

Introduction

Dear Student,

We are so glad that you will be coming to Amherst College and look forward to welcoming you in person. Amherst is a richly diverse and evolving community and we are actively engaged in creating an environment that fosters a sense of belonging and encourages students to thrive.

You have chosen to come to a college that is known for its academic rigor and diverse student body. We expect that Amherst will challenge you to stretch and grow academically and personally. You have been accepted to Amherst because we believe you have what it takes to rise to those challenges.

Students have shared that it would be helpful to hear more stories about students' social and academic challenges, not just successes. The following reading is a compilation of student letters describing some of the challenges they faced, how they responded to them, and what they learned in the process. At the end of the reading we will ask you to write a reflection of your own.

We share these stories to offer tools and encouragement in case you find yourself navigating a difficult situation at some point during your time at Amherst. There are a broad range of resources on campus that provide personal and academic support, and we hope you take advantage of them.

Sincerely,
The Mental Health and Wellness Committee

Letters (each letter to appear on an individual page)

Dear New Student,

Before I even arrived at Amherst, I thought I already knew what it was going to be like. Everyone was going to be 100% outgoing and 100% gorgeous. Amherst is the ultimate college paradise and I wanted to be just like the students at Amherst. I based my conception of Amherst on all the look-books from Admissions, the website pictures, and articles. It's exciting, and when I did arrive I did my best to uphold these images. I went to all the parties, joined as many clubs as possible, and although I never liked sports, I joined a sports team anyway. Part of me enjoyed some of the things but another part of me was drained, tired, and forcing myself to go to practice every day. I no longer did things I liked, I did things that I thought an achieving Amherst student should do and it took me awhile before I realized that.

One night my friend suggested we play a board game instead of going out, and suddenly I felt a sense of relief. Wow. I did not realize how much I didn't want to socialize. It had never occurred to me that it was even an option. I was trying to build who I am based on the quantity of events I went to and the things I participated in rather than be comfortable with who I am. I wanted to fit into the Amherst mold when that mold is really just a mosaic of all the individual

students. Every student is different and Amherst is diverse, not just racially but in terms of our personalities and hobbies too. We often focus on noticing what's similar between us and try to be like one another, but there are differences too, and these differences are a great source of conversation. It's ok to want different things than other Amherst students you see and it's ok to be more introverted than extroverted. In fact, those are the things that will make you you. Let other people know you for who you are, not who you are with.

Rosy He, junior

Dear New Student,

Welcome to Amherst! I remember feeling nervous and excited when I got here last fall, but most of all I felt like I had *made it*. I had *arrived*. At *Amherst* (I'm a first-gen student so it was a big deal). It didn't take me long to realize this was not going to be like high school. My classes were hard. I mean really hard. I was in over my head and started to wonder if I could make it here.

I remember at orientation, someone from Admissions said, "We chose all of you for a reason – we don't make mistakes." Okay, nice sentiment and all, but to err is human, I mean, doesn't everyone make mistakes sometimes? Or, maybe I had just fooled them, as I continued to fool everyone. Even as I was floundering, I would smile brightly and act like everything was great. Everyone else seemed to be doing great, and I didn't want to be the only one who wasn't.

Problem was that behind that cheerful, "everything's great" front, I felt more and more lonely and desperate. What was I going to do? And more importantly, what was I going to tell my parents??! I was too chickenshit to admit to anyone that I was falling behind. I don't know what would have happened if it weren't for this: a conversation with friends (less chickenshit than me) who were talking about how hard the classes were, how they couldn't keep up. It was such a relief! I don't think I said much, but it was a turning point. I started going to the Writing Center to get help, and talked to my advisor. I think I'd been unconsciously expecting to be humiliated when I was "found out," but it was the opposite. Everyone encouraged me. It helped.

Clearly I haven't *made it*, I've just started. Or maybe "making it" is just a fleeting moment, not a place to linger in. I'm okay with that.

My advice? If things get hard, don't freak out like I did! Amherst is *supposed* to challenge you. That's the whole point. You've made it this far, you can excel here. I believe in you. And there are so many people here to help you. Seriously, they're actually here for *you*. (I don't know why, but I thought office hours, the Writing Center, and definitely the Counseling Center, weren't for me, until I started using them and realized they were!)

Good luck!! And be YOU.

-Anonymous freshman

Dear Incoming Student,

There are a lot of things that go into the healthy functioning of a human being. College is one of the first times that you will live away from your loved ones, the ones who know what you look like when you've woken up on the wrong side of the bed, and you will be responsible for your own self-care.

My first semester of college was interrupted by a medical leave. I came into the school filled with energy and excited about my new surroundings. I was a bubbling brook of conversation and life, much like the rest of my class. Just into October I started experiencing difficulties sleeping due to the noise in Chuck Pratt on first floor. It stressed me out that I couldn't feel at rest in my own room due to its location. Schoolwork was becoming more and more challenging and the weather was becoming colder. All I knew was that a lot had to change for me to continue life at school. What I didn't know then, that I know now, is that I was in the middle of a manic episode. I think it's strange to even refer to it that way. It's still difficult for me to own the fact that I suffer from a mental illness. You would never know it upon meeting me. I didn't feel like I had the support I needed to come to terms with this painful truth that fall. It was only my mother and sister who picked me up, brushed me off and helped me come back to school the following semester.

For me, it took leaving school to fix my problem and help me realize that I really did want to be here. The second time I suffered from a manic episode was this spring (2015). The conditions were different, I was different, my support system was different...but the condition was the same. I had to accept that I needed help, and have faith that the school had the means to help me (because it does). I was hospitalized for 12 days, with no cost to my family, and I was cushioned as I transitioned back into the school environment. I got to finish off the semester, and my care team from the hospital followed me right back onto campus.

When you start experiencing discomfort here, it doesn't matter how big or small it is, reach out to your class dean and just sit down and chat with them. They are here to be the friend that listens without judgment, and will help you with almost anything. There are safety nets all around us, and it took me the long way round to figure this out. You will be okay, and you will love it here, but sometimes when you aren't okay or loving it, it's okay to reach out.

Best,
Joyce Wamala, freshman

Dear Student,

August 24, 2014: the beginning of first-year orientation, along with what was supposed to be the most fun, most productive, and wildest four years of life. The first time I stepped on campus last August, a series of emotions fought for dominance within me. Of them all, fear won out: Fear of failing too-difficult classes, fear of an overwhelming workload, and, most of all, fear of social failure. What if *super-amazing lifelong college friends* didn't happen for me? What if I was doomed to spend the next four years — well, the rest of my life — without them, while everyone

else had an amazing time? With that fear looming over me, I started desperately trying to find friends, though at first it wasn't so much "making friends" as it was "not being left out." That meant spending a lot of time with people I was kind of familiar with: People who lived on my floor, who were in my orientation squad, who I'd sat with by chance in Val during those first few days. It was easy, and less frightening, to hang out with them. I didn't quite mesh with them, but as the semester went on freshmen had found their friend groups and became more closed off. I felt like the only one who hadn't found great friends, but that just meant I had to try harder to make it work with the ones I had, right?

Except it didn't quite work that way. By the middle of second semester, I'd experienced a falling-out with one of my closest friends from first semester, and was left feeling betrayed, empty and alone. I wandered about feeling like this for about a week, until it got almost unbearable. That was when I decided to start hanging out more with other friends I'd made in different contexts—I'd instantly clicked with them, but because we were in different classes or dorms I'd never had the chance to get to know them well. Instead of passively getting sucked into hangout sessions with my dorm or with my old friend group, I began initiating them. Instead of spending time with people simply because they were in the same common room, I started asking myself where I wanted to be. This time around it was much, much easier—instead of forcing myself to mold to personalities that clashed with mine, all I had to do was be myself and let things happen. Things happened much faster, too. A few weeks ago, one of my newer friends told me that friendships like these were what she had always imagined having in college. "Me too," I told her, struck by the truth of her words.

It took, of all things, a BuzzFeed article (of unusually high quality) for me to realize what had changed. Number three on the list of "18 Important Things You'll Wish You'd Known In College" was about being an active friend-maker, versus a passive one. This part of the blurb rang especially true for me: "The best friendships are made intentionally: When you actively seek out people who enjoy the same passions, activities and interests as you." I thought about how much happier I had gotten since the friendship fallout, and realized that this was what had changed. Instead of hanging out with the most-accessible or least-threatening people, I was now choosing to spend my time with people I felt to be on the same wavelength, people I clicked with easily, people I genuinely liked. The act of choosing: That was the real difference. It had been, I thought, a choice all along. After all, friends don't just appear—there's a reason why it's called making friends.

Yelim Youm, freshman

Dear New Student,

The beginning of this past year was truly a rough time for me. I am a member of a sports team here and have always had a buffer of teammates and friends around me. However, fall of this year, I lived in a single on the outskirts of campus, and was overwhelmed with an incredibly tough course load. In high school I had always been a straight A student, and figured I was bound to go to a top tier medical school after graduating from Amherst.

What I didn't realize, however, was that I could not expect to get the same grades that I did in high school, and that this would be OK. I began putting considerable pressure on myself to be perfect, and get great grades. I was never shy, but suddenly was overtaken by social anxiety, my self-confidence plummeted, and I began avoiding all social interactions entirely. My teammates and friends had no idea what I was struggling with and I felt helplessly alone. I was reluctant to talk to any of my peers about how I was feeling because everyone else seemed to have it all together. I felt like I was the only one who couldn't get the hundreds of pages of assigned reading done before class, or manage to get the grades I got in high school on a single paper I turned in.

It wasn't until I felt I was a failure both socially and academically that I decided to reach out to the Counseling Center and began seeing one of the psychologists there on a weekly basis. Talking through my feelings with her helped me to understand the root of my loneliness, how I was perpetuating it, and what steps I could take to become more socially connected in a comfortable way. I also learned invaluable time management skills, which have greatly decreased my overall levels of stress and anxiety. I joined a committee on campus and attended several club meetings—I even branched out and attended an affinity group meeting where I met many people who I felt I could open up to and make myself vulnerable with. Through these experiences, one of the most important things I learned was that even at my lowest times, I was nowhere near alone; there are hundreds of students walking around on this same very campus, dealing with the same academic and social pressures, and trying desperately to put on the same “perfect” front that I wore.

Ultimately, I could not be more grateful for the hardship I went through because I am much more socially resourceful and emotionally strong than I had ever been. I no longer wish to go to medical school, I am no longer afraid to sit with someone I don't know at the dining hall, or to say hi to a stranger in the quad, and I know now that it is perfectly fine to get a B, to tell my friends when I'm going through a difficult time, or to see a therapist at the Counseling Center. Being happy and enjoying your time at Amherst College is extremely possible, especially if you are willing to look for and take advantage of all of the help that this school has to offer you.

Anonymous junior

Dear You,

It's ok to be not ok. There is beauty in the pattern of brokenness across my life. This year has been crazy, no? I'm done. Gonna walk across that stage in May and I'll be gone. Last year it would have been a relief for all of it to be over, but now? Now I'm sad that I leaving this place and the people I've come to know and know me.

I remember being in community college where no one really cared what people thought of them because it had everyone from the community, young, old, dumb, smart, straight, queer,

everyone was present in the classroom. So you didn't have to be perfect. Then I transferred to Amherst,

I remember well the passion in my heart when I arrived to Amherst as a new student. I was going to rock this place just like I had at my community college. Dive right in, make friends, ace the tests and be challenged, but I was going to stand on top of the world. Then I saw that things were different here. I had to be perfect. No one could know that I felt alone, depressed, suicidal. I was perfect at hiding my brokenness.

I'm proud of me. I revealed my brokenness before it broke me so completely that I would be swept away. I came out from behind my mask of perfection. I pushed my private reality in front of my public image. I became vulnerable. In this place I found spiritual healing as I began to accept myself. I am a child of God, busted, broken and bruised, but I am still his child. Through the combination of vulnerability and acceptance I start to understand and invite those around me into my notion of self. People felt safe sharing their darkness with me. Together, we normalized our humanity through accepting our vulnerabilities and found healing and belonging through honesty.

I'm not ok. But I have heard a choir of voices resound with the self-same words and in my ears the confession is transformed into an affirmation. "Me too" I hear the melodies fall like chants, "Me too." In that, I know that I am not alone. Because of this song, I know that it's ok to be not ok.

Tim Gaura, senior

Dear New Student,

If you are like me, you come to Amherst accustomed to being the proverbial "big fish in a small pond." Since primary school, year after year, you may have been praised for your unique talents, your leadership skills, your level of maturity, and, of course, your intellect. You will quickly realize that now you find yourselves in a much larger pond among individuals equally or, I dare to say, more talented and more intelligent than you. The thought can be frightening to some, especially when excelling and overachieving has been a big part of our identities for most of our lives.

Frankly, I came to Amherst scared of flunking out and becoming a negative statistic. Though I had excelled in my suburban high school and in my community college both inside and outside the classroom, I worried that I was not ready for the academic rigor that characterizes an Amherst education. Amherst's reputation as one of the top colleges in the world was one of the main factors that drew me to the community, but I was terrified of not being able to keep up. As a first-generation, undocumented, transfer student, I considered the opportunity to attend Amherst as my chance at an education and network that would allow me to climb the socioeconomic ladder and bring my family with me. I came resolved to do what it took to make the most of the experience, but I doubted whether I could succeed. I remember writing about these insecurities in a letter I wrote to myself at the end of the CEOT trip in which I attempted to ready myself for the struggles ahead.

The next day I entered my Introduction to Political Theory class in the Red Room. I remember feeling both a sense of pride and awe looking around the room. It was still surreal to

me that I was an Amherst College student. I also remember that sense of pride and awe being slowly overtaken by a greater sense of fear and intimidation as the professor went through the class syllabus. The reading load, the eloquence with which my peers expressed themselves, and the minimum length of the papers that we had to write surprised me and intimidated me. The longest paper I had written up to that point was six pages. I did not speak much in that class because I did not feel eloquent enough. When the professor returned our first paper of the semester, my fears seemed to be coming true. I looked around the room. Everyone else in the class seemed content with their grade. To my surprise, I had received a “C.” The grade was particularly demoralizing considering the time and effort I invested into writing the paper. My best work was only average at best at Amherst. I contemplated dropping the class. During that time, I could not stop thinking about my mother and the sacrifices she had made to afford me the privilege of a higher education. If giving up was never an option for her, it should not be for me.

Ultimately I decided against dropping the course. However, I knew that I needed to become a better writer if my grade was to improve. I visited the professor religiously during office hours in hopes of gaining a better understanding of his expectations and scheduled weekly appointments in the Writing Center. I ended the class with a “B,” a grade that I was not used to seeing on my transcript. Nonetheless, even to this day, I feel proud of that “B” because of what it symbolizes. I stayed in the class, overcame my unfounded sense of pride and sought help from the right people. I now realize that I was not the only one struggling in that class. It turns out that very few people ended the class with anything higher than a “B+.”

I share with you part of my story not to frighten you or to discourage you from striving for excellence, but to help you realize that you wouldn’t be the only person struggling in a course or overall on campus, although it may seem that way. Seek help when you need it. Or better yet, seek help BEFORE you need it. I am glad I did.

Best of luck,

Carlos Adolfo Gonzalez Sierra, senior

Introduction to reflection

These letters have given you a taste of some of the difficulties that Amherst students have faced and how they have navigated them. We have learned that when students stay closely connected to their values, they handle challenges more successfully and thrive in this environment. Please take a few minutes to reflect on your most important values. Now write a letter to yourself to encourage and support you through the transition to college. If you encounter challenging experiences, how might your strengths and values help you through? Your responses are completely confidential. Please write freely, without concern for grammar or structure. If you like, you can write the letter from the perspective of your future self, a friend, mentor, or family member, sharing what they see in you and your ability to thrive at Amherst.

End Page

Thank you for taking to the time to complete this reading and reflection exercise. If you have any questions or comments, you may contact Jessica Gifford, Mental Health Educator, at jgifford@amherst.edu or 413-542-5637.

For information and resources on self-care and stress reduction, please check our website <https://www.amherst.edu/mm/519569>

If you would like to consult with a therapist, you may contact our Counseling Center 413-542-2354