You do not know what it truly means to be in a rush until you have attended a large state university. I think I really discovered the meaning of “hurry” my first week on campus, when I found that distances Google Maps said would take precisely fourteen minutes to cover by foot needed to be traversed in less than ten if I was to be on time to class. My college story thus far has been full of similar, though perhaps less frivolous, learning experiences, where I have been dealt life lessons that went far beyond the academic sphere.

My first few months at Illinois felt simultaneously like they stretched far too long and like a blur. I dived right in to the unknown, talking to students who were vastly different from me, even at the cost of ignoring those similar to me, in a concentrated effort to get a diverse experience. As an international student, I determinedly shied away from cultural organizations, and the very resources provided to ease my transition into this new country. I told myself I was strong enough to deal with everything on my own.

And I got lonely. Sure, I made friends, but I struggled to find a deep connection, a spark that would indicate the start of the lifelong friendships I had romanticized about making in college. And while I thought I was well-adjusted, I began to show telltale signs of stress.

Not until my second month here did I begin to understand how much I was hurting myself. It struck me then that I was trying so hard to not fit into a stereotype that I was making myself miserable. I was in an entirely differ-
ent country on my own, but instead of slowly allowing myself to adjust, I tried to do a complete 180 in culture and lifestyle overnight.

I think what I learned then applies to all college freshmen, no matter where they are from—to take things slowly, and to use the multiple resources that the U of I has to offer to new students. College is full of new things: financial freedom, flexible class schedules, professors who don’t coddle you – it can all be overwhelming to deal with at once. If I could go back in time, I would tell myself: it’s okay to take care of yourself. It’s okay to not be good at everything right away. And it’s okay to ask for help. Once I came to this realization, I did a lot better in college; all my friendships improved with my heightened self-awareness, even as I reached out to those with a similar cultural background to mine.

College is a time for professional and academic development. Through the semester, I was understanding the depths of the scientific method, learning fascinating things in my NRES class every week, and discovering the art of writing a resume as I applied for jobs. But perhaps most importantly, I was learning to get organized. In college, I discovered quickly, professors would give you a syllabus with assignment due dates written in at the beginning of the semester—it was up to you to stay on top of your deadlines after that.

One week, I had a big midterm coming up, and focused all of my efforts into studying for it. I was so focused, in fact, that I did not realize until a few days before that I had another exam scheduled for the same week! I had been so used to repeated reminders in high school that I had neglected to look at my syllabus. I did manage to get through the exam, but learned my lesson: stay organized, or run the risk of missing important deadlines! I’m glad I figured that out early; in the real world, companies will not remind you that their internship application deadlines are approaching, and your landlord isn’t going to remind you daily that your rent is due. It’s up to you to keep track of everything!

Cheesy as it sounds, my freshman year at Illinois taught me so much. I learned that the secret to being successful is to take things slowly and realize when you need help. I understood the importance of setting goals and getting organized. I even mastered the art of power-walking to class! I can say with complete confidence that I changed as a person during my freshman year, and grew as a person in ways I had not anticipated. Now all that is left is looking forward to learning more about myself as I advance in my college career!