

I didn't take advantage of this space in last year's application, so this time I'll use it to address some of the bumps and highlights of my experience at Duke.

It was quite a shock to have a party person for my first semester roommate. There was so much distraction, so little sleep, and no help from the residential staff. Once I moved second semester, my grades improved so much that I made the Dean's List of Distinction. Unfortunately, my first math and physics classes at Duke had already suffered. I felt I would never be admitted by any good physics graduate program, so I decided to major in biology where I could still take electives in biophysics and computer science. Biology was a strong program with many options, and I did well in it despite my constant effort to keep my GPA on an uphill climb.

Consequently there wasn't much time for student activities on campus, but I found other ways to enrich my student experience. The research I did in biophysics kept me busy, as well as the web design I did at Duke and my old high school, the NC School of Science and Math. Almost every week, I volunteered 4-8 hours to help with Dr. Loren Winters' High Speed Photography course at NCSSM. However, my most worthwhile experience didn't happen until after graduation, when I became a TA for Paula Lemons' introductory biology course. I taught and guided the labs and seminars for 24 students each semester, constantly trying to instill in them the importance of nature to our lives and livelihoods. It's a message that would have been lost to me in Biology's mostly pre-med oriented curriculum if I hadn't actively sought out courses dealing with ecology and global change.

There were twelve TAs total, and we were a great bunch. However, I found I had a lot in common with Jason Jackson and Nicki Cagle, our two Ecology graduate students. There's something about the worldview of an ecologist that I find pleasing, how it's impossible to study how an organism interacts with others or its environment without seeing how we also fit into the picture. We're not just observers of nature, as many biologists are content to be, or manipulators of it, as molecular biologists are inclined to do. We are participants in it, and what we do affects the entire system of things, for better or for worse. So if I am granted the chance to study at Duke this time, I'll already have a great start on friends in the Ecology program.