Work Hard, Play Harder

When someone asks you what your experience at the University of Illinois was like, what will you tell him? Will the stories we carry away from college be similar to the stories we heard before we got here? For this paper, I decided to interview students who were done with or finishing up their college careers, some of whom, like myself, have taken some time off. I found that college has run its course mostly as we expected it would. Before coming to the University of Illinois, many of my interviewees had heard stories from older siblings, parents and friends. Not surprisingly, many of the stories I heard from them told of large parties, bars and drunken debauchery but also of tough classes, hard work and difficult professors. We all grew up with the idea that obtaining a college degree would be immensely important in the real world and would be the solidifying aspect in helping us secure a job.

It seems that before coming to the University of Illinois, we had all heard stories about two different aspects of college life. On one side we heard about crazy parties and drunken mishaps, but on the other hand, we all were conditioned with the same expectation that going to college was going to be a lot of work. We all heard there were going to be times in which the teachers would probably never recognize your face due to the obscenely large number of students enrolled in one class. One student told me that his first impression of the University of Illinois was poor because of “large classes and faceless teachers, with a sense of being processed or pumped through the system.” One girl was warned by high school teachers of “horror stories of how difficult classes and
professors would be.” It was our job to ask for it if we needed help, because the professors would never dream of ‘babying us.’ I had some high school teachers who used to laugh when we complained about how much homework we were given on any given night- “Just wait until you get to college,” they would laugh, “you are going to wish you only had it this easy.” One student I interviewed told me that before coming to the U of I he figured, “some professors would be too absorbed in research to care at all about their students.” When I was growing up, my mother, who went Western, used to tell me a story about a professor she had who was going through a mental breakdown and almost failed his entire class for not doing the work he assigned (the problem was that he would forget what he assigned and next class think it was something totally different). Everyone kept drilling into our college-bound brains just how hard everything was going to be. Sometimes we believed them, but sometimes we thought that they were just out to scare us into having an easier time of it all. One thing we did know was that we were going to be on our own. There would be no mom or dad to get you out of bed if you slept through your alarm, no teacher to call home if you were in danger of failing a class because you didn’t do the homework, no one to look after you to make sure you were completing everything you needed to be completing. One of my friends that I interviews and I had also heard a phrase that sounded like music to our ears (yet was not exactly true), “classes are optional.” We had heard that if you are smart enough to learn the material from the book then you wouldn’t have to go to class, but only show up for the tests. It seemed like the two of us could not get that idea out of our heads, which was a problem since the two of us are English majors, a major in which attendance is absolutely required because our classes all entail discussing literature. We knew the
campus was going to be huge and we would meet tons of different people from varying backgrounds. One girl I interviewed correctly stipulated that we would find people who might become our friends for the rest of our lives.

In the same way we knew that we would be responsible for ourselves, we knew that being on our own was going to mean making our own decisions about if we wanted to go out on a school night, if we wanted to drink whenever we went out, when we were going to come home and whom we were going to go out with. No one was going to yell at us if we stumbled home drunk on wine on a Tuesday night at 2:30 in the morning. We had all heard stories that bleed into one another that have to do with alcohol. I remember a friend from my freshman year who got drunk that on his three block walk home he decided he couldn’t make it and instead saw a bush and figured that it was a good resting place to nap for an hour or two. One girl told me her brother fell into a bush on his way home and ended up needed stitches. Also, there are always those rumors about someone getting drunk and going streaking, which comes to our attention easily after seeing Will Ferrell do it in the movie Old School.

After getting here, we learned that there is some aspect of truth in every story we hear. I say this because every person that I interviewed told me that college turned out to be exactly the way they expected it to. The professors did not ‘baby’ you, but for the most part they are there and willing to help if you take the initiative. There are some classes that attendance is never taken, but you most likely will not do as well on the tests if you never show up to class. Some people have majors in which they can just read the texts and do well on the tests, but my friend and I had to fail an English class here or there to realize that our major was not one of them. Since I have been back in school, I
realize that classes, and life in general, is much less stressful if you simply attend class. There are classes in which you have an absurd amount of homework, but also classes in which you receive almost none. All of the people I interviewed have had a class in Lincoln Hall Theater, with enrollment pushing 700 students, and I have taken a few classes that had four students or less. We have slept through our alarms, sometimes when there was a test to take or presentation to give, but we have also had our roommates wake us up just in time. We didn’t have parents to watch over us and/or yell at us when we stumbled home drunk at all hours of the morning, but we sure felt it the next day. One girl told me that her brother had lost his keys while he was out drinking and had to break into his own apartment. Two of the people I interviewed and I had made that mistake of not going to class enough and in turn had to take some time off from school to get our heads back on straight. Three students told me that at one time or another they were intimidated by the size of this university or their classes. We all have different stories, but it is funny how many of them overlap each other’s; overall college was just as we had expected, lots of work accompanied by lots of play.

Now we have our own stories to tell people who are coming to the University of Illinois or another school, and they are very much the same yet more personalized than the ones we heard before we got here. Considering that many of the movies that gave us images of college depict social situations and parties (Animal House, Old School and Van Wilder), it is not surprising that many of our favorite memories from our time at the University of Illinois are from times we were under the influence of alcohol and surrounded by our close friends. One student I interviewed said he will never forget that time when he stayed up drinking the entire night with friends and co-workers only to
return to the bar when it opened again the next morning. Some of our favorite memories have to do with traditions. The tradition of watching NCAA basketball led to many memorable moments during the 2004-2005 basketball season. Many students who went to the U of I that year can remember where they were when our Illini beat Arizona in overtime over spring break. One of the girls I interviewed was driving home from Florida with some friends and stopped in a small town bar just to see the game, which turned out to be the most exciting one ever. I remember being at work at the bar and getting cut right before the team started to make a comeback. The employees who were off already were watching the game from the d.j. booth, the only available area in the entire place. The cheering in the bar grew louder with each basket we scored, and by the end of the game people were standing on the booths, unable to contain their excitement. The next week, in which we won our Final Four game against Louisville, we will never forget how Green Street was flooded with a mobile mass of people from the Quad all the way down to Third or Second Street celebrating. There are other traditions that were more personal. It is funny how between friends, you can hear a single word or phrase that evokes a slew of memories. A friend that I have known all throughout college wrote a single word as an answer for the questions about your favorite memories in my survey. Church. Church to us is not what one would expect. Many of our friends did not have to work on Sundays, so going to the bar on Sunday morning became a tradition for about a year. We started calling it church because one Sunday we were sitting around and someone we knew said they had to go to church. My roommate at the time said, “I am at my church, and by church, I mean the bar.” This tickled us so much that she started writing notes on paper napkins and signing them as ‘god.’ I think it started because we
thought of the book “Are You There God, It’s Me, Margaret.” We came up with different roles for our friends; for instance, there were three wise women and we were called that due to witty comments we made that day. One guy was Noah because he spilled his beer all over the table, flooding it, while the guy who cleaned it up became Moses because he ‘parted the sea.’ There was a profit, because she predicted something that came true later that day, and many more. We had so much fun the day that originated that we made it our Sunday morning tradition of going to ‘church.’ There isn’t much that can make some of us smile more than thinking about taking a ‘communion’ of shots with one of us running around with a hat made out of paper napkins asking, “Are you my baby’s daddy? If you are, please introduce yo’self.”

Throughout this number of years we have seen some changes in ourselves and the campus. We realize that we have grown up and become more responsible, and we really did get a sort of education that taught us to stick up for ourselves, become more independent and more confident. One student told me he learned how to perfect procrastination and enjoy a good beer, but some of us also learned that we had been fooled somewhat by our expectations. In the end, I learned some of us feel that we did earn a valuable education here, but also realize sadly that a college degree will not simply get us a job and in many places experience matters as much or if not more to future employers. One student noted that parking fines and other University fees seem to have been created to milk money out of the student body, and he said it seems that “college is run more like a business that a center for higher learning.” I think that it is really interesting that we see this idea surface as far back as in Stover at Yale continuing up to
today’s students. All in all, we found that school has taught us a lot, but our friends and experiences have taught us more about ourselves.