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[Assignment: In response to William Zinsser's "College Pressures," write an essay in which you analyze pressures you feel at VU using cause and effect reasoning.]

(1) Freshmen entering Valparaiso University meet many new pressures and challenges. Over the years, these trials may change slightly in context, but they remain of a nature that all new students must face. Confronting peer pressure, competing for grades, quelling parental concerns, and maintaining scores similar to those earned in high school: these are some of the trepidations one encounters when attending an institution where the majority of freshmen graduated from their high schools in the top 10% of their class. Yet, first-year college students can find solace in the fact that they all share similar challenges together. Except me.

(2) I face challenges in being a freshman, of course. However, I am not a typical new student at Valparaiso University. I did not graduate in the top 10% of my senior high class. I finished at the opposite end of the grade spectrum—in fact, in the lower 10%.

(3) This, of course, brings all sorts of different pressures that I am going to have to contend with for the duration of my first year of college. These are: learning to learn, catching up, ignoring the competitiveness of those around me, maintaining a decent grade-point average, and putting the goals I have set for myself into practice.

(4) Out of all the weaknesses that contributed to my poor performance in high school, the inability to study properly was my biggest drawback. I never managed my time appropriately and even when I did have time to study I would procrastinate so that there would be no time left at the end. I rarely completed homework assignments, took notes, or even paid attention in my classes. Now I am in a situation where I want to perform well; I am interested in all the topics of my courses and enjoy learning. However, handicapped by previous bad habits, I now find it difficult to transform my "techniques" of studying and occasionally I will be tempted to ignore an assignment or put off reviewing for an exam. The situation is stressful. I am learning to learn.

(5) Since I did so poorly throughout my secondary education, I lack the knowledge possessed by my peers. Thus, my level of mathematical understanding is limited to the basic concepts of Algebra and Geometry. (The latter was even repeated for several semesters in order to receive credit.) World History, Political Science, and Exposition and Argument are all new subjects to me. In the realm of Social Studies, I've only had U.S. History (of which I also had to repeat a semester), and in English, I have taken only the required courses of Composition and Literature, plus one Creative Writing course. I'd taken classes, prior to my acceptance at the University, in Spanish, Psychology, American Foreign Policy, and Journalism, but all with failing grades. I see the urgency of catching up. I know that I am as capable as other freshmen of absorbing and
understanding the material presented to me by my instructors. And I know that if I do not take my learning seriously now, I will never again have an opportunity of this magnitude to better myself. I am suffering the stresses of catching up.

(6) Proverbially, college students live in a competitive academic environment. Having previously been at the top of their class, freshmen find themselves surrounded by others who are equal to or greater than themselves in ability; hence, former valedictorians and salutatorians can only remember their past glories as they are now labeled "average." To subdue these new anxieties, and to boost self-confidence, grades are made public among circles of friends and/or neighbors in residence halls. Perhaps one person who did not perform as well as others on an assignment or examination will lament at not receiving a score of 3.8; I silently rejoice at my C+. I can't remember many times in high school when I received test grades even comparable to that. I do not want the parading of others' achievements to affect me. After all, my expectations of myself do not allow for contending with valedictorians. That would be an unreasonable goal; my immediate goals are only to gain the skills and confidence that I need to be successful in my schooling. My third pressure, then, is not allowing the competitiveness of others to affect me.

(7) Naturally, in order to remain at Valparaiso University I will have to prove that I am a good student—not by writing about intentions and declaring my interest in my studies, but by earning acceptable (if not exceptional) grades. The only way to go about this is to apply my newly found study skills and to have faith in my abilities. I will not demand too much of myself, for then I might suffocate under an impossible workload. Nor will I allow myself to once again become undisciplined and neglect my studies, for then I might fall behind the rest of my classmates. Struggling to achieve this is the source of my fourth pressure.

(8) Putting all my goals into practice is as hard as setting a rusty wheel into motion; I know my mind is like a continent of unsettled, fertile, arable land—untainted by any wisdom and unscathed by too much information. Nobody is making me attend college and I have very little parental pressure. It's my choice. So far I have been quite successful. My lowest grade on a test or large assignment has been a C+, and that was in German; in all other classes, I've been graded in the B range. I'm very pleased with myself (the only source of praise that really matters to me), so apparently my newly found techniques have proven themselves.

(9) I still, on occasion, associate with persons whose condition was similar to mine. Today they are plagued with money troubles, police difficulties, alcohol and drug abuse torments, and complications in finding work. I know how easily I could have slipped into that lifestyle; I realize how shockingly close I was. My affiliation with these individuals reveals to me how important my education is to my future—without it, I have no future. Dealing with the challenges that I face as a freshman in a pragmatic manner can only increase my ability to face tougher ones in the days to come.