When I think of my freshman year, I distinctly remember the sound of twigs snapping, the pungent smell of wet grass, and the feeling of heaviness in my chest. I remember wandering through a cemetery, without an umbrella, in the midst of a ripe thunderstorm. I remember the warm flush of my face when I dripped into math discussion, late and out of breath. What miserable memories resulted from taking a step onto the wrong bus! If only I had allowed my pride! In that thirty-minute bus ride, I could have asked the bus driver where I was, where I was going, or if I would ever return to campus. Instead, I sat there helplessly alone as the bus slowly crawled to Parkland College.

Later that day, I emailed my ABE 100 professor, explaining my absence from class, expecting the worst (I had already bid farewell to first impressions after my math discussion fiasco). To my surprise, the professor replied back, saying that she completely understood; she even recommended to me a bakery on that bus route! I realized that it was only the first week of college and that it was okay to make mistakes, especially as a freshman. **Mistakes help us learn — they help us change and better ourselves.**
I was both excited for and scared at my newfound independence, but my first semester on campus was hard. I found it difficult transitioning from a high school class of thirty students to a lecture hall of three hundred. I was constantly introducing myself to a sea of people (whose names I now cannot recall), yet I was not making any friends. An introvert at heart, I dealt with my loneliness by focusing all my attention on my grades — and food. Although I achieved a 3.7 GPA and a perfect freshman fifteen by the end of my first semester, I wasn’t happy. Winter Break couldn’t have come at a better time; it gave me a chance to unwind, reflect, and think. I spent all of my first semester focusing on my grades, which prevented me from getting the most out of my college experience.

I began my second semester refreshed and determined. I struck up conversations with my classmates, applied for an internship at the Taiwanese American Students Club (TASC), and crossed the boundaries of my comfort zone. I stepped into the Activities Recreation Center (ARC) for the first time and started running. I listened to my body and ate healthier. Even my grades improved because I had friends to go to for help instead of just relying on myself. In TASC, I found a niche — a place where I belonged: a place plump for memories, a place filled with people who supported me without hesitation in all my endeavors. I enjoyed being by myself sometimes, but I was never alone. Making friends in college was hard at first, but attaining invaluable things usually is.

When I think of my freshman year, I remember all the mistakes I made, but I also remember the lessons I have learned. My first memories of college are embarrassing, but I have to admit that they were memorable. I don’t necessarily remember the grade I received on my second MATH 231 midterm or the mechanism for the hydration of an alkene, but I remember the people I’ve met and the places I’ve been. I remember screaming my lungs out when we won the Homecoming football game against Northwestern, the warmth I felt emanating from utter strangers when I first joined the Taiwanese American Students Club, and the joy I felt when I finished second at the Illinois Marathon relay. I remember this immense sense of possibility when I first stepped onto campus. It’s still there. After all, we’re still young. We’re still open to possibility, to change. We can take the wrong bus or fail a class or have misunderstandings, and we still have the ability to start over.
After reflecting upon my freshman year, I can honestly say that the most important value I learned is simple: Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid to be yourself. Do not be afraid to take advantage of all the rich resources offered at the University. Do not be afraid to enmesh yourself in the diversity provided by the U of I. There are students and staff from all over the world here. There’s you and me. **We all have different perspectives to voice, experiences to relate, and knowledge to share, but we are all in this together.**