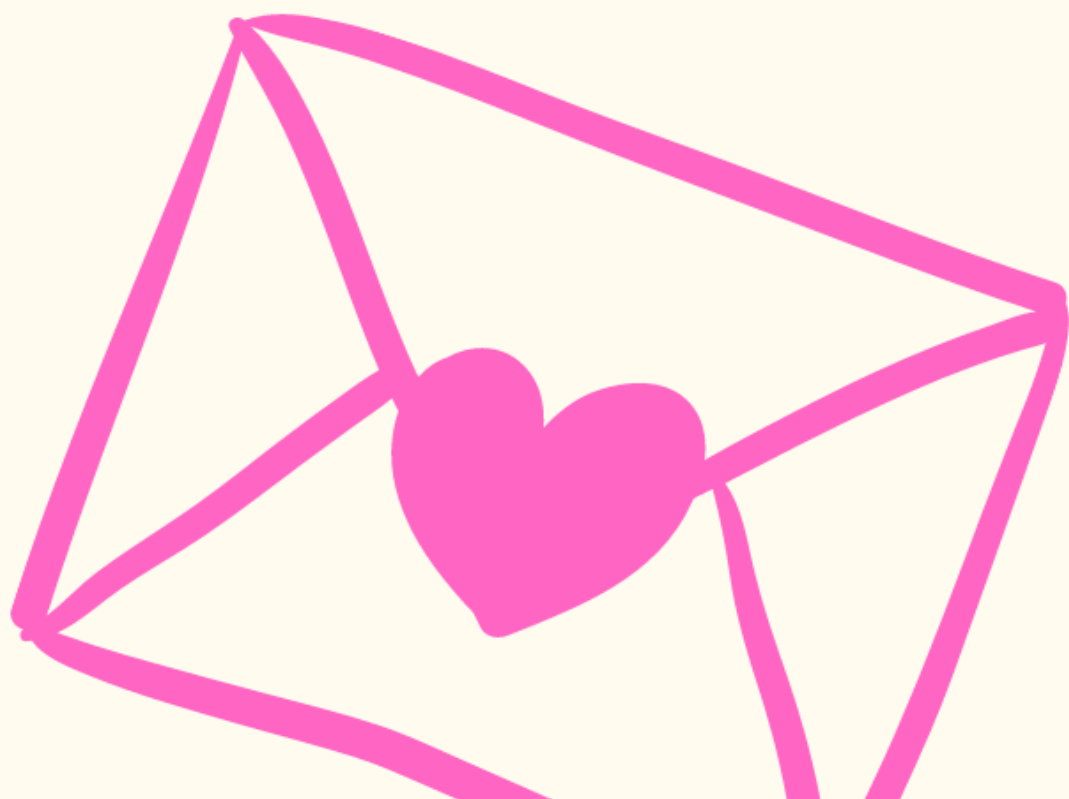


A word of

Advice

letters from those who want
the best for you



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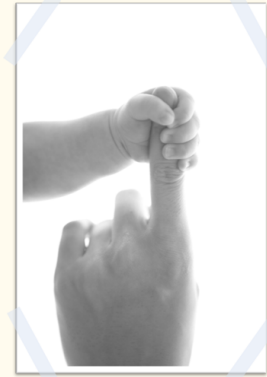
Dear Reader,

Hello! I hope this letter finds you well. If you are reading this, then someone really cares about you. Maybe this was gifted to you by a loved one. Maybe you found these letters yourself. Either way, we're so glad you are taking the time to read this. Each letter corresponds with a year in your life and advice from those who have been in your shoes. Regardless of where you're at in life, we're sure that there are things that may seem uncertain or confusing. You might feel like you don't know what the next step is. We're here to tell you that you're not alone. There are many people out there who have had the same feelings you're feeling right now, and they want to help. Within these letters you'll find advice and stories on how others navigated their journey through life. They wrote these with the intent to help you with your journey.

We hope you enjoy, and wish you the best of luck on your future endeavors.

Sincerely,

Collen, Gina, Matt, Olivia, and Quinn



College has always pushed students to work harder than we have ever before. Classes are meant to challenge us academically in new ways, whether it be through exams, group projects, research papers, or other assignments, all with the added responsibilities of work, social life, clubs, and the pressure to find intern and volunteer experience that will look good on our resumes and help us to eventually enter the workforce. The need to maintain such strict focus on time management and packing our schedules with clubs, classes, activities, and internships can be exhausting, and most incoming freshman find themselves completely overwhelmed on top of entering a new school, as living away from home is already a major stressor in and of itself.

Stress is completely normal; it's both motivating and encouraging, but I've found that college has been, up to this point in my life, full of the most stressful situations I have encountered, for better and for worse. Some stress is beneficial, but living in a constant state of stress can drastically impede our ability to maintain positive relationships with the other students around us as well as our ability to make and maintain positive memories of our college experiences. A lot of this is the result of newfound pressure we as students feel in order to complete our academic assignments (whatever they might be), attend clubs, play sports, go to our part-time jobs, have a social life, and attend class on top of all of that. With all of the pressure to succeed and juggle various new activities and stressors, many college students forget to value their leisure time, or even their time spent doing nothing, myself included.

My freshman year of college was incredibly enlightening and rewarding, but I found myself taking around twenty credit hours each semester, feeling pressure to tackle a workload that I had never experienced before and that I was completely unprepared to handle. On top of this, I was playing a sport, joining extracurriculars, and making new friends. As a result of these stressors, I ended up struggling my first semester; I had to drop one of my classes and I consistently was pulling all-nighters at the library during the week so that I would have time

for my athletics and spending time with my friends. This was not healthy behavior for me to be taking part in, and, if anything, it made me feel even more stressed out than ever before. My grades suffered even though I thought what I was doing was to benefit them, and I rarely found myself taking time to relax and unwind. Being in a constant state of stress is unhealthy for both our physical and mental health, and not permitting time off from this stress is one of the ways in which many college students find themselves burnt out by the time they get to midterms and finals, poorly impacting their academic success. Stress can manifest itself in so many different ways, from impatience to forgetfulness to concentration problems, and can even lead to even bigger mental problems in the long run, including anxiety and depression.

While there are plenty of other ways to de-stress—getting more organized, getting enough sleep, seeking help from friends or even from counseling services provided from the university—the technique of doing nothing can be one of the most beneficial to for students who are seeking to destress. I struggled with this at first, mostly because I was under the impression that doing nothing meant I was being lazy. The first time I allowed myself to do nothing, I felt even more stressed out because all I could do was think about all of the things I wasn't doing. Doing nothing doesn't have to be doing nothing in its most literal sense; my favorite form of doing



nothing is binge-watching Netflix, Hulu, or the most recent season of *Game of Thrones*. It's doing nothing in the sense that my brain gets to take a break from academic work, group projects, or whatever stressors I'm allowing myself to take a break from for that time. It's unfortunate that doing nothing has developed a stigma of being lazy when, in reality, it's one of the best ways to decompress. Taking time to enjoy our time is so beneficial to our mental and physical health, and it even helps us handle stress in a more

positive way, which invariably has a positive impact on our academic and social lives as well.

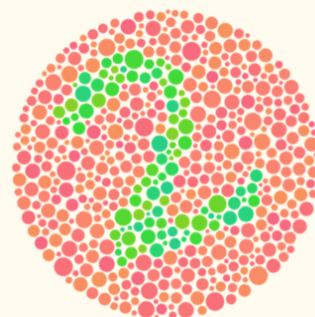
This is not meant to imply that social situations, clubs, or athletics are added stressors for everyone—for many people, going to the gym or spending time with friends are some of the ways that they indulge in their stress-free time—and it shouldn't be considered lazy, unproductive, or detrimental to indulge in alone time, relaxation, or Netflix binge-watching from time to time. Doing nothing shouldn't be considered lazy if it's used sparingly, not as a mechanism for avoiding responsibilities, and we should be able to take time off from our packed schedules without feeling guilty, or, even more importantly, without feeling even more stressed for allowing ourselves some time off from our stress.

The future itself is imposing, and since college is how we achieve the futures we want, it makes sense that it would be one of the most stressful times of our lives; however, knowing that stress is something that is extremely manageable and is sometimes as easy as taking a half-hour break from working on studying or writing papers makes it much easier to not over-stress. It's not always easy, and I still find myself slipping up at times and not giving my brain and my body the rest that it needs when I feel like I have too many things going on, but that's normal, and the last thing I want to be stressed about is that I need to take time off from being stressed. It's a learning process, but manageable in ways as easy as doing nothing.

Best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Audrey Fanshaw". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first letter 'A' being particularly large and stylized.

Audrey Fanshaw



I came to Miami University as a shy, quiet girl. I had heard stories about college and listened to people's advice, but I really had no idea what to expect. I am an only child, so I did not have older siblings to share their experiences with me. I had always been one who was up for a new challenge, and boy, was I in for something I had never experienced before. I quickly latched on to a few people I thought could be potential friends and knew I needed to join a club or get involved in some way on campus. My dad works for an advertising agency, so I thought Miami Advertising Club (MAC) would be a good fit for me as I already had some knowledge of the advertising world. Nervous and unsure, I attended my first meeting a few months into school. I sat in the very back and quietly observed the people around me and the happenings of the meeting. This is a story of personal growth due to stepping out of my comfort zone.

Over the next year, I attended MAC's meetings and began to feel more at ease. Every year, the club puts together a team to work on a project for the National Student Advertising Competition (NSAC). NSAC is a competition that provides college students the real-world experience of creating a strategic advertising, marketing, and media campaign for a corporate client. The client we were assigned was Ocean Spray. My team and I worked on the project for six months to produce a final plans book. It was time to pick who would present our plans book to the judges at the district competition in Cleveland, Ohio. The quiet, shy girl in me was screaming "No way," but there was another part of me urging me to go for it. I hesitantly volunteered to be one of the presenters for our team. I soon found myself in a car with three other people who all really had nothing in common with one another besides the fact that we

were passionate about the project. Needless to say, I was in for a long four-hour car ride.

My teammates and I arrived in Cleveland with butterflies in our stomach. We had less than twenty-four hours until we had to present our project to the judges. We put our bags in our hotel rooms and got to work. We set up camp in one of the conference rooms and began to practice our presentation. We ran through our slideshow time and time again, stopping to critique one another. One of my team members, Andrew, provided comic relief during those long hours, and my other team member, Liz, brought enough snacks to last us a week. While practicing late into the night was tiring, it was a good bonding experience for the four of us and is something I will never forget.

The next morning came around way too quickly for our liking. We were scheduled to present right after lunch. Of course, none of us had much of an appetite, so we put the finishing touches on our presentation. Soon our team name was called to the stage. My heart felt like it was beating out of my chest, but I walked up to the stage looking as confident as I could. We all introduced ourselves and my team member, Ian, began presenting his part. It was my turn next; my hands were getting clammy. Words began coming out of my mouth, and I couldn't believe how comfortable I actually felt presenting in front of the judges and all of the other teams. We concluded our presentation by answering a few questions from the judges, and we returned to our hotel rooms. I was so proud of my team members and of myself; I felt as though I had conquered my fear of public speaking, which was no small feat. We gave it our best and were very pleased with how the presentation went. Now we just had to wait for the award ceremony taking place that evening.

We took our seats at the award ceremony in the conference room of the hotel. The woman in charge of the competition gave a few words and said some thank-yous, but no one was really listening as we were all anxiously awaiting for her to announce who won. The time finally came. After our team name was not called for third place or second place we began to feel defeated. All of a sudden we heard, "Miami University is this year's first place winners!" We could not believe what we were hearing. We were



so overjoyed that we hopped up from our seats and practically sprinted down the aisle to claim our trophy. We all smiled from ear to ear as our picture was taken and our hands were shaken by the judges. I was in a daze during the whole ordeal as I never expected us to win first place. I was so proud of our hard work, and most importantly I was proud of myself. I stepped out of my comfort zone and it paid off. Bringing that big gold trophy back to the Farmer School of Business was an unforgettable feeling.

Four years have come and gone; graduation from Miami University is fast approaching. That shy and quiet girl who sat in the back not saying a word at that first MCD meeting has broken out of her shell. I am so glad that I decided to step out of my comfort zone to present at NSAC because it strengthened my self-confidence and allowed me to make friends with people I might not have otherwise gotten to know. That experience taught me to go into every new experience with an open mind. My advice to incoming students at Miami University is to not be afraid to take on opportunities that make you step out of your comfort zone because they will help you grow and shape you into a more well-rounded human being.

Best,

Rachel Rosenthal

Rachel Rosenthal



Three

A little over ten months ago I was studying abroad in England with Miami University's Literary London program. The trip was a blast; I got to stand in Shakespeare's Globe Theatre (the recreation of it, anyway), explore gorgeous museums, and see the whole city from the air on the London Eye (which, fun fact, is technically the Coca-Cola London Eye. Really, look it up). It wasn't all fun and games, though. I was assigned to a seven-person flat which consisted of myself; four rising sophomores, who kept to their own tight-knit friend group; and my two best friends, who were dating and therefore spent a lot of their time together rather than with me. It was no wonder, then, that when I woke up one Wednesday morning to an empty flat I assumed that everyone was out to a nice breakfast and just hadn't told me about it. It wasn't until I was halfway through my own breakfast of toast and eggs that I got a frantic text from my friend Megan asking if I was on my way-the bus to Oxford University was leaving, and I was halfway across the city in my pajamas.

Mistakes are a part of life that might make for a funny story three years down the line, but can be paralyzing in the moment. The instant I realized that I'd misread the syllabus-and, let's be honest, stopped listening so intently to my professors-I felt my blood run cold. I dumped the remains of my breakfast in the trash, threw on whatever clean clothes I could reach, grabbed my backpack, and sprinted down the stairs, desperately checking my phone to figure out where exactly I was supposed to go. This, the immediate panic of attempted solution, is not an uncommon reaction to the sudden realization of having made a big mistake. The desire to fix one's mistake isn't a bad thing. There's nothing wrong with feeling remorse, even over something that wasn't intentional. If anything, it shows responsibility and empathy towards those might have been hurt by the mistake. But when there's little to be done to fix

it, this need to make amends is both futile and damaging to the mistake-maker. There was no way for me to turn back the clock on that morning. The only thing left to do was to get there.

As I power-walked through the Tube (subway, to us Americans) and among the London streets, I started to realize that what I was feeling was not only guilt, but fear. I was afraid of not finding the bus stop and getting lost in one of the biggest cities I've ever been in, of course, but I later understood that it wasn't just the practical aspects that I was afraid of. I was also afraid of disappointing my professors, of embarrassing myself in front of my friends and peers, and of being known as the "late one". But looking back at this nearly a year later, what was there to be afraid of, really? Eventually my professors and peers would move on and we would all be able to explore the beautiful Oxford University in peace, and even if they didn't simply forget about my lateness it wouldn't stop the world from turning. It is my belief that most of our hatred of making mistakes is rooted in fear that may be irrational but are nonetheless real. Knowing that a mistake is not life-threatening or -changing doesn't make the feeling go away. Mistakes are guaranteed to happen in college, and without the support and structure that high school offers these mistakes can seem much more dramatic than they actually are. And there's more bad news: when college ends and adulthood hits in earnest, these mistakes don't stop happening.



What rises to meet this, though, is the ability to deal with it. As mistakes happen more frequently, your ability to handle it increases in time. For example, you might call your parents (in tears, as I have) less and less the more you experience car trouble, lost credit cards, broken household items, or missed appointments. You learn on your own how to jump-start your friend's car in the rain; you learn how to fix your microwave by yourself; you learn how to apologize for a missed meeting with the appropriate amount of grovelling (hint: less is more), how to reschedule, and how to set the correct alarms so you aren't late next time. It's often a massive amount of trial and error, but I can promise that eventually the satisfaction of a successful trial will outweigh the pressure of all those errors.

Growing up as a goody-two-shoes child of little experimentation or risk, this was a hard lesson to learn. I was no stranger to mistakes, of course, but there was a difference between the mistakes I made (messing up a line in a play, for instance) and the mistakes my friends made (climbing onto the roof of the middle school and getting the cops called on them). Once I started living on my own, my mistakes tended to be of the variety that came with consequences that would actually affect me beyond the confines of the stage or the classroom. This was a scary transition, and one that I still haven't fully completed. What matters, though, is that the trial and error has started paying off. It's one thing to understand that mistakes are not the end of the world and another thing to actually feel that way. Once you truly make the shift, though, the world becomes a lot less scary, and you can start taking risks without being burdened by that self-imposed fear.

When I missed that bus to Oxford University, I didn't just start crying and give up (although I definitely did cry in front of some confused and concerned bus drivers. Nobody's perfect). I figured out how to get to the bus stop. I asked around and found the bus that would take me there. I coughed up the bus fee that would have been covered by the group, kept my professors updated on my progress, and spent the bus ride catching up on my homework and processing that last stressful hour. I was still feeling anxious and guilty, of course, but by the time I'd arrived in Oxford and found my group again, I was able to laugh it off alongside my classmates. I was able to ask myself questions that helped me slowly dissolve that fear of disappointing the people I respected: Would this matter a week from now? A year? Would I remember the time I missed the bus to Oxford in three years, or five, and even if I did, would it matter? The perspective gifted by the passage of time, even if it only existed in my head for the moment, gave me the courage and inspiration to better manage the mistake in the present. All that trial and error will pay off in the long run, so lace up your shoes, grab your directions, and head out the door into the wide, scary world-but don't forget your keys. That's one lesson you won't ever stop learning.

Good Luck!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Quinn Karrenbauer". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Quinn" being more prominent than the last name "Karrenbauer".

Quinn Karrenbauer



Way back in the fall of 2015, when I started my journey at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, I did not know what to expect or what I was getting myself into. I had always lived in the same home and had comfort within my hometown. It was a place where I was born and grew up, so when it came time to pack up my belongings and move five hours away I was nervous, anxious, and scared. As I prepared for the beginning of my college experience, I remember being very nervous about meeting and making new friends. In my hometown and at my high school I had the same friends for many years, so coming out to an area I had never been to before and somewhere I didn't know many people was very weird to me. I remember the moment I pulled into Oxford with a jam-packed car and my parents, I was about to move into a room with two guys I had never met or talked to before, the nervousness began to build up. As I began to unpack my belongings and get my room together, I remember meeting my roommates and many other individuals who were living in Dennison Hall with me, and sensing that they all had the same nervous feelings that I had. Knowing that there were many different individuals who all felt the same way about adjusting to coming to college as I did made the initial transition much easier for me. In the first weeks and months of college I was able to learn a valuable lesson of reaching out to people and putting yourself in situations to experience new things and meet new people, even if this takes you out of your comfort zone.

In the first days of school I was very quiet and didn't talk to many people aside from my two roommates and my neighbors in the hall. As I was adjusting I was afraid to leave the comfort zone that



I had built up and was afraid to put myself into new situations. However as the semester and classes started up, I began to expand my horizons, meet new people and try new things that I wouldn't have done if I had just stayed in the comfort zone that was my dorm room and bed. Because I was able to go out of my comfort zone, I met many new people and friends that I will have for life. I remember the second week of school, when I was just sitting in my bed not planning on doing anything, a neighbor asked me to hang out on a Thursday night with some of the people he had already met. At first I did not want to leave my room or do anything, but finally talked myself into going to hang out. That was one of the best choices that I made my freshman year, while hanging out that night I was able to meet three people who became my good friends freshman year. Although it can be hard to experience new things and meet new people, it is extremely important to reach out and try to connect with new individuals. When I left my comfort zone to go meet new people, I was nervous. But everything worked out and I still think back to that day and if I had just said no to hanging out, where I would be today and the different experiences I would have missed out on by never meeting new friends and never leaving my comfort zone. Although there are still things that I missed out on at the beginning of my freshman year, because I was afraid to reach out to others I still was able to break free from the comfort zone that I built up. As I began to step out of my comfort zone, I started to meet a lot of new people from all over the county. I was one of the only people from my high school graduating class who came to Miami so I came into school not knowing many people. As I began to step out and meet new people, I was able to experience a lot of things that I wouldn't have been able to experience if I had not stepped out of my comfort zone.

My freshman year, I lived in the basement of Dennison Hall with two other people that I didn't know at all before coming to Miami. I was able to become friends with both, however this was an adjustment that I had not experienced yet. In the basement of Dennison, there were ten to twelve rooms all with doubles or triples, and it was a male-only floor. In the basement, it is a small area so everyone has an idea

of what is happening around the hall. I knew everyone in the hall, and had an idea of what they were like and how social they were or were not. When it came to my neighbors down the hall, I got to see what it was like to not leave your comfort zone first hand. With my neighbors down the hall, I knew that one of the individuals in the room was social and the other person wasn't very comfortable experiencing new situations. In the first weeks of school I would hang out with each of the two individuals in this room. However, with the individual who didn't like to step out of his comfort zone at all, whenever we would hang out or leave the dorm, he would not want to meet new people and wouldn't want to be outside of his room for too long. As myself and the others on the floor started to branch out and hang out with new people, he did not leave his comfort zone. He would spend a lot of time in his room, when he could be spending that time experiencing new things and meeting new people. Towards the end of the year, when a lot of the people on my floor joined fraternities or clubs and started to branch off and do their own thing, he began to realize that he missed out on a lot of experiences due to the fact that he did not want to leave his comfort zone.

Starting college is a very scary and unfamiliar time for a lot of students. As 18 year olds go off on their own for the first time and begin a new chapter of their lives, it can be a challenge for many different reasons. Every student faces anxiety while starting off at a new school, and in a place that they are not familiar with. Looking back at my transition into school, I definitely went through challenges adapting to this new environment. However, by being open to new experiences and meeting new people, I was able to adjust and adapt to my new life at school, and made the transition much easier. I would tell any new student who is starting out at a new college to be open to experience new things and to meet new people. I would also tell these students that although it may be difficult to leave a comfort zone that one has built, leaving your comfort zone to experience new things is something it will help make your transition to a new place much easier.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Tom Gladden". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Tom Gladden



Interacting with people is scary. That's what I used to think whenever I needed to talk with a teacher, adult, or even someone my age. Granted, I still believe this to some extent, but at least now I don't walk the long way around a building to avoid conversation –yes, I actually did this. I would dread leaving the safety of my room to go to a social event or do a presentation because I didn't want to face glares and judgement from other people. Based on all of this, I'm sure you're thinking I'm the most qualified to talk about taking risks and putting yourself out there. I can already feel your eye-rolls from here. It's true that I wasn't born a social butterfly and never easily put my trust in people. However, based on my past experiences, I can say that it is worth it to step out of your comfort zone and take a risk.

In my personal opinion, I was one of the shyest kids in my class growing up. By the time high school came around, I basically kept to myself. As an only child who spent long hours playing Monopoly against herself to pass the time, I was used to doing things on my own. One of the things I discovered on my own was voice acting. It started as a hobby but quickly turned into a passion as I pursued it more. I loved voicing characters, narrating, and collaborating with people on projects. I wanted to share my funny and memorable experiences with others, but I never did. I was terrified of being judged and excluded even more than I already was. I kept my secret to myself for the rest of high school and into the start of college.

When I first saw Miami University, I knew I wanted to go there based on the scenery. As cheesy as that sounds, I fell in love with the look of Miami before I even looked at their academic programs. I was the only student from my high school to choose Miami. Since I was by myself, I did what I always did when I was alone: I kept my head down and got my work done. I focused solely on my studies for the first few weeks of college. I roomed with another girl in my dorm, but she came into Miami with a group of her high school friends and often went to hang out with them. This shouldn't have bothered me, as I had

spent the past three years doing things on my own anyway, but it did. As I continued to focus on my school work, I realized that I actually did feel lonely. I had spent so long not talking to people or making friends that it finally dawned on me that I had no one my age to talk to. Sitting at my desk doing biology homework, I decided I was going to change that.

As quickly as I made my internal declaration of change, I realised I actually didn't know where to start. I started to think about opportunities where I could get myself out of my room and with people. I remembered that there would occasionally be a group of four girls who sat in the common room and watched television together. This was my chance. I finished my homework and walked down to the common area. Sure enough, those four girls were sitting in the living room watching Jeopardy. I remember feeling incredibly nervous, but I also felt the need to try. If I didn't make a move then, I would lose my nerve to try again. I took a breath, walked up to the girls, and asked if I could join. They all welcomed me and introduced themselves. That night I met Emma, Sidney, Hannah, and Kashia. We sat down together, watched television, and talked briefly. I walked away that night feeling proud of myself and looking forward to the chance of seeing those girls again.

I saw those girls multiple times throughout the semester. We would all seem to gravitate towards

the common area to talk, watch television, and play games. Our group of five eventually grew to a group of twelve of us who would see each other almost every day. I would go home telling my parents about my new friends, and they told me they were happy that I was able to meet such great people. I started to leave my room more often and go out with friends to see shows and play games. We all grew incredibly close. One day, my friends and I were hanging out in a dorm room. One of my friends, Jessica, was listening to an audio drama online, which she loved to listen to often. In the middle of a conversation, Jessica interrupted and asked "Gina, is this your voice?"

Jessica happened to have picked an audio drama that I voiced in. I was

mortified. I never planned to tell my friends about my voice acting, because I was still afraid of what they would think. I hesitantly explained that it was my voice and how I had been voice acting for several years. To my surprise, everyone thought it was "the coolest thing." They asked me questions and wanted to see



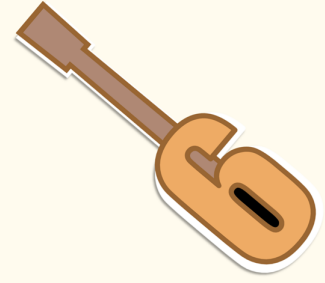
more of my work. It took everything in me not to cry. If I had simply opened myself up to them sooner, I would have learned how supportive my friends were.

College is the perfect opportunity to open yourself up to many possibilities. Not just with school or classes, but with people as well. College has taught me how to open myself up to others. If I hadn't taken the risk of introducing myself that night, I may have missed out on amazing opportunities, such as group dinners, friend photo shoots, and even making an audio drama together! Take some risks while you have the chance to explore in college, regardless of what area the risk is in. You might just discover something new about others as well as yourself.

Best,

A handwritten signature in black ink. The first line is "Gina" in a cursive script. The second line is "Moravec" in a more stylized, slightly larger cursive script.

Gina Moravec



This semester, the final semester of my senior year, I decided to do something that I'd never done before—learn how to play the guitar. I was already paying Miami tuition, had some room in my schedule after finishing up my graduation requirements, and the Beginning Guitar class was only once a week for an hour. It was basically a free weekly music lesson. So, I thought, “why not?”

I'd played piano for several years as a kid, taking lessons until I reached the point where I could read music and play fairly competently. I was never very serious about it; I loved making music and playing my favorite songs, but I never held any sort of lofty aspirations about becoming a great classical pianist. Playing in mandatory recitals, which were held by my piano teacher for kids of various skill levels to bang out half-memorized pieces on the keys in front of their parents, was the extent of my public performance.

I'd always loved music, though, and being able to imitate the notes I heard through my earbuds seemed like a skill worth pursuing. And maybe it would come in handy later in life—I could always pick up the guitar if some friends ever felt the need for a spontaneous campfire sing-along.

So that's how I found myself sitting in the storage room of my campus house, surrounded by discarded cardboard boxes and my housemate's potted plants, perched on a rickety white wooden chair with a large guitar in my lap. Not having one of my own, I'd rented it from my professor for fifty dollars. On this

particular day, I was feeling anxious and a little grumpy and not particularly motivated, but I wanted to try this new thing out.

The tiny room's window faced the backyard, and the January sunlight streamed in to illuminate the guitar's metal strings, which glinted brightly just above the fretboard. The body of the instrument was a warm amber, nicked in places from the bygone efforts of my fellow amateur guitarists.



The weathered chair beneath me creaked as I shifted my weight, trying to accompany the guitar's foreign bulk. I lifted my left hand and placed it on the guitar neck, the strings coarse and strange-feeling against my uncalled-for fingertips.

Pressing down on the high E string—the one with the highest pitch, and the one farthest away from me—I plucked it with my other hand.

A note rang out into the room, strong and clear, floating through the air among the dust particles sparkling in the sun. I let it reverberate for a few moments, listening until the tone faded from my ears. I could hear the echoes of it for a good while after my finger had left the string.

I decided to try playing some other notes and basic chords. Some came out clean, and others gave off an alarmingly loud buzz from the strings when I gave them a good strum—I wasn't pressing the strings down far enough as the muscles in my hand grew tired after just a few minutes, not used to technical work like this. After playing for a while longer, I stopped and looked up. Something felt different. Then I realized that while I'd been focused on playing the guitar, all of my lingering anxiety had been completely forgotten.

As the semester continued, I found that playing the guitar required me to be fully concentrated on the task at hand; I had to focus my energy on what was right in front of me while I was practicing. As someone who tends to worry too much, I was excited to discover that this new pursuit of mine was a fantastic stress reliever, especially in my final semester, with all of its attending anxieties about graduation, the job search, and life after college. Sitting in that sun-filled room, I always felt relaxed and calm when I played music, as if the notes slowly soothed my heart at the same time as they drifted into the air around me. I found that whatever I was preoccupied with disappeared from my mind for the moments when I was busy trying to get some semblance of a tune out of this boxy wooden instrument.

This guitar class, such a departure from my usual academic fare, had essentially no impact on my GPA or career, so there was none of the pressure to be amazing right out of the gate that I sometimes felt in more competitive courses. We were all beginners, and we were all learning. This was also something that I felt I could take with me after I left the class, and left Miami: the desire to learn new things, to try things that I'm a beginner at, and to pursue things that I genuinely enjoy, even if they're out of the ordinary from what I usually do.

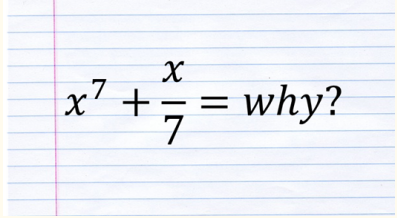
I've enjoyed the classes I've taken so far, don't get me wrong—it's just that these classes have always been centered around my academic disciplines, because I've had to fit the graduation requirements of a double major into my schedule. Beginning Guitar, though, was purely for fun, and let me use a different part of my brain and exercise a new creative muscle. My only regret? Not taking it sooner so that I'd have a semester left to take the intermediate class.

To anyone coming to college for the first time, my advice is to try your best to take the "fun" classes that the school offers—whether that be horseback riding, glassblowing, woodworking, ice skating, or anything in between. My small venture into learning a new musical instrument has left me with a new passion, a unique new skill, and a new desire to continue learning, and I believe that these takeaways are, in fact, some of the most important things I'll keep with me from my four years here at Miami.

Best,

Riley
Steiner

Riley Steiner


$$x^7 + \frac{x}{7} = \text{why?}$$

I was seven years old when I discovered that I wanted to attend college, specifically Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. I watched my babysitter graduate high school, accept Miami University's offer for admittance, and then move out of her family's home into her new dorm. I loved watching this transition and I wanted more than anything to experience it for myself. Unfortunately, as time went on I slowly lost faith in school and myself. Fast forward eight years: I was fifteen and a sophomore in high school. I was failing most of my courses in high school. I thought college was no longer an option and was prepared to settle for failure. Granted, I was going through a fairly rough time due to my parents' divorce and the ongoing stresses associated with it. My high school principal recognized this and pulled me aside in the cafeteria, and said to me "you're better than this, and you know it." I snapped. At that moment my world stopped spinning and I knew that college was still attainable for me. I enrolled in a program called College Credit Plus (CCP), which allows high school students to take college courses for dual credit at zero cost. I enrolled full-time at my local community college. I started to become more involved in clubs and organizations. CCP was one of the greatest things I ever did for myself. At seventeen, I gave the Honor Student Response Speech at my community college commencement ceremony. I graduated magna cum laude with two associate's degrees and my honors diploma from my high school. I

was ready for Miami, and I was ready to fight for what I knew I could be.

I stayed up until one in the morning so that I could read my acceptance letter the second it came through. I clicked the link. The balloons flew. I sobbed. I did it, I was now confident, I finally made it. I accepted without hesitation, and I started gathering all the information I could on the programs that interested me. I came across biochemistry and instantly fell in love with the idea of medical school, and eventually becoming a genetic counselor. I believed that medicine was the only viable option to make money. I received several comments from my parents about STEM being the only way in the world to make money and that humanities were hogwash. I planned my life out painstakingly with charts, graphs, and benchmarks, my obsession evolving. The summer slowly passed, my excitement for move-in day growing with each passing hour. Finally, August came and my dad loaded our truck up with the countless boxes I decided to pack. We arrived in Oxford and I was ecstatic. The first few days passed, my parents long-gone, and the reality of being alone started to set in.

Freshman chemistry started to become challenging, and I struggled to keep up. I started to feel like I didn't know as much as the other students and I rarely understood what was going on in class. I took the first exam and called my dad afterwards, I was elated at the thought of passing this exam. I studied hours upon hours and I came out of the exam thinking I knew it all. The following Monday rolled around, my professor laid the exams out on tables across the rooms and waved the flag for us to scurry to find our fates. All two hundred and

sixty-five of us leapt out of our seats, clambering over each other to find the score sheet that says our own name. I searched frantically, until I spied my exam. I snatched it off the table and started walking back to my seat. I flipped the front cover and stared in disbelief. I failed. I failed. I failed. I fought back tears and slumped into my seat as my new friends queried each other for answers. One friend turned to me and asked about my score. I stared at the floor and muttered, "I got a twenty-three percent." A few moments later my phone dinged with the message that my calculus exam from last week had been graded and was available for viewing. I opened the message to find worse news: I failed that exam too. In that moment, my world stopped spinning. Failing was not something I had felt in a long time, and it stung to feel like I was being dragged back to the dark place I was once drowning in.

I dragged myself back to my dorm, sobbing down the sidewalk thinking of what a failure I was. How I let all of my hard work dissipate, how my father would react to this news knowing that I had not received less than an A in two years. When I developed my obsession with school, I did not know that it would eventually destroy me. I felt so secure in my position with over sixty-five hours of transfer credit. I sacrificed everything I had for my education, even my high school experience. Those test scores erased all of it to me, and I no longer felt that I belonged in medical school or even as a STEM major. I called my dad to inform him, and I told him I wanted to withdraw from the university. He contacted my aunt, who is experienced in handling student crises like this one, and she told me to go to the student services building. An hour later I was sitting in a

little white-walled office with a friendly woman telling me that everything was going to be okay. I dropped the courses I was failing, enrolled in a sprint course, and all was right with the world. However, I did not know what I was going to do with my life anymore, let alone what I would major in.

A few weeks later I visited home and sat down with my grandmother. I explained my plight and she looked at me and said, "you have always enjoyed writing, so stop ignoring that passion and pursue it." She was completely right. When I arrived back at school I declared myself a professional writing major. I was excited beyond belief and registered for writing courses in the spring. I now love my program and feel a sense of purpose in my work. I now know that this is what I have always wanted, and my sense of obligation to STEM was a sham I created in my own head. I wish I would have understood that forcing myself to love a job or major is not possible.

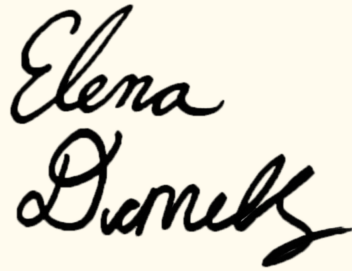
You have to love what you do and pursue it, no matter your personal history or outside forces trying to deter your path. It is also okay to not know what you want to do right away; exploring is part of college. There is a lot of pressure that exists within our culture surrounding the concept of college.



Sometimes we are faced with comments about what we do and questions of whether it is a legitimate career. We cannot let these pressures determine our lives, or they will be very unhappy. Finding my passion has introduced me to wonderful people, opportunities, and experiences.

Classes and friends are only part of the experience, how you choose to view your path is up to you. Keep your friends and family close on this journey, but also remember to separate your own ideas from theirs.

Best,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Elena Donnelly". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Elena" on the top line and the last name "Donnelly" on the bottom line, connected by a continuous stroke.

Elena Donnelly



The golden word for me when I was a high school senior: college. I was excited to venture off into a new place and become a new version of myself. I was convinced that it would be the best four years of my life, and in order to achieve that I would need to go far away from home. I had visited schools around me and while I always had fun, I thought that my parents would surprise me and drive up too frequently. I thought that I would need to be far away from them to become independent, even though I consider them both my best friends on the planet and they have done virtually everything for me. Growing up during the freezing Chicago winters had also convinced me that warm weather was the place for me. All of that combined led me to only consider schools in California. Even though people warned me about the different culture and people there, I never listened to their worries and blocked out all concerns. I had convinced myself that I wanted to do this and accepted the first school that I got into. I thought for sure I was doing the right thing.

Boy, was I wrong.

California was not the right place for me. The people, the culture, and the school itself all proved to be the wrong fit. The worst part was that I was lying to the people I loved the most about how unhappy I was by pretending that I was having the best time. My friends were constantly jealous of my posts on social media showing me on a beach after class or seeing random celebrities while out in Los Angeles. But for me it was all wrong. I realized I loved the Midwestern personality. The friendly, always caring, full-of-emotion persona that I had grown up with. I also realized that I was not a

relaxed Type B person and was very much Type A. I always needed a plan, to be organized and be constantly going, unlike many of my easy-going friends. Lastly, I realized that the school was not the right place for me. They didn't have the sorority rush experience that I had longed for and the clubs were limited. They had few majors that interested me and I realized that I did not want to do anything in business, which was what I enrolled in. On top of it all, I was homesick. That is something almost every college kid experiences, but for me, being so far away, with nobody to confide in, with no aspect of the school that felt like home, and being miserable with my choice of major, I felt like I was drowning. It was a random late-fall day when I decided I couldn't take it anymore. I called my mom and confessed what I was feeling. Of course, she was shocked that I had kept it all in and that I was this unhappy. She was my biggest supporter during this sad period and helped me make a game plan for how to turn my life around. Eventually, I was able to admit to everyone that I was miserable and decided to transfer to Miami University. It was the best decision I have ever made in my life.

My advice to prospective college students is that not everyone gets it right the first time. It's impossible to know that you will be happy for four years at an institution you have never lived at before. Of course, no matter where you go there will be ups and downs. There will be times where you feel like you've failed and times where you want to go home. That's normal. If you go to school somewhere and realize that you are at the wrong place for the wrong reasons, maybe it's something worth thinking about. My experience led me to be more open with myself and to other people and admit to my failures. So far, I have helped console a lot of families and parents in my area that experience difficulties in college similar to my own. Nobody is perfect; nobody makes perfect choices, especially at the young age of eighteen. It is okay to make mistakes, and I think owning up to them is the best thing you can do. Whether the mistake is small, such as lying to a friend, or big,



like choosing the wrong college, my experience has taught me that being truthful to yourself and to others is always the best action to take. The sooner you learn to apologize, the sooner there is room for forgiveness and change. I always think about what would have happened if I had kept my secret to myself. Would I have stayed another semester? Would I not have the same friends I do, the same experience at Miami, or the same major? I can't even imagine the endless possibilities that could have been my future if I had not been able to overcome my own obstacles. Being honest and open with yourself and others is the key to being successful and helping to learn more about yourself. I can't believe how different my life is now and how my struggle with opening up, to myself and others, has taught me to be a better, more fortunate person.

Best,

A stylized, cursive signature in black ink that reads "Remi Boleky". The letters are thick and fluid, with a prominent 'R' and 'B'.

Remi Boleky



It was the first Wednesday of the 2015 academic year. I had officially been at Miami University for six days, but it felt like a lifetime. Six days of sleeping in a room that was not my childhood bedroom, five feet away from a stranger who I had just met. Three days of attending classes without wearing the school uniform I had grown accustomed to over the past fifteen years. Six days of avoiding my mom's calls for fear of a tearful exchange but sending her daily texts to assure her I was still alive, and six days of waiting for one of the biggest events of the year: Mega Fair.

Mega Fair is Miami's club fair that takes place on Central Quad each year, but for me, it was so much more. I had been counting down the days until Mega Fair, eager to achieve the same level of extracurricular involvement I had held in high school. Although I had bonded with three girls in my hall and had met a friend or two in class, Mega Fair was where I was hoping to find other students who shared similar interests and liked to keep busy as I did.

When I arrived at Mega Fair, two of my friends broke off to check out Greek life. The other headed to the club sports, which left me alone. I stood in the center aisle studying the map, not knowing where to begin. I started wandering aimlessly, overwhelmed, and intimidated by the hundreds of organizations and groups of freshmen who already seemed to have found their group. As I wandered through the Performing Arts tables I heard a boy yell "IMPROV!" I turned around and saw a booth labeled "Sketched Out," with three students in bright blue t-shirts with a chicken on each of them.

"IMPROV!" they all yelled.

I walked over and listened to their quick spiel about Sketched Out, improv, comedy, and their mascot, a chicken named Kevin. Their booth had pictures of the group in front of The Bean in Chicago and goofy pictures of students performing in an academic building. As two members talked more about the group, one drew a cartoon caricature of me. I quickly wrote my name on an audition sign-up sheet, took the caricature drawing and left the booth.

I regrouped with my friends in the Greek life section amid chants, squealing, and laughter from the sorority booths. As we continued walking around the fair, I listened to more club spiels and signed up for Listservs, but the word "IMPROV" kept ringing in my ears. On the walk home, one of my friends saw the Sketched Out flier.

"What is improv?" she asked.

I started to repeat the explanation I had heard earlier that day but was stopped short.

"Oh I could never do that," one said.

"Me neither. Sounds terrifying," interjected another.

I silently finished the walk to my dorm, consumed with thoughts of my friends and family back home. Would they have been so quick to judge? Maybe these girls were right. I folded the improv flyer into a tiny square and shoved it in my pocket, out of sight.

The next week I summoned up my courage, pried the crumpled flyer out of my pocket, and went to Armstrong Student Center for the Sketched Out auditions. As I sat in Wilks Theater waiting for the audition to begin, my friends' words swirled in my head. My phone buzzed with a text from my mom. "Good luck!" it read.

"Alright! Let's get started!" yelled a long-haired boy named Christian as he sprinted into the theater.

I took a deep breath and stepped onto the stage with the other 30 auditionees. My heart was racing and I could not stop my right knee from shaking.

"The first short-form improv game we are going to play is called 'Purse!'" Christian enthusiastically announced.

AS Christian explained the rhyming game, I looked around the circle that had formed on the stage. I made eye contact with a tall girl with brown hair and bangs. She wore a Sketched Out hat and smiled. I slowly exhaled and tried to steady myself.

"Players, are you ready?" Christian asked. My heart continued to race. "BEGIN!"

The one-hour audition turned into a two-hour callback as the group went from 30 auditionees to five of us left at the final callback. I had a blast playing each game and getting to know the current Sketched Out members and other auditionees. I forgot about the stress of classes, meeting new people, and adjusting to life at school and laughed and smiled more during those two hours than I had during the entire first week at school. The next night, I received a phone call that I had made the team. It was the first time since I had arrived at Miami that I felt like I had finally found my group.



Looking back on my first week at Miami, I am so thankful that I found Sketched Out and followed my own passions rather than those of my friends. It is always challenging to go outside of your comfort zone and try something new, but with high risk often comes high reward. While it was nerve-racking to pursue something new without the support of my peers, it gave me the opportunity to meet people who were goofy, outgoing, and cared far more about having fun than what others thought of them. Sketched Out has given me a space to explore my creativity and passion for improv. Each practice also doubles as a two-hour break from the stresses of my daily life where I can goof around with some of my closest friends.

As I embark on the final weeks of my senior year, I know I would not be the person I am today without my time in Sketched Out and the relationships I have built with each member. My first semester at Miami taught me that choosing the most popular group, major, or activity is often not the most fulfilling. But if you follow your passions, no matter how small, they can take you to incredible places.

Good luck!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Olivia Prosser'. The script is fluid and cursive, with the first name 'Olivia' written in a larger, more prominent hand than the last name 'Prosser'.

Olivia ProSSer



Making friends in a new environment like college, can be an incredibly intimidating prospect, especially if you have anxiety. You want to find people you can trust and talk to, but you also don't want to seem desperate, and your mind is running at a million miles an hour to try and keep up with all of the new worries that keep popping up. It's even worse when you know the best way to connect with people is to relax; the one thing you just can't seem to do. So what're you supposed to do?

In the first week of college, you may notice a few things: there are so many people crammed into one location, everyone is hormonal, and it can kind of feel like being tossed out into the sea of adulthood without a life jacket, but it is also a place for you to find those people who can and will make it all easier. Sure, you can have six thousand pages of reading and twelve essays due next week, but your friends can be there at your side to support you. That's why finding your people is so crucial. It can, however, also be really hard.

Coming to college, I was the most scared I've ever been. Who would my roommate be? Would my classes be hard? How far were my walks? Could I make it to class in time? Were the dorm bathrooms going to be a nightmare? Most importantly, was I going to be able to make a whole new set of friends after finding such great ones in high school? College is a huge change, and it's okay to be a little nervous, but I was beyond nervous. I was ready to drop out and never set foot on university grounds, because everything was stressful and the adjustment was going to be too overwhelming. It almost felt unfair. I'd just gotten used to all the normalities of high school and all of a sudden I was going to have to adjust to an entirely new environment, one with a radically different set of social rules and

expectations. I wasn't sure if I had it in me, but making friends and connecting to people ended up being so much easier than I anticipated; I just had to try a little.

For anyone entering their freshman year of college, let me say this: if you make an effort, friends will find you, no matter how anxious you are. I suggest two things, both of which may require you to step out of your comfort zone (but it will be worth it!):

- 1) Make yourself accessible to people.

- 2) Find a club/sport you're passionate about.

Making yourself accessible sounds difficult, but it's all a matter of people physically being able to find you. If people don't know you exist, how can they try to befriend you? Hiding in your room with the door locked and the lights off may sound like a great idea, but it will not help you at all. Being accessible can be as simple as putting yourself in a place where it's easy to start conversations, like common rooms or dining halls. Everyone else is nervously looking around for people to hang out with too, despite how it might feel like you are alone in this. Common spaces are easy places to gather together or casually talk. Hanging around in places like this prompt conversations. The people you have conversations with can be your friends. They don't have to be, but they can be.

Dining halls provide another opportunity to be accessible. Everyone has to eat, even if you don't really want to, and thus dining halls are an excellent space to find people. Are people from your dorm talking about getting something to eat? Ask to tag along. You now have a whole meal as a window of opportunity to bond with people. Even if you don't talk a ton, though you should try, people will recognize your face and they might ask you to come next time.

For me, it was leaving my dorm room door open. I was lucky enough to have a room right next to the stairwell everyone walked up, and people had to come past my door to get to their own rooms. Most people said hi or stopped to chat. They got to know me just by consistent interaction as they came up the stairs. This is how I met the friends I currently live and hang out with as a senior.

I could have shut my door, put headphones in, and ignored the world, but then I also would have closed doors on a lot of friendships I cherish now.

Participating in a club or sport is another excellent way to meet people. I feel like this is the bit of advice all the condescending social butterfly adults give you, but as much as I hate to admit it, it's so true. If you're passionate about something, whether it be the Renaissance or rockets, there's probably a club for it. While it may be terrifying, join a ton of clubs at first. You can whittle down your list as you attend first meetings and decide if they're right for you. Give yourself a large pool of clubs to choose from, that way you're meeting a large pool of people too. Most importantly, if you find one you like, attend consistently. No matter how far of a walk, or how tired you may feel, or how much homework you may be stressing over, going and interacting with people is the only way for this advice to truly work. No one in your new club will be able to see how great you are if you aren't there. And if there isn't a club for your special interest, start one!

For anyone who's scared about making friends in college, I get it. However, you're going to be just fine. It can be terrifying to contemplate meeting new people, but it is completely worth it. These are the friends that'll stick with you. You just have to go out there and find them.

Best,

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'LK' or 'Leah Kuntz'.

Leah Kuntz



When I first started my journey at Miami University, I was aware of the stereotypes surrounding the student life and culture there. Nicknamed "J. Crew U.", Miami is known all around Ohio for its preppy style and strong emphasis on Greek life. I didn't pay much attention to these comments until I actually started my first year there and looked around at the sea of students wearing bright pastels and Lululemon. Like most college freshmen, my first few months of college were confusing and scary. I was desperately trying to balance my classes, make friends, get involved, and live away from home for the first time. I was working so hard to fit in with this new environment, but I often found myself trying to be someone that I was not. I felt like everyone else was so sure of who they were and what they wanted to do, and that I was falling behind. Being the typical freshman that I was, I decided, with a strong push from others, to sign up for sorority recruitment.

I originally had no desire to rush a sorority but hearing all my friends and everyone in my classes talk about how excited they were for it made me reconsider. Over winter break, I signed up for recruitment on the last day of the registration deadline and went shopping immediately after to get new outfits for rushing. During the first week back at school, recruitment was all that everyone was talking about. I was excited as well, but I was also nervous because I was still unsure if I wanted to join a sorority or not. Going through recruitment, I felt like I was unable to be authentically myself. I was scared to do or say something different from the other girls because I didn't want people to think I was weird. This process left me feeling lost and it took a major toll on my self-confidence because I felt like I didn't fit in anywhere at Miami. I listened to the girls in my group excitedly talk about getting called back to their favorite chapters, and how they couldn't wait for the next rounds. I, however, was so ready for this process to be over.

One week after being accepted in a sorority, I decided to drop out and focus on something else: the Miami University Rowing Club. The rowing team was a group I joined completely randomly freshman year. I had no prior experience with the sport, so I was incredibly nervous to write my information down on the email list at Megafair. Despite my anxieties, I showed up to tryouts the next day after learning how to use the erg machine

for the first time. I muscled through the tryout and went back to my dorm to wait and see if I made the team. After a few hours of waiting I get a knock on my door, and when I opened it, the varsity members were there to congratulate me on making the team. I was so excited, and I couldn't wait to meet everyone on the team and start competing. I felt a sense of joy and accomplishment that I didn't feel during recruitment. I was proud of my ability to push myself to do something new and scary, because I often let my fear of failure keep me from trying new things. I instantly felt at home with this team and enjoyed every second of my time spent with them.

Since my decision to tryout for the rowing team freshman year, I have not looked back once. My experience on the team has been filled with many challenges and has pushed me out of my comfort zone more than I ever could have imagined. Waking up at 6 a.m. to practice, working out six days a week, long road trips, and rowing twenty thousand meters in one day isn't always easy for me, but my teammates make it all worthwhile. This sport has introduced me to the most caring, funny, accepting, and crazy people ever. I have made so many amazing memories with them that I will cherish forever. In my third year participating on the rowing team I was able to compete in the Head of the Charles Regatta, the largest and most competitive regatta in the country along with three other teammates and our coxswain. This was so amazing for me because I got to see how much I have grown from freshman year. I started off as a novice with no rowing experience at all, and

eventually became one of the top women's varsity rowers on the team. My teammates have supported me every step of the way, and we never fail to have a great time together. I'm so grateful that I followed my gut and joined this team because it helped me find an amazing community that allows me to be authentically myself.

Through my journey at Miami, I learned that you don't always have to do things that are the norm, or what seems like the "cool thing to do." Joining a sorority is something that makes a lot of people

happy, but I found that it wasn't for me. As a freshman, it's so easy to get wrapped up in what everyone else seems to be doing, but it's important to find something that makes you genuinely happy. I'm glad that I found the courage to join the rowing team because it truly is the reason I am still at Miami. Looking around my freshman year, it seemed like everyone had a plan and knew exactly what they were doing. I came to realize that everyone is just doing their best to find a place where they belong like I was. Embracing who you are and allowing yourself to be different will attract people with a similar mindset and allow you to make friends that are genuine



that stick around for a long time. Making mistakes and taking risks are an important part of growing up, so do the thing that scares you, because college goes by so fast. College is filled with so many amazing opportunities for people to find themselves and thrive in their community. All it takes is one initial step, like signing up for a club or showing up to an event to change your entire college experience.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Colleen Rankin". The script is cursive and fluid, with the first name "Colleen" and last name "Rankin" clearly distinguishable.

Colleen Rankin



When I graduated high school and spent the summer preparing for my freshman year at Miami University, my friends and family all encouraged me that college would bring so many wonderful experiences, opportunities, and memories. Looking back at my time at Miami, those key people in my life were right; I have grown and learned so much, both in and out of the classroom during my time here. But what I quickly discovered is that experiences are shaped not by the events themselves, but rather, the people who are there to share them with you.

My first two semesters at Miami were periods of adjustment and change. All of the girls in the corridor in my freshman dorm were very friendly, but there was one girl I met move-in day that would soon become one of my best friends. Morgan and I met after my dad was hiding from the stress of unpacking my dorm room in the hallway. Noticing a familiar face, he soon realized that Morgan's mother was one of his classmates from his college days at John Carroll University, and thus, we were introduced. We quickly realized we both aligned in our values, thrived on being busy, and were extremely dedicated to our schoolwork. In the process of navigating college life and re-learning how to make new friends after going to a different university than my best friends from home, I was so grateful to have found a friend in Morgan. Although undecided at first, we both decided to register for sorority recruitment in the spring to find a core group of friends similar to us, but who were also going to help us grow. Two overloaded weeks in February 2017 all paid off when I put on my Chi Omega t-shirt in Millett Hall, knowing I just made one of the best decisions of my college career. Though I barely knew anyone in the chapter, I could feel the empowering, uplifting energy of this group of women and knew that a lot of good things were about to come. A few days later, enjoying dinner at Garden Dining Hall with a few of my new sorority sisters, I met who was soon to become one of the most influential people in my life. Juliana, a ball of energy, came sliding into the booth at full force, her dark curls bouncing with every word and laugh. The two of us

immediately hit it off, and her infectious energy, combined with my Type A personality, soon afforded us a great group of friends in our pledge class.

I came back to Miami my second year as a newly hired Resident Assistant and entirely naïve to the adjustment from freshman to sophomore year. Balancing work and higher level coursework was a transition that proved to be challenging. I questioned if my major was the right choice, timidly attended career advising appointments and professor office hours for advice, and started to see opportunities to expand my college experience beyond something that just benefitted myself. In the spring, I became a “Big” to the most conscientious, hard-working, and funniest person I know. I consider Sarah to truly be my little sister and her overwhelming wisdom truly astounded me. I left Oxford last May with a grateful heart for my college best friends, a contract to return as an RA for the following year, a new major and minors with my highest GPA yet, and a large packing list for my study abroad trip to Italy departing in just a few weeks.

This September, I arrived back to campus full of growth, but also exhaustion. Grinding away at the internship application process and my hardest academic load to date, I felt as if I had little energy to devote outside of my looming future as an adult. It was my best friends that helped me not just survive, but thrive, throughout my Miami career, but especially those 15 weeks. It was my Chi Omega sisters that placed faith and confidence in me that I wasn’t recognizing myself; I was nominated and slated on our 2019 Executive Board in November. It was my Career Center advisor and IMS 418 professor that encouraged me every step of the application process of my internship for this coming summer. I truly could not have triumphed that semester without the support, guidance, and humor provided by these key individuals in my life.

Morgan and I ended up joining different sorority chapters freshman year, but both succeeded in finding our “people,” and though we don’t see each other as frequently, we can pick up right where we left off every time. She is a true example of kindness and diligence.

Juliana and I are currently serving on our sorority’s executive board together. Her zest for life and bright spirit makes every mundane task an adventure. She is the friend that I can dream big with.



Sarah and I continue to become better friends each day. Even though she is my “Little,” I love how we both challenge each other to grow through new experiences and opportunities in life. Her thoughtfulness and intelligence is going to take her so far.

Life is always going to throw us curveballs; these curveballs can present themselves as triumphs, failures, challenges, and opportunities. We turn these curveballs into home runs because of the supportive communities in our lives. I am not the same person that I was on move-in day my first year at Miami; I have blossomed into a more confident, driven, and empathetic woman with a greater sense of mission and purpose because of the network I have found here. I share these anecdotes of my life as a college student because we all have the ability to recognize and cherish the power of community in our lives, no matter what age, race, gender, major, or hometown. My wish for all of those preparing to begin their collegiate careers is to challenge oneself to step outside of their comfort zone and engage in an abundance of fascinating and uplifting experiences; it is in these opportunities that you will discover your chosen family.

Good luck,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Elizabeth Fulco', with a stylized, cursive script.

Elizabeth Fulco



I entered Miami University a completely different person than I am today. I often reflect upon my high school days and think something along the lines of, "Wow, how did I become so different?" Throughout high school, I was a very meek person. I made little effort seeking out friends. I was content with my small group and nerdy writing clubs. Spending my nights playing online video games with people, many of whom I'd never even met in real life, was good enough for me.

I've always had somewhat of a passion for video games, but not in the sense of a typical gamer. I didn't consume a vast array of video games, lapping up every new game that came out. Instead, I preferred to hunker down on one game at a time, dedicating all my gaming time to that one endeavor. I enjoyed the challenge of pushing myself as far as I could go in a certain game. This competitive drive took me to games which matched that very spirit. Games such as Team Fortress 2 and Counter Strike dominated my free time in high school. I wouldn't necessarily say I enjoyed the actual games themselves, but more so seeing myself improve in them over time. In fact, over half my time spent on these games wasn't actually playing them, but digesting tutorials and advanced guides on internet forums.

Slowly, my interest in these games began petering off, as they normally do. To me, the first several months of learning a new game were the most interesting and engaging. Once I got over that hump, practicing became a chore and my affinity for such games would wane. My senior year of high school I learned about a new game. Actually, it wasn't exactly new to me. Super Smash Bros. Melee, a casual fighting game released by Nintendo in 2001, was a staple of my family's entertainment room for years. The same could be said for millions of other households as it was the best selling game for the Nintendo GameCube platform. My friends, my brother and his friends, and even my parents would spend

hours upon hours sitting in front of a CRT television while Mewtwo and Kirby duked it out on Hyrule Temple. I had fond memories of it.

I stumbled upon a four-hour long Youtube video sometime during my second semester of senior year. It was simply titled The Smash Brothers. The documentary detailed the 13-year competitive history of Melee. I was shocked to learn that this game I had played as an 8-year-old was responsible for one of the oldest and most storied competitive video game communities in history. I had found my next game.

I spent the rest of high school in that familiar routine--scouring internet forums for technical guides, watching competitive matches uploaded on Youtube, and practicing every niche moveset I could. But I ran into a new challenge: I wasn't getting better. The tools and workflow that would allow me to gain ground on the competition in other scenes wasn't working for this one. Why was that? The thing that makes Melee unique from other current competitive games is that it is, obviously, not developed as a current game. There is no online community. If you want to get better, you have to go to someone's house, sit down next to them, and play. I hadn't done that in ten years. I was nervous. So nervous in fact, I never ended up playing someone in person. That is, until I came to Miami.

There are so many cliches regarding move-in week at college. Of course you're nervous. Are you going to make friends? What do you do for fun?

[Editor's note: The ending of this letter, as many things are, is up to you.]

Matt Irwin

Matt Irwin

14/18

77%

If you're dreading every class, if you find yourself disliking everyone in your major, if you start to consider prison as a decent alternative, if you find yourself googling things to do with an education degree besides teaching, if you purchase a Necronomicon in the hopes of bringing about a world-ending cataclysm that will result in not needing to student teach, it may be a sign that teaching is not for you.

Cue to me, in a panic, grading papers at three a.m., wondering what I was doing with my life. It was the second week of my teacher education field placement, I had fallen behind on deadlines, and sleep was in low supply with high demand. Thirty papers surrounded me, all of them listlessly-written essays of flimsy argument and apathetic disposition. The students were writing them as carelessly as I was grading them, presumably with similar amounts of coffee and last-minute concern that deludes the mind into scrounging up the last, tiny bit of interest that can be mustered in order to throw words at a page and pray.

Three a.m. Four a.m. Five a.m. It was going to be time to go back out soon, and not even a catnap was possible. I had been working on these for hours, and the pile hadn't even started to shrink. Perhaps instead of an essay, one of the students had turned in some sort of malevolent elf that feeds on sleeplessness and writes bad essays for pleasure, as the pile

seemed to be growing. Really, I should have just not gone home in the first place; it would have at least saved on gas money.

"Teaching is a lifestyle!" some of the older tenurees would tell me. "It's not for the faint of heart." Well, that was true. I wasn't faint of heart, but I definitely wanted some sort of life that wasn't exclusively teach, then don't sleep, then teach again. "Why, I've never even had kids since I get thirty every year," one of my hosts said. "Wouldn't have time for them anyway."

Oh God.

There comes a moment, where everyone must ask "what am I for." Not necessarily in the opinion sense, as in politics, or religious beliefs of "what am I for," but rather, in the epistemological sense. An often-said phrase is "what am I doing with my life," whether in jest, or in despair, and we humans don't seem to be very good at figuring out what we actually want to do with our transient existence, tending to move ephemerally between our desired life outcomes. It is readily apparent, however, when that outcome isn't grading papers.

While those who need security and don't necessarily seek a life outside of their work are perfectly cut out for teaching, this simply was not me. It may have been me at one time, but people change, and holding onto the values of a different iteration of myself was slowly killing me. While I may be someone who concerns myself very much with rules and conventions, I recognize that they're not necessarily a way to live one's life, especially life away from work.

So, then...if not teaching, then what? I tried to think about the things that I liked most about teaching compared with the

things I disliked most about it. I was never one to make a "pros and cons" list, but it seemed applicable in this case since I'd already made up my mind.

I started to think about the tasks that I felt the most fulfilled with. I had already wanted to be a writing teacher, but though while my creative writing was passable it definitely wasn't something I was good enough to make a living off of doing. I was thinking about how much I enjoyed working with student writing, and how much I enjoyed working through the bumps and cracks of the specifics of writing, when I remembered something that my field director told me while I was planning a lesson on comma splices. "Don't teach grammar," he said, ignoring my mortified expression. "It isn't important, and there's other things that are more important to your students."

Uh. Hello? Collen Young, English Education Major. Nice to meet you. I thought we taught English here. However, he was entirely correct. If one were to open up the content standards, they would find that all grammar content ends in the fifth grade, at which point the writing standards become increasingly vague, and much more standardized test-esque, while at the same time seeming exceedingly pleasing to a board room full of bored politicians. (My favorite will always be "students will use language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful.")

At that point, I resolved, I was going to be a champion of grammar, a preacher of the participles, a gladiator of gerunds, a martyr of the metonyms. Much less charmingly, "a professional Grammar Nazi," as my roommate put it. I was going to try to edit professionally and set myself free of the shackles of public education. For years I have toiled, seeking to appease the aloof

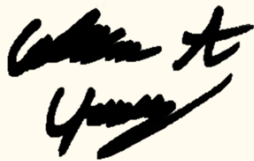
and faceless government overlords that dictate my day-to-day life! I have struggled under the weight of professionalism while not being treated like a professional, a non-autonomous automaton!

But I digress.

Since then, everything's been amazingly upbeat. I feel like I can breathe, like I'm allowed to be a person. In the English department, the change was immediate. I feel like a professional working towards something, rather than around some arbitrary guidelines.

There's a lesson to be learned here: make the change immediately, and do not wait for things to get better. If you seek change, be the change that you want to see in your own life. Just like the education system, things do not inherently change without effort. Just as in editing, and in life, exercise good judgement and be cautious, but ultimately, if there's something that needs to be changed, change it.

All Best,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Collen Young' with a stylized, cursive script.

Collen Young



My first semester at Miami University was the worst time of my life.

I didn't make any close friends in the fall of 2016. In fact, I was pretty sure my neighbors in my dorm disliked me. I didn't feel like I fit in at the preppy school known as "J. Crew U." and "The Mother of Fraternities." My close friends from high school felt so far away. Their Instagram accounts showed the cultivated aesthetic of a perfect, fun college experience. They'd moved on and made new friends, and I was left in the dust.

I wanted to transfer, but as a student paying for college on her own, my scholarships trapped me in a financial web. I spent hours researching what kinds of financial aid I could get at another in-state school, but looking at the numbers discouraged me from mustering the energy to apply anywhere, especially when there was no guarantee things would be better at a new school.

I wish I could go back and tell that freshman girl that no matter how awful it felt watching her roommate and the girls next door get ready to go to a party that she wasn't invited to, things will get better. I wish that before I came to college that someone had told me that no matter how awful the first semester is, don't jump the gun on transferring as the only possible solution so quickly.

Looking back as a second-semester junior, I'm grateful that I stuck through that awful freshman year. If I'd transferred, I never would have had the life-altering experience of studying abroad in Spain during Miami's 2018 summer abroad program through the assistance of scholarships from the Miami Family Fund and the Department of Spanish and Portuguese.

I got to celebrate the Fourth of July on el Camino de Santiago, the Way of St. James, with about 40 other Miami students. El Camino is a 500-mile pilgrimage across Spain that ends at the western city of Santiago de Compostela. As part of our study abroad program, we spent a week biking and hiking the last 125 miles of the journey. While the whole experience was memorable, it was the fifth day of that Spanish pilgrimage that (somewhat ironically) showed me Miami was where I was meant to be.

Due to a knee injury and a baseball-sized, purple bruise on my inner thigh, I walked a few kilometers that day while the rest of my classmates biked ahead. Accompanying me was another girl, Tess, who didn't know how to ride a bike. Throughout the entire trip abroad, Tess and I became great friends as we discussed our respective boy drama back home and the challenges of navigating Spanish language and culture.

After over an hour walking through beautiful open plains, our professor, José, came by and picked us up in his red rental car. The students on bikes had already stopped for lunch, and since we missed the free sandwiches our guides passed out to the group, José took us to a small café-bar and bought us seafood paella and Cokes. It was one of the best meals I've ever had.

José wanted to walk with us, so we left the rental car with another chaperone who had met us at the otherwise empty restaurant and made our way leisurely through the town streets back into open land. After twenty minutes, dark clouds rolled in and thunder rumbled in the distance. As sheets of rain began to fall, José called our group's charter bus and asked the driver to come pick us up on the side of the road.

We embraced the safety of the bus and stopped to pick up the rest of our class a few kilometers ahead. We bused the rest of the way to León, our stop for the day, and José said there was a surprise waiting for us when we got there.

By the time we got to León, the sun was shining bright. The bus pulled over on the side of a city street and let us out at a park. In the middle of the park was a giant bumper car arena. One

of our guides knew the operator, and we piled into the cars for as many free games as we wanted. Spanish music blasted through the stereo speakers as 40 college kids let out their inner children, zooming around the track and slamming into each other with loud screams and laughter.

It was that moment careening around the sunlit track for the fourth time while my friends and I belted the lyrics to “Échame La Culpa” that I realized I was lucky to be a student at Miami University. If I had transferred, I probably never would have received the financial aid to make a study abroad trip like that possible. If I had transferred, I never would have lived out my high school dream of trekking el Camino and be able to proudly display my framed compostela on my wall. If I had transferred, I never would have met the guy I was seeking advice from Tess about during the trip—a guy I’ve now been happily dating for over nine months. I never would have started dancing again and become the secretary and choreographer for Miami Dance Corps, I never would have met José and the other Miami professors who’ve truly impacted my learning beyond the classroom, and I never would have developed amazing friendships abroad like I did.



Yes, sometimes transferring can be the right choice for you. If you find another school that you feel like you’d truly be happier at and have the means to go there, then do it. But don’t be so quick to throw up your hands and say, “Well, if I’m miserable here right now, then I’m going to be miserable here all four years.” I made that assumption and spent my freshman year wallowing in my misery throwing a self-pity party. It wasn’t until the summer between my sophomore and junior year that I opened my eyes and realized I was right where I was meant to be all along.

Sincerely,

Amanda
Parel

Amanda Parel

16

I am a senior at Miami University, but unfortunately, I am not graduating this spring with all of my friends. I am a senior carefully planning the classes I need (and want) to take to graduate after a fifth year. I have spent almost four years of my life experiencing this tremendous school from both academic and social perspectives, and for the first three of those years, mostly social. While my social life soared, my academic performance flopped. But saying it that way suggests that the two are mutually exclusive—that you must sacrifice one to have the other. And that, I have learned, is not the case. In fact, a very important lesson I have learned is that each actually supports the other *if* you find the right balance. Academic performance provides the confidence and sense of achievement that make social outings feel better, like a reward, and a strong network of friends provides the emotional support and opportunity for escape that refreshes the mind for more academic engagement. Thus, it is imperative that freshman students coming into college understand that striking the right balance between social and academic engagement is not only beneficial for the remainder of their lives, but it is of utmost importance to excel at a place like Miami University.

Arriving at Miami as a freshman, establishing a strong friend group was a high priority for me. During my senior year of high school, I had a brain tumor removed. The combination of recovery time and the end of the school year coincided with my classmates all going off to college themselves. The result was that my social life was effectively eliminated for about a year. I was ready to cut loose.

And Miami delivered. This school is a very social place, and based on my interactions with my classmates, the student experience at Miami depends heavily upon the social experiences they have. I feel like this is more so the case at Miami University than at most other schools. For example, around thirty percent of the student body is involved in Greek life, and the density of bars and clubs in Oxford, Ohio is so high that there appears to be an individual bar for about every 800 students. Maybe that's because the school is a bit more isolated geographically than other schools—it's hard for the students to escape. Maybe it's because of the type of students Miami tends to attract. In any event, the combination of these circumstances as well as others make it very easy to lose sight of the most important reason for being at school—to learn.

That's what happened to me. When I got to school, I instantly made friends with some of the guys who lived in my corridor at Stanton Hall. The key, it seemed, was always being available. With every new friend I made, there were even more friends to be made as our friend networks combined. A group

of us formed an intramural hockey team and actually ended up winning the advanced league championship. Some of my core friends on my team joined me in rushing the same fraternity. We all got in. The combination of playing sports together, making all the same new friends together in the same fraternity, and drinking and partying created strong social bonds. It became very difficult for me to ever say "no" when invited to do anything social. Kids on my hockey team who joined a different fraternity didn't stop being my friends. Rather, they introduced me to even more people who eventually became my friends. Then the dreaded "FOMO" (fear of missing out) set in. I never wanted to let anybody down.

By letting my focus on friends get so encompassing, I let academics fall by the wayside. I would skip class, miss homework assignments (even sometimes tests), sleep all day, drink too much, and simply waste too much time. In fact, after about the eighth week at college, my roommate (who was on probation at the time) brought a gallon of vodka into our dorm. Because I was so obsessed with what my peers thought of me, I took the blame for the alcohol violation when the cops showed up. Fortunately, I was able to keep my roommate out of jail, but I was immediately put in bad standing with the school. My "good" act quickly earned me a reputation among my friends as being one of their most loyal, so it was becoming nearly impossible for me not to deliver! I ignored my responsibilities as a student. By the time final exams rolled around, there was no way I could cram enough to get acceptable grades. When I arrived at Miami, I was a pre-med major with high-hopes of becoming an orthopedic surgeon. By the end of freshman year, I was on academic probation.

Unfortunately, going the opposite direction—focusing entirely on academics—is not likely to benefit you any more. Spending too much time in the library or with your head in the books or in front of a computer screen might lead to burning out. Doing school work, whether it be studying, completing homework, or writing an essay, is a highly solitary activity. Spending too much time in solitary confinement can't be a good thing. After all, that's what our prisons do to their most poorly behaved inmates. One of the guys I met freshman year, someone who lived right down the hall from me and who was a very agreeable, friendly person, was also a pre-med major. We all enjoyed one another's company. He got great grades, and although he would have liked to go out socially with me and my group of friends, stayed in studying most nights. Underneath, he was unhappy. He couldn't figure out how to have fun in college and still perform academically. Unfortunately, he left Miami after only one semester.

Your time in college, in general, is one where you can most efficiently make connections and form these important social structures. College is a place where many people create their most valuable lifelong friends. While this is extremely important to creating a network of friends and peers with whom connections might become beneficial in the future, young, often naïve, college students usually cannot make the distinctions as to which connections are positive and which ones are negative. Therefore, ensuring each individual relationship is a positive one is paramount to student success and happiness; however, it is up to the student to make that decision. And how do you do that? The paradox continues. Students are on their own for the first time at college, so they are tasked with making their own decisions, and making the correct decisions early in their college careers can greatly impact their future success. Unless students have created a mindset, one they will retain throughout their college career and that gives them the ability to understand the importance of certain decisions' future impact,

the college-experience in terms of social experiences will be particularly enlightening.

So, what am I trying to say? Simply put, a student must have the discipline to strike the right balance between social and academic endeavors in order to benefit the most from Miami University. As a matter of fact, a successful social life as well as a successful academic one, together, create positive synergies. The two fields end up relying on each other, and the addition or subtraction of too much energy to either one will adversely affect the other. What is that balance exactly? That is for each individual student to find himself. It is the process of finding the discipline within oneself that will actually benefit that person for their entire life. I have only begun to find the balance that I need in order to feel and perform at my best at school (and I still haven't even been able to discipline myself enough to exercise at the rec center five times per week). Finding the right balance is a journey that can take students most of their college careers, but many of the most successful students do so very early in their college careers.



Ultimately, like I have stated before, you as a student are here at college to learn, so everything that I have said in regard to building a successful social network should obviously be proportional to the amount work that you do academically, and maintaining, a high GPA, and a good rapport with the school and its professors is the most effective way to succeed at Miami University.

While I cannot tell you exactly how to strike the right balance between school and friends, I can tell you how to excel academically at school. I am going to give advice to a new Miami student from the perspective of someone who neglected academia as well as the study process and pretty much anything that had to do with school for three years. However, after having changed my mindset to what it is now and coming closer to finding the right balance, I believe that my advice is particularly valuable.

There are a number of opportunities for a student to earn points for things as simple as showing up for class. Attendance isn't required at Miami University, but a large majority of the professors at the school award points for it. Also, professors often offer points for the completion of simple homework assignments.

These are examples of what I call low-hanging fruit. What I mean is that these points are some which should not be lost as going to class and completing homework assignments are simple ways to maintain a good grade in any class. Also, earning these points allows for the ease-of-mind that comes with truly knowing the material when finals come around. Miami University, like many other schools, works with a building block system where putting in the work when it is prescribed and not falling behind lead to a student performing efficiently during finals week.

To maintain a good rapport with professors, I can mostly suggest participating in class and also attending office hours when possible. Sure, both of these processes can be stressful, especially if you're like me. But, once you can get yourself over that hump of embarrassment or anxiety, you will quickly realize that professors and students alike actually highly value your input and your willingness to learn.

Fortunately, success breeds success. Once you understand what it feels like to put in hard

work and to positively benefit from it, you tend to want to experience that as often as possible. It feels good to do well!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sean'.

Sean Nerevil

In the last hours before it was due, I remember sitting in front of a computer screen, the clock ticking, staring at the application question with my brow furrowed. This question seemed to hold my entire future within its construction.

"What is your intended major?" it read, in Times New Roman, 12-point font, bolded and given an asterisk, because it was just that important.

It wasn't as if I hadn't considered this question before. Teachers, parents, and friends alike seemed to obsess over it, inundating me with their opinions and expectations, all qualified with a "but don't worry, whatever you choose, I'm sure you'll do fine." Even magazines and news sites had an opinion, with headlines promising to let you in on the best and worst majors, the ones that make the most money, the ones that have the best job satisfaction, and which memes most accurately represent each major.

My answer for years had been pre-medical studies and biology, with a minor in Spanish for good measure. I thought I'd had everything figured out. I would breeze through organic chemistry and honors biology, amass hours upon hours of community service and shadowing, then nail my interviews and voila! I'd be drowning in anatomy textbooks and slicing open cadavers at a mid to top-tier medical school in no time.

This plan was everything to me at the time, I thought I'd had everything figured out. While other friends struggled to decide and took personality quizzes to match themselves with careers, I sat back and relaxed because I didn't have to worry. I'd taken all the science advanced placement exams and did well, so of course everything would be fine and I was meant to be a doctor, right?

wrong. My plan had several flaws, and in my first semester of college, this realization smacked me in the face. My idealization of having a glittering career in scrubs and saving lives made me forget that a) I have no aptitude for math b) I've always greatly disliked math, c) science beyond high school contains a lot of math,

and d) you have to do well in advanced science to go into medicine, because medicine is, in fact, a science. These, among other reasons and realizations, threw me into a whirlwind of trying and failing, and trying and failing again, to decide what it was that I truly wanted to do with my life.

In my second semester of freshman year, still apprehensive about changing my major, I took a pre-med required class called "Intro to Psychology" and loved it. I became part of a research lab and by the end of the semester, I'd taken the deep-dive, without consulting anyone, and changed my major to psychology. My stress and anxieties about the future eased because, finally, I thought I'd had everything figured out.

Unsurprising to you, but very surprising to my sophomore self, I was wrong yet again. Through working in a research lab and taking several intro level classes, I quickly discovered that central to psychology is the kind of math I despise most, statistics. While I enjoyed learning about the intricacies of human behavior and of social interactions, every other aspect of psychology gave me a headache. This sent me back into a flurry of uncertainty and anxiety about what to do next, and for the first time, I set foot in my advisor's office. This turned out to be the best decision I've made in my time at college.

My advisor recommended taking some general education requirement classes and enlightened me with the suggestion that perhaps I should consider my academic strengths when deciding on a major and doing a little more research into what a discipline entails before jumping in and finding out afterward. This advice guided me toward the major I have today, and I can, for once, say with certainty that I found my match.

My journey is a common one, and I don't regret the winding path I took toward landing on a major, but the mistakes and stumbles I made along the way could have been prevented. I could have saved myself time and money. You can too. If you're a prospective college student finding yourself staring at a computer screen, scrolling through the options for that all-important question, "What is your

intended major?"; first, just breathe. The decision you make on that application is not the be-all and end-all of your future. Letting go of the pressure to make a premature decision can help ease the anxiety of the process of figuring it out and can prevent you jumping into something too quickly like I did.

Second, consider your strengths and weaknesses. If solving math problems invokes the feeling of a stampede of cattle trampling around your cerebellum, then maybe don't force yourself into a major that involves copious amounts of mathematical reasoning. If you thrive off of collaboration and interpersonal communication, then a major that leads to a career sitting in an isolated cubicle might not be for you. Get to know yourself and think about how different majors align with your strengths.

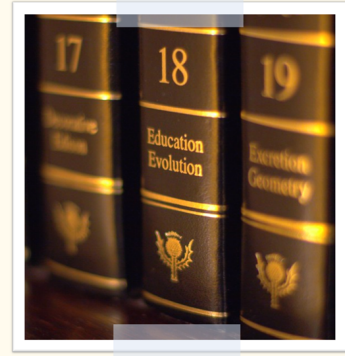
Third, do some research. It's helpful to know exactly what a major entails and what careers it leads to before you take the plunge. Consider your strengths and weaknesses while doing research, and talk to people who are in that field to get a better grasp of whether you can see yourself doing the same thing.

Fourth, listen to advice and don't be afraid to ask for help. I would not recommend avoiding your advisor like I did. You probably should not be seeing their office for the first time as a sophomore. Advisors can provide you with resources and information you wouldn't have access to on your own. Their job is to help you, and they've helped countless other students in your exact position. You are not alone and you have time. Things will fall into place as you grow and become more attune to who you are as a person. Deciding on a major can be stressful and anxiety-inducing, but it doesn't have to be. Following these steps can mitigate the stress and ensure that when you do eventually decide, the decision will be one you can make with confidence.

Best,

A stylized, cursive handwritten signature in black ink. The signature appears to read 'Alexandra Contestable' with a large, looping flourish at the end.

Alexandra Contestable



College is a like a novel; as a freshman, you start with a chapter already behind you. As you continue to read, you will find that you end and begin in the same place, but with an infinitely stronger sense of self. You are an energetic 18-year-old whose first large-scale daunting life obstacle is living far away from family and with a roommate who you may or may not know. Behind you are your parents back at home and your entire high school life, and before you is a brand new chapter filled with characters both identical and completely different than you. It is easy within the first year or two to lose focus on the exciting pages ahead of you, and linger on pages in the past. Luckily, there are a plethora of distractions in college—so many that you may find yourself overcommitting to activities, clubs, and classes. Taking the first step off the diving board of your college experience starts with finding people who have similar interests, and trying your best to blend in.

When classes begin you will be the same as everyone else—eager to learn, nervous, and completely lost as to what you actually want to do for the rest of your lives. The biggest thing you have in common with a quarter of your new college population, is that you are new. This is one of the first steps in developing a stronger sense of self—fitting in or blending in just to survive. Most of the time, students will pick a major because it's what their parents suggest, what friends alike recommend, or what older people have told them they need to specialize in to make a living. But these suggestions can alter your perception on what it is you really enjoy doing. Questions like "what is the right thing to do?" and "Now that I'm on my own, who should I go to for guidance if I don't know what to do?" will hold your attention like pages folded in a book.

You are now in your sophomore or junior year of college, the next chapter of deciding if you want to continue to fit in or if you want to find your own path. A lot can change in the first few years at a new place; by now you have made friends (whether it be through organizations, classes, intramural sports, or clubs) and realize that your friendships and major may have already changed from freshman year. You must continue to remind yourself not to look back on the previous page—on last year's chapter—and to plan for the rest of your college career. Strengthening your sense of self in these years takes a lot of reassurance. By now, most of your collegiate colleagues will have a clear vision of exactly where they want to be, how they want their chapter at college to end. At this point, you may ask yourself, "I must be going in the right direction, right?" "Everyone seems to have their entire future planned out, but is this what I really want to be doing?"

A pivotal point in this situation is the decision to trust oneself. You have to combat the instinct to compare yourself to others, and make decisions that you feel are the most conducive to the completion of your own chapter. If all your friends are going out every night or staying in every night, which one do you follow? If you trust and respect both of these friends equally, which one is right and which one is wrong? College,

is the epitome of trial and error. It is essential to test the waters, try different tactics, different personas, to see which one fits you best. In doing so, there will be peaks, pitfalls, and moments of question, all which will only lead you to your stronger sense of self more quickly. For example, if these are the "best four years of your life," who cares if you skip class? No one can hold you accountable to showing up for class and working diligently other than yourself. This is a decision that you need to make. What is the best path for you? Not what is the best path that everyone else is taking.



Then, before you know it, your college chapter has become almost completely filled with pages and pages of stories, experiences, and lessons. You have tackled challenges that you never knew you would need to face. You have mastered meeting with professors, job recruiters, advisors, teacher assistants, and classmates with many different types of work ethics. These interactions have challenged your ability to be self-assured even if you disagree with those who are ten, twenty, or sometimes thirty years your senior, you now understand that being treated as if your thoughts and concerns are unimportant is unprofessional and not okay. This is exactly what college is all about, learning and understanding what you stand for, what you're interested in, and what you want to do with your life.

At the last part of this chapter, you have been through almost four life-changing years of growth, understanding, and learning. Titles in your chapter should make you realize: you have made a lot of mistakes but have chosen to take each mistake as a lesson, you have made lifelong friendships and you have also made acquaintances, you have had professors tell you to do the wrong thing and have had some who helped you discover your true passion. Some classes that you take in college will stay with you for the rest of your life. The time you have spent at what once was a blank page is gone, and you can reflect knowing confidently that every single year was filled with no time wasted. However, this is not the end of your novel, this is simply the end of a section. You now have a more-defined and stronger sense of self, ready to fill the remaining pages.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Adina Ahlstrom'. The signature is stylized with a large, looped 'A' and a long, sweeping underline.

Adina Ahlstrom