

University of Virginia  
September 17, 2020

To the incredible First Year reading this,

You are going to do amazing things with your life. I know how hard first year can be. Regardless of how much confidence you came into this year with, your first year of college is probably the hardest one you will face. Making friends, weeding through the not so great friends, adjusting to the difficulties of college level courses, figuring out what to eat at Newcomb when there are a thousand students swarming you... don't worry, I've been there too. We all have. UVA is no doubt a special place and a remarkable school, but as you will soon learn, it can be so much more than that. It is a place fellow Hoos have called home for generations. It is the home of the 2-year reigning men's basketball Natty Champs (thanks Corona for that extra year of our reign). Home of my Bodo's bagels, Take it Away and Grit Coffee obsession. The people you will meet here over the next four years will help you in ways you can't even imagine now.

This current state of our world is such a challenging time and honestly you are doing the most you can do each day, so be proud of yourself for making it this far. While we are all still struggling with the uncertainty of this pandemic, one thing is for sure and that's we're glad you're here at UVA. You're exactly where you need to be (whether you're physically in dorms in Charlottesville, or somewhere else).

I'm here to offer you some advice I wish I had followed more closely when I was in your position. First of all, and I'm sure you're going to hear this a ton, but relax a little more! (rElAx JoHn B~~~~ (if you don't get that Outer Banks reference... I am so sorry)) It is so easy to get caught up in the UVA bubble of stress, and to feel like you always need to be doing something, but it is so, so necessary to take a step back and just do nothing sometimes. You're smart and talented, otherwise you wouldn't be here at UVA. Remember that you earned your spot— you deserve to be here. Take that walk with a new friend, go to that basketball game, join that IM team (when things are safe), go see Rocky Horror at the Paramount with your hallmates; whatever it is, find some way to have some fun. There is so much to do in Charlottesville, it's actually a little overwhelming at times. Whether it's hiking, volunteering, attending the Virginia Film Festival or any of the other amazing resources that are at your fingertips, find some way to add new perspective to your time here. I promise you it is so refreshing to exit the college bubble from every so often and it really helps ground you and shape your identity.

My next piece of advice is to try one class every year that is out of your comfort zone or area of interest. There are so many classes I wish I would have had the time to take now that I am a Fourth Year. We have some amazing professors and some really high-quality departments here – use these next four years as your time to explore yourself, your interests, and the greater world around you. I would definitely recommend taking a class from the School of Education and Human Development (formerly “Curry”) if you get a chance. The professors really know how to teach there! I would also recommend “Dracula” SLAV 2360 and “Unforgettable Lectures” INST 3600 to add to your list of potential classes. The Media Studies and Religious Studies departments are also incredible (can you tell I'm a humanities kind of person!!). You should also look into the Take Your Professor to Lunch program that is offered

through the different schools. Professors are actually pretty cool people and can be great resources in the future – plus, you can get a free lunch which is awesome. Also, go to office hours – even if you have nothing to say, just go and introduce yourself. Office hours are an extension of class time and are meant for you, but so few students actually attend. If nothing else, you'll make a new connection, but if you make a habit of going, professors/TAs notice and tend to grade more favorably. My professors were way better at helping with course recommendation than any of my assigned advisors. My all-time favorite professors have been Herbert "Tico" Braun and Melissa Levy. I've learned more about myself in their classes than in any other class at UVA. Look them up, you won't regret it.

My last piece of advice is to document your time at UVA in whatever medium you like best. Whether that is through pictures, videos, letters to yourself, journal entries, or more, you are going to wish you had more to look back on by the time you are through. It's so cliché, but these four years really do fly by. Some days feel excruciatingly long but others you don't ever want to end. Take some pictures of yourself too. It will be nice to look back at the person you were when you started college – trust me, you will not be the same person four years from now. Remember that you are living through a historic time and it will be nice to have stuff to look back on from this crazy time in your life.

Between everything else, lean into discomfort and use every opportunity to better yourself. Remember that you are your own worst critic, so show yourself some extra love and understanding. Celebrate yourself – your failures and your successes. Be kind to others, and remember to write a first year four years from now.

If any of this was a tad helpful, I am glad. You deserve the best college experience. I would be so humbled if I had even the tiniest positive contribution to your first year here. I wish you nothing but happiness, safety, and success during your time at UVA and beyond.

Best wishes,

Daniela Bernstein

P.S.

Oh, and one more thing. Please don't party now. There will be plenty of opportunities for that when we're not drowning in a pandemic. It's just not worth it and I really want to be able to Walk the Lawn this Spring. Okay that's all ;)