

When I walked onto USC's campus for the first time, I was filled with awe. Everything was so different, so big, so *nice* and fancy compared to what I knew in Alaska. I was excited, ready to embrace this change.

But welcome week was a quick awakening. I met student after student from private single-gendered Catholic schools, nationally ranked public high schools, or extremely wealthy backgrounds. I was coming from an underfunded public-school, and a middle-class family by Alaska standards. I began to panic: how could I learn, or harder yet, compete with students who seemed so much more prepared than me?

The first week of classes, I was terrified. I vigorously took notes from the moment the professor started speaking. I read and annotated the readings, even though my classmates boasted of never doing a single one. I made my own study guide and wrote and rewrote the answers. When our first midterm came back, my classmates, who had never experienced academic failure before in their prestigious schools, were shocked by their low marks. In that moment, I realized your background does not determine your future success; I had outperformed them. This helped me see that I needed to work with a community with a similar diligent work ethic. I turned to clubs to find this type of community.

Initially trying to join clubs was extremely discouraging. Every club at USC is application-based, requiring a resume and supplemental essays. My resume didn't contain the internships, research, or competitive clubs many of the students here had. I was rejected from four consecutive clubs, and I started to question whether my college admission was a mistake. But I refused to accept failure. Eventually, I was accepted into two clubs, each working on empowering youth in surrounding underprivileged communities. These clubs have provided me the comfort of a community I can relate to, as well as endless joy from being able to lift people out of a situation I was once in. The personal growth stimulated by these unique communities was well worth the initial wait.

It hasn't been easy transitioning to a different environment surrounded by people of such different upbringings. At times it got lonely. I wish coming into college, I had known the disparity between my upbringing and that of other students, especially at a private university. But you *will* eventually find a community you can relate to. I have gained a very different global perspective being in this more privileged environment.

If there is one lesson I have taken away from my first year, one small tidbit of advice, it would be that *your background does not determine your future success*. If you continue the hard work and dedication that got you into college in the first place, and take risks that may mean rejection, you will succeed and ultimately outperform those around you. In the process, you will experience immense personal growth, and meet a community of like-minded, hard-working individuals who make the whole struggle worth it.