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# Dyani Sabin: OC '14 Translating Science Panelist

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*OC '14 Translating Science Panelist*

**By Tara Santora**

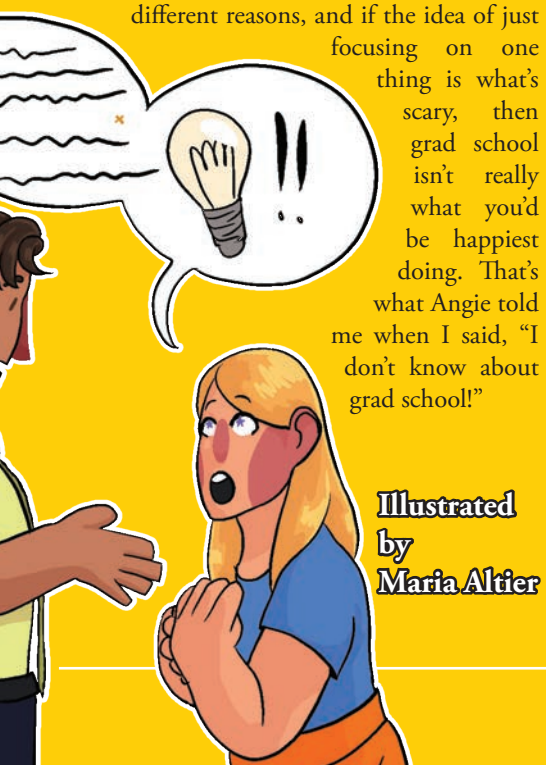
*Dyani Sabin is a freelance science journalist who recently graduated from the Science, Health and Environmental Reporting (SHERP) program at NYU. Before this, Dyani graduated from Oberlin College in 2014 with a major in Biology. She has written for publications including Scientific American and Inverse.*

**What was your experience with science like while you were a student at Oberlin College?**
I got to do research in two labs while I was in Oberlin. The first was Marta Laskowski's plant lab—I was there for my first two summers at Oberlin. Then I went to Angie Roles's crayfish lab for my last two years, and it was amazing. I had a great time! I particularly liked going outdoors. I didn't get to do that a lot in Marta's lab, which is why I moved to Angie's lab at first. Research is really an experience that is not like anything else.

**Did you do anything while you were at Oberlin that specifically related to science communication?**
I was an OWL [leader for Oberlin Workshop and Learning Sessions], for BIOL 102: Genetics, Ecology, and Evolution, which is BIOL 200 now. It was my first experience in learning how to present science in a different way. I often had to target different learning styles and turn science into a game.

**How did you decide to go into science communication?**
I was doing research and I got to the point where I was thinking about what happened next. When I thought about going to grad school and studying one thing and doing such depth of work, I panicked. I didn't want to focus on just one subject. I ended up floundering and discovering that science journalism was a career. I thought, Cool, I could do that. And here I am.

**That's extremely similar to how I feel at the moment in regard to grad school.**
Everything is scary as a senior. You don't want to choose badly. But things can be scary for different reasons, and if the idea of just focusing on one thing is what's scary, then grad school isn't really what you'd be happiest doing. That's what Angie told me when I said, "I don't know about grad school!"



Illustrated by Maria Altier

**Why do you think science writing is important to the world?**
Science affects everything that we do, and scientists are not trained to communicate what they do. This makes sense; they have a lot of other things that they have to do.

**So someone has to do it, right?**
Right. Also, most people are either afraid or don't realize how much science impacts them. One of the stories that I worked on relatively recently was about how the FBI's facial recognition database is prejudiced against women and African Americans. It has a much higher rate of false positives in these populations. I managed to talk to one of the scientists who worked on analyzing the FBI database, and he told me that as a community of facial recognition researchers, they're not entirely sure why this happens, and that it's a failure of their community that they haven't fixed the problem and really studied it. The FBI is using it, and most people don't know that even the scientists who do it think this is a problem. They know it's a problem and they're trying to fix it, but don't know what to do yet.

This was six months ago, so things may have progressed, and I don't want to misrepresent what they're doing—but with those sorts of things, the impact is immediate. But even for something like crayfish research in evolution, the research can tell a story about how we are here, and what the world is like, and why. And there's a value to that, even if the research doesn't impact the average person's life.

**Well put. So, what exactly is your job at the moment? What do you do?**
D: I am a freelance science journalist. I'm not tied to any one publication, but I pitch stories about anything. On an average day I get up, I shower, I eat breakfast. Then I sit down at my desk in my apartment and open the research journals. Then I go from there, sending ideas to editors and asking researchers for interviews. That's first thing in the morning. Then I try to write for a while, then make some phone calls.

**What's the best moment that you've had as a science writer so far?**
When I was doing research with Angie we went to The Evolution Conference. I got to listen to a researcher who was doing work on rats. He was using rat mitochondrial DNA to trace the travel of the Vikings because the rats travelled with the ships, and when the ships got to land the rats would stay even if the Vikings left. Rats tend to survive, so if any rats survive, they can look at the mitochondrial DNA and say: These are Viking rats. I was able to write a story about that when I was in school—I got to call a researcher in Madeira, Spain, who was so excited because no one had ever called him about his research before. And it was the moment when I realized [that] this is what I want to do for the rest of my life.