

Sixth Avenue Journal

A SPIRITED CONVERSATION ABOUT HONORS AND HIGHER EDUCATION



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I Wish That I Knew What I Know Now (About Higher Education) When I Was Younger

I Know a Place

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What Teaching Has Taught Me

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Talk Among Yourselfes

By Henry John Latta, Ph.D.
 Editor-in-Chief, Sixth Avenue Journal
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It may not come as a surprise to you that I teach a course on gossip, rumor, and social change.

Communication with imposed formality, essential as it is, comes with its own limits. It does a job. Informal speech and conversations also do a job. It is different, not lesser, communication. What Bakhtin called the carnivalesque is rude and rule-breaking conversation; but it is also both honest and influential.

Orwell in *Politics and the English Language* argued that politicians had hijacked and repurposed the language. Perhaps our official academic language is a hijacked version of what we say in corridors, cafes and kitchens when talking to friends and colleagues about life and work on campus.

When we use only our official academic language to present ourselves, or it appears that way to the American public, we isolate, we silo. And we get used to silos and isolation and their practices. They represent us. Is it a surprise that the public sees us isolated in silos and that politicians explain us as out of touch with the communities around us?

Does the process teach academy leadership to always frown on informal writing as lesser writing? Do we shun the everyday as inadequate to our purposes and reputations? *The Sixth Avenue Journal* simply presents faculty and students using everyday language as one other view of life in and around the silos.

As a communication theorist, one of the most influential ways of looking at communities that I found in grad school was the idea of the “storytelling neighborhood, sometimes called storytelling networks” and their effect on community engagement, participation and belonging. A brief AI

summary says that “storytelling networks are the ‘living’ part of a community’s communication system. They aren’t just collections of stories; they are the active links between different ‘storytellers’ that allow a neighborhood to build a collective identity and solve problems.”

The storytelling network is integral to Communication Infrastructure Theory, developed back at the turn of this century, mostly at the University of Southern California under Sandra Ball-Rokeach, but also with one of my grad school professors, Yong-Chan Kim while he was here at The University of Alabama.

This journal inevitably grew out of my conviction that higher education needs to promote storytelling neighborhoods and networks as other representative voices.

If we are robbed of the STNs, problem solving, or for that matter problem recognition, relies more heavily on formal sources and inputs, individuals have fewer people to draw on to consider and understand. Dialogues roam less, we feel we begin to accommodate into smaller and smaller units (maybe using the word unit is a symptom) and perhaps call ourselves more focused for doing so. STN demonstrates that conversationally, unselfconsciously, talking to each other and talking about each other to each other, who we are and what we do in everyday exchanges, is influential, or can be if we keep it going.

We walk and talk our own halls, but also there are scholars, from faculties and student bodies, living in our cities and towns, and the more they contribute to everyday conversations, not only about those communities but also the academies within their boundaries, the better those communities might know us.

By the way, in this issue our optional theme was, “I wish that I knew what I know now (about higher education) when I was younger.” Not surprisingly, the idea of community is prominent in the responses. ●



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I Know A Place

*By Anne Franklin Lamar, Director, Honors Year One; Assistant Professor
Honors College, The University of Alabama*

“What I wish I’d known on that first day is that college is, at its core, about community.”

WHAT I WISH I’D KNOWN WHEN I STARTED COLLEGE

I started college in a place I never imagined I’d be. I hesitate to tell this story because I am now a fierce advocate for the university who made me who I am today, but to tell you the truth, I spent my first day, my first week in tears, wanting to be anywhere but there. Four years later, I walked across the stage at graduation as the president of my class and gave a speech about how I couldn’t imagine us being anywhere else but there. It was transformation by the hardest.

WHAT CHANGED? COMMUNITY.

What I wish I’d known on that first day is that college is, at its core, about community. Learning what community is, what it looks and feels like, how to build it, how to live in it well, and how to show up in it as yourself.

Now, I wouldn’t be teaching Honors Years One at The University of Alabama’s Honors College if I didn’t believe that the skills you develop, the deep dive into your major, and the knowledge you acquire in your classes is why you are here. But, I also teach HYO because I believe that discovering who you are in this world and how to be in community matters just as much. This work doesn’t come with a syllabus and isn’t always about discovering your profession or your larger “why.” It is more tangible. It’s the work of learning how to be a good friend and what it looks and feels like to have a hard conversation with someone whose life experience looks nothing like your own, It’s about learning to walk with other folks as they go through breakups, failed tests, moments of doubt, and asking for help when you go through those things, too. It’s about celebrating a successful final project presentation and showing up for another meal together at the dining hall. This work is not a distraction from your education. It is your education.

THIS WORK OF COMMUNITY HAPPENS EVERYWHERE, AND IT HAPPENS MOST OFTEN WHEN YOU PAY ATTENTION.

When I started college, I landed in a place where everywhere I turned, there were people who cared. People who said “Come and go to Week of Welcome with me” or “Won’t you be my little sister?” or “Why don’t you join us on this Golden Girls oral history project?” I cannot tell you the ripple that each of those invitations had on me, but I can point to one example that captures these ripples nearly 20 years later. Here at UA, there’s a program called Honors Action. It is a week-long experience for 250 Honors College freshmen led by current Honors College students. It’s part orientation, part service, and constant learning. It takes months of preparation and collaboration to pull off, and it took me a minimum of five years before I felt like I had a real handle on everything it required, but I had the courage to jump into leading Action two weeks before it started, the skills I needed to do it, and the support from my community to believe I could because I’d learned to do the work of community during college and saw that modeled time and again for me by my college professors. I knew how important it is to offer students the same invitation I was offered, the one that calls you to do the hard work of community and to be a part of something like Action, like the Honors College, like a small group and show them with every student leader, staff, and faculty member what working in a community looks and feels like. What Action has taught me, and keeps teaching me, is that community doesn’t just happen. It is built, carefully and together, by people who show up for each other.

That is what I would tell my first-day-of-college self: Pay attention to the people around you. Learn to read closely, write well, and communicate, and also learn how to be good neighbor, make community, and discover the person you’ll be the rest of your life. Your classes will challenge you and help you grow. Your community will teach you how to live. ●



Historian Twitter and Me

By Jonathan Schneiderman, Graduate student
Harvard University

When I was in high school, the political historian Kevin M. Kruse went viral for some Twitter threads in which he rebutted Dinesh D'Souza's claim that the "party switch" of the mid-twentieth century is a myth and that the GOP remains Lincoln's party and the Democrats McClellan's. Kruse's threads were formidable in both their cogency and their evidentiary ammunition, and they represented a level of argument I was unused to seeing on the internet, even in newspapers' op-ed sections. (Those last five words, which seem absurd to me now, I would have said with perfect seriousness then.) I felt as though I were being let in on a new and slightly secret way to talk about politics, and the world, and I wanted more.

Kruse was not, of course, the only historian with a Twitter account, and his replies and retweets were filled with other scholars of history—professors, postdocs, grad students, and others—who were part of what I came to know as "historian Twitter." I don't remember if discovering historian Twitter made me want to become an historian, or if it simply compounded an existing desire. Either way, by the time I got to college I not only wanted to get a history PhD but had a well-developed idea of what the world of history PhDs looked like.

Well-developed but not, alas, well-formed. Historian Twitter wasn't all bad: among other things, it got me reading books of historical scholarship, starting with Kruse and Julian E. Zelizer's *Fault Lines: A History of the United States Since 1974* (2019). But the sense I formed from it of what history was, as a field, was severely distorted. Of course it was. Historian Twitter possesses—or at least it possessed, when I was in high school; I haven't been on the site since 2023—many of the vices of online spaces more generally: a tendency toward conformity and ritual displays thereof, a taste for viral punchiness over nuance, and a predominance of grousing. (It was conversations with some of my TAs in college that made me realize that some people actually enjoy graduate school.) The problem, as in other online spaces, wasn't so

much this or that person as a combination of selection bias and the system of likes, replies, and retweets. Case in point: Kruse's threads were excellent, but no doubt much of their appeal as "content" arose from the gladiatorial-audience thrill of witnessing an online "dunking." Certainly that was part of their appeal to me.

What worries me is the prospect of lots of other people coming to college, like me, with their notions of what academia is—and therefore of how to approach it—formed online. It is just so easy to find a corner of Twitter, and so easy to get sucked in. The site is designed precisely for the purpose of finding you and sucking you in, and designed very well. JSTOR cannot compete on UI; and Twitter is free. But there is a reason that academics use journal articles and books rather than social media posts as their primary professional medium. Medium is message, and one of these is much better than the other for advancing the collective endeavor of organized thought. And while I managed to lose my misconceptions, it seems frighteningly plausible to me that I might not have. In theory, everybody knows that the world is wider, deeper, more various and more free than what one sees online. Hence the refrain, "Twitter is not real life." But the scroll has a way of making itself seem total, and speaking only for myself I did not see that I had built walls around myself until I realized that they didn't need to be there. I am almost certain that there are eighteen-year-olds today who have a similar outlook to mine then, and I wish I could tell them what I am now telling you.

As it happens I switched from history to American Studies in sophomore year and from American Studies to English as a junior. But because the pitfalls of historian Twitter arise systemically from the form of the website, I strongly suspect that I would have found much the same dynamics had it been literary scholarship Twitter—or whatever catchier name it is called—I landed on in high school. And, for that reason, I'm glad it wasn't. I'm very grateful for the world, the wide, deep, various and free world, that I found in college. I only wish I'd known about it sooner. ●

What Teaching Has Taught Me

THE FUTURE OF MEDIA IS BETTER THAN YOU THINK

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*By Mark Mayfield, Journalism Instructor
Department of Journalism & Creative Media
The University of Alabama*

I have often told students to consider journalism as a great adventure. It can take them to places they might otherwise never visit and introduce them to remarkable people and cultures beyond their own experience. This was certainly true of my career as a reporter and editor and has since served as a backdrop to most everything I've taught in my classrooms at The University of Alabama.

Journalism gave me the opportunity to meet a diversity of people in nearly every American state and several other nations. Some of these folks were famous, a few maybe infamous, but the great majority were ordinary people doing good—and sometimes extraordinary—work.

I still consider myself a journalist long after I left the profession. Maybe I cling to this because I remain convinced that journalism is a most worthy endeavor and essential in a democracy. It's an understatement to say it's needed now more than ever.

Yet nothing in my earlier career has been as rewarding as teaching. Much of this is connected to the eye-opening discovery that in an era of social media clickbait, a lot of it wildly inaccurate, there are plenty of aspiring young journalists dedicated to getting it right. They are mastering the skills needed to be successful across a wide range of digital media platforms that didn't exist in earlier decades.

For more perspective, I asked Tom Arenberg, one of my faculty colleagues and a veteran former *Birmingham News* sports and metro editor, if there is anything he understands now about college students that he didn't know before making the transition from the industry to teaching.

"I'd heard the stereotype That they're all there for football and parties," he said. "I didn't know if that was true or not. But I know now that that's baloney. The vast majority of my students are busting their fannies to learn stuff and do good work. They're very smart. They're hard-working and I figured out that they are thinking about how they can contribute to their communities after they graduate."

This all reminds me of an essay I wrote sixteen years ago, called "Leaving New York." It was a memoir about my work in Manhattan's magazine world, and an ode of sorts to the things I would likely miss as I made the transition to higher education.

You won't find this work online or in print. I never published it. Looking back, that was a good decision. It would be a far different memoir now. I could not have known then that teaching journalism, after decades of practicing it, would be my most important and enjoyable work.

At some point, the success of my students became more important than anything I accomplished. However, as Arenberg reminded me, the sense of personal accomplishment is still there, just in another way.

"If you nail down a great story in journalism, thousands of people are gonna see it and read it," he said. "That's not the case with higher education. It doesn't need to be the case with higher education. It's a smaller scale sense of satisfaction when I can legitimately give an A to a hard-working student. That's great."

Or, he added, "when a student might get a class assignment published in local media. That's a little smaller scale, but great self-satisfaction there, as well."

Overall, my role on faculty has been to teach writing in several forms, from news to sports to food. I have also regularly taught media ethics, a course which, at its core, is aimed at giving students a chance to learn and apply theories, codes, and guidelines to specific issues and help them make ethical decisions as they enter the media landscape.

Through these years I have tried to see myself in the seats that students occupy in my classrooms. I remember the grind, the uncertainty, the balance between fitting in and being left out, and the usually unspoken but real desire to have someone treat you like a human being instead of just another student in a school filled with 41,000 of them.

This is a subject that has often come up during talks that *Sixth Avenue Journal* Editor-in-Chief Dr. Henry John Latta and I have had over the years. Both of us agree there are few moments in life better than the privilege of walking in a classroom and teaching students.

That's not to say, of course, that every student will dedicate themselves to learning. To be sure, many will excel while others, some of whom are equally talented, won't fare as well due to any number of reasons, including a lack of study and missing class and assignment deadlines.

As another of my colleagues once told me, "You can't save all of them." Yet a good class can make a difference, even with less talented or less dedicated students.

"I'm not looking for mastery from every student," Arenberg said. "But if a student comes away with any basic skills...they write a little bit better...they think critically a little better. I'm fine with that, even if maybe the work wasn't what I hoped it would be by the end of the semester."

Nevertheless, it's not a stretch to say that the future of journalism and perhaps our democracy likely depends on how the best of these media students conduct themselves in the years ahead.

I'm confident they will be up to the challenge. ●



The Class is Cancelled While I Do My Job

By Laura McCullough, Professor of Physics
University of Wisconsin-Stout

Dear Students —

I am sorry to say that I will need to cancel all classes for an indeterminate length of time while I work on doing my job.

I realize you think that teaching is my job, but there are many other aspects to being a professor. In the unlikely event that you are curious about what else a professor might have to do, here are a few of the issues that need my attention.

The recent change to our course-management system has meant that I need to re-upload every document and assignment and reassign every homework. I will be attending three two-hour training sessions to help me do this. I was staying ahead of the class for the first few weeks, but I've finally lost that battle.

My contract with this institution requires me to be active with research. Unfortunately, I have been too busy to keep up with what's happening in my field. So, I need to read six months' worth of journals and then develop a new research project to allow me to get the first pay raise we've had in three years. It's only a two percent raise, but on my salary, that makes a big difference. I would ask if you're interested in being a student researcher, but I don't know how to hire or pay you, and our department's administrative associate has been doing the work of three people since the recent budget cuts.

Research also involves dissemination, and I need to finish the two half-written journal articles and submit them before my annual review in three weeks. The annual review also requires me to write up my accomplishments in detail and submit them two weeks before the review. This involves searching four different places to find the correct information on how to submit the document.

I also need to provide service to the university or my professional communities. This includes reviewing and providing feedback on four manuscripts from three different journals. I don't know what I've missed from my university committees since they are regularly scheduled during my classes.

Current legislation requires training on different topics on a regular basis, and I need to finish up my training on FERPA, IT security, and sexual harassment, or they dock my pay.

I have to report the last three months of sick leave, or the system will deny me all earned sick leave for the last year. Since my workload leaves me so tired I catch a cold every three weeks, I have to be sure I have enough sick days to not lose money. And since my family is forgetting what I look like, sick days are doubly important to me.

Finally, there is yet another new software program for dealing with advisees that requires three hours of training next week. I realize we had a new program two years ago, but we are told this is a better one. (This reminds me: If any of you are my advisees, you will need to help yourself regarding next term's schedule until I know how to use this new system and I can find out who my advisees are.)

I promise that before our classes start up again, I will find out who has whiteboard markers and erasers so that I have something to write with. It used to be our custodial staff, but we lost half of the campus facilities employees two budget cuts back, and I have never figured out who controls the cache of markers.

I am sorry that my job is getting in the way of your learning. I hope that the time you gain can be productively used in employment so that you can pay for your college education.

Sincerely,

Your Professor ●

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At Home in a College Newsroom

FOUR YEARS OF DEADLINES —
BUT A LIFETIME OF MEMORIES

*By Maven Navarro, Senior News Media Major
The University of Alabama*

When I applied to be a contributing news writer for the student-run newspaper during my freshman year, I had no idea that I was about to embark on the best, most-challenging four years of my life.

Nearing the end of my sophomore year, I took a wild gamble and applied to be *The Crimson White's* editor-in-chief. When the day came for my Media Planning Board interview, I wore my frilliest pink poofy dress to show off my spunky personality. I was never expecting for my life to change that day.

In typical Maven fashion, nothing starts calmly. Even as an infant, I screamed and cried constantly, never allowing for a moment of peace. My very first day as editor-in-chief fell nothing short of my chaotic life. From that moment on, I knew this would not be an easy role.

There was a protest on the quad over the ongoing conflict in Palestine. There were hundreds of students shouting and marching outside of the student center exercising their First Amendment rights. It was beautiful, really. I had the knack to whip out my phone and start recording when both sides of the rally started to scream, “F... Joe Biden!” I put my phone back in my pocket and switched back to the new Canon Rebel T7 my mom had gotten me as a congrats gift. When I pulled my phone back out, I had thousands of notifications. I could not even open my phone as there was phone call after phone call preventing me from even logging in.

That video ended up getting nearly 20 million views and served as a great measure of the amount of attention we would have at *The Crimson White* for the next two years. While that was a fun, and frankly silly video that went viral, my next dash of attention was neither of those things.

In March of last year, I received an email that a University of Alabama student had been detained by Immigration Customs Enforcement. This was by far the most challenging story I have ever reported, as I felt deeply emotionally connected to it. In the midst of all of it, national news outlets were messaging me every day asking me for updates. My family and friends kept telling me how cool that was, but

I felt nothing but guilt. Somehow, I was receiving praise while the student, Alireza Doroudi, was experiencing the worst. My dream is to one day work for a legacy media outlet, but in that moment, I was not the least bit interested in hearing from them, and I was just selfishly hoping that I could have one week of no news, and especially no national news affecting UA that I was in charge of reporting on, while I juggled tests, homework, and learning a new language.

It was silly of me to think it would calm down. A few weeks later, the president of the United States announced that he was coming to campus. “Great, more national spotlight,” I thought to myself sarcastically. I was tired, overwhelmed and needed summer more than ever, but that was not an option. My staff was having almost identical feelings to mine, but we worked hard and ended up receiving multiple awards for our coverage of the president’s visit to the Capstone.

Over the summer, I continued to follow Doroudi’s story. He decided to self-deport, and when he got back to Iran, he sent me a simple message that said, “Thanks a lot,” in regard to my coverage of his story.

That one message reminded me of the importance of journalism. It is not for recognition. It is not to be self-fulfilling. It is not to promote an agenda. It is to give a voice to the voiceless. For the first time in my life, I felt that I had truly accomplished that.

Though my second year hasn’t been quite as tumultuous, I have still covered the University’s suspension of our two Student Media magazines, professor firings, campus elections, and even the closure of my favorite fast-food restaurant — Whataburger, I miss you. Each one of these stories has reminded me of my reason for writing.

The Crimson White has been my home for the past four years. The place that I have grown, laughed, cried, and even met my best friends. I sometimes joke that I am excited for my “freedom” and to not have to work full time while also being a student, but I know that the *CW* always has a place in my heart. Looking back, it hasn’t felt like work. I am a firm believer that if you do what you love, you will never work a day in your life. I am lucky to have to never, ever work. ●



On Transferable Skills

*By Billy O'Steen, III, Associate Professor
School of Leadership and Professional Practice
The University of Canterbury, New Zealand*

IT ALL MATTERS. A LOT.

“Can you please help my husband and me? You’re our last option.”

The woman’s voice was desperate and hoping. I received this call one month into my job as a constituent relations caseworker for U.S. Senator Jim Sasser after just graduating with a B.A. in English and history from Vanderbilt University. She was calling from the Senator’s home state of Tennessee and her husband, a former coal miner, was way overdue for his black lung payments from the Department of Labor and their bills were piling up.

While it might be considered a stretch from studying Milton, Shakespeare, and the Romantic Poets in the hallowed classrooms in Nashville to problem-solving a missing black lung payment, maybe not. You see, during my studies of English literature and European history, I picked up key transferable skills—some without even knowing—including analysis, collaboration, communication, and, yes, problem-solving. So, with my trusty “big yellow book” that included most federal employees, I set about to find the exact person in the vast Department of Labor who was responsible for black lung payments. To my surprise and delight, I found another young university graduate just as eager to solve the puzzle as I was. After several days of sleuthing, we found that the file had slipped down underneath the other folders and our constituent was due nearly \$1 million in back-payments and interest. A huge win for the miner and his wife, the Senator, and the Department of Labor!

When I called the woman to inform her of the good news, I realized that everything I experienced in my education to that point had truly mattered. In this instance, it mattered in a very real-life sense that I had learned how to communicate

and collaborate through my classes at Vanderbilt. Those excellent professors I had known this—that their job was to prepare me to be a capable, competent, confident, and contributing citizen and not just a consumer of academic content. This realization has profoundly affected how I design and facilitate transferable experiences for my students through having a dual focus on content and skills. Comparing two of Shakespeare’s sonnets is, at once, an activity to engage with the Bard’s content while also practicing analytical skills that are useful when later comparing cars, mortgages, or job opportunities. For the majority of my students, they will not become an academic like me so my job, like my Vanderbilt professors, is to prepare them to do other things—work at the bank, sell insurance, become lawyers, start non-profits, etc. As I often say to my students, my goal is not for them to become “pro” students but to become “pro” citizens. This approach requires both of us to acknowledge that what we do in our university classrooms really matters.

I’ve had the good fortune to further pursue this idea about what matters and transferability through participating in and researching the impact of Outward Bound courses. It has been an ideal context through which to consider transferability. Similar to what I say to my students, you don’t do Outward Bound to get better at Outward Bound. You do Outward Bound to get better at life. The transferability aspects that ring true with Outward Bound—authentic assessment, challenge, metaphor, physical engagement, and specific and timely feedback—can readily be applied in a university classroom. The key with teaching for transferability like this is for both students and teachers to believe that it all matters. A lot. ●

“Can you please help my husband and me? You’re our last option.”



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I Came Here with a Plan

(AND THAT'S EXACTLY WHAT CHANGED ME)

*By Lucy Rumbley, Senior Operations Management Major
The University of Alabama*

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. ●

I Thought University Would Make Me Someone.

IT DIDN'T.

*By Akasha Sergeant, Senior Political Communication and International Relations Major
Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand*

I came to university with the quiet expectation that something would happen to me. Not all at once, and not in some dramatic, cinematic way, but gradually, through lectures, readings, and late nights in the library, I thought I would become someone new. Someone sharper. More certain. Someone who knew how to speak without second-guessing every sentence halfway through.

I thought university would make me someone.

It didn't.

It just showed me who I already was.

That realization didn't arrive all at once. It came slowly, in fragments, in the moments after tutorials, when I replayed what I should have said. In the silence of lecture halls, where asking a question felt like stepping onto a stage I wasn't ready for. In the strange awareness that everyone else seemed to move with a kind of ease I couldn't quite replicate.

At first, I thought I was falling behind.

But if I'm honest, that feeling didn't start at university. It started earlier, growing up in a small town, where it often felt like I was slightly out of step with the people around me. Not in a dramatic way, just in the quiet sense that I didn't always think the same way, didn't always want the same things. I didn't have a large circle of friends, and for a long time, I thought that meant something was wrong with me. That I was missing something everyone else seemed to understand naturally.

University, I thought, would fix that. It would bring me into a space where ambition and curiosity were shared rather than questioned.

And in some ways, it did. But not instantly, and not effortlessly. University, I assumed, was designed to level the playing field, to take students from different backgrounds and reshape them into something more equal. But it doesn't quite work like that. Instead, it reveals things. It amplifies what is already there.

Confidence becomes more visible. So does hesitation.

Those who already know how to speak the language of academia, how to argue, how to question, how to sound certain even when they aren't, move through it differently. Not necessarily better, but more fluent. And the rest of us learn, slowly, how much of university is not just about learning, but about recognizing rules that were never explicitly taught.

And those rules aren't neutral. They reward the people who already know them.

I wish I had known that earlier. Not because I think I would have done anything differently, but because I would have understood myself with a little more generosity. I would have recognized that feeling out of place, whether in a small town or a lecture hall, wasn't a sign that I didn't belong. It was just a sign that I hadn't found my people yet.

And you do find them. Slowly, through shared conversations, late nights, mutual frustrations, and small moments of recognition where you realize: someone else sees the world the way you do.

What surprised me most is that the version of myself I kept expecting to "arrive" never really did. There was no moment where everything clicked into place, no clear before-and-after. Instead, there was continuity. The same habits followed me, overthinking, pushing too hard, caring more than I admitted.

University didn't erase those things. It exposed them. And then, unexpectedly, it forced me to make a choice.

Two years in, I realized I didn't want to pursue law anymore. For a long time, that felt like something I wasn't allowed to admit. Law had been part of the plan, the stable, impressive, sensible path. Letting go of it felt, at first, like failure. Like I had misunderstood something fundamental about myself. Like I was stepping away from something that made me legible to other people. But the more I sat with it, the clearer it became: I hadn't failed the path. The path just wasn't mine.

So I changed it. I turned my conjoint degree into a single degree, a decision that felt, at once, terrifying and strangely simple.

And something shifted. It wasn't just relief; it was lightness. A clarity I hadn't realized I was missing. In stepping away from what I thought I should do, I found myself returning to something I had quietly buried, an older passion, waiting underneath all the expectations I had layered on top of it.

That, more than anything, is what university gave me. Not a new identity, but the space, and sometimes the pressure, to confront the one I already had. I'm still young. I wish I could tell my younger self that she has time, so much more of it than she thinks. That she doesn't need to hold onto a plan just because it once made sense. That it's okay, she didn't have many friends in high school, it didn't mean she was behind, or doing something wrong. It just meant she hadn't found the right people yet.

And that it's okay if Plan A doesn't work out; because sometimes, it's only when it doesn't that you're forced to pay attention to what actually fits, to what feels like yours. University won't make you someone. But it will strip away enough of what isn't yours that, eventually, you're left with a choice. And that choice, quiet, uncomfortable, and entirely your own, is where becoming someone actually begins. ●

When We Talk about Data . . .

LET'S BE HONEST

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By M. Tyler Sasser, Assistant Professor
The University of Alabama Honors College

Throughout the mid- to late twentieth century, each generation of academics, whatever their disciplinary background, more or less had a book that everyone seemed to read. I'm thinking about books like Lévi-Strauss's *Structural Anthropology* (1958), Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), Said's *Orientalism* (1978), Gates Jr.'s *The Signifying Monkey* (1988), Latour's *We Have Never Been Modern* (1991), and whatever was the latest from folks like Foucault, Chomsky, Frye, Butler, and Fish. One of the earliest such books may have been Darrell Huff's *How to Lie with Statistics* (1954), the all-time best-selling book on statistics. In it, Huff engages with common misuses of statistics (think small sample sizes, blurring correlation with causation, and data dredging). Essentially, he explains how statistics often are manipulated to deceive rather than inform, and in our era of evoking data as authority, I find myself thinking, "Exactly what data are we talking about?"

This opening is a roundabout way of my wanting to introduce data published since 2021. Studies from BioMed Central find that reducing smartphone screen time in classrooms improves mental health, while an article in *Human Behavior and Emerging Technologies* shows that depression among college students is directly linked to screen time. An article in the *Journal of American College Health* links screen time to broader student mental health outcomes, while one in *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry* finds a positive correlation between screen use and self-harm. The *International Journal of Research in Humanities, Arts and Sciences* examines dozens of prospective teachers at different universities and reveals a decline in mental health compared to earlier cohorts of education majors. A Brookings Institution report concludes that in under two years AI has disrupted foundational development, while studies from Harvard, Wharton, Cornell, and Penn find that LLMs hinder skill acquisition, weaken cognitive abilities, and contribute to rising anxiety and depression among Gen Z students.

Yet in the wake of all this data emerging during a supposedly data-driven educational culture, here's what I recall from my 2025-2026 academic year: multiple required in-person meetings where a campus counselor asked faculty to be more thoughtful about the academic expectations of anxious students; a colleague sharing an email with me where their supervisor asked faculty to lower academic expectations at the start of this semester; a shift to another online learning management system; conversations with colleagues using LLMs to create and grade their assignments; and countless invitations to webinars about AI, brownbags about better online education, seminars about virtual attendance tools, Zoom meetings about digital accessibility, and events about mastering Blackboard grading, improving courses with Ally, using technology to increase student engagement, and "coaching towards TurnItIn drafting" (whatever that means). I was even hoodwinked in December into a timeshare-like luncheon sponsored by yet another new digital learning platform that "guarantees AI-powered student success" by implementing its app into all UA classes, thus allowing students to "share their notes," which—let's be absolutely clear—is code for I need your students to feed my bot, essentially bribing educators to become allies in denying students the opportunity to create.

Yet this is not to say all universities ignore data. In fact, in 2024, at the University of Virginia, several professors piloted a series of no-technology courses, and the practice has since spread across the university. In 2025, the biology department at Temple University adopted similar restrictions on classroom technology, and that same year, Loyola University began offering "digital detox classes," where specific sections were advertised in the course catalogue as being "completely screen free." In January 2026, Washington University in St. Louis began "heavily restricting or banning the use of digital devices in the classroom" under the guidance of the Dean of Undergraduate Affairs. And in recent years, student newspapers at Harvard and the business school at NYU have reported on student-driven initiatives for limiting device use in the classroom.

Further, I've lifted all the research in my second paragraph from senior research projects at my home Honors College, where approximately 15% of the seniors completed a project that aimed, in one way or another, to address their own growing concerns about such things. To quote from one of these representative senior projects, "I despise the use of AI in classrooms, and how upper administration pushes for its inclusion in academia so heavily. If it were up to me, it would be banned." So says this 22-year-old biology and chemistry major with a 4.10 GPA about to graduate with Honors.

The most behind when chasing nominal innovation, universities ignoring the data on mental harm and cognitive decline, not to mention the environmental costs, may soon have much to answer for. How will we answer the parent who asks, "Why does my daughter need to take your class if everything you do caters to LLMs?" Educators do not need to find ways to educate exclusively with AI as much as they need to find ways to educate in a world where students already have AI.

That's the shift that needs to happen, and while I somewhat applaud the banning initiatives of the universities listed above, the real innovation will come from creating opportunities for students to be independent, creative, and experimental in this era. In other words, it's not 2006, and we don't need to create so many digital spaces for students. They've got that covered. They've inhabited digital spaces for 20 years, and the data confirms the harm it caused. They don't need to come to college so 50-year-olds can say, "Hey look, we've got some AI for you!" Instead, we need innovatively to create the unexperienced physical spaces that the data shows students need and want.

And maybe here is a good place as any to note that a syllabus line along the lines of "cite AI if you use it" is about as effective as the "drink responsibly" disclaimer obligatorily tacked on the end of an alcohol commercial. It's there to cover the company's interests, not because it benefits the consumer.

I'm not addressing technology's important role in helping non-traditional students find a classroom nor its place in enhancing classroom equity. I'm simply suggesting we find the nuance between "AI is ruining everything" and "AI is beyond critique." The concern I keep returning to with friends and colleagues is that beneath the corporate-driven platitudes of "work smarter, not harder," "it saves money," "we can't put the genie back," and worst of all, "we have to meet students where they are," we're mostly just helping students regurgitate.

As I put the final revisions on this . . . whatever this is, Davis Riley prepares his opening tee shot to begin the 2026 Masters Tournament, an event that has banned cell phones since 1993. This morning, when asked what he thought about this policy, 26-year old pro-golfer Ludvig Åberg responded, "it feels like the fans are a little bit more engaged and attuned to what's going on." So, given the data, let's consider how we can bring the contemporary classroom to the level of engagement found at a sporting event. Many universities already are finding truly data-driven ways to address the needs of their students, so let's see how it all pans out over on Sixth Avenue. ●



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Laundry, Cigars, Tailgates, Classes, etc.

*By Joy Margaret Scheuren, Junior Management Major
The University of Alabama*

What do I wish I knew, that I know now, about higher education when I was younger? Where shall I start?

LAUNDRY. Your heart will break a little each time you pay \$1.50 to wash and \$1.25 to dry, but your conscience will thank you for clean clothes, sheets, and towels.

CIGARS. The third Saturday in October will be fun, but you must leave the stadium at least eight minutes before the end of the fourth quarter (or just leave before the fourth quarter if Alabama is winning by more than 21) if you don't want to inhale cigar smoke every time you breathe. Take it from future you: Cigar smoke, especially in that quantity, is atrocious.

TAILGATES. Not that fun, but if you have food, it's so much better.

CLASSES. All that hype about college professors being pr*cks isn't the full truth. Most of them are great and you do a disservice to everyone, including yourself, when assume otherwise.

CLEANLINESS. You have undiagnosed OCD that will plague you and make you want to gouge out your eyes sometimes, but you'll survive.

FLIP FLOPS. The entire male population sees them as a necessity and unfortunately, that is not changing anytime soon.

YIK YAK. Twitter on steroids, because it's anonymous. Just as funny as Twitter, if not a little more.

MENTAL BREAKDOWNS. You'll have a few, don't be scared when you do. They're cathartic, especially when your roommates are going through it too.

FRIDAY NIGHTS AT A BAR. It's alright, but a cozy night in watching a movie with your friends and then going to bed at 10:30 is even better.

CALL YOUR MOM MORE. She will fix all your problems and solve world hunger in the span of ten minutes. It's awesome.

Also, everything will be okay. It doesn't really get more cliché than that, but it also doesn't get more true than that. All of those plans, decisions, goals, and ideas you have are great, but they won't become a reality if you keep waiting for the perfect moment to start. The perfect moment to start is now, and then you can figure the rest out along the way. Quit being so afraid to fail that you never try (current me still hasn't fully grasped this).

And, while you're at it, please talk to people. In class, turn to the right and say, "Hi." Introduce yourself to your professor. Go to interest meetings for clubs and organizations. DM a classmate to ask about an assignment (she'll become your best friend by the way). Be curious about everything. It will make a difference when you want to have that girls' night on a Friday but you don't know who to invite. It also helps when you're stuck in class and need someone to reteach the lesson to you because you were playing Wordle. I promise, everyone around you is just as scared as you are to talk to new people and even if the conversation goes nowhere, at least you made it through alive and can now yap about it to your mom.

Make mistakes. Live in the moment. College will go by in a flash so don't forget to enjoy it. Some classes will not be as fun as others, but that doesn't mean they can't teach you something valuable. Art shows in Tuscaloosa are really cool. Goodwill is your best friend. Chocolate is the answer to any problem. Rejection only hurts for a little while. Boys are dumb, girls too. No one is judging your acne. Your outfit looks great. Do it for the plot. And. Once again. Everything will be alright. ●

What is the Value of My Education?

GOOD QUESTION

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*By Alex Endorf, Senior Economics and Finance Major
The University of Alabama*

You may have heard the old joke about the work culture of the Soviet Union: “They pretend to pay us, and we pretend to do work”. Well, replace the word “pay” with “teach” and you have the educational culture of this school. There are, of course, some highly-regarded opportunities at UA—majors like accounting, public relations, and nursing and organizations like the Culverhouse Investment Management Group (CIMG), the Blackburn Institute, Witt Fellows, and the Shelby Institute all come to mind. However, I’ve often felt like I was sold an experience instead of an education; given this school’s strength at branding, it’s fitting that the PR program is one of our best.

Why am I here? The simple answer is that I scored well on an exam I didn’t study for in the fall of my junior year, and this university thought that was enough to invest some amount greater \$200k on an 18-year-old. It was an offer I couldn’t refuse, as I wasn’t going to receive anything better: I had no exceptional story to tell for scholarship essays, and my parents weren’t going to pay out of pocket for an experience I could get anywhere. And as someone who grew up in the only triple-landlocked state with harsh weather patterns and an awful football team, Alabama’s proximity to the beach, mild winters (everything on campus was green when I visited in February!), and Nick Saban all seemed attractive.

I really miss the ambition and drive that I first had when arrived in Tuscaloosa. Well, sort of. During Camp 1831 (a three-day program for first-year students before the fall semester), campers were asked to answer the prompt “When I cross the stage at graduation, ...”; they were then encouraged by the A-Team leaders to share their responses in front of the entire camp, one at a time, during a session called “Take a Step”. At the time, I didn’t have much respect for the answers I heard, though each was going to receive zealous applause no matter what. While my response was about something about grades and achievements, the others were about growing as a person and having fun. Listening to them, I couldn’t help cynically thinking their parents might not want to hear what their money was funding.

My view of college as a challenge to complete instead of a journey led me to be very active my freshman year. I signed up for a bunch of different clubs at Get On Board Day and actually went to the meetings. Despite finding the Camp 1831 experience to have been overly focused on emotional affirmation, I applied for the A-Team to boost my resume. I joined Beat Auburn Beat Hunger for volunteer experience, signed up for Freshman Forum to boost my leadership skills, and was accepted into an honor society (dues were only \$45, so it had to be real!). I faced setbacks for some of the most important organizations—my application to First Year Council was so bad I didn’t get an interview, while I was unable to surpass the final round of interviews for CIMG and the Blackburn Institute—but with good grades, my resume looked fine, and I looked set up for success.

If you couldn’t tell from the opening to this piece, I’ve since become somewhat disillusioned with college over the past few years. Though I still work to keep my grades high, I stopped caring about the achievements and the titles and the meaningless campus politics and the marginally useful (if that) research. Where I at one point was invested in all

the Machine lore, voted in the SGA elections, and viewed joining Greek Life as the act of paying for friends, I started voting for the Machine candidates because they’re generally the safer choices and joined a business fraternity. I gave up on the idea of club leadership or applying for honor societies to boost my resume and decided to study abroad over multiple semesters in Budapest and Buenos Aires. I should, of course, be focused on securing a 9-5 for after graduation, though I can’t say I’m excited for another rat race.

Thinking back on the “Take a Step” exercise, I think we were all right and wrong at the same time. College is certainly a time of personal development; it’s a life-changing social experience, for better or for worse. The view that it is a gateway to success in life is also true, with all the opportunities to build credentials for the future. However, both views are utility-focused and superficial, missing the deeper purpose and value of education itself.

My issue here isn’t with UA specifically—given the nature of our commercialized, data-driven society, valuing measurable, aggregate outcomes in our education system over effects on individuals is inevitable. But the consequences of this approach are easy to see. General education classes are a joke shared by both professors and students. Class grades have become inflated to the point that they tell us nothing about subject-matter understanding; overall GPA is useless as students can optimize professors and classes. Professors are reluctant to reproach or fail students for fear of poor Rate My Professor ratings and potential departmental complaints; this of course assumes they care about teaching at all when most incentives are for publishing papers and securing grants. There’s no incentive to struggle with class material – I know hardly anyone that does assigned readings, as it’s much easier to regurgitate the professor’s thoughts on papers and exams. We all seem to assume that education is happening simply because we are in an educational institution.

So, what is the value of education? Good question: Some thinkers say it’s the pursuit of truth and free-thinking, while others view it as the development of character or of good citizens. I personally love the analogy of education as entrance to a Great Conversation that started way before me and will last much longer; perhaps my disillusionment was actually a gift that will jumpstart my contribution to this conversation. ●



Visual Storytelling

EXPLORING MEANING, ETHICS, AND BELIEF THROUGH JAPANESE ANIME

By *Ronald S. Green, Professor and Chair of the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies Coastal Carolina University*

WHAT PROMPTED THE IDEA FOR THE COURSE “ANIME AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITY: CULTURAL AESTHETICS IN JAPANESE SPIRITUAL WORLDS”? As a scholar who studies Japanese religion and has a lifelong love of visual storytelling, I started using anime in my class to spark conversations around the Buddhist ideas of karma and Shintō notions of “kami,” or spirits in nature.

When I introduced the idea of karma, a scene from “Mob Psycho 100”—a Japanese manga and anime series from 2016 to 2022 about a shy teenage boy with powerful psychic abilities—came up in discussion. It sparked a conversation about how our intentions and actions carry real moral weight. In Buddhism, karma is not just about punishment or reward in a future life. It is believed to play out in the present—shaping how we relate to others and how we grow or get stuck as people.

Later, when I explained kami in Shintō, a quiet moment from “Mushishi” helped students think differently about the world around them. “Mushishi” is a slow-paced, atmospheric anime about a wandering healer who helps people affected by mysterious spiritlike beings called mushi. These beings are not gods or monsters but part of nature itself – barely seen, yet always present. The series gave students a visual language for imagining how spiritual forces might exist in ordinary places.

The Japanese animation movie “Mushishi.”

Over the years, two moments convinced me to create a full course. First was my students’ strong reaction to Gyōmei Himejima, the Pure Land Buddhist priest in “Demon Slayer.” He is a gentle but powerful guardian who refuses to hate the demons he must fight. His actions lead to honest and thoughtful conversations about compassion, fear and the limits of violence.

One student asked, “If Gyōmei doesn’t hate even the demons, does that mean violence can be compassionate?” Another pointed out that Gyōmei’s strength does not come from anger, but from grief and empathy. These kinds of insights showed me that anime was helping students think through complex ethical questions that would have been harder to engage through abstract theory alone.

The second moment came from watching “Dragon Ball Daima.” In this 2024 series, familiar heroes are turned into children. This reminded me of Buddhist stories about being reborn and starting over, and it prompted new questions: If someone loses all the strength they had built up over time, are they still the same person? What, if anything, remains constant about the self, and what changes?

WHAT DOES THE COURSE EXPLORE? This course helps students explore questions of meaning, ethics and belief that anime brings to life. It examines themes such as what happens when the past resurfaces? What does it mean to carry the weight of responsibility? How should we act when our personal desires come into conflict with what we know is right? And how can suffering become a path to transformation?

WHAT MATERIALS DOES THE COURSE FEATURE? We start with “Spirited Away,” a 2001 animated film about a young girl who becomes trapped in a spirit world after her parents are transformed into pigs. The story draws on Shintō ideas such as purification, sacred space and kami. Students learn how these religious concepts are expressed through the film’s visual design, soundscape and narrative structure.

Later in the semester, we watch “Your Name,” a 2016 film in which two teenagers mysteriously begin switching bodies across time and space. It’s a story about connection, memory and longing. The idea of “musubi,” a spiritual thread that binds people and places together, becomes central to understanding the film’s emotional impact.

“Attack on Titan,” which first aired in 2013, immerses students in a world marked by moral conflict, sacrifice and uncertainty. The series follows a group of young soldiers fighting to survive in a society under siege by giant humanoid creatures known as Titans. Students are often surprised to learn that this popular series engages with profound questions drawn from Buddhism and existential thought, such as the meaning of freedom, the tension between destiny and individual choice, and the deeper causes of human violence.

The characters in these stories face real struggles. Some are spirit mediums or time travelers. But all of them must make hard decisions about who they are and what they believe.

As the semester goes on, students develop visual or written projects such as short essays, podcasts, zines or illustrated stories. These projects help them explore the same questions as the anime, but in their own voices.

WHY IS THIS COURSE RELEVANT NOW? Anime has become a global phenomenon. But even though millions of people watch it, many do not realize how deeply it draws on Japanese religious traditions. In this course, students learn to look closely at what anime is saying about life, morality and the choices we make.

Through these characters’ journeys, students learn that religion is not just something found in ancient texts or sacred buildings. It can also live in the stories we tell, the art we create and the questions we ask about ourselves and the world. ●

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Say ‘Yes,’ and Then Say ‘Yes’ Again!

YOU ARE THE ONLY CONSTANT IN YOUR LIFE, BUT THERE IS ALWAYS MORE TO COME IF YOU LET IT

*By Riley Goff, Senior Operations Management and International Studies Major
The University of Alabama*

“I underestimated how contagious it is to be surrounded by such driven and passionate people.”

Before starting college, I thought I had it all figured out. I graduated from a college-prep high school with an International Baccalaureate diploma, having learned French since I was 11. Naturally, it seemed clear to me that I should take on an International Studies major and a French minor. Naturally, I tried out for and joined the club lacrosse team, since I played in high school. Naturally, I tried to hang on to the same person I was in high school, since that’s the only person I’d ever known, and she was entering an entirely foreign environment. So, naturally, I was scared of losing her.

My first year of college was honestly pretty difficult, as it is for so many who leave their small towns for the first time in all of their 18 years of life. So, I thought that clinging onto familiarities was the best, or even only, way to cope. But what I had neglected, was that “coping” is only sustainable if you’re coping in response to changes that you’re making instead of just changes in the environment you’re in.

Although I may have had to learn it the hard way, I learned nonetheless, and I made changes. I learned it was important to start saying “yes,” and only then was I able to learn how much more important it is to say “yes” again.

I was initially reluctant when I was asked to accompany someone to a rush event for a co-ed business fraternity. I spent the entire pledgship process making progress by shrugging and saying “why not?” However, by the time I got to our initiation, I was proud to finally be able to say “yes.”

Little did I know how many doors this simple affirmation would open for me. Sure, there were many leadership positions within the chapter I could take on to learn more

about myself and my leadership style in a safe space before taking on those within other organizations, which was great. But the most impactful part of that experience was the people. I was suddenly surrounded by people that were so different from myself. Different backgrounds, different majors, different perspectives on the world. Little did I know, it was exactly what I needed. Even though I felt out of place at first amongst this group of people so accomplished in fields I thought I would never touch, I underestimated how contagious it is to be surrounded by such driven and passionate people. Honestly, because of how different our trajectories were I was able to break out of my toxically comparative mindset from high school and appreciate the accomplishments of others more genuinely, without being clouded by how I measured up. I started saying yes, just like they did.

I added a second degree that I have since fallen in love with and found passions within, taken on an undergraduate research position, played countless intramural sports, and get to teach kids French every week. Because of the first “yes” I found the courage to say my first year, I discovered opportunities that I never would have been aware of, let alone considered saying “yes” to as well. As a result, I have found out who I am outside a cloud of familiarities.

Although I could expand on this brief anecdote for pages and pages, I’ll leave you with this: no matter how certain you may be of the person you are, if you only hang on to those certainties, you are denying yourself the opportunity to find out who you could be. Say “yes” to change, and then say “yes” again. ●



Give it to Me Straight

By Rella Yarrington, Junior Psychology Major
The University of Alabama

“When students are not given the realistic picture, they are unable to make informed decisions or build plans for when things do not go as promised.”

I spent most of my childhood believing that adults had everything figured out, which I’m sure is a sentiment that many can relate to. I also believed that the teachers, counselors, and advisors placed in positions of authority over my education had my best interests at heart and were genuinely invested in helping me succeed. However, my college application process dismantled these assumptions entirely.

I was, by the typical measures, the exact student the system is designed to serve. I had strong grades, a reputation for responsibility, and was “a joy to have in class.” Some might recognize these as stereotypes of the eldest daughter. Adults in my life responded to these academic results by telling me, repeatedly, that scholarships would come easily, doors would open, I was bound to be successful, and that my academic record would speak for itself. These assurances came from family and friends, as well as the high school guidance counselors and educators whose role it was to prepare me for this transition into college.

These reassurances did not prove to be true. While I did have many options as to where I was able to attend college, for which I am extremely grateful, the scholarships I had been promised were far scarcer than anticipated. I was forced to pivot late in the process, not due to lack of preparation, but because the guidance I had received was overly optimistic to the point of being misleading. I did my own research, submitted an application to the University of Alabama, a school eighteen hours away from home, and found a solution that worked for me. The position I am in now was because of research I did and actions I took. This process revealed something to me: The adults responsible for guiding me through one of the most important decisions of my life had not given me accurate information. I had to find my own path forward.

This is not an isolated failure of one disorganized school district or one unhelpful counselor. It reflects a pattern in how educational institutions communicate with their students. The guidance system, from high school counselors all the way to college advisors, leans towards reassurance. Students are told that they’re going to be fine, everything is okay, it’ll all work out. This kind of comfort can be harmful. When students are not given the realistic picture, they are unable to make informed decisions or build plans for when things do not go as promised.

Upon arriving at college, I found myself continuing to run into advisors who sugarcoated things and offered encouragement instead of honest counsel. I want to be clear: This is not an argument against using the institutional resources available to you. Office hours, advising appointments, ambassador meetings, and faculty relationships can be extremely valuable. The problem is not that these resources exist, it is that students aren’t taught to approach them critically. We are conditioned to defer to authority rather than to verify things we are told. Students need to understand that advisors operate within institutional guidelines that do not always align with the best interests of individual students. Fact-checking, seeking multiple perspectives, and doing independent research are acts of self-advocacy that the system should be encouraging. The students who navigate the higher education system most successfully are often those who learn to rely on themselves. This should not be a lesson that students are left to find out on their own. ●



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Active Recovery

A TIP I LEARNED FROM LEARNING TO RUN

*By Katherine Firth, Head of Lisa Belleair House
The University of Melbourne, Victoria Australia*

I've recently taken on a new challenge and have started running. This has meant I've had to learn a whole range of new skills and strategies. And because I've spent a dozen years turning everything I learn into something about writing via this blog... I'm going to keep up the habit.

A tip I learned from learning to run is "active recovery."

In fact, there is a whole thing in running called a... "recovery run!" This horrified me when I first found out about it. Any run felt like a huge effort, surely any kind of running was the opposite of recovering from running!

And it's true, you should be sleeping, and resting, and taking days off from running, to recover from running.

But it's also a good idea to sometimes run, slowly, easily, not for too long, to help you recover from running.

And there are other active things you can do, and that really help, to help you recover from running. Like going for a walk, or stretching, or doing yoga.

And this made me think about what active recovery strategies we might use to help us in our writing.

It can be tempting, after a long and exhausting day at the desk, to get up and head straight to the couch, or straight to bed. And sometimes we are so tired and sleepy, there really isn't any other choice. But I often find that I don't find that strategy quite as restful as I think it will be. I'm still achey and tired and my head is still buzzing from all the writing and thinking.

It often works better if I get up from my desk, and go to the gym or for a walk or to a pilates class. I move my body and work through my feelings and empty out my brain. And then I collapse on the couch, and I feel great. And later that night, I crawl into bed and sleep well.

Sometimes I use a strategy that looks a lot more like desk work, but is actually desk recovery. I write down my done list, or I reflect in my journal. Or I tidy away my files and pens and papers, using my hands to help me complete the day's work.

Or I use a ritual that looks a lot like more thinking work, but is actually thinking recovery. I do a mindfulness meditation, or listen carefully to a complex musical piece (I'm a trained musicologist, so music is always something I think about), or imagine the big picture for my research. (These links take you to podcast recordings from my most recent book so you can try it out for yourself)

If you have ever used editing, copy editing, tidying up your footnotes or formatting your citations as a bit of a mental rest (but not a full break), then you have already understood how to use writing to recover from writing.

A recovery run complements other forms of recovery, like eating enough and getting enough sleep, it doesn't replace them. And doing email or marking essays or coding data doesn't count as recovery—these are often high-stakes brain challenges in themselves. You can judge for yourself what works as active recovery: when you finish the task, do you feel drained and exhausted? not a recovery task; do you feel pleasantly tired and keen to get going again the next morning? a recovery task.

When we are doing something really complicated and long and challenging and tiring, like writing a PhD thesis, we need a whole range of recovery tools as well as working tools. This one surprised me, and then when I thought about it a bit more deeply, it seemed obvious.

I've been more intentional about scheduling in recovery tasks at the end of working days, and it's been really helpful for me. My back is grateful as is my brain. ●

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Invisible Layers

NAVIGATING CHRONIC CHALLENGES

*By Karlee Reyes, Senior Neuroscience Major
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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. ●



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MISSION STATEMENT

THE JOURNAL'S MISSION is revealed in its format. There is a reliance on, and comfort with, the conversational voice, plain speaking and thinking out loud, to effectively present the lives and thoughts of faculty and students in higher education to an, at best uncertain when it comes to us American public. And to each other. Thoughtful, persuasive conversations have been widely abandoned in this digital and social media age and lesser, clumsier forms of exchange unstoppably shoved into their place. To generate public conversations about life in academia, the *Sixth Avenue Journal* calls for short, thoughtful personal essays, clear, transparent, delivering a talking to-your-friends story. Maybe a little outspoken. No stiff stuff, no academic writing rituals, detailed citations or dense academic flourishes. Not too many big words. The vernacular and unguarded moments sought. Elegantly crafted and argued. But no social media styling: We don't do that.

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OUR FORMAT IS A SHORT, thoughtful, personal essay, clear, transparent, thinking out loud. Between 500 and 1,000 words.

It's about your studies, your work, your field, your campus life, your writing and/or your teaching. Conversational. Maybe a little outspoken. Something in your own style. No stiff stuff, no peer review rituals, detailed citations or academic flourishes. Not too many big words. Perhaps an anecdote. The vernacular and unguarded moments sought. Elegantly crafted and argued, stylish, and with some bite. And, of course, no social media styling, e.g., NO ALL CAPS or acronyms; we don't do that. Transcripts are records of spirited, informal conversations about life in higher education (with our 1,000-word limit).

Email submissions to 6aj@ua.edu with name, rank/year, department, university, contact information and a few personal details you think may fit. A photo, formal or informal. Email to request a publication schedule if later issues are more to your liking, or with questions. Submissions will be published at the discretion of the Editorial Team.

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Spirited conversations about life in higher education

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