My Communities, Experiences, and Personal Growth: A Reflective Essay

 I don’t think I’ll ever forget moving into Maple Hall my freshman year of college and thinking that I lucked out to be living on the pre-health floor, because it was 80% females. It turns out, I was quite lucky to be on that floor, because it meant I wasn’t on the engineering floor living around everyone I was competing with in class. It’s hard to imagine that I was so driven to be an engineer back then. I loved solving complex problems but was never strong at math and complex equations. Either way, I was strapped in for a wild four years that would change the way I learn, think, and even dress.

 Coming into UW, I was a bit of a cocky freshman. I had done pretty well in high school (like everyone else at UW), I was coming off of a third place finish at youth nationals for ultimate frisbee, I had just been to Israel to play ultimate frisbee (which took way too long to explain to brag about), and of course I thought I was way too good for the Greek System (more on that later). With that being said, I hit the ground running with hopes of killing it in school and making the UW Ultimate frisbee team. I took math, chemistry, and physics classes all year with a side elective class I always just expected to be easy. I also went to every ultimate frisbee event I could, because I wanted to play with UW and Division I College Nationals.

 In my first quarter, I spent every Monday and Wednesday night on the turf fields at ultimate practices and even my Saturday mornings. I went on runs when I didn’t have practices, and even went to lift weights. This engulfed my life, and I was hell bent on making UW’s team. Tryouts came around and I went out and played my ass off. There was a combine, and then endless scrimmaging, which cumulated with UW taking two teams down to Eugene, OR for a tournament to act as a final stage of the tryout. With my experience, knowledge of the game, and performance at tryouts, I felt like I stood good chances of making the team and living out my dream! Many of my friends had made the teams at their respective colleges and I couldn’t wait to play against them at tournaments around the country!

A week later I got an email to deliver the news that I would be spending the year on the B-team to brush up on my fundamentals. To add to my disappointment, the head coach of the A-team pulled me aside one night before our B-team practice to tell me it wasn’t likely I’d ever have a spot on his team. He was nice enough to elaborate that I had already been coached too much, and he didn’t see me as someone he could mold into his specific system of ultimate frisbee. While this still stings to this day, it came as a blessing in disguise. I quickly realized that I would hate to be surrounded by a community that cutthroat. I quickly fell in love with the B-team mentality and positive team environment.

As the school year progressed, I noticed that school was becoming harder and harder. No matter how hard I worked, it felt like I couldn’t get things right. I decided to keep soldiering through though, but my grades kept going down. In my spring quarter, I took math and physics, two subjects I had always felt comfortable in before, but I couldn’t seem to get the hang of these classes. It seemed like no amount of studying yielded results in terms of strong grades. Eventually, two thirds of the way through spring quarter, I had failed my second math midterm, and it became apparent I wasn’t going to pass the class. There was a distinct moment, while crying to my mom on the phone on the steps of red square, that things had to change. I had spent my year without a community chasing a major that clearly wasn’t where my heart was. Humbling and sad at the same time, it had to have been one of the most important moments of my college career.

The next year I ended up joining the fraternity Sigma Nu and surrounding myself with an incredible group of guys. Having a place to call home that wasn’t a cramped dorm room, or dingy apartment, but instead a house filled with history and tradition made a huge difference. I was convinced to join the fraternity by my friend, Calvin, from the frisbee team, and haven’t looked back since. I was quickly greeted by guys that already treated me like family. There was even a chef that cooked delicious food for us every day. You read that right, someone cooked for us! She was like a second mom to me, and I will always stop by the house to say hi to Geri, because she has always been there for me in the best and worst moments. At first, I just thought I would be partying and having fun all the time, which isn’t completely wrong, but it helped me get better at time management and prioritization. It’s hard to procrastinate homework when I knew I had an event at night. There were also countless moments where brothers pressured me to go to the library with them just to get things done and even ahead. This was the first time at UW where I started to feel like I had a community I could rely on.

Another big change that happened in my sophomore year was getting out of the STEM world. I had no idea where I would excel, so I just decided to try a lot of different classes to see what I enjoyed. Someone was smart enough to recommend I take CEP 200 with Marty Curry in the fall as well, which is the best class I will ever take at UW. The subject matter, readings, in class activities, and the facilitation aspect of it was all incredible. Coming to class everyday was a treat, and I felt at home in Gould. It was clear to me that I had solved my major problem. After fall quarter I had to become a strong applicant for CEP as well. I took more time to enjoy a wide variety of classes and try to boost up my GPA. Taking environmental classes as well, was a great experience and lead me to want a minor in environmental studies, because that is my favorite aspect of planning. Sociology classes were also helpful, because I was able to tap into my love of people, which made me realize my interest in social issues.

As the year progressed, I became a recruitment chair for Sigma Nu, which will forever be one of the most formative positions I’ll ever have. I was tasked with planning weekly events, big trips, reaching out to hundreds of potential members, and working with both alumni and our national organizations. This was a tall order for a 20-year-old, especially with knowledge that the house was currently struggling. Through this position though, I learned an incredible amount about myself and had countless opportunities for growth. Learning to sell wasn’t an experience I had ever had, and there was no clear training for trying to sell a messy, smelly, out of repair house. I learned the importance of connecting with people and finding out what they were looking for in their college experience. If I could do that, then I could bring in new members. This process also helped connect me deeper with the fraternity and create a stronger community to rally behind.

Eventually Junior year rolled around after a summer of recruitment, being accepted into CEP, and my first summer living without my parents in Seattle. Doing recruitment all summer was fun, but I was burnt out and ready to get to school. CEP 301 got started, and it was surreal to be in an actual major at UW studying something I was genuinely excited about. Class only had 16 people in it, and Chris sat down to participate with us every day. Gould felt like more than home, but where I belonged. Early on, I sat next to Michael and Sophia by complete chance but that turned into two incredible friends I would grow close with over the next two years. We made jokes like we were middle schoolers no matter how serious class got and always had a good time. Fall quarter introduced me to my cohort and introduced me to brand new ways of thinking and looking at the world. This brand-new community was different, but an incredibly strong group of people to be surrounded by. I knew from the beginning that this community would have a profound impact on me.

Junior fall quarter was incredible in CEP, but with a quarter left of recruitment and behind on numbers, I was under the gun and alumni had high expectations of me. For the house to stay financially stable, there needs to be a certain number of guys living in it, and we were approaching a dangerous turnover. I had to kick it into high gear and by some miracle, sign a lot of new members. I’m still not sure how it all came together, but I was able to rally the house, and get everyone behind the recruitment effort. In a quarter we managed to sign 17 guys and managed to build one of the largest pledge classes in 25 years. With that in the books, it felt like things were starting to come together and the house was at an all time high of morale.

The next quarter, I couldn’t take CEP 302 with the rest of my cohort due to complications from my minor, and that is something that still makes me sad. Winter quarter junior year ended up being one of the most stressful quarters I have ever experienced with 18 credits and some outside problems as well. This quarter is where I was so happy to have the CEP community around and I learned I could I always talk to someone on a bad day. I also took on another leadership position within Sigma Nu, which was not a great fit in retrospect, but more on that later. Wrapping up winter quarter last year was one of the biggest reliefs of my college career, and I decided to go off to Mexico for spring break. In this time, I learned the value of a break and traveling with your friends.

Junior year went by in such a blur and I was able to grow much closer to my CEPsters. Spring was an incredible time where I enjoyed time with both my cohort and my fraternity. Junior year was also one of the first times where I had to say goodbye to some of my best friends in my college career. Calvin, who was an older brother to me since freshman year was moving on, and it felt like he passed a torch to me in a way. You could always count on him for a good time and bringing people together, which is something I strived to do my senior year. I spent the summer working and having ridiculous adventures with all my best friends.

That summer, I was lucky to start spending more time with my parents and started listening to lots of Grateful Dead music. Hearing stories from my parents of them in their youth and connecting over music is something that has helped me realize more important values. I also worked on South Lake Union at a kayaking rental place which was another experience that has helped me shift my ideals of how I want to be an adult. At work, I was surrounded by wealth and people who cared so much about materialism. Imagine having kids complaining about paddle boarding on Lake Union, because they already do it so much at their beach houses. I want to be comfortable, but I realized that I care much more about people and shared experiences with the people I love. It’s helped me become closer to my parents and the hippy ideals that I grew up on.

The next fall hit me like a train. I was flooded with responsibilities and I also had to start worrying about this senior project thing? There were 26 new guys in the house that I had to be responsible for, which included planning out many events for them and facilitating a smooth move in process. I also had missed my cohort like crazy, and I loved spending as much time as possible with them. Adventures with my LCY team and especially riding bikes around with Will became highlights of the quarter. In retrospect, I was not the right person for my job in the fraternity, and that became a hard thing to deal with fall quarter. Holding people accountable is something I struggled with, especially in that setting, but I still learned from that experience. This point caused a shift for me in where I valued my communities. I used to think my fraternity bros were so much to me, but I loved the CEP community I was surrounded by and it helped me realize I needed to distance myself from the fraternity in order to grow.

The next quarter I was lucky enough to find an apartment a block away with some guys I knew from high school. At first it was hard figuring out my way outside of the house, but I am glad I went through it. I started cooking for myself. Believe it or not, I love making my own food now. Trash and floors sticky with beer became something I DIDN’T have to deal with every week. A room to myself is something I hadn’t had since high school, and I have learned to love the ability to have personal space. In this time, I was also able to spend time with a wider variety of people and gain new experiences outside of Greek life. It took 4 years, but I was living the dream. To top things off, I went to Las Vegas for my senior spring break, which could not have been a better way to wrap up my college career. Vegas was an entirely different world, where my friends and I were still “balling on a budget”, but it was an amazing experience all the same. I’m not sure when I’ll have another experience like that again, so we lived it to the fullest.

This last quarter at UW hasn’t felt real in many ways. Finishing up senior project has been one of the biggest points of stress for me all year, and I have learned a lot about myself through this experience. Looking back, I wish I had done a different topic of something less academic and more aligned with my interests. I think it would have been fun to do something based around music or kayaking. I love Bellingham and my subject matter, but it never got me super excited, it was just something I could talk about and feel smart. There is a lot I wish I had done differently, but I’m ready to move on from it at this point.

Enjoying communities has been a big focus for me this past quarter. Outside of school, I go out of my way to spend time with my friends and live up this last time in school. I also was able to get a job working at Tommy Bahama selling Hawaiian Shirts, which has been an awesome experience so far to help me pay for food, rent, and fun. Balancing school, work, and making the most of my last quarter has been a brand-new challenge, but also a healthy one to get me ready for the post-graduation life. I finally feel like I’ve been able to find a healthy balance of communities as well between the fraternity and CEP. Happy hours in Gould Hall and BBQs at Sigma Nu on the weekends has allowed me to enjoy my last bit of time with all the people that have shaped my college experience. In my final week of college, we had a senior roast at the house, and I was able to re-live so many of the crazy times I have had with so many friends. It made me realize that I have lived college to the absolute fullest, and while there were plenty of mistakes along the way, it has helped me grow so much as a person and enjoy my time here. I am proud to be a Sigma Nu, I am proud to be a CEPster, and I am proud to be a Husky.