STUDENT TO STUDENT: College Beyond the Classroom

Edited by Marlene F. Blumin
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“[C]ollege is the place that propels me to the threshold of the world.”
—Kenisha Gibbons, WATCH High School, Brooklyn, NY

"I want to go away for college, but I am having doubts."
—Makisha Claverie, WATCH High School, Brooklyn, NY
To the students who have dreams and the courage to follow them.
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Preface

For many students, the transition from high school to college can seem daunting. After all, so much changes for the student who has become used to parental guidance at home; teacher-centered learning at school; and curfews, rules, and prohibitions.

College means freedom for students, and freedom means shouldering new responsibilities from day one. Students must become responsible for their own learning, for instance, even as they take on greater intellectual challenges. They also are asked to cut their own path as they navigate the complex and tempting cultural landscape of parties, cliques, and clubs.

A sibling or a parent who has been to college often can answer questions, offer advice, and alleviate anxieties, but what about students who are from immigrant backgrounds and who are first-generation college students? Who can help ease their transition?

I met students curious about what it means to go to college on a 2011 site visit on behalf of Syracuse University Project Advance to partner school World Academy for Total Community Health (WATCH) High School in Brooklyn, NY. In fact, the discussion that we began there—one that revealed the students' lack of confidence in their ability to be accepted at a college and to be a success there—eventually led to this book.

That is, I noticed how thrilled these students were to meet the author of the textbook they were using in their Syracuse University College Learning Strategies course, offered through Project Advance. So, because of their genuine concerns about college and their interest in authorship, I decided to offer the students a chance to contribute to a book-length project that could help others in their situation with similar questions.
Besides, having the students contribute to a book would bring value to their thoughts and questions. I also hoped that they would see that the possibilities for them are limitless and that college is an attainable goal.

I decided to ask the students to reflect on their own lives in a short biography and to express their questions in the form of a short essay around a single theme. The questions could then be answered by Syracuse University upperclassmen who “know the ropes.”

McNair Scholars were chosen as interlocutors because—as you will see from their biographies—many come from similar backgrounds and could identify with the questions and concerns of the WATCH students. The McNair Scholars, I believed, would make great role models and mentors and would give candid responses.

*Dr. Marlene F. Blumin,*
*Syracuse University,*
*June 2012*

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**About WATCH High School**

World Academy for Total Community Health (WATCH) High School in East New York, Brooklyn, NY opened in 2004 on the grounds of the old Thomas Jefferson High School. It is organized under Brooklyn’s New Century High Schools and the New York State Department of Education’s Empowerment Schools initiatives. It enrolls approximately 400 students.

WATCH’s goal is to prepare students for careers in the health industry. To enhance learning and student participation, there are internships, job placements, and classroom lectures from health industry professionals. WATCH works with many community health care partners, including lead partner Brownsville Multi Service Family Health Center.

The school’s population is primarily diverse, young, immigrant, and of low income. Addressing this community’s challenges drives an important aspect of WATCH’s mission, to ask its students to make healthy choices, lead healthy lives, and advocate for the total health of their families, their community, their nation, and their world.

WATCH sets high expectations. Students must adhere to a uniform dress code, perform well academically and behaviorally, and—to acknowledge
their community’s support—put in hours of neighborhood community service and service learning in a health setting.

About the McNair Scholars Program at Syracuse University

The McNair Scholars Program at Syracuse University is one of 194 McNair Post-Baccalaureate Achievement Programs funded by the US Department of Education, designed to support students from disadvantaged backgrounds. McNair programs prepare high-achieving undergraduate students for graduate studies with research opportunities, academic services, financial support, and internships.

McNair participants demonstrate strong academic potential and are either first-generation college students with a financial need or members of a group traditionally underrepresented in graduate education. SU works closely with its scholars throughout their undergraduate career, encourages their entrance into graduate programs, and tracks their progress. The SU program serves 25 scholars annually.

The McNair programs are named for laser physicist and astronaut Dr. Ronald Erwin McNair, who was killed in the 1986 Challenger Space Shuttle accident. A distinguished scientist and the second African American to fly in space, McNair was posthumously awarded the Congressional Space Medal of Honor and memorialized by Congress, which provided funding for the McNair programs, dedicated to the high standards he met throughout his life.
Makisha Claverie
WATCH High School, Brooklyn, NY

Biography
I was born Oct. 8, 1993 in Trinidad, where I grew up. Life in my home country, I would have to say, was very satisfying. I did not live the best life, but it was fun at times. My grandmother was always sheltering me from things that I did not need shelter from. Even though I was isolated from society, always under my grandmother’s orders, my siblings had some part to play in my happiness. My brother and cousins always encouraged me to join them when they went outside to play, but I was always held back from doing so. I have a passion for drawing, music, and creativity, so in my free time these are the activities I am engaged in; also sporting activities such as track, football, soccer, netball, and volleyball.

I migrated to the United States of America, where I attend WATCH High School on the Thomas Jefferson school campus. I am in the 11th grade and well on my way to attending college. I am a determined, well-rounded student, and I always complete my tasks given to me by my teachers. I am part of the Wellness Community and also an advocate for Thomas Jefferson Garden. I have improved in my academic studies and look to new opportunities. My goal is to be a medical doctor. To me life is not about how much you can get but what you can earn for yourself.
Essay: Transitions

Transitioning has been an important factor in the lives of many young people. Young adults who are very attached to their parents face this problem. Parents have always been around to help and shelter them in every way. I guess they feel comfort around them, but now they are old enough to make decisions of their own, especially as they are preparing to enter college. I want to go away for college, but I am having doubts. Considering these facts of moving away from home, meeting new people, and remaining focused is the cause of my dubious state of mind. My parents are not eager for me to go away to college, but they want what is best for me and the colleges they recommended are far away from home. My earnest concern is being on my own and having no one to give me any direction.

This has been the plight of many high school graduates. For those who are thinking about going to college far away from home, this is an immense challenge. High school graduates may have these difficulties with leaving as I do, such as having no one to wake me up for classes, going to parties and getting in trouble, procrastinating, failing subjects, and flunking out of college. These are just some of the many problems of transitioning. My teachers also play a significant part in parenthood because they are like mentors. They guide you and encourage you to reach your full potential. I have been told by college graduates that the professors have no interest in getting to know you at a personal level, nor do they care whether or not you pass or fail. These factors contribute to the difficulty many youths may have during the high school to college transition.

However, some teenagers wanting to move away are very excited and are taking necessary precautions to ensure that they are comfortable where they are situated. Information was provided to them, as a means of helping them be better equipped and confident in leaving home. As they enter freshman year they are given a mentor until the end of the year. They also have ways of speaking with their professor one on one, before and after class. In dorms that you pay for, they can have roommates or they can choose to live alone. Campus security is always provided to ensure the safety of all students. These are reasons transitioning can be a safe, productive, and enlightening experience for any person entering college.
Many concerns have surrounded the transitioning issue. I, too, have my own concerns on the matter. I think programs should be initiated in every high school to have a two-week trip to a college that is out of state. This will be a great experience and a wonderful way of helping young people make up their minds on leaving home. I hope teenagers like me who face these challenges are obtaining the necessary information that they need to know about college and going away to college. In conclusion, knowing where you want to go and working towards that is the best you can do until the time has come for any more decisions.

Michele Cantos

Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY

Biography

My name is Michele Cantos, and I am completing my senior year at Syracuse University. By December of 2011 I will be 21 years old, and by May 2012 I will become a college graduate, so transitions are nothing new for me.

Like you, I also grew up in a different country and came to the United States when I was about 12 years old. I was born in Brooklyn, NY to Ecuadorian parents and I lived in the projects until I was 6 years old. However, a little after my 6th birthday, my family and I moved to a small town called Riobamba, in Ecuador. Moving to an Andean town, surrounded by snow-capped mountains, cornfields, and indigenous people, was a huge contrast from growing up on the 19th floor of a federal housing project in the Southside of Brooklyn, where we had Caribbean and Orthodox Jewish neighbors.

We moved back to Brooklyn about 5 years later, back to the same projects and environment, but this time I no longer felt at home. These transitions have been very hard and have also impacted my transition from high school to college as well. In Ecuador, I was raised by a very conservative and tight-knit family, so the idea of a young girl leaving her home to go study law, which is what I wanted to study at the time, seemed ridiculous and dangerous. People at my church also had some say and told my
parents that sending me to college would mean that I become a “partier” and “lose my way,” and essentially that it would be a waste of money. I understand their fears and their concern but, ultimately, education is not a waste, and I told my parents that this opportunity was too good to give up. I also told them that they had raised me to become a responsible and studious young adult; no college, no friends, or any “dangers” could change me. And just so you know, my parents weren’t too happy about me going to Syracuse until they visited the campus with me. Once they saw the campus, the environment, and what the dorms looked like, they told me that this was a dream come true and that they would be so proud if I graduate from this university.

Parents are often reluctant and overprotective, but at least in my case, and maybe yours, it’s because they don’t know a lot about college and perhaps don’t know anyone who has gone away from college. My parents fear came from a feeling of helplessness; they wanted to help me make the right decision about which college to attend, but they didn’t know which one would be best. So I would recommend taking a tour or two with some of your family. They may understand better once they see the university.

Response to Makisha Claverie
Makisha, you are right to have worries about waking up for classes, procrastinating, going to parties, failing subjects, and flunking out of college. These are real concerns, and I have dealt with all of these at some point. I am lucky to be a morning person and don’t mind waking up very early. However, it is hard to wake up early when you are tired from doing homework all night, studying, working for money, and trying to have a social life. Sometimes, my alarm clock is not enough and I can’t wake up for classes. That is normal.

However, you can prepare for it by taking some very simple steps. The summer before you start college, get into the habit of waking up early and doing something productive like reading a newspaper, studying a couple of SAT words, or doing something creative, since you mentioned a passion for drawing and music. This will get your body (and brain) used to that routine, and if all else fails you can always sign up for classes that take place later on in the day, since most college let you make your own schedule.
Failing subjects and flunking college wasn’t something that I struggled with a lot with in my college career, but I did have a hard time with classes my freshman year and sadly, that is reflected in grades for my first and second semesters. I was very behind academically and had trouble with my science classes. I never failed a class or got anything below a B-, but I often felt that I would not pass and this brought me a lot of stress.

I considered returning to Brooklyn a couple of times my freshman year because I thought it was too hard, but you know what, I just dedicated myself to my studies, asked for extra credit from my professors and trusted that I ended up at this school because I was meant to achieve great things. And I have! I am now an honors student and have had leadership positions in many clubs and organizations. Makisha, if you ever feel like this, please don’t give up! Everyone struggles in college, but you will find your way and become a great academic and professional.

Now, let’s talk about parties. I attend one of the top party schools in the country and have somehow managed to do very little partying. In fact, I didn’t go to a “real” college party until my junior year. I am just not that big of a partier, it’s not really my scene, but it was definitely an option throughout college. I have many friends who party and managed to get good grades and such. However, they were responsible and made sure to never neglect their studies for a party. There will be many parties through college and much after college.

My advice to you is not to worry too much about this aspect, have fun, be young, but always be responsible. Conduct yourself as a lady and realize that just because you are away from home does not mean that you can do whatever you want. Most likely than not, you will have to take a couple of loans to pay for college, and those will be expensive. You do not have the option of not taking school seriously because that is what you are going away to school for.

Parties will come and go but your degree and your grades will follow you around forever, especially if you are thinking of pursuing a medical degree. Also, I think that parties are a lot more fun now that I am older because I have good group of friends to go with and there is no need to try to fit in or impress anyone. I often go salsa dancing or go to the Hispanic parties and have a good time with my friends. I don’t drink alcohol, and, honestly, I
think that because of that I have a great time. I also have great pictures that I am not embarrassed to show my family.

Let’s get back to the academic stuff. You must become resourceful and take advantage of all the opportunities your university offers. Research scholarships, programs, and your faculty online and learn about what projects they are working on. You have been told that teachers don’t care about our grades and that they aren’t as nurturing as our high school teachers. While that is true to some degree, it has been my experience that most professors became professors because they like to work with young students, and if you are scared of lacking guidance in college, then they are the perfect people to get to know.

If you enjoy a class a lot and like the professor, then you can always go to their office hours, a time they set apart for helping and meeting their students. What I’ve done during office hours is introduce myself to them and tell them how much I am enjoying the class. Perhaps you can bring up something specific you learned in that class and ask more questions about it. Even if you know a lot about that topic, your professor will be impressed with your intellectual curiosity, and these conversations can help you develop a professional relationship, and sometimes even a friendship.

Often, I have approached a professor who studied what I intend on studying in graduate school, and I asked them to share with me what their experience with that process was. They have been so happy to share that with me, and all of those professors have influenced my decision to pursue a postgraduate education. One of those professors has even become a good friend. She and I used to meet weekly, and she’d tell me about her research, her classes, and even personal things like when she decided to look for jobs at other universities. So don’t be scared to talk to professors, just remember to approach them with respect and kindness and to always be prepared for these meetings. I always take a notepad and jot down some questions before I see them.

Makisha, you and I have a lot in common. I struggled with almost all of the same questions that you are struggling with. You seem like a very hard worker and have set many goals for yourself. When you get to college, you just need to remember that you are unique, intelligent, and an asset to your new university. Always remember to set your priorities. You must work
hard and not let anyone tell you who you have to be and what you have to do.

You will meet a lot of people, many from other states and other countries, and you will have to distinguish between who is a real friend and who is not. A real friend will want you to be happy and to succeed in all of your endeavors, whether they are academic or an organization or club at your school. Don’t lose touch with your family, especially if you have always been close to them. Make time to call (or video chat with) your family and to keep them informed of what you are doing. You are fortunate to have a family that wants to be involved in your life, and you should always keep them in the loop and let them know that you are grateful for their support.

You will be a great college student and maybe someday I will run into you at one of these schools. It is a pleasure to extend any advice to you, and I wish you the very best!
Amelia Fraser
WATCH High School, Brooklyn, NY

Biography

My name is Amelia Fraser. I am a junior in WATCH High School on the Thomas Jefferson campus. I was born in Jamaica, and I have been living in America for almost six years now. I was coming into a new school system, new to everything. I had a totally different idea about America and its people from the stories I heard from people who traveled there. Coming here, I realized that the place is not as I was told; I just imagined such a beautiful place where everything happens, and I would be mixed up with a whole different race of people. Instead, I was surrounded by people of Caribbean descent. I had absolutely no problem with that; I just had a different mindset.

As time went by, I was doing very well in all my classes; I made friends and was having a good time. I learned a lot of new things and started to assimilate with my new surroundings. I missed being back home, but I knew I had to make good out of what I have now because I was not visiting Jamaica anytime soon; to this day I still have not set foot on Jamaican soil. Entering my high school years, I started to miss home even more. My mother told me we should be visiting in like two years, which would be 2013. School seems to be a little more difficult than before. I sometimes feel like I am losing my edge for doing very well in school, then I remember if I
was back home how many tons of schoolwork and studying I would be doing in order to pass a boatload of exams I would be facing. This helps me to keep on track.

Now I am at the ending times of my high school years, and it went by so fast. I can still remember the first day of freshman year. This summer I have a wonderful internship at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center. It is a very wonderful opportunity for me because it will help me to decide where I want to stand in my future, professionally. I am excited and hope to excel in this internship because not a lot of people get this opportunity, and being able to do this is such a blessing.

I am nervous about college and choosing the ones that best fit my transcript; it is a new ball game and working at Memorial Sloan-Kettering will hopefully help prepare me for that. I am the type of person who wants a lot in my future, and in order for me to attain that I need to take everything school-wise seriously. I do not plan on being in my late twenties working a minimum wage job; I plan to be in my career doing very well, and in order for that to happen I need to make sure I am focused. I have big dreams, and I really want to see me showered in them, so I know I am going to make it if I do the right thing and not mess up or let anyone get in my way.

Essay: Dating on College Campus

In high school a lot of people save themselves from the drama that comes with a relationship; they prefer to start all that business in their college life. Some students do this because they are not ready or interested in mixing with the opposite sex, or they were brought up to focus on their schoolwork and to leave dating for later in life. This type of thinking has both its positive and negative effects.

The positive effects of waiting till college to start dating are that you will be able to focus and keep up your grades, because being in a relationship is distracting to some people. But dating in high school allows one to learn healthy communication skills with a partner. It allows teens to resolve disagreements as they go through the ups and downs of a relationship; these are useful skills in preparation for marriage. Another positive effect is that it gives young people lot of confidence and standing with their peers,
so when they enter college, they know how to handle dealing with a new variety of people.

The negative effects of waiting are you will not have any experience; you will fall for a lot of things and always feel like you are in love. If you have dealt with all the ups and downs before, you can easily spot a dead end and not make that mistake because you’ve already made it. People who wait do not have this knowledge and can break down, causing their grades to drop; this is the wrong time of your life to be making these mistakes. Everyone should experience something like this in their high school years so you know how to handle yourself in college and not make silly mistakes that can turn into a huge problem for you later down the line.

I am concerned about when is the best time to get involved in a relationship. I think that freshman year I should have fun yet focus on my schoolwork and getting to know my surroundings. It also depends on what year is most important, when you get to actually go deep into your major. Another concern is that in high school I see people who have a lot of partners getting called names; will it be the same for college? Why do some women drop out of their majors to be with their partners? Is the dating life of college similar to high school? How does one handle relationships and academics together without getting off-track?

Priscilla Owusu
Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY

Biography
Hello Amelia, I was born in another country too (Ghana, Africa), and I came to the US when I was about 8 years old. I can completely relate to what you were describing about the misconception of America by people from other countries. I was told that I would be in a land where it’s easy to make your dreams come true, and I would be exposed to people of all different cultures and would probably learn hundreds of languages as a result.

I have to admit dreams do come true here, but this was obviously highly dramatized because I went to school at Dewitt Clinton High School where
the student body was predominantly black and Hispanic. The only contact I had with Caucasians was when I went to Manhattan and saw most of them walking around focused on where they needed to get to for work. The low-income building my family and I lived in was predominantly black Americans, but some of the residents were also Ghanaians, who seemed to report my every action to my parents.

You can imagine why I was so excited to go away to college and experience life more independently.

Response to Amelia Fraser

My experiences with relationships have been complicated and evolving. I actually started a long-term relationship in my sophomore year of high school. My boyfriend was two years ahead of me, so when he went to college at Syracuse University, I followed after thinking it would make the relationship stronger.

In college, I became involved with trying to maintain my grades in school, maintain my relationship that was going on for three years, and, at the same time, make time with my friends. It was difficult. Your college is most likely going to be predominantly white, and, as a result, the small populations of minorities left are going to know each other, and there is going to be this minority community that develops.

In this community people who you are not even aware of are going to know information about your relationship you didn’t even know existed. This can easily come between you and your partner, so you have to make sure you keep your relationship private and stay immune to any rumors of cheating, break-ups, or fights people may claim you are having. This is all keeping in mind you decide to be in a relationship.

But even with the drama of being in a relationship in college, I wouldn’t discourage it. It determines how well you can multitask and handle situations that come up in the future. It appears that many marriages stem from college relationships. It’s about balancing your work, friends, and relationship. Unfortunately, my ex-boyfriend and I couldn’t keep the drama from intervening in our relationship after a year of trying to make it work. I would advise you to spend your first year testing the waters. I made the mistake of starting a relationship right away.
Guys seem to have more freedom in college. They have their pick of girls, and they have preconceived notions from media telling them college is a place to hook up and have fun. Especially be mindful of talking to athletes. Most athletes relish in the opportunity to have sex with multiple girls each week or even each day. The girls they sleep with are just another number on their list, as I’m sure you already know.

Please don’t fall prey to these men. Your first year may determine your reputation for the rest of college. If you go out a lot, you will be named the party girl. If you are seen with different guys, you will be named the promiscuous girl without any proof. I have friends that are hesitant to go out because they wonder what people may say about them because of their actions one crazy drunken night. This may make having fun seem so incriminating, but just make sure your actions aren’t anything you will regret the next morning and you will be fine.

So have fun, but with caution. Form relationships, but make sure they don’t impact your work negatively. And most of all, enjoy new experiences and take lots of pictures so that you can reflect on this new amazing adventure you are about to embark on!
Kenisha Gibbons
WATCH High School, Brooklyn, NY

Biography

My name is Kenisha Gibbons, and I am a junior at WATCH High School. I am a native-born American with parents from Guyana, South America. I feel that my parents’ heritage has influenced me a lot, and some of the same values and morals they grew up with have been instilled in my life as well. This makes me the bubbly and considerate person that I am today.

In the early years of my childhood, I spent time with my family in Guyana living and going to school there. Although I was far from away from parents who were in America at the time, I still learned many things from my cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents, and friends during my stay there. A few years down the line, I returned to America with my brother to be reunited with my parents. It was here when I started my life. I attended elementary school at a school rather close to my home, called Public School 249. After a few years I elevated to a junior high called Public School 235. Currently, I am attending WATCH High School. When I first arrived at this school, I greatly disliked it because I felt it was lacking many things and programs that I thought were necessary to have in a high school. Compared to movies I saw and assumptions I had, I realized it was completely different. Now that I am in my third year in this school, my mentality is different. I learned that everything in life is not going to be
what you expect it to be. Assumptions and actual experience are two completely different things. Along with this, I have learned to accept some of the things I cannot change, such as the fact that I am already in my second-to-last year of this school and transferring now would not make much sense.

On the plus side of my experience, I have gained knowledge in several areas. The first is that even when things go wrong you can still meet great people who will encourage you along the way. People such as these are my wonderful friends who I am glad I met. They make my experience at this school worthwhile.

Another plus is the engaging and interesting Syracuse classes I have been able to take which have made me learn a lot and get a gist of what college life is like. I know that I am really young but hope that with my experience I have gained from high school and other things I have learned in the previous years before that, I will go to a great college and become the doctor that I have yearned to be for so many years.

Essay: Socializing

College is all about enjoying oneself and preparing oneself for the real world. When starting in a new environment such as college, it is important to keep oneself on top of one’s life and workload. I am concerned about socializing and the effect it might have on me in college.

I feel as if the pressures of partying and going out to have fun might overshadow me and distract me from my main goal of becoming successful. Studying might become a hassle and having fun might become my main concern. Once I start focusing on all of these things and not my coursework, I would start to fail and maybe even drop out of college. This is something that I do not want to happen to me. I am going to college for a reason and intend on completing what I go there for.

Socializing, as I hear, is one of the main highlights of being a college student. This may range from making more friends than I ever did in high school to relationships. Then follow the great parties and other activities I hear about: going to school-oriented games, doing community service, and even completing an internship might all be on my agenda. If I get involved in some of these activities, how the heck do I keep my focus? Is it even
possible to balance completing assignments, studying, partying, and being on top of my game?

In college I feel it would be important to know how to maintain a healthy balance. Of course, I want to socialize and have fun, but focusing on my courses is really important to me too. I know that I am the type of person who gets easily distracted once something else lies in my way. This is where procrastination comes into play and with it arise consequences. If I procrastinate from doing one assignment, I might procrastinate from doing the rest. This cycle would lead to an array of failing grades. Since college is the place that propels me to the threshold of the world, I definitely do not want to mess up and land flat on my face.

I feel that in order to be successful, I have to put my best foot forward. Losing my focus, stressing, and failing are things I want to avoid. I want to be able to stay on top of my courses and yet still be able to manage my life and have fun. Is there anyone out there who can help me, please?

Jonathan Martinez
Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY

Biography
My name is Jonathan Martinez. I am currently a junior at Syracuse University. I am currently double majoring in Political Science and International Relations. I am also on track to pursue a third bachelor's degree in Public Policy. I graduated from the Murry Bergtraum High School for Business Careers and originally anticipated pursuing a business degree.

However, experiencing campus life and learning more about the world around me led me to consider my major choices. My college experience has impacted me in such a way that it has stimulated a desire to pursue a career in diplomacy/consular work. My experience in college has also stimulated my desire to learn more, and I am already gearing up for graduate school.

I cannot continue telling you my college experience without introducing my family and my roots. I am of Nicaraguan heritage, with my parents
living decent, humble lives prior to their immigration to the United States. Their lives, as well as mine, were scarred by revolution. My family fled Nicaragua after the armed conflicts following the Sandinista Revolution that toppled the Somoza regime. They immigrated to Costa Rica and eventually to Venezuela, where they settled for a short period of time.

Eventually, my family made the journey to the United States in search for better economic prospects. With a knapsack and a bag full of dreams, my family started their lives here humbly: my father worked as an industrial baker, and my mother worked in a garment factory. The world was not our oyster, but we lived humble lives, and I grew up just fine without some of the luxuries like the Xbox, Playstation, etc.

Response to Kenisha Gibbons

I remember my last few days of high school. I was overjoyed, happy with my GPA, and prepared to start my summer at Syracuse University. No doubt, my head was in the clouds.

But as I walked the aisle at the Brooklyn Academy of Music for my graduation, I could not help but sense a slight bit of insecurity for what lay ahead. It didn’t help that I watched Asher Roth’s “I Love College” music video. I was familiar with college and party atmospheres, since that’s pretty much what American media bombards you with when you put major television networks and college in an equation. But I always worried about some sort of balance.

Of course, naturally, I wanted to be conscientious about my work and possess a healthy work ethic. But at the same time, I didn’t want to be antisocial and graduate from college without some friends. Of course, you can make friends in the classroom, but many times (as I would argue), it would be nice to have and sustain relationships with people outside of the classroom who aren’t devoted exclusively to academics. Plus, it certainly is nice to let out some steam once in a while after a long, hard week.

Parties are indeed the highlight of the average college student’s workweek. The average college student does not run on a Monday-to-Friday schedule. We tend to run on a “whatever day it is” schedule. Once you enter college, it can be hard to keep track of dates because you always have something to do. Sure, you don’t have as much class instruction, but you’ll always have
something due; if not tomorrow, then eventually. It’s when we say the word “eventually” that we college partygoers usually decide to go out and have some fun. I encourage you to have fun but, of course, always with moderation.

For many students who are new to the whole “I’m in college away from home” experience, they tend to forget that there’s more to college than parties and crazy Facebook wall posts, pictures, and statuses. Before you know it, those are the students who struggle academically and have a hard time keeping their GPA up. Understand that you need to find an adequate balance between work and play. If you work hard, you deserve to play hard. If you haven’t been doing your work or have been struggling, you should consider staying in your dorm catching up with your work.

My high school principal once said that we “do not live in a world of self-gratification.” Years later, I realize that she is right. Your grades are of your concern, not of your classmate’s. You should be prepared to take responsibility for your grades and your lifestyle. If you can’t do that, who will?

I also like to think of parties as a sort of “treat.” If you do it often, you’ll probably get bored of it, but still do it and still find a way not to procrastinate that paper you have due on Monday. My research mentor here at Syracuse has something in his office that is simple but, in my opinion, powerful in meaning. It’s a small piece of paper taped on to the monitor of the screen. The paper says, “Earn it.” You should consider doing something similar (I myself have done it). If you have done your work and have “earned it,” go have fun. If you haven’t (and be honest with yourself; you’re only hurting yourself if you’re not), stay in until you have “earned it.”

But college socialization is more than parties. There are many clubs, sports activities, cultural events, and school-sponsored events that you can participate and make friends. Taking a minute and walking into your student association/government office will give you a wealth of information of places you can go, clubs you can join, and activities that you can participate in and where you can make friends in the process. There are also university-wide events sponsored by student organizations, fraternities, sororities, and the university that can be free or of little cost to you. The more you know, the more variety you have to add spice to your
daily college routine. I would absolutely recommend that you take advantage of any events or clubs that are of interest to you. If you already know somebody, bring him or her, too! If you do that, you’re already networking!

However, I would also advise caution and moderation as you consider participating in school-wide events and clubs or even consider exploring the possibility of adding an internship under your belt. You should not be victim to the too-many-clubs syndrome. In other words, don’t try to do too much. You should consider focusing on one or a small handful of clubs/organizations at a time and avoid loading yourself with so many activities that you put those activities as a priority above your grades.

The key to your college success is a relatively simple one: time management. You have 24 hours in a day. Seven to eight of those hours should be devoted to sleep (but that can change drastically as you adjust to college life, so don’t worry). That leaves you with 16 to 17 hours to go to class, do your homework, go to any clubs/events, study, work a few hours, and take a break. Yes, it sounds easier than it actually is, but it is not impossible. Remember, there are five weekdays and two days for your weekends.

Adjust your work schedule as you desire. If you learn to manage your time well and do your work in advance, you will have no problem in finding a balance between work and leisure. Use your weekdays productively, study during the weekdays when you don’t have class, and do your work during the week so that you can have your weekends free to go shopping or see a movie. Consider going to bed early and waking up early, you will find that you will probably have more productive days when you do so instead of working late into the night and waking up groggy the next morning.

Do your work (especially essays) early and have your work revised. Your best work comes out when you have the time to craft your masterpiece, not when you’re busy cramming your work within a few hours so that you can hand it in to your professor.

Before I end, there’s one last bit of advice I think is helpful as you manage your time: avoid distractions. Yes, that means the Internet, your mobile phone, or anything else you use to procrastinate. Eliminate them from your study times. You will notice that you will be more productive and still have time to go online and chat with your friends without stressing about
homework or compromising your grades. I wish you the sincere and absolute best as you embark on your college journey. Work hard, but, of course, have fun! Good luck as you pursue your academic interests!
Melissa Guobadia
WATCH High School, Brooklyn, NY

Biography
I, Melissa Guobadia, am a junior at WATCH High School. In my free time I enjoy watching television, reading, relaxing with my dog, and I love sleeping. In the future, I see myself as a successful lawyer, though I am very unsure as to what type of lawyer. Over the years, my desired profession has changed numerous times, and this makes me feel a little uncertain about what route to take in life in terms of my future. This also worries me because I feel like all my friends are certain about what they want to become in life, and I am what one may call undecided. I went from wanting to be a vet, to a teacher, to a pediatrician, now to a lawyer. Even though I am not sure that this is what I definitely want concerning my profession, I feel like I should take the opposite route from medicine and do law. I also have a special interest in the field of law because I have a tendency to remember cases. Instead of paying to go to college “undecided,” I’ve decided to go to law school and give it a try. If law isn’t for me, at least I can’t say that I didn’t try my hardest at it.

Apart from school, my family is the most important thing to me. I am the youngest of three girls, and I live with my mother and my elder sister. She is 18 and a sophomore at Hunter College. She has always been extremely bright, and she is my role model when it comes to schoolwork and
achievements. My eldest sister, who is about to turn 21, lives with my father apart from my 18-year-old sister and I. Even though we do not live together, we still find time to hang out and talk on the phone almost every day. She is more outgoing than my other sister, but she is in her last year of college.

My dad is also a great role model for me. He believes in everything I do and reminds me that anything in life is possible. He is an investigator for the government, and he makes me proud. Lastly, but probably the most important of them all, is my mom. My mom is my strength in everything, and she never makes me feel like there is anything I can’t do. She believes in me and makes me know that nothing in life is ever unachievable.

Without her, I don’t know where I would be. I look to her as to what I want to be when I grow up. She is a registered nurse’s assistant, and she makes me feel that if I put my mind to something, I can get it. She also tells me that education is the strongest weapon in this society, and education is something that will never disappear.

I feel like no matter what life throws at me, I will never be discouraged. You pick your destiny, and you can achieve anything as long as you think it is achievable. Life is hard, but one must never lose faith in oneself.

Essay: Relationships

I always have a group of friends around me. Like many other teens my age, friends are always one of my top priorities. Other than friends, I also try my best to maintain healthy relationships with my family members and my boyfriend.

During freshman year in high school, I had a group of friends—Ashley, Ryan, and Michelle. Even though they were extremely funny and always made me laugh, when it came to schoolwork, they were not interested. When I would do my work, I would be distracted by them and usually just not do schoolwork at all when I was around them. If Ashley would ask to hang out, and I said I was doing homework, she would tell me missing one or two homework assignments wasn’t a big deal. So I would leave those one or two homework assignments that would later turn into seven or eight.
When report cards came, my average was the lowest I had ever seen it, and while I was depressed and sad about my failing grades, my friends did not care. It was then that I made the decision that this was not the group of friends for me. Though they weren’t bad people, they did not have my best interest at heart. I changed my group of friends to people who were more serious about schoolwork than Ashley, Michelle, and Ryan had been.

I also had a boyfriend named Michael. Every time he wanted to hang out, and I had things to do like studying or homework, he would get jealous. We even argued about it, and he told me that he felt my work was more important to me than him. With him feeling like that our relationship could not last. My education to me comes before everything. So we broke up.

When I get into arguments with my mom or my sisters at home, it affects my schoolwork. Problems at home should be left at home, but sometimes these problems linger in my mind, and I think about them even in school. During a hard time at home, while taking a test I got so stressed out about the problem, I was not able to take the test. When I failed this important test, I felt that I should try to never get into a problem so bad that it affects my schoolwork.

In college I fear that I will pick the wrong group of friends who will not have my best interest at heart. I hope to find people who are fun but who are also serious about their work, like I am. I also do not want to date a boy who thinks I will put his needs before mine when it comes to schoolwork and expect me to drop my work just to be with him. I hope that in college I will maintain a healthy relationship with my mother and my sister so that I can focus on what’s important: my education and my well-being!

Andres Moreira  
*Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY*

*Biography*  
Melissa, I hope your school year is going well so far. My name is Andres Moreira, a senior at Syracuse University studying public health and just in the midst of applying to graduate school for healthcare management. In
my free time, I enjoy being with my friends, watching movies, going to the beach, volunteering, and just relaxing at home with my family and the dogs.

My whole family is from Ecuador in South America, and we first came to the United States when I was only a baby, so that makes me the most American out of my whole family. We live just outside of New York City in Greenwich, CT and have for over 15 years. I have an older brother, Santiago, who works in New York City; he is 30 years old and still living at home. I also have an older sister Kathy, who is happily married, and, hopefully, I’ll be an uncle soon.

Just like your family, we are also very close and everyone tries to support each other as much as possible, but I would say that I am the most independent in my family so that stirs up trouble as well. I like doing things on my own, and I just like the feeling of not being constantly dependent on someone else. I would say that I am closest with my dad and my sister because I feel that I can share with them any information and get their support whenever I need it.

Response to Melissa Guobadia

Melissa, you mentioned that you have changed what you want to do in life numerous times and so have I, so I can definitely relate to you. When I was in high school, I was set on going pre-med during my undergraduate studies and then apply to medical schools and become a physician. Things did not work out that way, and even though it was disappointing at first, it’s important to be patient and find something that you love doing.

My advice to you is to not let it hinder you right now and not to worry about it because you will find what you want to study and be in life eventually. I’ve always said that it is really hard and unfair to ask an 18-year-old what they want to do for the rest of his or her life, because how are we suppose to know?

I am a first generation college student, so my parents really just know doctor, lawyer, and other professions. It took a lot of patience and communication to make them aware of all the other careers a person can have and specifically with mine, I’m still trying to convince them that I know what I am doing, and I just want them to support and trust me. It
took me up until last spring semester (junior year) to finally find what I have a passion for, and I’m happy with it.

When I was starting out freshman year, it was one of the craziest and emotional days of my life. This was the first time that I was leaving my family to live somewhere else, and even though Syracuse is only four hours away, that separation is still there. It took me a while to get adjusted, but I made a lot of close friends my freshman year from all over. What was nice is that I had a mixture of friends: some that wanted to go out and party, some that took school really seriously, and others with a good balance of work and play. This gave me the option to connect with people that best fit my needs at a given moment. I’m also not afraid to do things independently.

I would not worry at all about picking the wrong group of friends because you will find who you are going to connect with and who has the same likes and priorities as you. If you do have some friends who don’t share the same ideals as you, I wouldn’t suggest that you put them off but rather learn from them. Whatever college you decide to go to, diversity is widespread, and, throughout my four years here, I have learned so many things about people from all over the world. I wouldn’t say that you’re going to be friends with “bad friends” but just people different from you. Every person has something unique to offer, and you can learn a lot from each of them.

College is really a time where you truly find out who you are as a person, and overall it’s a unique growing experience. You are going to learn how to be truly independent and to take care of things yourself. Additional things are time management, making priorities—all lessons that you will need for the rest of life.

We should appreciate that our parents value education and want us to move forward in life, and that is something you should never forget while you’re studying. At the same time, if you feel that you are pressured into following a career path that you are not interested in, don’t be afraid to say that it is not for you and follow your heart.

Steve Jobs put it best, “Your time is limited, so don’t waste it living someone else’s life. Don’t be trapped by dogma—which is living with the results of other people’s thinking. Don’t let the noise of others’ opinions drown out your own inner voice. And most importantly, have the courage
to follow your heart and intuition. They somehow already know what you truly want to become. Everything else is secondary.”

I wish you the best of luck with everything, and I’m glad that we had this opportunity to interact with each other. Hopefully, I’ll hear back from you soon.

All the best,
Andres S. Moreira
Biography

My full name is Joanne Marisela Mendoza, and I am 17 years old. I was born on Oct. 12, 1993 at Flushing Hospital Center, which is located in Queens, NY. I am the daughter of two Salvadorian immigrants and very proud of it. Living in El Salvador was very difficult for my parents. Though my grandmother was a nurse and my aunt became a teacher, my mother had a hard time adapting to a life filled with a lot of poverty. It did not matter whether or not you had an admirable job; your income was still low.

Life for my mother soon became even harsher when she had a child at a young age. After her mother died, and later her husband, she decided to come to the United States in search of a better life. Both my parents struggled to come to the United States. They came here illegally and struggled to remain here because finding a good job and adapting to this entirely new culture was complicated. But in the end, they did it.

My parents taught me to never give up. Even though life may bring struggles you believe you cannot overcome, you must remember that there always is a solution and light at the end of every tunnel. That is something valuable my parents showed me. Both my parents have been through a lot of difficulties, but they always keep their heads held high and keep going.
through life, knowing that each challenge brings new wisdom. After going to school in Queens for most of my life, my mother, three siblings, and I moved to Brooklyn, NY after my parents split up.

Having my dad out of my life so suddenly was very stressful for me. In part I was glad that they split up because they would argue at times, but I missed my dad and things would never be the same. This transition taught me that life always goes on, and it made me stronger when it came to facing other obstacles.

This situation also made me experience a whole new culture and different experiences. In Queens, my peers were mostly Asian, Caucasian, and Middle Eastern, but in Brooklyn my peers were mostly Black and Hispanic. This cultural change gave me a new outlook on the world and made me more open-minded.

At this point in my life I am very proud to be taking two Syracuse University courses at WATCH High School. These courses include US History and College Learning Strategies. I believe that having these two college classes will have a great positive impact on my academic life. At the same time, I am still trying to find out who I really am, as I believe most people are. Career-wise, I truly do not know what I want to become, but psychology and literature are of great interest to me.

What I am certain about is that I will continue to study what I am passionate about. As a junior, I have to say that my favorite subjects are US History and English. I love to know about what occurred in the past and the impact it has today. I also love to read because I gain new experiences through characters that I otherwise would not go through. I have done a lot of community service hours for my school, including reading to children and helping out in the library.

I was also part of the Arista Honor Society, which you get into when you achieve high scores on your report card. I also am a peer mediator, since I care to help others and feel strongly about speaking up against bullying. This year I was also a part of a sickle cell program that spoke about sickle cell disease at Brookdale Hospital.

In the end, this is part of who I am.
Essay: Academic Competition

As a junior at WATCH High School, I have come to realize that competition is something that occurs in all educational systems. Since I was very young, I acknowledged that my friends and I were always asking to see what grade each of us received, not because we truly wanted to know the score but because we wanted to see who was able to pull off the highest grade. We were competing to see who would do better on the exam or project.

Personally, I wanted to make sure I was stronger and more focused on the subject than the other person. When I say stronger, I mean more capable, more educated, and a superior academic threat. Obtaining a better grade than another person boosted my confidence, not because I was shallow or had low self-esteem, but because it motivated me to improve on my assignments. It also proved to me that studying, hard work, and motivation beyond doubt pays off. I strongly believe that we need to be competitive in order to strive, survive, and succeed academically. Therefore, I discovered that competition stems from motivation.

When you are in high school, you may believe that you are the most intelligent person in the whole school or you might believe that you are the most ignorant person in the school. Yet when you enter a diverse academic atmosphere, different from the ones you have adapted to, these perspectives may change. You might be used to interacting with a certain type of students who have experienced certain things that you can connect to, students who have been taught what you have been taught, have dealt with the problems you have dealt with, and have learned in the same type of educational system you have been brought up in.

These situations can be frightening. I experienced this when I went on an interview to see if I was qualified for an internship at the YMCA. Going to the interview I was very nervous, but I soon calmed down and believed that I did very well, even when I saw other candidates who seemed more
intelligent and well spoken. Sadly, I did not get accepted for the internship, and this lowered my confidence, but I soon realized that I did my best and I still am intelligent. I also learned that I must try harder next time.

Going to college makes me wonder whether or not I will be competitive enough to be an outstanding student. It is nerve racking, but I know that it is up to me to try my best and choose a career path and classes that truly interest me, though there will always be competition among students.

Competition brings about challenges that can help one better him or herself. I wonder if the professor will take into account that we all have not learned the same way or the same things, but I doubt it. I will just have to think about what I must do for myself. Thus, it is up to me to realize that college is about enjoying oneself and learning for oneself.

In the eighth grade I was selected as that year’s salutatorian, and I believed that when I entered high school, I would have an advantage over many people. When I was in class later on in high school, I realized that there were people who knew different things than those I had been taught. In classes like history and English, I felt I did extremely well, and I felt that I was being even more competitive because I knew that I could do great; seeing others obtain higher grades than me in these classes angered me and made me try harder. I was terrible in math, but in the eighth grade I was doing badly because, I realize now, I was not being challenged.

In high school I improved, but I still need to work harder. What seemed easy for me before suddenly became harder, and that showed me that I had to better myself and not pay as much attention to what others were doing. Currently, I mostly compete with girls in my class, though it is mostly friends I focus on. I compete because it gives me a challenge when I see others might have done better than me and because it feels good to see I received a higher grade.

In college I know that I will have to work to the best of my abilities and realize that I may also know things that others do not. We all have the ability to increase or decrease our intelligence. It is up to me to do my best when I go to college and remember that I must be open to new experiences, new knowledge, and, finally, to be unafraid to face the world.
Janique Cheesman  
*Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY*

**Biography**

I grew up in Trinidad and Tobago and always had fervor for learning. I am truly lucky that I was blessed with a family who encouraged me to pursue the things that I enjoyed and that I was interested in, such as singing, soccer, cricket, and, in the academic realm, environmental engineering. They supported me in all my endeavors, and they are a big proponent of all the success I have enjoyed thus far in life.

My parents are both retired teachers and instilled the value of education in me and my three siblings from a very young age. I have had so much support throughout my life from not only my family but also my teachers, mentors, and friends, and it would be remiss of me to let their influence go unacknowledged.

My views and opinions have undoubtedly been shaped in part by the interactions and experiences I had while I lived in Trinidad; however, being from a small island has its benefits and disadvantages. Although the size of my country allows for very close-knit communities and increases a sense of belonging, it also can also result in somewhat limited experiences.

My most significant life occurrence would therefore be a compilation of all the experiences I have had since I moved to the United States and started attending Syracuse University. Leaving my comfort zone and stepping into a completely unfamiliar environment was as terrifying as it was rewarding. I have proven to myself that I am capable of self-motivation and adaptation, which are two traits that I believe has aided in my continued success. Syracuse has not only offered me the chance to pursue my career goals but also has given me a safe space to grow on a personal level through the connections I have made with my peers and faculty, and for that I am extremely appreciative.

I am currently in my senior year at Syracuse studying environmental engineering and would like to continue on to graduate school to study sustainable engineering. This will no doubt be another big challenge in my
life, but I am confident that all the things I have learned up to this point will continue to serve me well as I continue moving forward to achieve my goals.

Response to Joanne Mendoza

Joanne, in your essay you touched on some very interesting ideas that allowed me to see how truly self-aware you are. I think that this is something very important for success. Being able to examine and closely evaluate yourself is something that will allow you to improve on your weak areas and enhance your strengths.

With regard to academic competition, I agree that competition is often something that motivates us as students. I, too, was very motivated in high school by competing with my peers. While in college, however, I found the experience somewhat different. In high school, I focused a great deal on how others were doing, mostly with respect to grades, because grades, for the most part, are the standard with which we are judged in high school. In college, it is slightly different. Although grades are still extremely important, they are not the only factor that is considered by professors, employers, scholarship committees, etc.

When you enter college, you will most likely be put in a diverse environment, and you were correct in saying that everyone will not be on a level playing field. There will be students who have knowledge in areas that you do not, and you will have knowledge in areas that they do not. Therefore, there are generally two consequent outcomes. You may be in a discipline where competition is the driving force, and you need to observe the strengths of others and work almost single-handedly at becoming equally skilled whilst still developing your own strengths. Conversely, you may be in a discipline that is more collaborative and your peers may help you to develop new skills.

The thing to always remember, however, is this: everyone is bringing something to the table, including you. What I have found in college is that it is more difficult to compare yourself to others and truly determine who is “most successful.” When you are applying for certain internships, scholarships, etc., the requirements for many of these go beyond your GPA or even your past work experiences and extracurricular activities.
The deciding factor could be the interview or personal statement that made the reviewer believe that you were right for whatever you applied for. Even if you and one other applicant have similarly outstanding profiles, you may be given an internship, for example, simply because your personality shone through more when being interviewed.

At the end of the day, you and several of your peers who have worked hard will have very brilliant things to show for yourselves. It is better to spend your time developing the skills you need for the discipline you decide on than to spend it comparing yourself to others. This, as you said, could end up lowering your confidence because you feel as though you don’t measure up when in fact you do. The experiences you will have will be valuable if you learn as much as you can and are passionate about what you do.

All you can do is continue to work hard and do something you enjoy. If you do this, success will be inevitable.
Sheneice Paul  
WATCH High School, Brooklyn, NY

Biography

Hi, my name is Sheneice Paul. I am 16 years old, and I attend WATCH High School. I was born, and raised for a majority of my childhood, in a country called Guyana, which is in South America. When I was seven my mother and I moved to North America for a new life and a better education.

Life in New York was very difficult for me at first; many people did not understand how I spoke, and I did not understand them. Even though things were very new to me, I adapted quickly, learning new things and making friends. Over time, I stopped thinking about returning to Guyana; I started to focus on achieving a better education and eventually going to college.

There is much you need to know about me. But if I had to tell people about myself, I would start by telling them about the things I like and dislike. When it comes to things I dislike, there are not very many, and I always have a reason for disliking that certain thing. I dislike the colors yellow and pink because they are too bright, and I don't like very bright things. I don't like when the sun is shining and it's still cold; I don't like the sun at all (too bright). One thing that I don't like the most is people who are stuck up. The reason these people annoy me is because they always think they are
better than everyone. Just because they may be fortunate to have something that another does not (for example, nice clothes), they may sometimes think they are superior.

When it comes to things I do like, the list is endless. I like/love anything that is electronic: computers, laptops, iPods—all these fascinate me. I spend most of my spare time on my laptop or computer. I love to surf the Internet. Two things I love to do most in the world are reading and taking photos. To me they are a quiet way of getting away from the world; when I read it’s like I am in a whole other place.

Thanks to my teacher Ms. Coates, I’m thinking about becoming a radiologist because it is in the health field and it deals with electronics; this would make both my mother and me extremely happy. (Thanks, Ms. Coates!) My favorite color may seem odd, but it is black. To me it is very beautiful. I also like blood red and midnight blue. (I guess I’m just weird.)

One last thing you should know about me is that I’m always open to new ideas; I love to have fun, and I tend to fall asleep when I get bored, even in class.

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**Essay: Partying**

Partying is something I am very excited about and looking forward to in the near future while attending college. You know what they say; all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy. I live by that quote. When I attend college I want to make sure everything is balanced: although I do want to graduate and eventually get a job, I still want to enjoy the college experience. To me the college experience means have fun, party with my friends, and just get wasted sometimes.

Attending college is not the same as attending high school; many things are different. In this short period of time, one of transition for a young adult to an adult, choices and things that may not have been allowed in previous years are now acceptable. For example, partying.

I am not really aware of what actually occurs at college parties. Even though I have been to my fair share of parties, I still may not be prepared for what is to come when I attend college. When I think about college parties, the only things that come to mind are the things I see in movies. It’s kind of sad if you think about it. In my mind everyone is drunk,
random people are hooking up, people are throwing up, and finally the cops arrive, breaking the whole thing up.

I can’t help but think that the things I have seen on the TV are false. For all I know college parties could be dull and just a waste of time. Other than movies and television, I was also informed by some of my friends that partying, especially college partying, is a dangerous thing.

According to one of my old friends, Matt, partying can be and is extremely dangerous. The reason he thinks this is because at the last party he went to, an innocent girl was raped. Even though I understand how he feels and sympathize with the girl, everyone only lives once, and I want to enjoy my life. Since I don’t know much about parties, if I had the chance I would like to know some things.

Are the parties in the movies the same as the real ones?

Tiarra Currie  
Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY

Biography

I am a 20-year-old senior at Syracuse University. I was born and raised in Washington, DC. I consider myself an African American young lady who has evolved into the woman I am supposed to be. I leave (back home in DC) many families and friends who are very supportive of all my college accomplishments. I come from a single parent family home where my father was/is not in my life. One of my biggest motivations in life is to make sure I don’t let such a setback be the reason for my failure.

My life has never been perfect, but my spirits are always high. Something I have struggled with is my diction or the way I speak. Many times I have been told the way I speak isn’t Black enough or people assume I have no struggles. This was something that made me really upset because people judged my story before they knew me. I never knew there was a certain way you had to talk to be black, but it took a while for me to be comfortable with who I am and where I come from. My time at university has given me the opportunity to see many different layers of what Black is.
I like to be around my friends doing whatever comes to mind, and I love listening to all types of music because it can really affect your mood. One of my favorite things to do, which is a problem, is shop. I love clothes, shoes, and accessories. My fashion evolves with me as a person, and it speaks to my personality. My favorite color is yellow because of how bright and vibrant it is and it stands out.

I really enjoy being around children. I love kids. Much of the work I do, aside from school, is related to working with all types of children in the Syracuse community. Some kids have non-typical behavior but most don’t. I love being a mentor because I think it’s important to share information that can help someone younger than me excel. I am a strong advocate for sisterhood and making sure young ladies pull each other up.

When I was in high school, I knew I wanted to be a child and adolescent clinical psychologist, and I am still following that dream. I came to Syracuse University because it was a safe distance from home. I knew I would not always be tempted to go home but could if I needed to. Syracuse was a top choice for me because it invites people from all different backgrounds and experiences to learn from each other every day.

Response to Sheneice Paul

I came to college excited to be away from home and to be able to go out and not have to answer to my mom. We packed up the truck, and we drove six hours up to Syracuse. However, in about a few weeks into the semester, I broke down. I cried because I missed my family so much and the big transition was overwhelming. However, it took time, and I started to build a family of friends on campus.

I was labeled a party girl because that’s what I wanted to do every weekend. I try to stress to people there is nothing wrong with having a good time and partying, but you have to make sure you prioritize. I partied all the while, but I never let that interfere with my GPA (which is currently a 3.76/4.0 scale) or other important responsibilities, like the organizations I lead.

College, so far, has very much been the best years of my life, but it’s not just because I partied every weekend. I grew as a person and matured greatly. The first time I made the decision to stay in one weekend because I had too much work, I was proud of myself. College is full of temptations and
pressures, and it’s important that you find that balance. You are making choices without your parents to help you, and I was so indecisive. I was so used to my mom and grandma making my decisions for me that it was hard to realize I am now a young adult in charge of my decisions.

Don’t get me wrong; I had great times and better memories. College is fun, and the parties are perfect times to let your hair down, dress up, and socialize with people. We have diverse groups here, and we can experience all types of parties, from Greek organizations to themed parties. When you look at college parties on television, you see a lot of hooking up, drinking from red cups, and wild partying. I would say “yes” that is what some college parties look like but definitely not a majority.

College parties can be dangerous and risky. As young women we have to watch what we wear, unfortunately. It’s always important to go with friends and never alone. I think it’s more about being aware of your surroundings, and if you feel a bad vibe, knowing what to do. My grandmother still warns me to never put my drink down or accept a drink without seeing it being poured. Unfortunately, you do have to look out for such things, but I have not experienced any extreme danger from being at college parties.

I always remember: it’s a good time when you are with the right people. And don’t feel the need to confine to one group of people. You may miss countless opportunities to develop friendships.
Akeira Small
WATCH High School, Brooklyn, NY

Biography

My name is Akeira Small. I was born April 4, 1994. My family was born in Barbados, but I was born in New York. When I was born, my mom tells me I never liked the color pink. Other than that, I love everything: I love nature, I love the sky (my favorite color is blue), and I love the ocean. I love to write and read about anything.

In life, my only concern is safety, seeing that we don’t have nine lives to live. I feel that since I’m only 17 years old, I should still be cautious of the world around me. I love to walk around New York, play in parks, and have fun wherever I go. I like to go to Barbados and swim in the ocean (even though I can’t really swim), and I love to shop just like any other teenager you may know.

When I grow up I am going to become a pediatrician who owns two businesses, a vacation home in Florida (the part with NO snakes), and a dog named Max. Most people don’t feel I will complete my goal, but I feel I will because I love challenges. I’ll probably be working hard for the rest of my life, but with a lovely life right behind it, I think it’s worth it. I will use everything I’ve learned along my way to help me throughout my life. My mom taught me to always help others, so I’ll do things like give back to the community, or I’ll do what I’ve been doing now and feed the homeless.
Essay: School Safety

When most high school students think about college, the first few things that come to mind are partying, sleeping, independence, social lives, and college work. But no one ever thinks about what might happen when they’re, like, 5,000 miles from their families. They never think that people can snap at any moment and that some people are empty souls just waiting for the right moment to kill themselves. In my eyes, I am so excited about going to college. I’ll get to make more friends, work even harder on my goals, and socialize. But I’m really afraid of getting shot.

On April 16, 2007 at Virginia Tech, the deadliest shooting rampage in American history occurred. After killing 32 innocent people, the killer, Seung-Hui Cho, then shot himself, leaving behind nearly 50 wounded victims. When I heard this terrible news, all thoughts of what college life could be broke into many pieces. And from that very moment, insecurity about college safety arose for me. When I think about this, thoughts arise: Will I get shot also if I go to college? Will I see a friend get shot when I’m in college? Will I be in a safe environment? What does it feel like to get shot? Thoughts like these will keep me up at night.

When it comes to the challenges of college, I’m not afraid of anything. I’m not afraid of the lifestyle, the independence I’m not used to, the partying, the drinking, or the hard work I’ll encounter. I feel that it will help strengthen me against my fear of living alone and also help me gain alone time to better understand myself and what I have to offer.

I’m not afraid of the fact that I don’t know how to cook anything that isn’t meat. I’m not afraid that I’ll be away from my mom’s great meals for four long years (not including the barbeques). I’m not afraid that I might have to make new friends. I’m not afraid. I’m not worried about anything, other than how safe being away at college is going to be. After hearing how people die from tragic shootings, all I can think of is what college life will be like for me. How will my family protect me from afar? And how can I stop things like this from arising? The most likely answer for this question is that I can’t stop this from happening.

Some people probably think that this isn’t a big problem, but it is. I don’t have nine lives, where if I die once, I’ll come back. I feel that colleges
should be told the mental history of a student and keep an eye on him or her. I shouldn’t have to worry about whether or not the student sitting next to me is going to take my life because he or she’s not happy with his or her life. I shouldn’t have to see the dead bodies of my fallen classmates who have died because he or she felt these people didn’t deserve life.

In my opinion, college should have a home-like feel to it. What happened at Virginia Tech brings more fear to me than the fact that I go to school in Brooklyn and every day I have to go through a metal detector in order to enter the school building. Even while I am in the school building, I see School Safety Officers and even police officers in every part of the school. Some may feel that the school I go to is bad, but it’s only for our safety.

When it comes to Brooklyn, everyone claims that there are gang fights, people smoking weed, and people getting jumped on every block, but that’s not true. I feel safe wherever I go. Whether I go to East New York, Brownsville, Bushwick, Williamsburg, Bed Stuy, or anywhere at all, I feel safe. Suicidal shooting, in my opinion, occurs more than suicide bombing in Manhattan.

In the opinion of most people, they feel that Brooklyn is where blacks on food stamps go, but I live in Brooklyn, and with the job that my father works, we don’t even qualify for it. I love being in Brooklyn. Brooklyn, just like Manhattan, is always alive at night. People are going to parties, drinking at clubs, and just having a good time. I’m not saying that every neighborhood is safe, but trust me when I say that you won’t be harmed as long as you have a beautiful smile on your face.

Manhattan is another story; you never know when a terrorist is about to bomb the subways or a skyscraper. I know that I should probably be more worried about terrorism than mass shootings, but there is a difference between the two.

A terrorist is a person, usually a member of a group, who uses or advocates violence or threats of violence, especially in pursuit of political goals. Terrorists usually bomb important buildings and subway stations. Mass shootings occur mostly in big crowded areas. Terrorists usually aim for political leaders or locations. Mass-shooters usually aim for people of interest. Terrorists are known to be heartless, showing no sympathy to Americans. Mass-shooters are known to be mentally unstable, killing the ones who hurt them the most.
Do you get where I’m going? I am an American, but I’m not a political leader, so terrorists mostly won’t aim for me in particular. But I’m going to be going to a campus for four years with unknown mentally unstable persons who may take my life because of some messed-up reason.

When I think about these things, I think maybe I’m over-thinking things. When I go to college, I’ll get to party and drink and study, and then have a beautiful relationship with someone, and then get married, and then live a good life. And probably during my college years, my best friends and I will become PINK representatives and get jobs working in retail. Then I will go to medical school, graduate with my MD, become a successful pediatrician, and then go back to college for business and open my own bakery or even a doctor’s office.

When I went to the SUNY-Albany, I loved the college. I was looking at dorms, and they had security locks. But not just any security locks, they had the ones that you need a card for in order to open the doors, and I was told that only students and administrative staff have the cards. And I was surprised because most colleges just have the dorm doors open, and I wonder if that is safe. But I believe that if I go to college at SUNY-Albany, I’ll be safe.

Another thing I noticed at this college is that anyone can just walk right onto the campus. I understand that it’s in Albany and that people don’t walk, they drive, but I don’t like the fact that it has no heavy metal gates with 24-hour surveillance seven days a week. Most may think that I am overreacting, but it’s the little things that always come around to bite you on the butt. I have faith in God that He will protect me, but I also have to watch out.

Chelsea Marion
Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY

Biography
My name is Chelsea Marion, and I am currently a junior communications and rhetorical studies major at Syracuse University. Philadelphia is my hometown, but when it was time to choose a college, Philadelphia was the
last place I wanted to be. I pictured myself far away from home, somewhere warm, maybe southern California … but somehow icy Upstate New York stole my heart. I wouldn’t choose to be anywhere else now that I am here because being at Syracuse has been amazing for me. I’ve had so many great experiences and learned so much about myself in process.

I’ve even discovered new passions, all of which have led me to cultivating my post-graduation plans. I love to learn, so I am positive I want pursue graduate school after finishing undergrad, but oddly I picture myself working at desk as well. This is weird because if you knew me as a child, you would never think that I wanted to work in the corporate world. In fact, at age seven, I was convinced I was destined to be an actress. However, this was also coming from a kid who thought she had a future in professional wrestling. I blame my older brother for that aspiration. So I suppose I am not so great at predicting my future, but I know I am ready for whatever is in store.

Response to Akeira Small

Akeira, I understand your apprehensions about college and safety. When you get to college you leave all of the family, friends, and environments that you’re used to behind, which can make you hypersensitive to your new surroundings. I don’t want you to worry too much when you get to college because worrying may have you missing out on some really great opportunities. I have a few tips to help alleviate your nervousness.

1. *It is important to be aware of your surroundings*

   This is a something my mom has said to me repeatedly, so I am passing her advice on to you because it’s true! You never want to put yourself in a situation that takes advantage of the fact that all of your senses are not at their peak. This could mean anything from walking from class with your headphones blasting to coming back from a party after having too much to drink. When you are aware of your surroundings many of the things that worry you can be avoided.

2. *Treat others with respect, no matter the circumstances*

   I was sitting in French class in the seventh grade when the teacher told us to choose a partner to work with. Of course, everyone ran to their friends,
and I almost did too until I noticed a girl waiting sadly in the corner for someone to approach her. I went up to her and asked her if she wanted to be my partner even though all of the kids in school made fun of her because she was a little awkward. I didn’t really know her, but I found out that day that she was a really nice girl. I mention this because nearly four years later, that same girl came up to me and thanked me for working with her in class that day. She said it meant a lot to her that I didn’t treat her the way my classmates did.

I think a lot of students like the one you mentioned from Virginia Tech experience the same sort of out-casting that the girl from my middle school did. For this reason, I believe it is important to approach and get to know people you may not see yourself being friends with, but at the very least treat them with respect. That person may remember you and your kindness years later. They may even remember your act of kindness when they are thinking about making unsafe and rash decisions.

3. Create your own support group

You mentioned that you were worried about having people look after you while you were away at college. This is why it is important to create your own, new support group while at school. I have a few good friends and a few great teachers, coworkers, and mentors that all make up my support group, so that whenever I feel like I need help, they’re all there for me. At first you will feel like this is impossible, that no one will be able to take the place of the family and friends you have now, but believe me, without you even knowing it, it will all fall into place.

These are all things that have helped me feel safe while away from home. To be honest, you probably feel comfortable and safe in Brooklyn because you’re used to it and have done all these things there. I promise once you get used to college, you will start to feel comfortable and safe there too.

Oh and Akeira, if you think about it, you’re not as nervous about safety as you say you are. Considering you’ve been breaking boundaries your whole life, I don’t think you even know what playing it safe means! Maybe you don’t know it yet, but you’re more prepared for college and everything it has to offer than you may know.
Noelle Stewart
WATCH High School, Brooklyn, NY

Biography

My name is Noelle Stewart. I was born in America but with Jamaican heritage. My mother is half Korean, which I really do find awesome. At first my mother was not certain of where her father came from, but some family members later did research based on my mother’s maiden name and found out that her father’s family was from South Korea. However, he was born in Jamaica.

My father is partially Indian, which in Jamaica we call Coolie. The term Coolie comes from Urdu and translates as “day-laborer.” It is used loosely in Jamaica and other West Indian countries to refer to someone of East Indian descent in a derogatory manner. My father is also of Israeli descent. When I tell my friends about my cultural background I include all of these details. My friends’ usual reactions make me laugh because of their state of shock. I honestly accept my heritage because it makes me who I am. Therefore, without a doubt my heritage makes me unique.

My mother’s family history is a blur to me because she barely talks about it. My father’s family history is very interesting. From what he told me his family is very artistic. I say this because my grandmother was an actress, and she lived next to influential people in Jamaican history. Because of my grandmother, my father has been close to very famous Jamaicans,
including the late Bob Marley. My grandmother led my father into music, so he is very passionate about music and instruments. Because of my father’s love of music, I was forced to play classical music until I entered high school. The instruments I played were the piano and the flute. Since I started high school, I have slowly forgotten how to play those instruments.

Personally, I am very hard to define because I have trust issues from past experiences. I can sometimes be stubborn, and I can be devoted to anything if I put my mind toward the subject. I smile on some days; on other days I can be emotionless, or my emotions may be random. In other words, I am a cult of personalities.

Here are some short facts about me:

- My favorite food is bulogi dolsot—it is a hot stone bowl filled with Korean marinated beef, rice, and vegetables.
- I love anime and mangas.
- I am an artist to others—I was taught how to draw by a friend.
- I like to cosplay* at anime conventions.
- I prefer Kpop and Jpop to American music today because it sounds refreshing to me.

*Cosplay is short for “costume play,” typically a form of performance art/role playing.

Essay: Making New Friends

Senior year is near for me, and I will be starting to pick the schools that I want to go to after graduation. For me that was easy, because I knew where I wanted to go. When I went to ask my friends which schools they were planning to apply to, they were different. That was when I realized that my friends might choose different schools that are very far away from my choices.

I started to feel anxious and wondered if I want to go to their school choices or my own choices. If I pick their schools, then I would feel happy that I will be with my friends; but if I choose to go with my own choices, then I will have to make new friends. This would be very difficult for me because I hate being the oddball or alone in large areas such as a college campus.
Campuses are huge, so if I walk alone I would start to feel lost and insecure. Making new friends is hard to do especially for me because I have trusting issues. It is also hard for me because it is a huge transition from having a group of friends, whom you trust and feel comfortable with, to being a lonely freshman. It is like I would have to start a new page in my life. I eventually started to get worried and was thinking: Am I going to make friends easily? Would I become friends with people who irritate me to bits? Am I going to have issues with finding friends?

Most of the colleges I have gone to on school trips are very diverse, but there is still a problem where I notice that everybody segregates themselves by their nationality. For example, Asians group up with Asians, blacks group up with blacks, and whites group up with whites. This will make finding new friends hard for me because I think I would feel out of place and sometimes I might feel awkward.

In cafeterias as a freshman, how do I go up to people without being awkward? Sometimes I wonder if I do need to be friends with new people, because of the unnecessary drama I would face with them. My sister had drama problems with the new people she met at college. She felt that it was too hectic for her to deal with them, so she started to become a loner. She only hung out with her old friends when she had the chance, since they were in different colleges. I fear that this could happen to me because it is hard to make new friends whom you can trust for four or more years.

I also heard as a freshman you have to stay in dorms and have a roommate. I worried that if the roommate was random, would I get along with that person? Since the movie “The Roommate” I have had fears of actually having an insane bitch for a roommate.

That movie scarred me for life … OK, not for life, but it ruined my image of college roommates and dorms. What I would like for a roommate is a kind, respectful, and clean person. I would hate it if my roommate borrowed my items without me knowing and ruined them. For example, if my roommate borrows my shirt and then when I look in my closet I find the shirt dirty … OK, not just dirty but screwed up, like the shirt has holes, and it is stretched out 10 times bigger than when I bought it. I would feel so pissed off and violated that I cannot explain with words. So, will I get a roommate according to my preference? If not, I am certain my college experience will be a complete hell for me.
Hey Noelle!

I am really excited that you are about to embark on this new journey in your life! As a junior in college, I know exactly how you feel! Starting college in 2009 was one of my most nerve-racking experiences but definitely one of the most rewarding, fun times in my life!

Biography

My name is Kimberly Huggins, and I was born and raised in Brooklyn, NY. My parents are from the Caribbean island of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. I absolutely love Caribbean culture, ranging from the delicious cuisine (oxtail and peas and rice happens to be my favorite food!) to the festive music (I love, with a capital L, Soca music and participating in the West Indian Day parade on Eastern Parkway!)

Being raised by immigrant parents in America, I knew I had to set the standard for the rest of my family. My parents never had the opportunity to finish high school, so I personally took it upon myself to not only finish high school but to go on to seek higher education, not just for my academic advancement but for the betterment of my family.

I attend Syracuse University, where I am a double major in Psychology and African-American Studies.

Here are some short facts about me:

- My favorite color is purple
- My favorite movie is *Goodfellas*
- I love bargain shopping
- I aspire to be a clinical psychologist
- I am a member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.
Response to Noelle Stewart

I shared some of the same sentiments that you are currently experiencing. I was really nervous about coming to college because I was afraid of being in a new environment without the security of my family and friends around. Since I live in Brooklyn, and my school is in Syracuse (which is five hours away), I grew more and more uneasy about not only being in a new environment that is completely different from NYC but also being out of my comfort zone.

After my high school graduation, I attended a summer college experience at Syracuse University. That was definitely a great experience for me. I had the opportunity of taking college classes, having a roommate, meeting new people, networking with professors, and getting a head start on navigating the campus! It took a load of stress off me because by the time the fall semester started, I was already acclimated into life as a college student! I would strongly encourage you to find out if your school has a pre-freshmen summer experience!

By the time fall semester came around, I already had my group of friends. My roommate freshmen year was so nice—unlike the horror movie! She was from Long Island, NY so we shared similar tastes in music and fashion and had similar personalities. We meshed really well! Though sometimes we would argue about little things, ranging from keeping the light on in the middle of the night to loud music playing to loud guests at inconsiderate times. But we always were mature about our differences and always communicated our issues with one another. I think that’s what made our roommate living situation a positive experience—we respected each other’s space and were always willing to compromise.

The toughest thing for me my freshmen year was picking my classes! I came into Syracuse University with high hopes of becoming an obstetrician/gynecologist, so I was on the pre-medical track. However, as the semester went on, I grew really frustrated with my performances in my science courses. I wasn’t doing as well as I’d hoped, so I opened my eyes to new career paths. That was probably the smartest thing I could have done academically!

When in college, you are on a preparatory path, cultivating yourself in the pursuit of a particular career. If you are not enjoying the courses, you probably are in the wrong career path! It was not until I took some
psychology courses that I truly found my fit. The courses I took in psychology the following semester were very interesting. I was always intrigued during lectures (class time) and didn’t find it daunting to tackle some of the challenging material. I just thoroughly enjoyed the classes. By enjoying the classes, I knew then that a career in psychology was something that would be best for me! And sure enough I was right!

Here are some quick tips for your first year:

- Buy things for your dorm on sale! Things can get pretty expensive when you are trying to buy sheets, furniture, etc. for your room!
- Go to office hours! Office hours are allotted times that your professor (teacher) has set aside outside of class time to give you additional help. These hours come in handy when you need extra clarification on something from a lecture!
- Prepare yourself for an hour and fifty minute class periods!
- Study every day! It is so easy to fall behind on your schoolwork if you don’t always study!
- Take advantage of your resources! There are special programs and offices on every college campus that are of great help to college students! In my experience, being affiliated with CSTEP (Center for Science and Technology Program) gave me many networking and skill-building opportunities that helped me be a well-rounded student.
- Join a club/organization on campus! Most campuses have many different student-run organizations that aid in your college experience and that are there for you to have fun outside of the classroom.
- Eat well and get plenty of exercise!
- Always get a good night’s sleep!
- Have a great time because these are the best years of your life!

Sincerely,

Kimberly Huggins

Good luck!
For many high school students, the challenge of transitioning from school to college can seem daunting, even insurmountable. Concerns are natural, and in Student-to-Student: College Beyond the Classroom, Vol. I, students from WATCH High School in Brooklyn, NY pose questions about the nature of college academic and social life in a series of personal letters. They ask about work/life balance, relationships, safety, and coming of age so far from home. Syracuse University McNair Scholars, experienced college students who “know the ropes,” answer them, providing insightful, prescient, and practical advice that is sometimes deeply touching.

About Prof. Marlene F. Blumin

Dr. Marlene F. Blumin is professor and director of the Study Skills Program in Syracuse University’s School of Education and an SU Project Advance faculty liaison. The author of It’s All About Choices (Kendall-Hunt, 2012), Blumin is the designer of a one-semester college learning strategies course that is context-specific to SU and that has been adapted for use with Project Advance partner schools. Prior to her community college and university career, Blumin was a HeadStart, elementary, and secondary teacher and an administrator at both levels in urban and rural settings. Her research and teaching interests include learning strategies for undergraduates, the use of technology in undergraduate education, and learning models in post-secondary settings.

About Syracuse University Project Advance

Project Advance is a premier cooperative partnership linking SU with secondary schools. Through this partnership, high schools can offer qualified seniors the opportunity to enroll in SU courses for college credit. Teachers who have qualified through Project Advance as SU adjunct instructors teach enhanced concurrent enrollment university courses in high schools during the school day.

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