

During the 7th grade my class was assigned to do a book report; I had procrastinated and went to the library to search for the shortest book that I could find (and if it was about a woman even better, I loved reading about inspiring women). Rushing through the shelves I grabbed a biography about Rachel Carson; I read about her life and how she fought for creatures that could not speak for themselves. A sentence in the biography referred to her book *Silent Spring* and illuminated a sentence about spring forests being silenced by the effects of DDT. This tugged at my heart strings and I decided that I wanted to do something to help. Biology and Geography were my favorite subjects in high school and although my parents never had the option or opportunity to go to college, they worked hard to make it a reality for me; I started taking general education classes at the local community college during high school in order to get a head start. Finally, senior year came along and I applied and visited all of the state schools that had great environmental studies programs: Southern Illinois University Carbondale and University of Illinois Champaign were my best options.

Part I: Undergrad

I began my undergraduate degree at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale (SIUC) in August of 2008; majoring in Geography and Environmental Resources, I was ecstatic to be studying the environment but had no idea what I was going to do as a professional. Laurie Bell, assistant director and recruiter to the University Honors Program and had been contacting me the entire summer before school started, and had me doing a bunch of work in the summer, filling out applications, etc. Laurie contacted me because I was a first-generation college student and a woman in science; she said this made me eligible for programs that would give me relevant experience to help me choose a career path. During the first week of school, I was scheduled to meet with Laurie in person. Laurie explained that as a first-generation woman in science, I would be eligible for: Research Rookies, Saluki Scholars, the McNair Scholars Program and the Research Enriched Academic Challenge (R.E.A.C.H.) programs (among others) at SIUC. Each program was designed to train me in my field of expertise and would pair me with a mentor in my field. Research Rookies focused on training freshman/beginners in research, Saluki Scholars pairs students with a research lab to gain hands on experience in your field of study, the McNair Scholars program paid for tutors, application fees, the GED, and allowed us a summer research experience followed by a professional symposium; The R.E.A.C.H. program allowed students to apply for awards of up to \$2,000 to fund any project the student proposes.

My first stop would be Research Rookies, a special program for freshman students interested in research, from keeping a scientific journal to literature review and ethics, this program provides the absolute beginner basics of academic research in any field. The meeting was about 30 minutes in total and I left feeling totally overwhelmed and completely uncertain about what I should do. After I left the meeting, I stood outside Faner Hall and imagined two paths: one where I accepted working with Laurie Bell, which seemed daunting, but if successful, could help me choose the perfect destiny... or play it safe and keep to myself. After about 5 minutes I decided I could not turn down such an awesome opportunity; although I feared failure, I knew that I would never know if I didn't try.

I woke up late on a rainy, humid August day and raced to my Research Rookies interview with Julia Spears staff member and program director. I sat down with sweat dripping everywhere as she handed me a Kleenex box while I apologized for being late; I left the interview thinking, man, I really blew it. Shortly after my interview, I received an email saying I had been accepted to the Research Rookies Program!!!! Next, I had to choose a mentor, meet with them and decide on a research project. Matt Therrell was a professor in the Department of Geography and his research on sustainability and tree rings seemed cool to me, so I asked him to be my mentor and he accepted. Matt used words like “gnarly” and “right on” and he loved earth so I felt comfortable working with him; after lots of discussion, I decided I would do a lighting sustainability project, assessing the amount of electricity wasted in Faner Hall due to “inappropriate lighting”. My lighting sustainability project was a blast, I got to choose a topic of my liking, design a project and work through the project to retrieve a result. I was officially addicted to research!! Soon after we began working together, Matt suggested I get a female mentor and said that it would be good for me to have such a role model. He told me about an amazing Professor/Researcher in the Department of Plant Biology named Sara Baer who would be perfect. Luckily, it just so happened that Sara was already my general biology teacher.

Visiting Professor Baer’s office hours became a regular part of my schedule and eventually I expressed that I wanted to join her lab as an undergraduate research assistant / worker. Although there were no openings at the time, she said that she would let me know if that were to change. During the second semester of my freshman year I signed up for another one of Sara Baer’s classes Environmental Studies, which wasn’t a requirement, it was a random extra class that I would be taking to ensure that I would be in touch with Professor Baer (and get that job in the lab). During this class, Dr. Baer made an announcement about an internship opportunity through SIU’s “Center for Ecology” and that anyone could apply. That semester I got the internship with the Center for Ecology and began working in the Baer Lab. Personally committed to participating in as many programs and summer internships as possible I was not only a part of Baer’s lab but also a Saluki Scholar, McNair Scholar, R.E.A.C.H. recipient, sat on the sustainability council for the city of Carbondale, received a Green Fund Grant and studied as a Research Experience for Undergraduates (REU) student. Throughout my undergraduate career I lived in the Chihuahuan desert, traveled to Oregon, Washington, Kansas, Pennsylvania and Texas for various research outings and conferences (all while dancing on the side). I even applied for a big scholarship (the Udall Scholarship) but did not receive it #youcan’twinthemall. Lifelong friends and memories were an extra bonus I gained during my four years at SIUC and I am forever grateful. Upon graduation I earned an honors certificate and was named one of the “Top 25 Most Distinguished Students” for the class of 2012.

All of my achievements were possible thanks to amazing mentors who guided and supported me, along with guidance and support from peers and advisors as well. From Laurie Bell teaching me what programs would beef up my resume, to Sara Baer working with me on mother’s day to roto-till a plot for a prairie restoration at a grade school, and Rhetta Seymour (McNair Scholar Director) who gave me a tough lesson in dressing right for certain occasions. I learned everything that I could be at SIUC. However, one big mistake I made during my undergraduate career was during the last semester of my senior year. In order to graduate by the “on time”, I

needed to take more than the suggested number of credit hours during my final semester; so I went to the college and received permission to overload my coursework. Too many classes paired with research and a job left me burnt out and at risk of losing my job. .. Thankfully, many conversations with my boss and graduate student advisers later, I did not lose my job and I graduated with several C's, D's and a slightly lower GPA. Overall, SIUC helped me grow as a professional, scholar and individual; good mentors are everything and I vowed to pay forward the mentorship I received. I graduated from SIUC in May of 2012 and had already been accepted to a graduate program at Indiana University Bloomington in the Department of Evolution, Ecology and Behavioral Biology. With a project in hand, I was ready to hit the ground running at IUB, more excited than ever to continue expanding my skills and paying forward good mentorship.

Part II: Graduate School

After finishing a summer teaching as an Environmental Educator with the McHenry County Conservation District Summer 2012, I moved to Bloomington Indiana to begin my graduate degree. The adviser I interviewed with at Bloomington was very eager to work with me; she even accepted my dance background and the fact that I would be dancing while earning my degree. Indiana University Bloomington (IUB) also had the most funding, so I accepted a graduate assistantship with the Department of Evolution, Ecology and Behavioral Biology; I was officially a PhD. student! Project in hand, I joined my new lab with an eager excitement; I earned my graduate dollars by working as a teaching assistant every semester and applied for small, specialized grants to fund my research projects. I also danced with the African American Dance Company, studied journalism, mentored McNair students, taught for the Jim Holland Program (a summer program for underrepresented high school students to broaden their knowledge in genetics, evolution, environmental biology and more), Girls Inc, The Boys and Girls Club, Co-Founded a Science Writers Club, mentored Women in STM (Science, Technology, and Math), coached for the science Olympiads program, was a writer for NPR "A Moment of Science" and closely mentored three undergraduate students in lab work and research. All of these activities occupied my time outside of coursework and conducting my research projects, which led me to learn about new types of soil analyses and conduct research at one of my favorite natural areas in Illinois, Nachusa Grasslands. By now, I was in year two of my PhD, and preliminary exams were on the spring semester horizon; my cohort and I were frightened for our soon to be very stressful lives.

One by one my classmates scheduled their preliminary exams which included receiving one question from each academic advisor on your "Committee". Each student was to complete a full literature review around the question, form an opinion and write an essay to support that opinion. After the written exam was submitted, committee members reviewed their essay prior to "oral exams", which consists of sitting in a room with all of your committee members, your essays and a million questions. I scheduled my exams fairly early in the semester (why drag it out); this way I had back up time during the semester in case I needed to re-do a question or make edits etc. It was fairly common for students to fail or do poorly on parts of the exam and then have to "re-work" an essay or subject until the committee felt the student had a good understanding of the

subject. I sincerely hoped this would not happen to me, I played out several scenarios in my head and the worst one ended with me having to re-do all of the questions. Hoping for the best I entered the spring semester ready to work hard; not only was I scheduled a regular course load (I actually dropped some classes), but I was also teaching during my preliminary exams, I put everything else on hold.

Sleep became the enemy and days seemed like they were getting shorter as I overloaded on caffeine to stay awake... I was working 70-90 hours a week (easily) for 6 weeks to finish my five exam essays, teach and take class. Red bull, Adderall, caffeine, chain-smoke, work: repeat led to lots of weight loss and weekly breakdowns, my cohort wasn't far behind me. Any questions about my exam went unanswered by my advisor, she stated the inappropriateness of my questions and said that it was something I needed to figure out on my own; many of my classmates had been consulting with their advisors, but I figured every advisor was different. After the most grueling 6 weeks of my life, I turned in my Preliminary Exams ~10:00 P.M. EST (they were due at midnight and yes I was writing and editing up to the very end). Terrified but relieved, I started preparing for my oral exams and possible exam outcomes.

The classmates ahead of me explained what oral exams would be like, lasting about an hour, each committee member would ask questions about what you wrote in your essay. Preparing the best as I possibly could, I entered my oral exams one spring morning in 2014. One hour turned into three and my anxiety was soaring amongst my committee members, some of whom were yelling amongst each other during my exam. I wasn't sure what was happening but I knew that nothing about the exam felt good or right. I felt doomed, sitting in the hall waiting for a result.... 20 minutes turned into 30 which turned into an hour or more. I sat outside of the exam room on the hall floor, was it normal to take this long for a result? I didn't think so.... was I the worst student in the history of students? Whatever was happening, the pit in my stomach was growing exponentially. The door opened and the committee called me in, they informed me that although I had performed well on some of the exam questions that, I had failed the entire exam and had three options: Completely redo the test and try again (everyone gets a second chance), Master out (leave with a master's degree instead of a PhD.), or leave with nothing. I knew that if I did anything besides redo the entire exam that I would always regret it, so I informed my committee that I would like to re-do the exam. My committee obliged and said they would make up brand new questions and send them to me ASAP and that I had to the end of the semester (3 weeks) to complete the written and oral exam again. As everyone was packing up to leave my advisor leaned in with some words and told me that "Maybe this wouldn't have happened if you hadn't danced and done journalism." I instantly knew that I would never pass the second exam and that I was never meant to pass this exam in the first place. It's not very common for a PhD. student to fail out as I did, more often, PhD. students have high value to the advising professor and produce important papers and perform key research for the advisor. Even problem students are kept (even if they take 7 +years to finish a 5 year program); I even knew of other students dancing their way through a PhD. program... But maybe I had taken things too far, for example, I opted out of taking some of my EEB classes (not required but suggested) because they conflicted with dance; I went to journalism conferences to better understand how to communicate science to the general public; something essentially frowned upon in the program. I entered the program and

was told I could be and study whatever I wanted to during my degree; the reality which I experienced does not align with that idea.

My committee left and I was left in the room alone; finally succumbing to my emotions I collapsed on the ground in a rage of tears and experienced one of my lowest lows. One of my best friends responded to my text for help and was suddenly cradling me in her arms and rocking me for comfort as I lay on the floor trying to comprehend my new reality. Without much time to rest, my friends and family rallied around me to carry me to the next finish line. It was now spring break so I went home to re-do most of my exam questions and then ventured back to IUB for my “mock orals” which I jokingly called my “morals”. I gave each of my friends (science, art and dance alike) a different question to read, critique and question me on. I went into my second set of oral exams feeling prepared for whatever was to come. The second set of oral exams extended beyond an hour and my wait in the hall seemed endless as well. Queued by the dreaded door handle click, I stood to enter the exam room and awaited my results; my advisor told me that I had completely failed every part of the exam and my remaining options were to master out or leave with nothing. I informed my committee that I would be mastering out.

A year later on June 5th 2015, I defended my Master’s Thesis and passed. Although I had to leave out several key aspects of my research (which was later picked up by my advisor) and it was hard to walk the department halls amongst many passing peers. Turns out I was not the only “out of the box” student that was forced to master out of the EEB program at IUB during my time there; later I would learn about other close friends who experienced similar injustices in schools all the way across the country. Being a part of the African American Dance Company (AADC) at IUB saved me from entering dark places from which I would never have returned by loving and accepting all of me as an individual and although I initially went to IUB for EEB, however, I believe I was meant to be there for AADC. Even though it is not technically connected to my degree, dancing supports my well-being in a way that nothing else can; and although I didn’t receive the support I expected from my advisor, I gained mentors from AADC and teaching jobs.

I officially graduated from IUB with a Master of Science in EEB in August of 2015; I was officially out on my own to find my way in the world of conservation. Seasonal jobs were the best first fit for me and I worked as a Restoration Technician at Nachusa Grasslands in the fall of 2015; a Research Assistant for the Chicago Botanic Garden in 2016; a Field Botany technician for the Indian Dunes National Park in 2017; a Restoration Technician (AGAIN!!!) for Nachusa during 2018 followed by my first (and current) permanent job with The Land Conservancy of McHenry County (TLC) in the Fall of 2018. TLC is led by women who have fully embraced me as a co-worker, friend and professional in the field of conservation; I sincerely look forward to my future with them. My journey to this point has had many highs and lows; I’ve experienced extreme poverty, food insecurity and homelessness. But I have also gained knowledge, friendships, mentorships and priceless opportunities. I have been fully supported as a human and also fully rejected and although I would not change my path, I don’t wish the struggle of professional rejection on anyone. Not only did IUB fail me out of the EEB program, but they crushed any belief I had in higher education and academia in general. My once naive eyes were

opened to the harsh and rigid reality of societal rules; sometimes I still can't believe something as pure as trying to educate oneself can end so rashly and at the whim of human emotions.

Lots of time and reflection later, I aim to fully embrace my wide range of talents which may be a little too diverse for (current) academia, but are perfect for the non-profit world. I believe in being your most authentic self, seizing a diverse set of opportunities, to learn where your passions lie and paying it forward to the next generation. Despite what society may tell you, there is a place for you in society: Dancer & Scientist, Woman of Color & Lesbian, Teacher & Mentor are some of the flags that I am proud to carry. Surround yourself with people who accept you and educate people who can't understand you, because as one of my grad school friends wrote to me

“You are exactly who you are supposed to be” – L.C.