Taking the Leap

Why PEG Was the Right Choice for Me

by Priyanka Nadar

In the summer after seventh grade, I studied biology at CTY for three weeks on the campus of Dickinson College in Pennsylvania. For the first time in my life, I was surrounded by people who were academically driven and loved to learn just as much as I did. It was hard to go back to my school after that; eighth grade paled in comparison to the friends I made and things I learned at CTY.

Staying in touch with my CTY roommate, Ali, made the transition a little easier. One day, we were chatting online when she mentioned that she was applying to college. In eighth grade. When I asked her to explain, she linked me to the website of the college she hoped to attend.

I spent hours perusing the page, learning that the Program for the Exceptionally Gifted (PEG) at Mary Baldwin College allows mature, academically capable girls to bypass some or all of their high school years by entering college early. PEG students live together in a dorm on campus and attend college classes full-time with traditional Mary Baldwin students. They can participate in the college’s wide range of extracurricular activities, serve in leadership positions, conduct research—in other words, they have access to a full college experience.

There is a good chance that I would have been academically satisfied if I had stayed at my high school. I would have been allowed to skip ninth and tenth grades, and take Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate classes. But I wanted to study—in depth—math and science topics that were barely being introduced in my school’s classes. And because I had attended the same school since kindergarten, I was also ready for a new social environment, one that valued intellectual growth. When I really thought about it, I didn’t see the benefit of waiting four years to go to college.

The Door Opens

At first, my parents wouldn’t let me apply. They wanted me to enjoy my teenage years without the stress that college would inevitably bring. They worried about how I would adapt to classes with students five or more years older than I was, to the independence of dorm life, and to living hours away. But finally, after several frank discussions, a lot of tears, and a meticulously crafted PowerPoint arguing my case, they allowed me to apply.

Applying to PEG is just like applying to any other college. The application requires students to submit personal information, a transcript, SAT scores, four...
Considering early college entrance?

EXPERTS AGREE that early college entrance is not for all gifted students, and it’s not the only option for those students who need more challenge than their high school curriculum provides. If you’re thinking of entering college early, consider these questions:

› Have you taken advantage of the challenging opportunities your high school has to offer, including local, regional, and national competitions?

› Have you tried college-level coursework (e.g., AP or IB, 12th-grade honors, or suitably difficult part-time college courses)? How well did you handle the rigor and pace of those courses?

› How do your SAT scores compare to those of the entering class of the college you plan to attend? Your scores should be at least average for the college you plan to attend, and preferably in the top quarter of the entering class.

› Are you confident about your written language, critical reading, mathematics, computer, and study skills?

› Are you truly motivated to enroll in college—or do you see college as a way to avoid problems in your current home or school environment?

› Will you regret missing extracurricular opportunities in high school (e.g., being editor of the school paper or president of the student body, or participating in varsity sports or national competitions)?

› If you had your heart set on attending a highly selective college, will you have regrets if entering early means that you must attend a less selective college?


essays, and letters of recommendation. PEG also requires interviews with each candidate and her family. About a week after I submitted my application, my family and I made the three-hour drive to Staunton, Virginia, for PEG’s Prospective Student Overnight. I stayed in the PEG dorm with a current student and met other prospective applicants as well as alumnae of the program. In the morning, I attended a discussion-oriented English class and was surprised at how much I had learned by the end of it. I wanted to be part of this program more than ever.

Two months later, I received my acceptance letter from PEG. I was giddy with excitement about starting this new part of my life.

The summer passed quickly, and before I knew it, I was moving into my dorm. In the five days before classes started, I participated in both PEG-specific and campus-wide orientation activities. Some, such as skits run by the honor council and judicial board, taught us about the rules of PEG and Mary Baldwin. Others included icebreakers, free movies, and giveaways to welcome us. During this time, I met up with Ali again, made new friends, and got to know my roommate, Maggie. I was homesick for a few days, but by the time classes started, I felt much more settled.

Getting Adjusted

The transition from middle school to college classes was difficult at first. Though Mary Baldwin offers courses that help PEG students catch up—many PEGs haven’t taken the courses that most incoming college freshmen have taken—the teachers still had high academic standards. I was shocked when I got my first-ever B- on a test. After that, I resolved to exceed my teachers’ expectations—and forged good relationships with my professors and advisor in the process.

The single-sex environment was also new to me. I had attended a co-ed school, and growing up, some of my closest friends were boys. After the initial shock, I noticed that female students (including me) really do tend
to speak up and share their opinions more freely in this environment. Outside of class, PEG students have opportunities to socialize with boys our age at various mixers that the program coordinates.

Even though Mary Baldwin students are all female, the student body is quite diverse: I’ve met people with religions, political views, sexual identities, and interests I never would have encountered in my largely homogeneous middle school. My classmates have opened my mind to new ways of thinking and made me a more accepting person. Many of my friends have views, beliefs, and interests that I do not share, but what we do share is a passion for learning—and that includes learning from each other.

My roommate sophomore year taught me a lot about fashion; through other friends, I discovered Finnish glam rock, The X-Files, and Doctor Who. In addition to a wide range of interests, most of my friends have diverse and ambitious career plans—they are budding writers and historians, lawyers and professors, psychologists and Broadway stars, neurosurgeons and astrobiologists.

Living and studying in an environment where most everyone is passionate about school has inspired me to work hard and achieve more: I won the first-year calculus award and have been accepted into three honor societies. Yet PEG girls also remind me that there are plenty of people more intelligent than I am, which keeps me grounded.

**Drawbacks & Benefits**

Mary Baldwin is a small liberal arts school, so its science program does not have the resources and funding that larger research universities have. Though the
quality of science instruction is very good, the lab and research opportunities are not as extensive as at other schools. There is not as much demo equipment or lab equipment, especially for the physical sciences. That said, I do have what I need to conduct my chemistry research.

Currently, I am trying to find a way to use bacteria to better dispose of harmful compounds in wastewater.

Some of my friends have chosen to transfer to other universities to pursue their academic interests, especially in science. Others were accepted as transfer students to schools such as Johns Hopkins University, UC Santa Barbara, UVA, and Virginia Tech, but in the end chose to stay at Mary Baldwin.

The peer group and support system that PEG provides, along with the liberal arts education we receive at Mary Baldwin, make this a place where most of us thrive. Before coming here, I hardly knew how much math existed beyond calculus. Now, I’m majoring in biology with minors in math and chemistry. I’ve tested the effects of endocrine-disrupting compounds on the development of chicken embryos, and I’ve modeled Nash equilibrium with a professor who earned his PhD at Harvard. And I’ve made the best friends of my life. I couldn’t imagine leaving here—at least, not without my bachelor’s degree.

Priyanka Nadar is a junior at Mary Baldwin College, where she is treasurer of the college’s chapter of the American Chemical Society, a member of the Honor Council and PEG’s Steering Committee, a calculus tutor, and an active member of three honor societies. Priyanka is also involved with the Spencer Center for Global and Civic Engagement, where she helps organize events to share Indian culture.