**THE SWANSON SCHOOL AND ME**

**THE MOST STRESSFUL SEVEN MONTHS OF MY LIFE**

It would be ill-informed to say that at this time one year ago, I was certain I would be attending the University of Pittsburgh (Pitt). The American college application process reflects the values of our society, in that students are encouraged to make the most of their circumstances and “shoot for the stars”; this is most often associated with applying and gaining acceptance to an elite private university. Retrospectively, deciding to attend the University of Pittsburgh was the most practical, rational, and realistic outcome I could have expected from the college admissions process. But I, along with many other students in my position, focused more on the allure of private schools, however improbable it might have been to do so. Of the seven private schools I applied to, I was accepted to two: the University of Pennsylvania [1] and the University of Southern California [2]. Neither school offered a reasonable financial aid package and the overall practicality of attending Pitt won out.

I applied to the Swanson School of Engineering (Swanson) for a variety of reasons: its highly ranked programs, the resources for career advancement, and its focus on projects working to advance society [3]. However, having never spent a sustained amount of time considering how I personally would fit into the engineering program, it is apparent to me only now, after having started classes, that it is Swanson’s unique emphasis on forging one’s own path which confirms to me that I could not have made a better college choice. Though not stated outright, there seems to be a general belief in and around the Swanson school that every student, regardless of his or her backstory, is placed on an equal playing field upon arriving to campus. Through resources such as student organizations [4], study abroad programs [5], and internship opportunities [6], Swanson puts the world at one’s fingertips. However, because the responsibility to take advantage of these resources falls on the student, it creates an environment where many paths to success exist, but only for students with considerable dedication to, and passion for, engineering.

**“SHE WAS TOO YOUNG”**

The idea of having preconceived, concrete goals for my first semester at Pitt is a complicated notion. While specific goals such as “achieve a 4.0 GPA,” “secure an internship position,” or “become involved with many engineering organizations” may serve as valuable motivation,they can become counterproductive if I feel as if I must adhere to them. It is my personal belief that my own happiness and welfare should be my foremost priority for the semester. As I prepared for the transition to college, I was frequently told the story of Madison Holleran, a former student and track athlete at the University of Pennsylvania, who committed suicide less than one year into her college career [7]. It was not the combined demands of rigorous academics and Division I athletics that drove her to take her own life, but the feeling that she had lost control of her environment, being forced to live in constant stress out of fear of the consequences of losing her athletic scholarship. The weight of expectations—and lack of solutions—from all sides turned her from a promising student with many talents into a depressed, and ultimately suicidal, shell of herself [8].

I expect to give my best effort in achieving a high GPA and involving myself within the Swanson community, but I will not sacrifice my mental health and well-being to do so. The characteristics that define me as a human being are my personal footprint on this world. To sacrifice those traits in an attempt at success in academic and social ventures would be to lose the most unique facets of my personality. The most important and relevant goal I could have for my first semester at Pitt is to not allow myself to become trapped in an unfulfilling situation with no exit, as was Madison’s case. In a sense, I believethat I should allocate my time and energy in a way that reflects the priorities I hold for my entire life, as opposed to solely this semester on Pitt’s campus.

**CISCO WOULD BE PROUD**

Though I do not have a specific set of academic goals for my first semester at Pitt, I will still hold myself to a high standard in the effort I exert in my academic curriculum. In order to balance this standard with my primary goal of securing my mental welfare, I plan on building up a diverse network of support that draws from many sections of the Pitt community. Between the office hours of my professors and TAs and the services of the math, physics, and writing assistance centers [9], I have a wide pool of resources at my disposal for academic aid. I am also fortunate to be living with two of my close friends from high school, both of whom are first year students in Swanson. This living situation inherently encourages informal discussions about our classes that are occasionally more valuable in the understanding of concepts than classroom instruction. Ideally, I will have an academic network that is influential in my learning process both inside and outside of the classroom.

Outside of my curriculum in the Swanson school, I plan to take several measures to ensure healthy social relationships. I am already involved in clubs that draw on many different areas of interest, such as the Spikeball Club, Philosophy Club, and the Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineers [10]. I am even considering starting my own club: the Salsa Eating Club (as direct opposition to the Salsa Dancing Club). Of course, there will be days during which I need to step away from normal college life to relax and clear my mind. I have found that it is most beneficial for me to take a few hours to disregard the stressors in my life and turn my focus elsewhere. It would be foolish to not take advantage of Pitt’s resources for this type of mental rejuvenation, such as the stress-free zone in the William Pitt Union [11], or the counseling center in Nordenberg Hall if necessary [12]. Despite the formidable challenges I will face during the next four years, I am confident that by utilizing Pitt’s unique resources to create a support network in all aspects of my life, I will place myself in the best position for success.

**SOURCES**

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