

The 4

This document is more for me than anyone else, but I'm sure everyone can take away something useful from a former-4.0 student at UC Berkeley. I really don't like letting this one number rule my life, but it has made quite the impact on my college journey and has suddenly disappeared after 3 years. Do I regret losing the 4? A little bit, but there really wasn't much more I could do. Some classes at Berkeley are just hard, and we can't win 'em all. There was a lot of stress that came with bearing this prestigious GPA. Anything but an A or A+ felt unacceptable. Every test, homework, and lab built up an enormous amount of (sometimes unwarranted) anxiety. Getting the grade was more important than learning. As all of this comes to a close and I head into my senior year, there is a lot to reflect on in my Berkeley journey.

As a freshman entering UC Berkeley, I thought I would get straight B's. I never was at the top, yet practically everyone I met here was some form of valedictorian. Punahou, my high school, did not have any valedictorians, but if it did, I surely wouldn't be one. I don't consider myself to be smart, but I am very hard working and dedicated. I almost never give up once I have started on something, and it is practically an obsession to make it to the finish line. I thought this could only take me so far, but turns out it was enough to get a 4.0 that first semester. And many more...

I was a pure MechE back then, so it was always strange that my favorite part about any of my courses was the coding assignments. Whether it was to visualize fluid vector fields or calculate the energy released from combustion, I enjoyed the programming part most. However, EECS at Berkeley is notorious for hard tests, high-workload, and, most importantly, low-GPA courses. I didn't want to risk the precious jewel I had come to acquire, so I spent 2 painful years struggling to maintain the 4 as a MechE.

Eventually I decided that this was not where I wanted to be. There was a very high chance that I could graduate with a 4.0 and a degree in Mechanical Engineering, but I honestly just wanted to take EECS classes and declare the double major. I took my first CS course, 61BL in the summer, and I got an A+. However, taking courses for two non-overlapping majors was anything but easy, and maintaining a 4 was practically impossible. I had come in with the intention of sacrificing the 4 for a second major, and that trade had finally gone through.

Again, do I regret this decision? Not at all. The EECS classes I've taken have shown me the joy of working hard and learning something new, but they have also revealed greater value in the MechE classes that have gone unappreciated until now. I once said that "getting a 4 is the worst thing that can happen to a Berkeley student", and I stand by those words. The 4 is blinding and consuming, and the grass is much greener on the other side.

That was a brief overview of my story, and here are some takeaways.

Secret to a 4.0

It's probably very clear right now that the number one secret to a 4.0, a symbol of success, is just working unbelievably hard. There are very few people who can get away with being “naturally smart”, and I cannot speak on their behalf. For everyone else, there is no shortcut; you have to grind the lessons into your brain and perform when the time comes. Having academic success at Berkeley requires lots of sacrifice. I devoted an incredible amount of time and energy toward my classes, and it really takes a toll to keep pushing. This is not for everyone, and “burning out” is practically inevitable.

The Phrase “I enjoy learning”

I don't believe that someone with a personality like mine can truthfully say they “enjoy learning” until the 4.0 is gone. I certainly told myself that I liked learning, but those were always empty words; the 4 always took precedence, and it casted a shadow over everything academic in my life. I think I always understood this to a certain extent, but it is much clearer in retrospect.

A Sense of Pride

The Good: This entire journey was largely self driven. I don't think any external factors—parents, friends, etc.—could possibly give enough motivation to work this hard. I fought for this because I was proud of my accomplishments and the 4 helped to reaffirm that my work was worth something.

The Bad: Berkeley makes you feel inferior at many times, and the 4 told me that I am better than all of these people, regardless what it feels like. I am the upper bound. Sometimes a mindset like that was necessary just to make it through a stressful exam.