

*The Most Valuable Things That I Learned as a Freshman in the College of ACES*  
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As a former coward, I never understood the maxim, “Do something that scares you every day.” Prior to attending the University and becoming an ACES student, I rarely left my comfort zone. In high school, I would take classes I knew I would do well in and spent my free time with the same group of friends. Quite frankly, I was a boring person. Spontaneity, risk, and impulse were not in my vocabulary.

My first small step out of my comfort zone was the decision to attend the University of Illinois. This scared me. The longest I had ever been away from my family was six days. Now, I was supposed to go without seeing my parents or sisters for weeks or possibly months at a time? However, I was calmed by the fact that I would be in the College of ACES. Earlier that year, I had attended an honors presentation to learn about the James Scholar Program. I was heartened to get a feel for the smaller, more intimate community that our college offers.

Then, classes began. As a James Scholar, I was fortunate enough to enroll in an honors section of **ACE 100**. I had never taken economics before, so the decision to take this section of the class was a considerable leap for me. There were only about fifteen students in my class, and I made lasting friendships with my classmates. I really enjoyed this class, and I use the methods I learned from my professor in my more advanced economics classes.

Perhaps even more influential on my transformation was the **ACES 298** Discovery course. I chose to take this class because some students at ExplorACES had highly recommended it. I had never been to a foreign country before – even while just applying for my passport, I was nervous. I learned so much about the history of the Caribbean while just in the classroom. Then came the trip. Never had I imagined that a ten-day tour could be so life-altering. I honestly don’t know where I got the courage to go to the Dominican Republic with only acquaintances. While there, my hang-ups about

speaking Spanish to native speakers melted away. I made life-long friends from this class and trip. This was most definitely the biggest factor in my decision to study abroad. I will be going to Sweden next fall through the ACES program in Uppsala.

Incontestably, the most valuable thing I learned during my freshman year in ACES is that it is okay, and even good, to step outside my comfort zone. I have applied this lesson to other aspects of my life as well. During my freshman year, I spontaneously (yes, the word is now part of my vocabulary) decided to take a belly dancing class. From there, I joined a performance group called Trikhala. We have performed at the Illini Union and at a benefit for the College of Veterinary Medicine. We will also be performing at this year's Homecoming variety show. I also participated in a national sailboat regatta this past summer. The experience was both terrifying and wonderful.

Before beginning college, I would never have described myself as a brave person. Now I do. It is extremely refreshing to let go of my cowardice and really get out there and enjoy what life has to offer. Thanks to the College of ACES and my own will, I will continue to step outside of my comfort zone, until there is no zone to step out of.