

## “Hoo are you?” Audio Transcript

Produced by Alex DeLoach, Khai Nguyen, Bushra Osman and Owen Markow

### Opening

**Host:** Everyone always says “just be yourself”, but how many of us really take this advice when we just wanna fit in? The start of college stands out as one of those crucial times where you’ve gotta make your choice and find your group, or get left behind. For some of us the transition into one of the new “norm” behaviors is a smooth one. For others, it’s a lot easier said than done. Let me tell you about my story.

*[Background audio of a busy city street filled with people and vehicles fades in for a few seconds before dropping behind the voice of the narrator]*

Transitioning from a large, diverse city...

*[Brief pause in narration while city sounds continue, followed by transition from city noises to outdoor rural noises featuring birds and nondescript wildlife]*

...into a tiny, close knit Charlottesville was a challenge on its own, but my failed attempts to fit in were way harder. Consider this question:

*[Background noises fade out and stop]*

How much of yourself are you willing to compromise in order to find your crowd? For me, UVA seemed like a different planet compared to my Hampton VA hometown. Take my first ever “beach week,” for instance:

*[Beach sounds, featuring crashing water and the sounds of seagulls, begins to play and continues playing behind narration]*

A week of fun at the beach with my peers. My first taste of financial aid had me blinded by dollar signs, and left me at the mercy of impulse buying and peer pressure. What started out as buying essentials became a “little treat” here and there, or a “you HAVE to buy this so we can match!” I was at my social peak, til I checked my bank account.

*[Beach sounds fade out, more abruptly than previously]*

“Beach week” quickly became a very discounted experience, as my week of social spending stopped after the first 3 days. The loneliness hit hard and I could no longer keep up with my well

off peers, but it was either retail shopping or rent. I was way more used to a frugal lifestyle and I definitely let my social life compromise that.

*[Opening theme plays, continues in the background]*

But what other sacrifices do we make to conquer the ominous threat of isolation?

## **Introduction**

**Host:** Welcome to U OK UVA?, a student-produced podcast about mental health and wellness at the University of Virginia. I'm your host Alex, and in this episode, I'm going to discuss the challenges involved with assimilating to UVA culture. Specifically, I'm going to investigate how identity can both help and harm those who are finding their place at UVA.

To do this, I'm going to follow two perspectives: one from transfer students and one from low-income students.

*[Opening music fades]*

**Host:** Regardless of their background, each group has struggled with not feeling like they belong academically or socially. If you currently attend or have ever attended UVA, I'm sure you understand the amount of pressure and imposter syndrome you feel here. But imagine coming from a background that doesn't *feel* like UVA, or another school with an entirely different culture, or even both.

Before chatting with some current students, let's talk about culture and assimilation. Depending on who you ask, these words can mean a lot of different things. In this case, culture includes the social activities and academic behaviors that students at UVA have in common with one another. As for assimilation, let's call it the external "push" to adopt the same characteristics and beliefs as the majority group surrounding you. Since there are so many of us at UVA, it's impossible to fit everyone under the term "UVA culture." That being said, we can try to get an idea of it by exploring what it is that makes people feel like they don't belong.

And this is the crux of this story, that sort of wall that people feel when trying to fit in, trying to assimilate. Like when you notice yourself saying first-year instead of freshman, or grounds instead of campus. It may also be the urge to rethink of free time as time to catch up on work, or, to ask about what clubs people are in instead of how their day was. For some people, assimilating comes naturally, especially when what they're used to is represented by the majority of people. For others, assimilation is one of the greatest challenges they'll face. To begin to understand this challenge, the best place to start is with the students who went through it.

## Academic Barriers

### Interview with Alex

**Alex:** “So my name is Alex. I'm a fourth year in the College of Arts and Sciences. I am currently double majoring in Foreign Affairs and Media Studies... Even though it's my fourth year, it's my third year at UVA because I transferred here my first year... “UVA is known as a very.. they like to think of themselves, I think, as a very prestigious institution. And I can say that now that I'm here.”

**Host:** After one year at a different school, Alex needed a change. Between COVID and the desire for a fresh start, Alex thought that UVA might be a better fit. There was a nearly tangible change in attitude at UVA when Alex got here, and she wasn't the only person to notice this.

**Alex:** “I've had a friend, um, come visit me at UVA multiple times, and she said that all you guys talk about is school and clubs, \*laughter\* She was like ‘You can definitely tell that you guys are UVA students.’”

**Host:** Already there was an air of competition, of academic over-achievement, that felt like a wall to scale. Adding in the anxiety of starting over only makes things worse.

**Alex:** “I was already nervous coming into UVA and I think that a lot of other transfer students can be nervous, it's really intimidating coming to a big school...”

**Host:** One of the main things Alex remembers is the first day she arrived at UVA. Like all new transfer students, she was required to attend a sort of welcome meeting held by the transfer Dean, although it wasn't very welcoming...

**Alex:** “She was saying ‘you might not be ready for the academic rigor of UVA no matter what college you came from...’”

**Host:** Lots of other transfer students remember hearing this and feeling intimidated. One of the producers of this podcast, Bushra, also remembers this meeting and the lasting effects that first impression had.

**Bushra:** “Hearing the Dean's statement was something that really caught me off guard. I think that I came from a school that was very academically challenging too—I was kind of thinking how truthful her statement was going to be.”

**Host:** Bushra transferred from the University of Maryland after her first year because she thought UVA would be a better fit in terms of price and major. Really early on, she realized that the experience wasn't going to be exactly what she was expecting...

**Bushra:** "I had signed up for a religious studies seminar course. I just remember thinking almost everybody other than me had so much to say about a topic I've never even heard of, and I thought that, like, maybe the professors assigned readings or I missed the class, but that wasn't it. I spent that, like, entire two-hour class silent, and I think it took me like one more class before I decided to drop it. The Dean's words kind of rang true, and I was thinking, like, maybe this place is going to be too challenging for me."

**Host:** "A lot of transfer students here at UVA can relate to imposter syndrome taking over. Especially when they get the impression from their dean that she also thinks you're an imposter."

**Bushra:** "I remember going to meet with my advisor sometime last year to discuss my plans for studying abroad, and basically, by the end of that meeting, I was told that I could not major in computer science because they wouldn't accept me and that if I don't pick a new major, I'm going to be kicked out of the University. And I was also told that the computer science major won't accept me because I didn't even know where the department's offices were... and that told her everything she needed to know."

**Host:** Bushra was able to major in computer science, but the effects of that meeting still stayed. The experience of feeling overwhelmed and questioning your ability is not unique to transfer students. It's a sentiment shared by many, including low income students like myself, who are also navigating UVA's niche culture.

### Interview with Winnie

**Winnie:** "Hi, my name is Winnie, I'm a fourth year biology major who's trying to pursue a B.S. degree... I'm a first generation low-income student... I'm considered one here at UVA..."

**Host:** Winnie considers herself to be pretty driven when it comes to college coursework, which means she's no stranger to the overwhelming nature of UVA's academic culture. When asked about how her income status has affected her academic life, she was quick to point out the tutoring benefits enjoyed by some of her more... well-off friends.

**Winnie:** "Some of my friends, or at least one of my friends, she gets tutoring from her family recommendations and that tutor was expensive, it was like a hundred or so dollars for an hour, and I told myself I would never do that to my parents."

**Host:** Although Winnie comes from a middle-class family, she and many other students in her position are classified as low-income, and given a financial aid package that correlates to this label. For some students though, this financial aid reward is anything but rewarding.

**Winnie:** “Like, a good amount of students at UVA are also, um, coming from middle income families. And issue with being from middle income is just that UVA really provides little, um, aid to those students, which I think would impact their, um, financial aid package and their like, um, cost of attending, which further contributes to stresses.”

**Host:** Being a college student already comes with a multitude of struggles while we try to navigate things like our new independence and conquering poor time management skills. Needless to say, the lack of assistance from financial aid only adds another layer of stress for many low income students. Another big contributor to these stressors has been UVA’s naturally competitive nature, notable for making many students question whether they really belong here.

**Winnie:** “It just sucks hearing one of my friends mentioning that omg I can never achieve what I want to achieve cause this other girl in my class is just doing so well. I hate just like these comparisons going around.”

**Host:** Winnie is well aware of UVA’s high-end reputation when it comes to their admissions decisions. With some going as far to call it the “Ivy League of the South,” it’s intimidating to say the least.

**Winnie:** “UVA is definitely getting the cream of the crop out of all the high schoolers applying to the school, and I think that, comparison is never going to just fade away.”

**Host:** Even so, she realizes that not all competition is healthy competition and sometimes all we can do is our best.

**Winnie:** “I think we... are just humans we can only do so much sometimes, and can only try better next time, and just change our habits.”

**Host:** Being able to identify these kinds of unrealistic expectations can be extremely liberating. They say that we are our own worst critic, so naturally we need others to bring us back to reality.

That being said, it’s important to have social support that makes us feel secure in ourselves and our abilities. To some, our social lives are the highlight of our experience, but to others it’s just another hurdle to overcome.

*[groovy transition music fades in, featuring a loop of a simple drum rhythm, electric piano, and bass playing at a fast walking-pace tempo]*

## **Social Barriers:**

*[transition music continues underneath host narration]*

**Host:** Despite priding ourselves on being “smart” and academically driven, studying isn’t the only thing that our lives revolve around. Making friends and immersing ourselves into the culture and social matrix makes up the other half of the experience that you get at “Mr. Jefferson’s Academic Village,” or so they so call it. Coming into first year, some people bond over being in the same first year dorm and some might find their group in CHEM lab; we tend to bunch up by having things in common with one another. However, clicking with others at UVA doesn’t happen instantly for everyone.

*[transition music fades out as Winnie begins to talk]*

**Winnie:** “So whenever we were all introducing to each other, we were asking things like, oh, where are you from? such and such. I realized a lot of them keep saying Northern Virginia, Northern Virginia, Nova, Nova. I'm like, oh, so you guys already knew each other?”

**Host:** Winnie’s journey at UVA started on the margins of these pre-established social circles. She recalls, feeling a sense of otherness around her peers from Northern Virginia, or “NOVA.” She describes this as a “big mental barrier,” a sense of being on the outside looking in.

**Winnie:** “From my eyes it was just like, oh, they know each other, their cultures are probably more similar to each other, and that just really, um, dissuaded me from fully connecting with people. And I even started putting a label on these Nova kids because they're like, oh, they know each other already, they're all rich and stuff like that. It's like it's just a big mental barrier.”

**Host:** Alex's narrative as a transfer student echoes Winnie's feelings of intimidation.

**Alex:** “When you come into a school as a freshman or a first year with everyone else, everyone is in the same boat as you, where no one really has their friend group yet... Everyone's in this new dorm or new environment where everyone's just kind of, awkwardly trying to meet each other and stuff. And then you come in as a transfer student, and the situation's a little bit different because the majority of your year already all have friends.”

**Host:** For Alex, the transfer experience was a lonely one. It was a challenge trying to find her place in a community that seemed completed without her.

But there was something that helped level the playing field.

*[Zoom Chime sound plays]*

**Host:** Surprisingly, the upheaval caused by a year of college banished to the online world of zoom ended up helping Alex ease her way into making new connections.

**Alex:** “I will say that Covid actually helped, which is a really weird way of putting it, but helped in this way because the year before most stuff was online. So a lot of people in our year, and I don't know if you felt this too, but a lot of people in our year also didn't really know what was going on. And while they definitely did have friends, they maybe were a little more open to meeting new people and stuff because so many classes were online. So I think that helped.”

**Host:** Alex sees a silver lining in the effects of virtual life during the pandemic. Others became more open to forming new relationships than they might have been otherwise. While COVID was a negative force in many people's college experience, it highlights an important part of assimilation.

“Symbolic belonging” is defined as “a subjective sense of similarity between immigrant-origin and established populations (Schachter, 2016),” and it can tell us more about what Alex is getting at if we apply it to our situation. Basically, it's the social perception resulting from differences and similarities shared by transfer students and standard UVA students. We can see that COVID automatically increases a sense of belonging by providing one more similarity that everyone sees as common ground.

*[upbeat transition music featuring synth pads and percussion begins to play at a leisurely pace, continuing underneath narration]*

## **Community**

**Host:** Ultimately, the path to belonging for Winnie and Alex involved engaging with communities that resonated with their identities and interests. For instance, Winnie found comfort in cultural organizations made up of people with similar backgrounds.

*[transition music begins to fade, stopping about 1/3 of the way through the next paragraph]*

**Winnie:** “One of my best ways when I got when I first got here during Covid year, was getting involved in the cultural organizations here, and just like meeting new people and chatting with them about how their UV experience was, how their home life was... Yeah, just join the things that you feel you might be more comfortable with first and just slowly expand from there.

**Host:** Using the idea of symbolic belonging introduced earlier, we can follow Winnie's progress. By joining a UVA group that she identified with, Winnie was able to focus more on the similarities she felt rather than the differences.

Similarly, through her involvement in different clubs and her status as a University guide, Alex transformed her outsider identity into one of a knowledgeable insider, and now helps new students navigate UVA.

**Alex:** “Just having the opportunity to go to different events and stuff, I think has really helped, like, mental health wise, like, you know, I have things to do and I think that's the biggest thing for me personally... So when I have different social events or not even social events like tonight, for example, I have a history committee meeting for guides, and while that's more of an academic thing, I'm still looking forward to going and seeing my friends there, you know?”

“...Being a transfer student. I think it's just—it will take time, but finding that community that you know, you belong to and you have friends in makes all the difference.”

### **Conclusion**

**Host:** Getting to feel at home in a new environment takes time no matter who you are. But when UVA imposes an identity on you, either directly or indirectly, it becomes harder to see yourself as just a UVA student, but rather, you're a “transfer student” or a “low-income student” or whatever-kind of student you might be. It's this identity association that can make assimilating to UVA difficult for students and possibly cause negative implications.

After this episode, my hope is to bring more awareness to the burdens that imposed identities add to students who are already anxious or insecure about their background. To emphasize the fact that this unnecessary burden adds to an already massive mental load, and contributes to UVA maintaining its reputation as one of the most depressed schools in the US.

### **Outro**

*[Theme music begins to play, fading in and continuing underneath narration]*

**Host:** That being said, maybe finding community can help change the tides and give us an idea of who we really are.

*[Theme music continues underneath narration]*

**Host:** This podcast was produced by Alex DeLoach, Khai Nguyen, Bushra Osman, and Owen Markow as part of a collaborative project for Professor Steph Ceraso's “Writing with Sound” class at UVA. A full list of audio and textual sources used in the production of this podcast can be found in the transcript. Thanks for listening!

*[Theme music fades out over a few seconds]*



## Sources

Day 10 10th July acclivity Seaside Town Soundscape

(Used under CC BY 3.0 license; shortened)

[https://freesound.org/people/kwahmah\\_02/sounds/315946/](https://freesound.org/people/kwahmah_02/sounds/315946/)

Downtown street ambience 01

(Used under CC BY 4.0 license; shortened)

<https://freesound.org/people/klankbeeld/sounds/127590/>

Intro Small city sound:

(CC0 1.0)

<https://freesound.org/people/kyles/sounds/405083/>

Makiah Beats. “Deep End.” 2022. Free Music Archive.

[https://freemusicarchive.org/music/Makiah\\_Beats/deep-end/](https://freemusicarchive.org/music/Makiah_Beats/deep-end/)

Podington Bear - Thought Bubbles

(Used under CC BY-NC 3.0 license; song was shortened and looped)

Podington Bear - You Waste My Time When I Was Timewasting

(Used under CC BY-NC 3.0 license; song was shortened and looped)

Schachter, Ariela. “From ‘Different’ to ‘Similar.’” *American Sociological Review*, vol. 81, no. 5, 2016, pp. 981–1013, doi:10.1177/0003122416659248.