

## Stage Left, Lab Right

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Sunlight poured through a wide back window, catching on muted posters and scattered announcements. High ceilings arched above, and deep red and muted green chairs dotted the open floor beside wooden cube tables. This was the quiet lobby of Wake Forest University's Scales Fine Arts Center — a beautiful yet off-course setting for freshman Bradley Jiang, who had arrived planning to study chemistry in buildings far from Scales.

The space was familiar to him as a Winston-Salem native who sometimes visited for the college's plays, though quieter than usual. It was the start of the school year, not the charged minutes before eager audience members entered a theater. He walked down a long hallway with rich wooden walls, passing the doors he knew best — the ones he'd come through to see performances.

At the hallway's end, Jiang pivoted left and pushed through heavy black doors he had never crossed before. Bright artificial light took the place of the sun, white walls replaced warm wood, and white tiles were fitted on the floor where dark carpet once was. The quiet vanished, and instead, the surrounding area became layered with sounds: the hum of tools, the sharp whine of a drill, the thud of dropped wood, the roar of an overworked AC, all cut through by the consistent thump of upbeat pop music. The shift felt sudden, almost disorienting.

He followed the drill sound until he entered a vast, open space where black walls absorbed the work lights above. Jiang realized he was *on* the Tedford Stage — once a space he looked toward, now under his feet. Instead of intricate sets, the stage was wide, empty, and flat. Ropes and cables dangled from the towering fly system like bones of worlds yet to be built. Wooden flats and platforms leaned in corners, fragments of past productions.

He wandered deeper into the space, and Jiang could now see the many empty red rows of seats ahead of him. Then he noticed near center stage, a girl — who he soon learned to be junior Riley Shanaghan — crouched over a platform as she drove a drill into the piece beneath her. Jiang froze, then inched closer, unsure how to explain his presence. When she felt his gaze, she turned. Her face gave little away — maybe surprise, maybe confusion — but her eyebrows drew together in quiet question.

“Are you here to help,” she asked, “or are you lost?”

Jiang set his expression, attempting to mask uncertainty. “I’m here to help.”

“Okay,” she nodded toward the doors he had entered through. “Head into the shop, find the supervisor, and tell him you’re here to work.”

He followed her orders, exiting the stage and stepping into a bright, cavernous room where the ceiling soared even higher. Tan walls were patched with colorful remnants of past productions: painted signs, the face of a dragon, a wooden cutout of a woman’s leg. The smell of wood and sawdust hung thick, and the paint-splattered concrete floor was dusted with a fine layer of it.

Jiang found the supervisor near the table saw, protective glasses on. Timing his words between the saw’s whirs, Jiang said, “Hi. I’m here to help.”

Handed washers, bolts, a drill, and a hand-crank wrench with the simple instruction to “Help Riley,” he returned to the stage. His first task: attaching zero-throw casters, heavy triangular wheels that let a platform glide smoothly.

Jiang had never touched a drill, cut lumber, or considered the mechanics of a set. Shanaghan moved with effortless confidence, sweats hanging loose, each step precise and controlled. Jiang, in shorts — poor shop etiquette, as Jiang would soon learn after cutting himself repeatedly — worked clumsily as he fumbled with the drill, starting and stopping every few seconds. Yet the expectation was simple: you were here to work, so you worked. So, he did.

When Jiang first arrived at Wake Forest, his plan was simple: major in chemistry and forge his way down the path of science. Though as Bradley Jiang worked that day, he hammered his own brain on the possible pursuit of something else — theatre. But chemistry *and* theatre? Was that a thing that people did? Bradley believed it plausible, fascinating even. However, to many, the combination felt like a paradox.

This tension has long shaped American education: the push and pull between science and the arts, between measurable output and creative exploration.

In the past, being a “well-rounded” student meant studying both the arts and the sciences. A balanced education was seen as a mark of intellect: to understand the world, you had to understand it both logically and imaginatively. Philosophy, literature, and art were not considered luxuries but essential ways of cultivating empathy and moral reasoning, traits as valuable as technical skill.

But that belief began to shift in the mid-20th century. As the U.S. mobilized to defeat the Nazis in World War II, science became a tool of survival and power. The Manhattan Project, radar systems, and codebreaking operations proved that technological superiority could determine the fate of nations. Scientists became wartime heroes, and their methods of precision became cultural ideals.

During the Cold War, the changing views intensified as the competition with the Soviet Union transformed education into a new kind of arms race. When the Soviets launched *Sputnik* in 1957, it sparked national panic: if America wanted to win the future, it needed more engineers, chemists, and mathematicians.

Workers who could build rockets, computers, and weapons faster than their counterparts abroad were the new necessity. The federal government poured funding into STEM programs, reshaping schools and universities to produce technically skilled specialists rather than broadly educated thinkers. The arts and humanities were increasingly framed as distractions — fields with little measurable output, little to contribute to “progress.”

By the late 20th century, the tech revolution deepened this divide. Silicon Valley’s rise made coding and data analysis the new language of success. Innovation became synonymous with optimization: faster systems, sleeker devices, more efficient production. The workforce shifted toward technology and information management, and students followed suit, choosing majors that promised employability over exploration. Creativity was still valued but only when it could be monetized.

Today’s students are products of that history. For many scientists, art now seems like a glossy extra — good for decoration or outreach but not for real discovery. Many choose majors with an eye toward stability and status, unconsciously carrying forward decades of messaging that equate STEM with intelligence and the arts with indulgence.

Creativity and beauty were then treated as distractions — even liabilities. According to the American Academy of Arts & Sciences, the number of humanities bachelor’s degrees awarded in the U.S. dropped 24 percent between 2012 and 2022, falling below 200,000 for the first time in two decades. Fewer than one in 10 college graduates obtained humanities degrees in 2020, down 25 percent since 2012.

“It gets at a really deep societal question about what we value. What motivates the flow of resources? And in many cases, it's money,” said Callie Chappell, a postdoctoral fellow in biology at Stanford University.

Western academic science is largely funded because of the way it generates capital. Money flows to research that promises new cures, technologies, or products. That economic logic shapes institutions and priorities, and it often sidelines values that art might bring to science, like reflection, creativity, and deeper questioning of what science could or should be.

These economic and cultural pressures aren’t the only barriers. Scientists also face structural limits on their time: publishing papers, mentoring students, and securing grants leave little room for creative exploration. “If you spend time on a painting or thinking creatively, it can trade off

with your research,” said Chappell. “The incentive structure simply doesn’t leave space for creativity.”

Thus, the unspoken expectation was clear: focus on one half — almost always the science — or risk letting that side fall behind. For many, the idea of fully pursuing both seemed impossible.

At first, it didn’t feel like that to Jiang. He *did* come from a family of STEM: his sister a microbiologist, his father a mathematics professor, and his mother working in information technology. Though they were supportive of theatre, even surprised that he hadn’t gone all in.

It fueled Jiang to further his involvement in the theatre. Early in his first year, he earned a position working in the scene shop. To him, it always had been more than a workspace. He calls it his “first real home on campus.” During his first two years, the hum of tools, the smell of sawdust, and the tactile satisfaction of building something from raw materials offered relief from the pressures of classes and research. The shop allowed him to focus on something tangible and to see the results of his effort in real time.

Beyond his shop work, he performed in both of the mainstage shows in the second semester of his freshman year. Sophomore year, he built more sets, performed in another show, and was given the title of student technical director for the big end-of-year production of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. At the end of his sophomore year, he was voted into an executive position in the university’s theatre organization. He quickly filled his calendar with theatre commitments, throwing himself into theatre completely.

Then by his junior year, the balance he once maintained was slipping. One side was falling behind — of course, it was theatre. Mornings were swallowed by chemistry research downtown and evenings with the hefty workload attached to it. The shop which once had felt like a sanctuary was now a responsibility he struggled to meet. He had been absent from the shop more often than usual, and it was beginning to show.

Earlier that semester, his professor and a scenic designer for Wake’s productions had told him, “You’re a pretty valuable resource around here because you know your way around things.” It was a compliment, but also a reminder. His absence didn’t just affect him; it affected the whole team.

One afternoon, Jiang opened an email from one of his scene shop supervisors. The subject line was casual: a simple check-in. Though as he read it, Jiang felt a knot tighten in his stomach. The email acknowledged the semester’s chaos and asked how he was managing, gently noting that his hours in the shop had been sparse.

“At first, I thought, ‘Oh, yeah, I know I haven’t been in as much,’” Jiang recalled. “But reading it, I realized that I hadn’t fully communicated why I was absent.” That’s when he realized that he had been stretched so thin that something had suffered the consequences.

The email forced him to confront a truth many Wake Forest students know well: the tension between committing to one community while honoring obligations elsewhere. At the start of the semester, he and his fellow student employees had agreed on set hours to work. But as those once free hours filled with research, meetings, and leadership responsibilities, the shop had been quietly deprioritized.

Jiang felt a mixture of guilt, frustration, and determination from reading that email. He knew he was valued; he also knew that missing shifts disrupted the flow of work and the rhythm of the team. Sitting down at his computer, he opened a blank reply and typed slowly, deliberately. He explained his commitments, acknowledged the gaps in his presence, and expressed his desire to communicate more clearly moving forward. He emphasized how important the shop was to him, promising that he would make space for it again.

The act of writing the email wasn’t just about logistics. It was a moment of reflection, of accountability, and of recommitment. Jiang recognized that struggling to manage multiple passions wasn’t a failure; it was a challenge but one he was ready to face. He took a deep breath in, read over his words, and hit send. He now had a duty to continue with his new beginning.

Jiang’s balancing act was one that didn’t come easy, but the strife to continue with both art and science was a sample of Wake Forest’s broader reality. Students across the nation who major in the sciences often feel pressured to prioritize practicality and choose what seems employable over what feels expressive, while those in the arts sometimes feel their work carries less “real-world” weight. At Wake, however, the picture is more nuanced.

The university’s growing interdisciplinary programs and arts-driven research suggest that the divide between art and science isn’t as fixed as it once was. Wake offers more than 50 majors and 60 minors, and 82 percent of students graduate with at least a second major or minor. Though there is little public information on the exact breakdown of what students study, the college’s Presidential Scholarships in art, dance, theatre, music, and debate show that students are encouraged to explore and showcase their talents in the humanities, even if their primary academic focus lies elsewhere.

Students who bridge both embody what Chappell calls “a rethinking of what science is, and what values should be embedded in it.” Reuniting creativity and logic might not just broaden education; it could redefine what it means to be well-rounded.

Wake Forest’s former Vice Provost for the Arts and Interdisciplinary Initiatives, Christina Soriano makes it her mission to do just that. She integrates creativity across disciplines through

Wake the Arts, a Wake Forest movement that supports interdisciplinary partnerships and infuses the arts into every corner of campus life.

Last year alone, Wake the Arts funded 42 projects, including Wakeville — Wake Forest’s arts festival, which focused on sustainability. Soriano also collaborates with neuroscientists at the Sticht Center for Healthy Aging and Alzheimer’s Prevention to study how dance and music act as a “secret superpower” for older adults. Through her work and initiatives supported by Wake, she demonstrates how the arts and sciences can be deeply interconnected.

“The word ‘arts’ is in ‘liberal arts,’” said Soriano. Thus, with Wake Forest’s label as a “liberal arts” university, the mission to integrate creativity across disciplines feels like a return to the school’s roots. “The arts,” she said, “aren’t just about entertainment — they help us live better lives.”

For some students, that integration begins long before they commit to a major. Bradley Jiang was torn between enrolling in a structured five-year program at another institution or choosing the open academic landscape Wake Forest offered.

“And I chose Wake,” Jiang said. “At Wake, you have this liberal arts program where you can explore all these different opportunities.” The value, for him, was the freedom to find connections rather than being locked into a single academic track.

For many students, the power of a Wake Forest education lies not in choosing between art and science but in discovering how the two sharpen and expand one another. As more students pursue interdisciplinary paths, the university’s liberal arts identity becomes less a slogan and more a lived reality — one in which curiosity, creativity, and critical thinking are not separate skills, but different ways of asking the same questions about the world.

Within this environment of opportunity and challenge, Jiang’s own transformation became clear, shaped not just by classes or productions, but by the interplay between them. Now halfway through his junior year, he had changed in ways that went far beyond technical skill in the shop or lab. His character twisted and changed.

When he was growing up, his sister had often told him “it’s good that you didn’t get involved with the wrong crowd.” Because he had always been a follower, one who leaned into the example of those around him.

Where he had once seen himself primarily as a helper, he now stepped confidently into other roles. He took on the role of student technical director, forcing him to manage more than just the building of sets: he had to guide others, make decisions, and keep other students calm and focused under pressure.

“That added sense of responsibility,” he said, “taught me that I’m now not just here to do my job well, but also to help out the first-years who’ve never hung a light before or who may feel overwhelmed by the scene shop.” He was now the age that Riley Shanaghan was when he first met her, and so he realized that others might view him the way he did her.

He realized that leadership wasn’t about commanding attention or asserting authority; it was about creating space for others, sharing knowledge, and keeping things clear and steady even when stress ran high.

Jiang also grew in his sense of belonging. When he was in his first year, everything had intimidated him — senior mentors, supervisors, and skilled peers seemed untouchable. Though two-and-a-half years down the line, he now felt respected and valued. The shop, once a place where he had only followed directions, had become a community that recognized his voice and expertise.

In the end, what he learned transcends theatre or science. Jiang discovered how to be a contributor, a leader, and, most importantly, himself. And in doing so, he embodies what Wake Forest hopes all students will become: individuals capable of curiosity and creativity, grounded in both skill and self-confidence, ready to navigate the world with intellect, imagination, and a sense of purpose.

Bradley Jiang’s journey reflects a broader truth for Wake Forest students: the path to growth is rarely linear. Balancing research, theatre, and other commitments can feel overwhelming, but those pressures also foster resilience, creativity, and self-awareness. For many students, the campus itself — whether a chemistry lab, the Tedford Stage, or a scene shop thick with sawdust — becomes a space to explore identity, take risks, and cultivate skills that extend far beyond any single discipline.

Now, Wake Forest University’s Scales Fine Arts Center had an electric pull to him, just as the labs did. It was no longer suspended in time as it was those years ago. It was lively, bustling, and near to his heart. It was the stage to his experiments, the lab to his imagination, where his passions finally met. To this day, Jiang studies both chemistry and theatre. To this day, he is a man of both science and art.