

First-year Student Matthew Cortland Turns His Passion into Research

First-year student Matthew Cortland is pulling off perhaps every student's fantasy. He is leveraging his passion and main hobby, the [Madison Scouts Drum & Bugle Corps](#), into an academic study. All it took was desire, creativity, encouragement from his faculty adviser Jennifer A. Mandelbaum, two grants totaling \$5,050, and the purchase on eBay.com of a pocket-sized video camera. Now he is spending this summer doing exactly what he wants: traveling with the elite, competitive drum corps and producing a multimedia study of how two members communicate while riding next to each other on a cross-country tour bus.

This summer will be Cortland's second with the Wisconsin-based, 150-member brass and drum corps, in which he is assistant drum major and the only member from New Jersey. A student in the School of Arts and Sciences' (SAS) Honors Program who hails from Marlton, New Jersey, he shared his passion with Muffin Lord, assistant dean for undergraduate education, who immediately saw the possibility. "She said, 'Why don't you turn your marching into a research project?'" Cortland recalled. "She sent me to Professor Mandelbaum, who was on board right away."

"Matt is one of the most enterprising students I've ever run into," said Mandelbaum, who is an associate professor of communication at the School of Communication, Information and Library Studies. "He knew there was something interesting to study here."

Cortland received two grants – one from the SAS Honors Program and another from the Aresty Research Center for Undergraduates – worked up a budget, and purchased a refurbished Sanyo digital video camera, which he will mount with Velcro on the back of a bus seat and shoot hundreds of hours of video. He will capture two corps members – Ryan, from St. Louis, and Jose, from Miami – as they spend two and a half months as assigned seat partners. Cortland doesn't know what to expect of the pair, but he thinks they will finish the summer either close friends or, like members of some families, with a distant but unbreakable relationship. Either way, he believes he will end up with a fascinating study of how people communicate as they build and maintain long-term relationships.



Because he is a first-year student, Cortland has not yet chosen a major. Surprisingly, he knows it will not be music, and it may not be communication, but he offered a clue: He is reading textbooks on cultural anthropology to get ready for the summer.

Photograph courtesy of Matt Cortland.