Ella:

It's so good to see you all. I'm so glad we're meeting in person and you're not like in a tiny box on my computer. This is much better. But my name is Ella. I'm a senior from Coatesville, Pennsylvania, and I'm so excited to share with you all a bit about my Swarthmore experience in hopes of giving you a sense of comfort as you move through orientation and ultimately the next four years.

So to start, I'll give a bit of a background and how I ended up at a small college town tucked away in greater Philadelphia. So then I'll get into the crux of what I want you all to leave here with today. The two dimensions that made my Swart story and soon yours transformative.

So as I mentioned, I'm from Coatesville, which is only about a 40 minute car ride from Swarthmore. Despite this short distance, Swarthmore often feels a world away from where and how I grew up. Coatesville is a tight knit community that relies heavily on each other.

When I came to Swarthmore, I saw this idea of community manifesting itself in a lot of similar ways, but the access to resources and connections was nothing like I had experienced before. I did not know Swarthmore even existed until I began the college application process and started to consider all the options that I had when it came to schools.

I came to campus for the first time for an interview. I took that 40 minute drive all by myself on a rainy Saturday morning. And I was so lost. I pulled onto campus and had no clue what Parish Hall even looked like, let alone where it was located. I would soon discover that this ancient building is not only plastered on all Swarthmore merchandise, but would be the epicenter of campus life. Most of you are not familiar with campus just yet, but for the sake of the story, I parked all the way at The Matchbox and walked all the way back up behind Dana and eventually got to Parish Hall where I was met with a bunch of admissions counselors and different Swarthmore students.

So despite what seemed like a nightmare first impression, I was quickly greeted and I was so excited to meet everybody. I forgot about my miserable walk up to Parish Hall and I was so impressed by everyone that I was meeting. They were also accomplished and sure of themselves as they told me about their experiences and why Swarthmore was such a great school. This first impression translated smoothly into what has been my experience as a Swarthmore student.

So fast forward a year, I'm sitting in the same seats you all are sitting in right now. I started freshman year on crutches, which is to say least, was rough. Just like I'm sure many of you are feeling now, I was nervous and anxious about meeting new people and making it to every event during orientation. Orientation felt like a how did you Swarthmore one-on-one training that lasted five days and the amount of information that you got was endless. From learning the campus, to registering for classes and meeting too many people to remember everyone's name, it began to set in that I was a first-generation low-income student at Swarthmore college.

Now that you have a better idea of who I am and how I got here, I'll transition into the two key aspects of my Swarth story. Personal growth and community. To be candid, transitioning from high school to Swarth was very difficult. I spent much of the first semester doubting myself and my abilities to perform as a student. I wasn't sure if the school was the right fit and I began overthinking everything that I was submitting and participating in.

Coming from a community where I was comfortable into a community that forces you to grow was not something that I was used to. Swarthmore teaches you lessons that you never knew that you needed to learn. My intended majors as a freshmen were political science and Spanish. I took my first political science class during my freshman fall and I struggled. I turned my first eight to 10 page paper in during the fourth week of class and eagerly waited for the feedback from the professor.

So finally, after a few classes passed, we got our papers back and I saw that I got a C with a please meet me comment on it. I was so heartbroken. So at first in my mind, I was like, Ella, you're literally a poli-sci major. Like what are you going to do? How are you going to make it through four years at Swarthmore? And this quickly escalated to am I really supposed to be here?

So as I started to spiral, questioning everything that I was doing over one grade, I had to focus on re-centering myself and remembering who I was, how I got here and what I brought to this community as a whole. One grade did not define me and it certainly did not define my trajectory at Swarthmore. Ultimately, I changed my majors to sociology and anthropology and peace and conflict studies.

So I tell you this story to remind you all that even in what is considered a very rigorous and accomplished school, we all struggle and giving grace to ourselves as the adjustment to college occurs is absolutely necessary. Oftentimes we avoid these tough conversations about failure, reaching out for help and changing our plans. But the reality is the more we talk about them, the more we normalize them and the idea that this is a place for growth and discovery.

As I continued my journey, I saw myself opening up to opportunities and trying new things. I became more confident in myself, my ability to perform in the classroom and my interests. I took ownership over my experience and began to get comfortable with being uncomfortable. I saw the progress that I was making internally and looked to quickly translate that into action.

So the summer after my freshman year, with the help of a Lang Center grant, I interned at the Chester County Food Bank where I facilitated a summer lunch program for kids in Coatesville. After a short year at Swarthmore, I redirected resources from an institution and started a program that continued over the last two years. I cannot even begin to describe how meaningful it was to take what I learned after one year of college and apply that in my own community. As I became more comfortable with my presence at Swarthmore, I developed a sense of self that allowed me to speak up unapologetically and voice my opinion on campus.

Along with some of my closest friends, we planned a retreat over spring break for low-income students who were unable to travel home for break. So we took 32 first gen low income students to the Poconos and provided a full schedule of activities ranging from community building to an indoor waterpark trip. This trip was actually the very last thing we did before we were all sent home due to COVID. So you can only imagine how much more enriching and timely this experience was.

In the same vein, I served as Vice President of student government last year. Like most things during the pandemic, this experience was unprecedented, but full of more opportunities for personal and professional development. I went from a freshmen who was constantly asking herself how in the world she was going make it through four years at Swarthmore to a senior who can stand before you and openly tell you about my experiences and how they've gotten me to where I am today.

Much of what I've talked about so far focuses on growth, development and how I've changed as a person, but all of this would not have been possible if it was not for my community. This brings me to the second key part of my Swarth story. The people. Although it took a while to realize this, each and every person that I have interacted with during my time at Swarthmore has impacted me in some way or another. Many of the greatest lessons you will learn during your time at Swarthmore will not come from the books you read or the lectures you're given, but from the amazing people that you have the ability to interact with every day. The people sitting around you will become your support system, your family, and in many cases, your lifelong best friends. There is nothing I'm more grateful for when reflecting on my Swarthmore experience than the people that I now have in my life.

Although I told stories about struggle and disappointment, my community never left my side. This was especially apparent as we completed a year and a half of virtual school. I can tell you that the bonds you will create with one another at Swarthmore are so strong because despite the physical distance between my friends and I, we're now closer than ever.

Now that you have a personal account of what one Swarthmore experience looks like, it's your turn to define what Swarthmore is and will be to you. Yes, Swarthmore is a rigorous liberal arts school located in Pennsylvania that provides us all with a world class education, but it's also much more. Swarthmore has movie nights where you can't decide which movie to watch, impromptu trips to Philadelphia, existential conversations in the middle of the night and hikes in the Crumb, even when you get stuck and have to call for help. Swarthmore is occasionally all-nighters with your friends, because they don't want you to struggle alone. Chrome Cafe quesadillas and card games with your friends until you're literally yelling at each other because we're all way too competitive.

From this glimpse into my Swarth story, how I got here, what my adjustment to college looked like and how my community has helped me persevere, I want you all to hold onto this [inaudible 00:07:53] and personal account of what four years at Swarthmore could look like. Swarthmore is a convergence of personal growth and community with an original twist added by each and every one of us. With that being said, I'm excited to welcome you all to the campus, and I wish you nothing but the best as you begin your college career.