



# Invisible Layers

## NAVIGATING CHRONIC CHALLENGES

*By Karlee Reyes, Senior Neuroscience Major  
The University of Alabama*

On the surface, I appear as any other typical college student. I attend lectures, receive good grades, submit discussion boards, and take part in conversations. Nothing about my appearance suggests that a large part of my academics is shaped by an invisible illness. Because my illness is invisible, it is assumed to not exist. My professors see a student who never misses class, while my peers see someone who is constantly in a study room in Rodgers Library. My illness developed in the months before I began college. At a time when I was supposed to be preparing for independence and a new academic transition, I was learning how to manage chronic pain, extreme fatigue, and an inconsistent body. While many of my classmates were adjusting to dorm life and their classes, I was adjusting to a medical reality that is still evolving to this day. Higher education did not begin for me as a single transition, but as a multilayer one that very few people could see.

In the classroom, professors, by necessity, evaluate what they can see. Attendance, participation, assignment completion, and exam scores are constantly taken into account. But my pain is not on an attendance sheet, and my fatigue isn't reflected on a transcript. My body's physical calculations run in the background of every single day. How much energy I have left, how many packets of electrolytes I have drunk, and my internal pain scale remain invisible to everyone else. I have come to the conclusion that academic systems are built around a measurable output, while the conditions producing that output go unseen. My experiences with professors have been nothing but supportive, but the difficulty arises from the structural framework in which we all have been placed.

Observing my peers has deepened my understanding of how differently each of us experiences college. Higher education subtly encourages us to measure ourselves against each other, particularly within pre-professional paths. It is all about who studies the longest, who sleeps the least, and who handles the heaviest workload. In conversations with my fellow pre-medicine classmates, exhaustion and hard work are worn like a badge of honor. I constantly feel less

intelligent and less able than those around me. Within this type of environment, I feel immense pressure to view my limits as a failure rather than a necessary boundary.

College does provide ways to stay supportive, and I recognize the importance of them. I have accommodations and medical documentations, and yes, they do allow essential flexibility, but my illness doesn't always listen to administrative solutions. Extensions do not eliminate pain, and adjustments cannot create more energy. This support makes it easier for me to complete what is expected of me, but it cannot fully stabilize a body that stays unpredictable. Even tools that are designed to make studying easier do not always account for physical limitations. When my hands ache and typing becomes difficult, I search for speech-to-text and voice features, and anything that allows me some relief. But recently, I have found that those are considered premium, and I have to pay for them. These small barriers that would seem invisible to anyone else, accumulate and affect my daily life. It is another reminder that academic systems, as well as digital ones, assume a physical baseline that not every student has.

Before college, I imagined academic difficulty as long nights, late-night caffeine runs, and heavy workloads. I wish I had known that in higher education, so many of us are navigating chronic challenges that are entirely invisible to those around them. We are not just managing exams and assignments, but also bodies that fluctuate without warning.

An invisible illness has not changed what I am capable of accomplishing, but instead what accomplishment costs me. Effort is not measured by visible productivity, but instead by adaptation, and how I adapt to my constantly changing conditions. If I could speak to my younger self, the girl who believed success was just a matter of willpower, I would tell her this: Higher education is not experienced on equal physical terms. The effort required to be comparable is a large burden within itself. And some of the hardest work a student can do is the work that no one will ever see. ●