My College Experience

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It’s funny how whenever you’re having a really intriguing conversation with someone, you can never seem to stop talking about yourself. Somehow though, whenever you have to write an entire project about yourself, you’re cursed with writer’s block. Of course I, Valerie Ivette Santiago-Cruz, the normal college student, am not the exception to this rule. I have been struggling for weeks now in trying to think of what to say about myself, what type of meaningful events have taken place in my college life that the people of the future would actually want to read about. As I search for inspiration in my dorm room, I start looking around to see what could serve as my muse. The picture above is what I immediately see as soon as I lift my eyes from my laptop. The two toughest classes I have taken thus far, a bunch of notes and post-its, pictures and even a stapler. What an exciting life I lead, huh? Looking a little deeper into the background of the image though, behind the laptop, is a little lamp that says ‘Cyclones’ in yellow letters. Meet my muse.

“WELCOME! CONGRATULATIONS ON YOUR DECISION TO JOIN THE IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY.” For the next few weeks that followed my acceptance to the university, that’s what all the cardinal colored papers screamed out in gold uppercase letters. Two more months of summer and I’d be off to college, by myself. No mom and dad. No two little brothers. No grandparents, aunts, cousins, neighbors that think they’re family, nothing; nada. I was going off to a state I had never visited before, to stay for four years. It was the most exciting (and terrifying) thing I had ever even considered doing. In that moment though, when I was just graduating high school, it was all about having fun my last couple of months in Puerto Rico, my home, and working at McDonald’s to try and earn some money for the work-less semester to come.

I swear those two months went by faster than this last weekend did. They were a blur of beaches, Big Macs, friends, family and goodbyes. In the last bittersweet days of summer, I mentally prepared myself for what was going to come my way. I had some sense of security in the fact that my parents would go with me for the first few days, to get me settled into the residence hall that, to this day, is still my home away from home, away from home. Confused by that word play? Yeah, don’t worry; it’s just that my parents moved to Texas this year, no biggie. For now however, let’s go back to the day I left Puerto Rico.

My flight out of San Juan was scheduled to leave at about 7am. We got to the airport on time and checked-in and all that and, since we had about an hour to kill before boarding, we decided to get some breakfast. Once we were done, we walked over to where we were supposed to have our carry-on items inspected. After waiting in line for about half an hour, when we get to the TSA officer, he very
calmly lets us know that my boarding ticket was really somebody else’s and that we had to go back and change it. No worries, we still had time, right? Not. We had about 15 minutes until they closed the gate to board the plane. So, faced with this new challenge, my dad and I ran to the other side of the airport to change my ticket. Once we made another line there, the attendant excused himself and said he was the one to blame for and quickly changed it. Yay! We run back. We very swiftly make our way through the crowds of people and when we finally get to the gate, guess what? The plane left. All my hopes and dreams for a brighter future flew away in a Boeing 777... nah, just kidding. We did, however, get stuck at that airport for the longest time. Fast-forward the airplane to Milwaukee, the creepy, ghost-haunted hotel we had to stay in, the flight to Des Moines the next morning and, finally- we were off to Ames.

In less than 48 hours I had traded this beauty for this...cornfield. What an even trade, huh?

After many hours, I finally reached my destination...or so I thought. This happened to be just one of the many entrances to the university campus and the ride to my residence hall seemed to be eternal. Meanwhile, I was so overwhelmed by the enormity of ISU’s campus and I started dreading what the first day of classes would be like in this sort of environment. I was so afraid I would get lost while looking for my classes and, in trying to do so, probably ending up on the other side of campus. My parents, on the other hand, were in love with everything Iowa State and wanted to see everything and buy every souvenir the Iowa State University Bookstore had to offer. While I was still having my mental struggle and doubting my recent move, I was lucky enough to run into someone I knew
before coming here. He was already an undergrad here at the university and he quickly proclaimed himself as our tour guide.

We walked for what seemed like hours, simply getting a feel for what the campus was like and seeing every building I would probably be taking my classes in. I got my ISU Card, we had lunch at the MU and then we went to my residence hall to check out my room. Once I was settled in, we went to one of the orientation seminars I had to take as an Industrial Engineering freshman. You would think that all my fears would subside once I was among my fellow classmates and my advisors would encourage us to ask questions about our major or just about anything, pretty much. Yeah, it didn’t really help at all. We had our orientation in Hoover, so what better way to make me feel better than by taking me to one of the biggest classrooms at ISU? Needless to say, I was terrified.

Right off the bat, the advisors started talking about how great our experience would be here at Iowa State University and slowly my fears began dissipating. However, the defining moment for me; the instant I felt a wave of relief, came right after they asked a simple question. “Who is from Puerto Rico?” About three of us stood up. Among 150ish students, three was all I needed. Three people that had that same scared look on their faces. Once we stood up, one of the advisors quickly ran over to where each of us was and gave each of us one Cyclone desk lamp. I was so excited because it was at that moment that I realized that the people of Iowa State University actually wanted us to be here. They really wanted us to feel welcome and were willing to provide infinite encouragement because they genuinely wanted to, not because it was their job.

After I had that epiphany, everything seemed to fall into place. Suddenly, the campus didn’t seem so big, the buildings so scary and the people seemed to look even friendlier. I felt on top of the world. Or at least pretty high up, after climbing up the million stairs outside Beardshear Hall. After a while, I was pretty used to the university; I knew where all my classes were at, I knew all my professors and I really started to get the hang of the meal plans at the dining centers (I’m still learning about those, believe it or not). I’ve made a lot of great friends in the process; most of them are other Puerto Ricans here at the university. We even have a club here, the Puerto Rican Student Association (PRSA). We have Puerto Rican Nights, fundraisers at Orange Leaf and even go out together as a group some weekends. In fact, sometimes we
organize trips and last year, we even went to Chicago and it was a blast! Being a part of this club has definitely helped my transition into college.
In the process of finishing my first year, I came to the realization that college was nothing like high school, which meant that I actually had to study for tests a lot more than just the day before the actual exam. I have had to cut back almost completely, no, scratch that, I’ve had to cut back completely on the going out and having free weekends. I mean, I obviously don’t want to dissuade anyone from pursuing a career in engineering, it’s just that once you’re in it, you have to understand that it is NOT going to be an easy journey. With respect to my experience with the field, it has been quite an uphill battle, because I work two jobs and have to study almost 24/7. Oh yeah, the two jobs thing? Let’s talk about that.

I started working my second semester at ISU, which, looking back was not really a wise decision entirely, because second semester of engineering is usually the toughest one, what with the Calculus II and Physics I. However, I had used up all of my McDonald’s stash, so I needed a job ASAP. Luckily for me, I heard of job openings at the Iowa State University Foundation. This was no ordinary job, though. Basically, what I had to do was call people up and ask them to donate money to the university’s academic and extracurricular activities. At first, it was a bit awkward having to talk to random people and persuade them to donate money for ISU, receiving nothing in return, except the satisfaction of knowing that they helped provide a better college experience for thousands of students. After a while though, I got better and better at it and ended up raising more than $11,000 in about 3 months. Pretty good, I thought.

You might be wondering how much I’ve raised this semester, right? Well, the answer to that question is zero. I am not currently working at the Foundation anymore, because I got offered another job, one that I absolutely love. One of my two jobs this semester is working for the TelStars team in the Office of Admissions here at Iowa State University. I am the Puerto Rico caller in the team and it is my job to contact all the prospective undergraduate Puerto Rican students and help them out on their college search and possible journey into ISU. I love this job because it gives me the chance to connect with all the new incoming freshman and provide help to those students that are just clueless with respect to their college searches. I have helped many students through this job and I am really looking forward to seeing them all next year here on campus.

So, I said I had two jobs this semester...what’s the other one? Volleyball referee. Yes indeed, I landed a job with Recreation Services here at the University and became a volleyball referee for the intramural tournament. It’s really been an interesting experience. Despite my face in that picture, I have really enjoyed being a part of the intramural referees. You meet a lot of new people and you laugh a lot at the expense of how badly they play the sport. It’s okay to laugh during the games, because they do it just for fun, so they play badly on purpose sometimes. I’m really looking forward to next semester’s season and being able to tell all those Puerto Rican students how much fun they can have at ISU, especially by doing intramural sports!
As my third semester here at Iowa State comes to an end, I come to the realization that I am one semester away from being halfway done with my college experience. Up until now, I have to say that it has been an incredible journey. I have met a lot of people, learned so many things and I have built friendships that will last for a lifetime. Those three other kids that stood up with me at the orientation are part of those friendships and have been with me through almost all my college experiences. This year though, lots of other people were added to the mix and my circle of friends has grown exponentially larger. There is no doubt in my mind that it will keep expanding with the coming years. Thanks to the people at MSA and the Carver Scholarship, I can expand that circle to include a bunch of great people and awesome advisors!

I am very excited to be moving on with my degree, because starting next semester almost all my classes will be concentration-based, which means that I will be doing a lot more hands-on engineering projects. My mindset for the semesters ahead has changed dramatically into one more focused, more determined and more dedicated to my studies. I have confidence that my remaining semesters here at ISU will be very productive ones for me.

I can honestly say that my experiences here at Iowa State University have defined who I am and where I’m going in life more than any others. I cannot wait to see what else is in store for me before I graduate and establish my family and have a career. I am very happy with who I am as of right now, and I have no regrets of the things that I have done thus far while in college. Every single decision I have made has taught me something, whether or not the outcome was positive, it was still a learning experience. Through the good moments and the bad situations, I have managed to derive some form of meaning and I have tried to apply this newly found knowledge as much as I can. Just like William Ernest Henley said: “…I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul,” I will apply this philosophy to my remaining time here at ISU and I will find my way to success. Go State!
Oh we will fight fight fight for Iowa State, And may her colors ever fly, Oh we will fight with might for Iowa State, With line will to do or die.

Rah Rah Rah
Loyal sons forever true, and we will fight that battle through, 'Cause when we hit that line we'll hit it hard every yard for F.S.U.