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I Came Here with a Plan

(AND THAT'S EXACTLY WHAT CHANGED ME)

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When I decided to come to The University of Alabama, it wasn't a mystery why. I grew up in a town nearby, surrounded by the traditions, the football games, the sense of spirit that seemed to hum across the campus. By senior year of high school, I was officially hooked as the merit scholarships sealed the deal, but so did the feeling that this place had room for me to grow. I wanted a university large enough to let me explore everything that sparked my interest, but still close enough to home that it was accessible and felt familiar. Ultimately, I came here for two things: a degree and a community. I wanted to dive into a field that would equip me to make a real difference, to walk away not just with knowledge, but with purpose, leaving with the ability to make a bigger impact than with the skills I had from high school. Equally, I wanted to find my people: new faces, new ideas, a network of voices and perspectives to help me see the world in new ways. But what I've discovered is that college is far more than either of those, it's a crash course in becoming a fuller version of yourself. The experiences, people, and challenges that fill the space between classes have shaped me just as much as anything I've learned from a textbook. It's not just about earning a diploma; it's about learning how to live, connect, and grow with purpose.

Before I arrived, I pictured myself as just another face in a massive crowd: one of forty thousand students, anonymous in lecture halls and dorm buildings filled with strangers. I assumed professors wouldn't know my name and that I'd spend most of my time figuring college out on my own. But that turned out to be one of my biggest surprises. For a campus this size, it feels shockingly small in all the best ways. Everyone seems to know everyone, or at least a friend of a friend. I've met so many "strangers" who already had some connection to my circle, which makes this place feel tightly woven in ways I never expected.

People are also far friendlier than I imagined. The more I talk to new classmates, the more I realize how open everyone is to connection. We're all just trying to make this big place feel a little smaller. Getting involved in different organizations has only deepened that feeling. I've found smaller communities all across campus—some with peers who help me survive the toughest classes, others with people from completely different majors who share a

common passion. In the end, I've learned that every familiar face starts with a moment of courage. The more you step outside your comfort zone, the more this huge campus begins to feel like home.

What's also surprised me is how deeply some professors care. It's easy to assume they're too busy for individual students, but I've had professors who've done the opposite, who've encouraged me, noticed my effort, and even helped me see strengths I didn't realize I had. One in particular has pushed me to lead, to speak up, and to believe I'm capable of more than I thought. That kind of confidence doesn't come from grades; it comes from someone seeing you. There are, of course, small frustrations too. Sometimes I look at my schedule and wonder how two classes that both meet twice a week and are worth the same number of credits can be so different, where one demands twenty hours of study, the other barely scratches two. It's made me think about what we really measure in education. Maybe not all effort is quantifiable, and maybe that's okay. Academically, college has completely shifted how I think about myself. Each semester brings harder classes, longer study nights, and moments I wasn't sure I could push through. But I have. And each time, I'm reminded that most limits are self-imposed. If I showed my past self what I'm capable of now, the work I've done, and the subjects I understand, I don't think I would've believed it.

The biggest change, though, is internal. When I first came here, I had a four-year plan that was color-coded, detailed, airtight. Every class, every semester, mapped out. I thought it was best for me to preemptively control it all. But from one semester to the next, life keeps throwing things in such as new opportunities, unexpected friendships, different interests ... and they've all redirected me for the better. Now, I take it day by day. I've learned that education isn't just about following a plan; it's about letting yourself be changed by what you didn't plan for. College has taught me to stop clutching so tightly to certainty and to let curiosity lead the way instead. And so, "why am I here?" Maybe it started with scholarships and school pride. But "how's it working out?" Honestly, better than planned. Mostly because I've learned to stop planning so much. ●