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The Mulder Effect: I Want to Believe...in STEAM

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Abstract

The balance that Mulder and Scully discover in their partnership on *The X-Files* represents the balance we find in STEAM: trust in science with the ability to question, imagine, and dream.

Keywords

STEAM, literature

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The Mulder Effect: I Want to Believe...in STEAM

Olivia Burgess

Abstract: The balance that Mulder and Scully discover in their partnership on *The X-Files* represents the balance we find in STEAM: trust in science with the ability to question, imagine, and dream.

In 2018, the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media Studies released a report titled “The Scully Effect: I Want to Believe...in STEM.” The report lends scientific credibility to the “Scully effect,” a phenomenon named after scientist Dr. Dana Scully from the science fiction cult hit TV-series *The X-Files*. According to the findings, “Women in our study report that Scully’s character influenced their perceptions of, aspiration of, and involvement in STEM.”

I was a super fan of *The X-Files* growing up. I attended two *X-Files* fan conventions and lined up to get autographs from the stars who played the Lone Gunman, Skinner, and Agent Krychek. I was a member of more than a few fan clubs. I collected the comic books and the playing cards. I drove a car with the license plate “TRS NO1” in honor of the show’s famous line “Trust No One.”

Despite my dedication, I was never influenced by the Scully effect. However, I did become a “doctor”: I earned my PhD in literature with a focus in science fiction. I chased mad scientists, aliens, monsters, and alternative futures through the pages of literature, believing that the truth was in there. My love for science fiction made me especially thrilled to pursue a career teaching at STEM institutions, where I connect with students through our mutual love of science, albeit from different perspectives.

I was influenced by what I call the Mulder effect.

Agent Fox Mulder, self-proclaimed as “FBI’s most unwanted,” works in the basement of the FBI trying to solve the “x-files”--the weird, unexplainable, paranormal cases. His fascination with the unknown balances his partner Scully’s insistence on proof and logic. He’s the kind of role model that would inspire someone to pursue a career teaching science fiction rather than science fact. This is the “Mulder effect”: the phenomenon where watching a TV show about a quirky dreamer’s determined pursuit of the truth despite the skepticism of others inspires one to

pursue a PhD in English, become a scholar of science fiction, and then help STEM students grapple with the ethical and social impact of science and technology through the lens of the humanities.

The future looms ahead of us bigger and more unknown than space itself, and we need STEAM graduates who can balance formulas and certainty with a willingness to question, imagine, and dream. Scully and Mulder work together beautifully because their partnership bridges two perspectives, allowing them to better confront the problems they face. STEM and literature work together beautifully for the same reasons, helping students gain perspective on their work and their futures that goes beyond STEM alone. We need to believe in STEAM.

References

Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media (n.d.). “The Scully effect: I want to believe...in STEM.”

Seejane.org. <https://seejane.org/research-informs-empowers/the-scully-effect-i-want-to-believe-in-stem/>