

## The Tapestry of a Mustang: Threads of Growth, Challenge, and Integrity

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“World changers shaped here.” These words greet you as you step onto SMU’s campus, a promise etched into the university’s very identity. From the moment you walk down the grand Boulevard on a crisp fall afternoon, surrounded by the hum of eager conversation and the energy of a thriving student body, you begin to understand that college is more than just academics. A university is more than its curriculum, more than its lectures, and more than the sum of its departments. It is a living, breathing ecosystem—a dynamic exchange of ideas, cultures, and experiences that continuously mold and reshape the moral compass of those who step onto its campus. SMU, with its diverse student body and wealth of extracurricular opportunities, is no exception. Here, values are not static; they evolve, intertwining with the numerous interactions, challenges, and communities that comprise daily life.

At SMU, we do not merely inherit our values—we refine, test, and even reconstruct them. In a world where information is manipulated and opinions are manufactured, standing firm in one’s beliefs requires not just conviction but adaptability. The challenges we all face are varied in many forms: physical, emotional, psychological, social, familial, spiritual, etc. The modern world has created an environment where problems can grow rapidly, spreading like viruses during a pandemic. However, the opposite is also true. Never before have we been able to conceive ideas and generate solutions as rapidly as we do today, whether it’s the push of a button to send a text halfway around the world or find the cure for Covid-19 in less than a year, compared to the decades we took to find other cures.

Being a Mustang has broadened my perspective to seeing not just through my own eyes, but through the eyes of others. SMU strives to teach students to apply their knowledge and studies in the context of the world around us. As my writer instructor, Professor Polster, says, “We must aim to join the universal conversation” when discussing a topic. Essentially, become one with the community. It is easy to dismiss this as just another cliché—something we hear in every inspirational speech or see in feel-good sports movies. How many times have we watched a film where a lone-wolf character learns that teamwork is the key to success? From *The Avengers* to *Harry Potter*, Hollywood constantly reinforces the idea that a team is greater than the sum of its parts. And yet, despite how overused this message seems, it’s true. Victories feel sweeter when shared, and losses become more bearable when we don’t have to carry them alone.

Even beyond movies, science backs this up. Research in social psychology indicates that strong community connections can enhance resilience and overall well-being. As Nicholas Christakis, a physician and sociologist, puts it: “Connected people live longer, healthier, and happier lives. Our social networks shape our behavior, our emotions, and even our biology” (Christakis). Community isn’t just a sentimental ideal—it’s essential to growth, success, and survival.

Nevertheless, our American society often promotes a different narrative—one rooted in individualism and competition, where success is defined by personal achievement and the “survival of the fittest” mindset. This can feel like a paradox: if research and lived experience tell us we thrive in connection, why does our culture so often reward separation and self-interest? The pressure to stand out, to hustle alone, can make it harder to lean on others or prioritize community. But resisting connection only holds us back. At its core, even individualism depends on community. No one becomes “self-made” without a team—whether it's mentors, family,

friends, or peers—cheering them on, offering guidance, or simply showing up when things get hard. The truth is, the strength to be different, to think independently, and to push boundaries often comes from knowing you have a community that believes in you. It's that foundation of support that gives people the courage to stand out. At SMU, I've learned that behind every leader, innovator, or trailblazer is a network of people—professors who challenge your thinking, teammates who trust you, and friends who remind you of who you are. Individualism isn't the absence of community—it is a product of it.

So, if we already know that we thrive together, why resist it? Why not embrace the reality that we need one another? At SMU, the opportunity to build these connections is everywhere—in classrooms, clubs, late-night study sessions, and even casual conversations on the Dallas Hall Lawn. Belonging creates a sense of being part of something greater than ourselves, within a community that cares for us and that we care for in return. This connection fosters self-confidence and respect, which are essential foundations for personal growth. We aren't meant to walk this journey alone, and when we embrace community and the commonalities we share, we set ourselves up for something far greater than individual success—we create a legacy of shared triumphs.

The opportunities are limitless. SMU has one of the most diverse campuses I encountered in my college search process, and trust me—I looked. They introduce a variety of clubs, sports, cultures, and hobbies into campus life, ensuring that there's a place for everyone to find a home away from home. One of the most exciting ways SMU showcases itself is through its famous "Night at the Club," an event where students can explore the numerous organizations on campus, meet members, and sign up for any activity that piques their interest. Walking through Night at the Club felt like stepping into a world of possibilities. So many clubs called out to me—FSA,

PA Medical Club, Pickleball Club, Country Dancing, HOLA (Hispanic or Latino Association), VSA, Best Buddies, Big Ideas, SMU Serve, K-Pop Club, Rowing, Cooking Club, and even Real Estate Club. There was something for everyone, and it was clear that SMU isn't just a place for academics; it is a place to build passions, friendships, and communities that last beyond the classroom. It is all here; one must simply be willing to reach out.

Although I joined more than a handful of these clubs and communities, the community that has most profoundly shaped my values is the one I found through the Connect Program—a program designed to bring together a diverse group of students who would become my greatest challengers, encouragers, and lifelong friends. It was during one of the welcome events that I found myself drawn to something as casual as a volleyball net set up outside. What started as a simple game quickly turned into something more. Between serves and volleys, I met people who understood my experiences, respected my opinions, challenged my thoughts, shared my ambitions, and believed—just like I did—that we were going to succeed at SMU, even though we were minorities in the Connect Program. For minorities, building a community is crucial—it empowers us as a group, rather than as individuals. It strengthens our sense of identity and amplifies our collective voice, making it impossible to ignore. That night, we didn't just play volleyball; we discussed our dreams, our goals, and how we would one day be world changers, and it all started with a simple volleyball net.

That's the beauty of SMU. It's not just about the clubs, the events, or the resources—it's about the people. The ones who push you to be better, who remind you that you belong, and who prove that success isn't just about individual effort but about the strength of the community around you.

This was an unexpected classroom; we were learning beyond the lecture hall. Imagine walking into a bustling coffee shop, the air thick with the scent of espresso and the buzz of lively conversation. Every table represents a different world—a different perspective, a different culture, a different life experience. You take a seat at one of these tables and begin a conversation, only to realize that the people sitting across from you see the world in an entirely different way. This was what my volleyball club felt like: a constant exchange of perspectives, an intellectual and moral cross-training session that forced me to step beyond my comfort zone physically, mentally, and socially in hopes of challenging myself and improving.

At first, I was hesitant. The idea of walking up to strangers, starting conversations, and potentially disagreeing with them made me nervous. What if we didn't see eye to eye? What if I said the wrong thing? But as I soon learned, these conversations weren't debates to be won or lost—they were bridges, ways to connect and understand. And in the end, it was as simple as meeting a friend for coffee. The barriers I had imagined melted away when I realized that curiosity, not conflict, was at the heart of these interactions.

This newly formed group taught me that meaningful discussions don't require perfect agreement—just a willingness to listen, to challenge and be challenged, and to grow together. It was in those moments, sharing stories over meals, laughing over late-night study sessions, and diving into deep discussions, that I understood the true purpose of college: not just to learn, but to learn with others. This is the true beauty of a university, where universal knowledge, diverse people, and innovative ideas converge in one place.

As a Hispanic first-generation immigrant from Mexico, I always struggled to find where I fit in. I wasn't alone in this—everyone, in some way, feels like an outsider at first, believing there's something about them that makes them different. But that's the beauty of diversity. It is

these differences that add color to the moral tapestry we weave at SMU. The friendships forged through the Connect Program were not simply about bonding over shared interests, such as our mutual love for volleyball, in my case. They were about the conversations we had in the Commons, the late-night study sessions in Fondren Library, the teamwork and cheers during intermural sports, and the ways we pushed each other to grow whenever we were on the verge of giving up. We come from different walks of life—valedictorians, social butterflies, choir singers, artists, athletes, transfers—but our differences did not divide us. Instead, they forced us to broaden our perspectives and reexamine our assumptions about the world and the values that come with them.

Think of it like the characters in *Friends*—each one quirky in their own way, convinced they are somehow different from the rest, yet finding a sense of home in one another. Chandler was sarcastic and awkward, Monica was controlling, and Ross was nerdy. Yet, their differences created a dynamic that made their friendships stronger, and at the end of the day, they were always together. At SMU, my peers and I are just as different, just as weird in our own ways. Yet, it was in those differences that we found belonging.

Growth often comes from tension, and the most valuable lessons I have learned came from moments of challenge. My peers and I do not always agree—on politics, on ethics, on what it means to live a good life—but these disagreements were never a cause for division. Instead, they became opportunities to strengthen our reasoning, to articulate our beliefs more clearly, and, sometimes, to change our minds as we heard new perspectives on the same debate.

One night, over a game of volleyball, a casual conversation about ambition turned into a heated debate about success. One friend argued that success was about financial stability; another insisted it was about impact. Yet another pointed out that success was a deeply personal concept,

different for each individual. In that moment, I realized that my own definition of success had been shaped not just by my upbringing but by the people around me. This tension—the push and pull of different perspectives—did not weaken my values. It sharpened them. Similar to how we must slightly stress and tear our muscles to allow the body to rebuild them stronger, our values must be challenged to be reinforced stronger.

Like Rory Gilmore in *Gilmore Girls*, who constantly had to prove herself at Chilton and Yale, I had to navigate environments where I wasn't always the smartest, the most experienced, or the most prepared. But, like her, I learned that growth is uncomfortable. Famous speakers say that we must learn to feel comfortable with the uncomfortable; that is the way of growth. It requires stepping into spaces where you don't feel like you belong—until you do.

Throughout our lives, we are told to expect certain things, especially when it comes to significant milestones like college. Parents and teachers often offer wisdom, saying, “These will be the best years of your life,” “You’ll find yourself,” or “You’ll make lifelong friends.” Some of these truths proved to be spot on. Others, not so much. One of the most common clichés is that “you’ll figure everything out in college.” However, the reality is far different. At this moment in life, I think college is less about finding a perfect destination and more about the continuous journey of getting lost and finding yourself again. The answers aren't immediately clear, and that's part of the process—sometimes you take one step forward and two steps back, but all of it is part of a deeper exploration of your identity.

- “Your major will define your future.” False. While I love my chemistry and French major and feel deeply connected to the scientific field, I’ve learned that it is not the sole defining factor of who I am or where I want to go. The experiences outside the classroom, the leadership opportunities, the student organizations, and the service I’ve

engaged in have all contributed just as much to my understanding of myself and the world around me. These experiences have shaped my values in ways that go far beyond the theoretical knowledge I've gained in labs and lectures. It turns out, growth happens in all sorts of unexpected places.

- “You’ll change completely” is a half-truth. While I didn’t suddenly become someone else, I have certainly become more of myself. College isn’t about erasing your identity; it’s about refining and adjusting it based on new experiences and perspectives. The core of who you are remains, but it’s constantly evolving, adapting to the new ideas, people, and challenges that come your way. This transformation is one that happens quietly, over time, with moments of clarity and bursts of change that redefine how you see yourself in relation to others and to the world. As we go through our journey, it’s important to decide what to keep in our backpack and let go of anything—whether it’s people, habits, or ideas—that hold us back or jeopardize our journey.

In the same way, parents and friends remind us that great things happen in college; this openness can also bring the most significant risks, disappointments, and sometimes the most challenging experiences. So, be patient, keep moving forward, enjoy the journey, but don't be naïve—human nature, in all its complexity, is always present both the good and the bad.

Life is like a game of dominoes. One small push, one seemingly insignificant interaction, can set off a chain reaction that leads to something far greater than you ever imagined. One of the greatest lessons I have learned at SMU is that life operates much like Newton’s Third Law: every action has an equal and opposite reaction. Small acts of kindness, seemingly inconsequential moments of networking, and decisions made on instinct often come back in unexpected ways.



Life is a mix of highs and lows where opportunities for success and happiness can be anywhere and everywhere.

One interaction about how beautiful a pink sweater was led me to the teacher who changed my life and helped me find research opportunities. I met her through a friend who simply thought we would get along and that she could help me. I owe her all the scholarships and leadership positions I applied for. They came from connections I had made through clubs and programs I initially joined, thanks to that professor. A simple introduction, a shared experience, a conversation over coffee—these seemingly minor moments have had a profound impact on my life.

That is why interacting with people is the #1 skill for success. Both authenticity and networking are the two key aspects for success. The first provides a magnet that people feel attracted to because it reflects trust in the person, their ideas, and personality. Authenticity opens the door to networking, much like a casual conversation. Some people seek networking for the sake of being well-connected; that is true, with politicians being a prime example. However, it often ends up in a quid pro quo (you give me, I give you). On the contrary, networking built on authenticity is founded in trust. This kind will bear fruit in partnership, friendship, long-term relations, mutual growth, and connection.

At SMU, I realized that networking is not just for business students and that kindness is not just a virtue—it is a necessity. In a world that often prioritizes individual success, SMU has reinforced that no one succeeds alone. We are all threads in a more remarkable tapestry, woven together in ways we may not always see but must always respect. Kindness is what strengthens those threads. It's evident in the small gestures—holding a door open, checking in on a classmate, and offering guidance without expecting anything in return—and in the larger ones,

such as standing up for others, creating inclusive spaces, and showing compassion during moments of stress or uncertainty leading up to finals. At SMU, I've seen how kindness can open doors that credentials alone cannot. It builds trust, fosters collaboration, and creates a sense of belonging that turns a campus into a community. It reminds us that how we treat others is just as important as what we achieve.

As I prepare to end a year at SMU, I carry with me not just academic knowledge but a deep appreciation for the values that have been tested and strengthened through my time here. The Connect Program, volleyball courts, student organizations, and spontaneous late-night discussions have all played a role in shaping my understanding of integrity, diversity, and heart. They've shown me the importance of balance—the harmony between intellect, physical well-being, and emotional connection. We need brain, body, and spirit because without them, we are nothing. Stephen Covey Jr., son of the Author of “The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People”, mentions that there are four areas: brain, body, spirit, and heart, within a human being. The heart is powerful because it holds our emotions, and as Stephen Covey Jr. explains, it's like an owner riding an elephant. The owner is like the brain, leading the way based on the logical path. The heart, on the other hand, is like the elephant—strong, sensitive, and often more influential than reason itself. When the elephant is overwhelmed by fear, anger, or excitement, it can overpower its owner, trampling in random directions and sometimes contradicting the owner's commands. Like the elephant, the heart wants to act impulsively. That's why emotional intelligence—learning when to pause, reflect, and respond—is essential for making wise, balanced decisions. All parts are necessary—not just to survive but to thrive in an ever-changing world. At SMU, I learned that life is not a solo game; it is a relay, where the baton of knowledge, experience, and

growth is passed from one person to the next. And just like in volleyball, the best players are not those who play for themselves, but those who uplift their team.

So, here's my final serve: Stand firm in what you believe, but never stop listening. Respect all perspectives, but do not lose your own. Pay attention to the energy you bring into a room, the words you choose, and the people who uplift you. Your actions echo, even when you don't notice. And the people around you? They're not just circumstantial, they're part of your becoming. And above all, remember that every person you meet is a thread in your story—and you, in theirs. Walk with intention. Speak with heart. Listen with respect. Grow with courage.

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