Speaker 1: The Missouri State Journal, a weekly program keeping you in touch with Missouri State University.

Nicki Donnelson: Graphic novels. They're just a fancy name for long-form comics. But when you think about one, you may picture the bulging muscles of Marvel's superheroes. But my guests say not to judge comics by this preconceived imagery. I'm Nicki Donnelson.

Nicki Donnelson: Today on the Missouri State Journal, I have Cole Closser and Jennifer Murvin. They teach a course at Missouri State University on creating comics and are paving the road to an interdisciplinary program that is largely unheard of at the undergraduate level. Murvin and Closser share about what keeps them intrigued in this medium.

Jennifer Murvin: It's a different experience when you read comics. Art Spiegelman actually calls reading comics decoding versus reading because it is such a different exercise. You're looking, you're taking in visuals, sometimes you're reading in a non-linear way. If you read really avant-garde artists like Chris Ware, sometimes you're putting physically together pages to then read. I think it challenges different parts of the brain. It challenges what we think about when we think about the word reading or the act of reading. And it excites students.

Cole Closser: When I was a little kid, of course I read newspaper comics, and I got into superheroes when I was around eight. But then when I was 10, I discovered Francoise Mouly and Art Spiegelman's anthology work, Raw. That changed everything for me. I was too young to be reading that, but I would stay up all night with a flashlight, reading it. So that stuck with me forever.

Cole Closser: I've always been drawn to comics, ha ha, be of the fact that comics is a medium and not any genre, and that it's a medium that's capable of absolutely anything.

Jennifer Murvin: You can read graphic poetry, graphic memoir, graphic essays, graphic novels, graphic short stories. You can follow characters. You can follow a personal experience. Graphic journalism. And you'll see people writing about Baghdad and Palestine in the comics form.

Nicki Donnelson: Since comics have pictures and words, teachers and librarians have often suggested comics, since the pictures offer clues to the narrative and context. This is helpful for someone struggling with reading or lacks the desire to read. But rather than thinking of comics as a door to more traditional literature, Closser and Murvin are introducing students to the complex, mature, and nuanced work available in comics. Work that stands alone as phenomenal.

Cole Closser: You can definitely encourage children to read heavier literature by introducing them to reading through comics, but you can do the same thing with picture books or anything that's directed towards children. But there's plenty of work in the medium then that kids couldn't possibly process. Most of what Spiegelman and the other Raw artists were doing and are doing.

Jennifer Murvin: They're for adults.

Cole Closser: And intelligent adults. You know, not for adults because there's cussing or nudity in it, but for, you know that's sophomoric. They're for adults because they're complex and nuanced.

Jennifer Murvin: Yes. And that's the kind of work we encourage our students to write. 'Cause often our students are coming out of comics that they read as children for children, and so part of our work is to get them maybe reading people who they haven't read and really challenge them with the kind of writing that they're doing and the kind of storytelling that they're doing.

Cole Closser: Absolutely. And we're seeing that some of strongest work is coming from students who don't have a background in comics. Who didn't know about comics, weren't interested in comics. And they're coming in only knowing comics as a medium and only knowing comics as a place to explore poetry or prose, mostly memoir based, like Jen said.

Nicki Donnelson: Closser brings with him the experience of two published comics, and together Closser and Murvin have been invited to speak at AWP, the largest writing conference in the country. Murvin points out, with the bubbling up of small presses and Kickstarter campaigns, it's becoming easier to put your creation into print. It's an exciting time for the medium, they say, and their students are already having success in publishing their works as well.

Cole Closser: We all reach this point in our life where we look at our work and we decide if it's worth sharing or if we shouldn't share it, right. And then those of us who persist are the ones who become so-called artists. But we all have that natural language of comics, of combining words and pictures.

Jennifer Murvin: And so when we proposed this class, everybody kind of assumed that the writers would write and the artists would art.

Cole Closser: No.

Jennifer Murvin: And we had to say, oh no no. Everyone will write and draw, everyone will create their own comics. It's neat to see these writers who stopped drawing in third grade, fourth grade come back and draw.

Cole Closser: And these visual artists who didn't know that they could write, that they could tell stories.

Jennifer Murvin: Yeah. And it's exciting for like me to work with artists who have, like you said, no expectations in the world of writing and then for Cole to work with the writers who have not drawn in years and years.

Nicki Donnelson: That was Cole Closser and Jennifer Murvin from Missouri State University. I'm Nicki Donnelson for the Missouri State Journal.

Speaker 1: For more information, contact the Office of University Communications at 417-836-6397.