

How My Community College Has Changed My Life

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In high school I struggled with an eating disorder, and for a while, I balanced my academics and the disorder. As my junior year approached, however, my health began to spiral as it transitioned from anorexia to bulimia. With the loss of control over my eating, I quickly succumbed to the pressures of my rigorous schedule and my grades began to falter. I made the difficult decision to put a hold on my studies to attend a residential treatment program where I spent several months focusing on bettering my well-being. By the time I was discharged I was far behind the rest of my peers, which initially only further contributed to my guilt and depression. It was a very hard decision for me to get a GED in place of completing my diploma because of the stigma associated with it, but I chose to do so in order to enroll in a community college the upcoming fall and get back on track.

Prior to the beginning of my first semester, I decided to register for an independent research course that focused on the study of biofilms. The concepts I learned in that class opened up an entirely new realm of possibilities. This inspired me to seek other undergraduate research opportunities. My research professor, Dr. Ziegenhom, helped me apply for these positions, and luckily, I was selected for a summer internship at the Amato Lab at Northwestern University. This lab, situated in the anthropology department, conducts research pertaining to how shifts within the gut microbiome affect human health in non-Western, food insecure populations.

The graduate students often shared stories pertaining to their field work which inspired me to delve deeper in the topics. The time I spent here solidified my belief that I wanted to pursue a career in epidemiology with a concentration on infectious disease. As the summer was coming to a close, Dr. Amato extended an offer for me to continue working there throughout the 2019-20 academic year. I have been working here ever since, and recently I was recommended for another research position in the McDade Lab at NU.

Without Oakton and professors like Dr. Ziegenhom, I would not have had the chance to become involved in research like this so early on in my career. Oakton provided me with a sense of direction in my life that I desperately needed. The people I've met here have inspired me to pursue my dreams I previously thought unattainable due to my past, and have supported me tremendously throughout my academic journey. Oakton allowed me to experience things that would not have been available to me elsewhere, and my professors' confidence in me helped me overcome personal insecurities due to my past. Now I understand that being at a community college is not something to be ashamed of. This school changed my life by reinstalling the passion and love I have for the pursuit of discovery and knowledge that had been previously suppressed by my disorder.

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