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Choosing one experience in my life that has helped me form a belief is an extremely difficult task, especially when I want it to convey a helpful message. Coming into college I received advice from everyone I crossed paths with. My parents were telling me to focus on school and be myself, my friends who were already in college told me to balance my time between school work and my social life, and my teachers told me to study hard and make friends with my professors. My mind felt like a filing cabinet, making a folder for every new helpful hint while trying to figure out my own feelings about this new chapter in my life. Was I going to like my roommate? Would my classes be difficult? What if I absolutely hate this new experience but I'm too far to come home every weekend. These were all fears I faced entering my freshman year of college. Luckily I was able to go on an extraordinary trip and the lessons I learned carried over into helping with my transition.

My senior year of high school I was able to fill my schedule with a lot of electives and I decided to take an accelerated German class; it is basically a crash course on the language to teach you basic communication. My school participates in an exchange program with a high school in Germany every year, and the trip was open for anyone learning German to go. I applied and got accepted but I didn't fully realize what I got myself into until my first day there. It was a long day of travelling, and due to the time difference we had to start our day of activities when we would've been sleeping if we were still in America. There were 22 students from my high school, and we all got placed with exchange partners that attended Gymnasium Neu Wulmstorf (my German high school). After we spent the day at school with each other, we went home alone with our partners to meet our host families. I barely spoke German, I was separated from my friends, and I was about to live with a family of strangers for the next month. I was extremely sleep deprived and out of my comfort zone; the only thing I wanted to do was go home to New York and sleep in my own bed. The language barrier made for many awkward half German/half English conversations and I couldn't figure out where their light switches were or how to work the bathroom. The next day when I got to school, my fellow Americans and I gathered in our homeroom classroom to discuss our first day. Thankfully my peers all had stories that were equally as awkward as mine and I started to feel a little bit better. After school that day all of the students participating in the exchange hung out together, and we all started to form a bond that to this day is still strong. If you would have told me on the first day of my trip that I would soon call my exchange partner my sister, and my host family my second family, I probably would have laughed and disregarded it.

Going to Germany was a life changing experience. The language barrier wasn't an issue because smiling and laughing are universal, and I wound up learning more from my family than I could have ever imagined. While they share some of the same customs as us, there were also many differences. I would carefully watch my exchange partner so I could mimic her mannerisms. Within a short period of time my German had greatly improved, and my partner Linda became practically fluent in English. Although I wanted to fly home and call it quits, I stuck it out and created lifelong international relationships.

In college, you have to learn to listen to people and respect that people are coming from all over with different backgrounds. You need to adjust how you live, and other people need to adjust to you as well. Even though you might not have a language barrier with the people you encounter at Brockport, you need to learn to openly communicate about any problems you're having since you are now your own advocate. Last but not least, if at first you feel shy and uncomfortable, stick it out because it will get better. College is a once in a lifetime experience, and you have to make the most of it.