

Pushing Through Hurdles and Learning to Grow

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My time at Eastern Illinois University has been as rewarding as it was unexpected. I am sure each student here can relate to the fear, disappointment, and anger that came with the change in our lives due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This feeling was not unique to me transferring in as a junior in the height of COVID not knowing what to expect for my classes, in making friends, or how living on campus could even work. In starting with high hopes for my EIU experience it was anxiety producing, and frankly terrifying not knowing if I would have the same opportunities I would have had if I had entered before the pandemic. But I was certainly proven wrong, and my time here has been immensely meaningful and empowering. This campus has given me the opportunity to grow and challenge myself in ways I could never have expected.

Despite necessary precautions keeping us students physically distanced from each other, EIU's student engagement did not suffer. University Board ensured that new and returning students had safe opportunities to get out of their rooms and have fun with each other in things like socially distanced bingo and movies in the quad. Through events like this I was able to join University Board and help to plan more events for students to enhance their EIU experience. I also was given the opportunity to do this on Hall Council and make living on campus a true home for so many students as EIU staff, faculty, and administrators empowered us to create spaces to connect and socialize as student leaders. During this time, I saw how bringing students together as a community could bring joy and unity to our campus and living spaces. Being a part of University Board and Hall Council was not only about planning events, but it was about building a home and a campus where students didn't just learn, but could grow, make connections, and engage with each other. As student leaders, our experiences have empowered us to take steps to make our campus community more than just spaces where we live and work. These leadership positions that I have held certainly helped me gain professional and technical

skills, but they were so much more than this; they gave me the determination to advocate for an environment that would foster personal, academic, and professional growth for all of us.

This motive led me to apply for a resident assistant position in campus housing. I was chosen to live and work on EIU's first gender-inclusive housing community. This means so much to me and I know that I was given an important role in helping students find an inclusive and welcoming home on campus where we could grow and learn in a safe community. This living learning community was established as a safe space and designed to provide rich resources and programming that allows residents to live our unique realities and to reach our full potential. Through my position as an R.A. I was guided on how to serve each student in their own way because our needs are all unique as we all require diverse resources and support to succeed.

Housing is not the only place at EIU that I experienced this: although I live in McKinney, Blair Hall is my second home. My courses in sociology and communication studies did so much more than meet curriculum requirements. My professors all understood that we need to grow and learn not just as students but as humans and as compassionate, intelligent members of society. My professors have challenged me to think for myself and to push beyond what I perceived as my limits. I have made connections with my professors that have helped me in so many ways. They have guided and entrusted me with important research and supported me in applying to graduate schools. I have witnessed how faculty and staff at EIU care about the lives of students and take their time to help us grow, learn, and achieve things we never knew that we could. I know that I am where I am today because of faculty members and staff that have gone out of their way to mentor me, to advise me, and to push me to apply myself to opportunities that I may not have done otherwise. The support I have received from my mentors at EIU has been so meaningful and I know I will carry their advice and kindness with me as I move forward.

These connections that I have made on campus are some of the most integral components to my growth as an academic and as a person. I have made connections with faculty and staff that have served as close advisors, but I have also grown close with so many fellow students whose friendship, support, and guidance will stay with me forever. At EIU we are given the opportunity to build networks with others that become our closest friends. We have celebrated and had so much fun with these friends through amazing times, but we have also leaned on these friends during our worst struggles. Thinking of the times that we have shared on campus together brings so much joy along with the stark reality that we are leaving these times in moving forward.

Though we are all moving forward, I know the opportunities, experiences, and people I have encountered here will not leave me. None of us could have expected the hurdles that were put in our place during our journeys at EIU, but although it may not have been what we expected, we continued to persevere. We took leadership roles on campus, we continued to push for positive change, we proceeded to form relationships with others, and most importantly, we made the most of our college experiences while growing through immensely challenging times. I will look back with fondness and know that this has prepared me for a future in which I can continue to grow and use the skills I have gained here. We will continue to strive to make the places we work and live a home and a community. We will continue to recognize the unique needs of each person we work with. And we will carry with us the connections we have made here as we continue to make new and exciting relationships. As we have all had our successes and failures in our journeys at EIU I urge you to ask yourself what your time here has given you and what you will do with what you have learned in and outside class as you move forward.