuff that I wanted.”

Knowles has since published her “niche” and more common research at several conferences and journals such as the International Conference on Quantitative Ethnography and the Association for Information Science & Technology.

Now while pursuing her PhD, Knowles works as a project assistant at the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Wisconsin Center for Education Research while also being a teaching aide for several classes. She also serves as an instructor with Badger Precollege, which offers classes to students ages 5-18. Over the summer, Knowles even taught a course she helped to develop with her advisor on data ethics. One goal of the course is to encourage students who will one day work with AI to think more about the implications it can have.

It's a field that holds special interest for Knowles, as it is constantly evolving.

"AI is nothing new. There's always technology changing, technology is always advancing, there's always things that we don't fully understand. Reasoning, moral reasoning, about technical issues where you don't have the technical [understanding] is always harder," Knowles stated.

Knowles cited a case in Pasco County, Florida, in which the Sheriff's Department began using an algorithm to predict crime before it happened. Law enforcement would then use this data to target suspects to "prevent" the crime from occurring.

She explained, "In this case it doesn't matter if AI works. That's not where the ethical questions are. It's the fact of the targeting but using the AI as a justification for it."

Knowles' plan once she earns her PhD is to continue teaching in information schools as it allows for more cross discipline interaction. Knowles doesn't like to be limited to just one way of doing things, and this has been evident since elementary school when she was struggling with math.

"My dad was like, just look for shortcuts in math, and something about that led to this unlocking of, 'I don't have to do things the way the teacher says.' I can literally look for my own way to solve it, and I did from then on," Knowles stated.

And this approach has followed her all throughout her educational career, adding, "I refuse to accept the narrative that grad school has to be hard. That it has to be a struggle and that you're going to be tired all the time. I'm like [no] I'm going to have fun. I'm just going to make that be the narrative."

As for her narrative at WKU, Knowles noted how several of her classes prepared her for where she is now. Stating that many of her most notable classes were with Dr. Jones, Dr. Rigby, and Dr. Endres. The skills she took from classes in the English program continue to help her in her work in information sciences today.

Knowles values the education that she's received in both English and Computer Sciences, as it's given her a unique perspective of how almost all fields of study work toward the same goal.

Knowles stated, "The act of telling stories and the act of looking at how people tell stories just made more me more conscious of what we're doing and what human endeavors even are. In getting practice putting a fine point on those concerns and in the moral reasoning that we teach in data ethics here, that's really all were trying to ask our students to do. To put a fine point on what our human endeavors are and to be okay with messiness and ambiguity and so on. So, we tell stories. That's just something humans do in any field."

