

Experiencing Memories

Everyone who goes to college has a different experience. Their experiences can be affected by the size and location of the school they attend. It can also greatly depend on the friends they make while attending school. Classes they took and what they majored in also affect their experience. There are also many choices of places to live while at college which can affect their experience. Students can choose to live on campus or off campus, in a dorm, an apartment or possibly even private housing depending on what their campus offers. Involvement on campus can also make a difference in what a student's college experience is like. They could be involved in clubs, join sports teams, do volunteer work or attend sporting events.

Everyone also has a different idea of what college will be like. They may hear stories from parents, friends, relatives or siblings that will shape what their perception of college is. Various movies depicting aspects of college life will help shape people's ideals of what college is like. Some movies depict college life as being really serious where students have to study a lot and work hard for their degrees. Others depict college as a constant party where students never attend classes, do not have professors and drink alcohol at all hours of the day and night. Another venue for students to get a depiction of college life is through books they have read. All these things can shape an incoming student's perspective of what their college experience will be like.

It is almost impossible to go to college and come out with no memories and no experiences. Everyone ends up with plenty of stories to share about their college experiences. Many people who are college-aged have parents with their own experiences and stories from

college to share with their children. Even if their parents did not attend college, they have ideals about what it is like as well as expectations for their children who are attending college. If they did go to college, more than likely they are eager to share their stories with their children as they get ready to embark on the next stage of their lives. These stories also vary depending on where they went to school and what kinds of experiences they had.

Monica* is a senior at the University of Illinois majoring in Molecular and Cellular Biology and comes from Metairie, Louisiana. Her parents attended a university in Taiwan and Duke University. Her father told her about his academic struggles while at Duke because he did not speak English as well as the other students and would have to study a lot more to catch up to them. A senior from Peoria, Illinois, Rachel is a marketing major in the business school. Both of her parents attended Vanderbilt University. Her father was in the Alpha Tau Omega fraternity and her mother was in the Pi Beta Phi sorority so Rachel heard lots of stories about fraternity and sorority parties. They also told her stories about football games they attended as well as the classes they took and professors they had. Phoebe is also a senior at the University of Illinois, is a psychology major and comes from Freeport, Illinois. Her mother attended three different schools for undergrad and her father did not attend college so she only heard stories from her mother. The only story she remembers hearing from her mother is about how the dorm rooms were small. Ann, who is currently a freshman at Bradley University, decided not to attend either of her parents' alma maters. She does, however, remember being told stories about their experiences while she was growing up. Her mother attended North Park University and lived at home during college so she felt as though she did not get the true college experience because she did not live on campus. Ann's father attended Loras College in Iowa and told his daughter stories about different pranks he and his floor mates would pull on each other as well as different

* Names have been changed.

stories about his friends. “One story I remember hearing several times was about how my dad and his friends decided to go bowling in the hallway of their dorm and dented the wall at the end of the hallway,” she said.

Stories can definitely have an effect on a student’s perception of what college will be like before they go there. For example, Ann remembers hearing stories from her cousins, her older sister and her friends about what college was like. Monica did not really hear any general stories about college but instead specific ones about University of Illinois. She recalled hearing about it being a really large school with lots of partying and a prestigious engineering program. Rachel heard more stories about Vanderbilt than U of I because she was not close with anyone older than her who had attended U of I or was currently enrolled there. Phoebe said she only remembered hearing stories about the sports teams because her father is a huge Illinois sports fan. Patrick, who graduated from Loras College in 1974, did not hear any stories about his college. In fact, he learned about the school through a friend and did not even step foot on campus until school started.

Before a student can choose a college, they have to have an idealistic picture of what their perfect school will be like, which will in turn determine their college experience. Phoebe said when she was looking for a school she wanted a place where she could be independent and away from her parents. She also wanted somewhere where she could learn new things and meet a lot of new people. When Rachel was looking at colleges, she wanted somewhere with a good academic reputation, a good location, large size, a lot of athletic offerings, decent price, a strong curriculum and a pretty campus. Monica not only wanted a school where she could get away from her parents but also a good school with strong academics, a nice campus, a lot of diversity and somewhere that would be safe. While she was looking for schools, Ann looked at the

location, the size, how nice the dorms were and how good the education was. Patrick said he chose Loras College because he wanted a small college that offered a degree in accounting. He said he “also wanted to avoid all the hippies and the related drug problems that seemed to be prevalent at the big universities at the time.”

Outside factors besides stories can also influence a student’s perception of college. There are several books and movies about various college campuses and events which occur on them, whether they are realistic or fiction. One of the most popular college movies of all time is *Animal House*, which everyone but Monica mentioned was a movie they saw which shaped their perception of college. Ann said, “you watch that movie and it makes you think college is one big party and a good time until you actually get here and figure out how much hard work it really is.” Rachel also mentioned *Van Wilder* as a movie she saw. Monica mentioned several movies including *Mona Lisa Smile*, *Beautiful Mind*, *Roadtrip* and *Legally Blonde*. No one could think of any books which they read about college which shaped their perception of it.

Expectations about college can have a lot to do with the kind of experience a student has at college. For instance, Monica thought her college experience was going to be mostly focused on academics but she would also meet a lot of different people, have a lot of independence and it would be really easy to make friends. Her college experience was pretty much what she expected, though she found it difficult at times to adjust to a new state because she felt everyone knew someone from high school and they did not want to make new friends. She also said she did not expect so much emphasis on drinking. Rachel thought her college experience was going to be full of lots of work and would be very competitive and challenging. She also thought it would be overwhelming with the size of the school and it would be much different from home life. She found that it took a little while to adjust but it was not nearly as difficult or impossible

as she thought college-level work would be. Rachel said U of I had so many opportunities to get involved, whether it was through sports, classes or clubs, that it made adjusting easier as did making friends early on. According to Phoebe, she thought she was not going to enjoy life at college because it was not her first choice of where to go but she was excited about being on her own. She found that making friends made all the difference as she said she ended up meeting great friends and now could not imagine going anywhere else. Patrick said he did not really have any expectations about college before he went and thought it would be a lot like high school except he would be living away from home.

While expectations and perceptions can be shaped before a student comes to college, further information learned from tour guides during a visit to campus or student leaders at orientation can also shape a student's perception of their school before they have any real experiences there. Monica remembers hearing stories from a tour guide during a visit she made to the school as well as stories from orientation group leaders. The tour guide told her myths and tales about school buildings as well as about the legend of the eternal flame (if you kiss your significant other in front of it, you will be together forever), the legend about the English building being haunted, the history of the Morrow Plots and the Undergraduate Library and about the school's super computer. During orientation, she remembers hearing stories about living in the dorms, how to deal with roommates and stories about Resident Advisors. Phoebe also recalled hearing the story about the eternal flame from her tour guide but she also talked about the story about Lincoln's nose in Lincoln Hall (if you rub it before a test, quiz or exam, it would bring you good luck and you would do well). She could not remember any stories from her orientation leader. Rachel remembered the exact same stories as Phoebe from her tour guide and also could not remember any stories from her orientation leader.

Parents pass along stories about their college experiences to their children in hopes that they will either want to attend their parents' alma mater or they will learn a lesson from their parents' experiences. Phoebe's mother did not encourage her to attend her alma mater and Phoebe's first choice for college was Tulane but her father pushed her into going to University of Illinois because he was a huge fan of the school. Rachel's parents strongly advocated her going to Vanderbilt because they loved it there but when Rachel applied and was put on the waiting list, they told her that she could do better and supported her decision to go to University of Illinois. Monica's parents said they would have liked her to go to one of their schools if it was possible but in the end, it was her decision of where she wanted to go. She said that her mother supported her decision but her father was worried because she was going to school so far from home. Patrick has several memories of college that he passed along to his children, including stories about how he met his friends, how much of a pain going to a hilly campus was especially when there were snow storms, playing intramural sports with his friends and food fights in the cafeteria after football games.

In the end, the experiences and memories of college come down to what people make of them. Those who want to be really involved will join a lot of clubs and perhaps make their friends that way. Others will meet their friends during their first year at the dorms and make friendships that will last for the rest of college and beyond. Some will study hard and focus on getting good grades. Some will go out often and party a lot. Many will split their time between the two. Friendships are perhaps the most important part of a college experience because it is with them that memories are made and they are the reason stories exist.