

BUSINESS INSIDER

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CAREERS

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Essay by **Britto Herard**

When my phone rang during my senior year of high school, it was Florida Atlantic University calling. I didn't know that answering would change the trajectory of my life.

I had 48 hours to decide whether to take a chance on an opportunity that seemed too good to be true: the opportunity to graduate debt-free.

After a last-minute decision to apply, I was admitted to Florida Atlantic University's Kelly/Strul Emerging Scholars Program, which provides a fully funded, four-year scholarship package.

The moment I received the call, a weight was lifted from both my family and me. College was no longer something my parents and I had to approach with fear about how we would afford it. The people who had spent years sacrificing to give me opportunities could finally watch me step into one without wondering what it would cost our family. For me, the scholarship meant possibility. For my parents, it meant relief.

I didn't know what I wanted to major in, and some of my dreams still felt too ambitious to seriously pursue. But for the first time, I had the freedom to discover what I was capable of without letting difficult financial circumstances make that decision for me. So, 48 hours after receiving that phone call, I said yes.

I almost let fear pick my major

When I first arrived at Florida Atlantic University, I didn't declare a major. I was considering studying accounting because numbers came naturally to me, and it seemed like a safe and successful career path.
There was just one problem. I had no passion for it.

I kept getting asked the same question: Why choose what's safe over what I actually wanted? It took time and a lot of encouragement before I realized the answer started with believing I could become more.

Having a full scholarship also changed what felt possible. Without the constant worry of how I would afford my education, I finally gave myself permission to explore the career I had once been too afraid to seriously pursue.

Shadowing a dentist changed everything

I began researching what it actually took to become a dentist and spent the following summer shadowing one. I expected the experience to help me understand the profession, but it did more than that. I fell in love with dentistry.

Even though I was spending hours observing without pay, it never felt like unpaid work. I was fascinated by the combination of science, precision, problem-solving, and human connection involved in dentistry. For the first time, I could clearly picture myself building a career around something that genuinely excited me, and I changed my major to biological sciences.

The financial support from the Kelly/Strul program made that transition possible in ways that went far beyond tuition. I didn't have to rush from class to work every day or take out loans simply to make ends meet. Instead, I had the freedom to study, explore my interests, become involved on campus, and figure out what kind of professional and person I wanted to become.

The scholarship gave me more than financial freedom. It gave me room to grow.

My biggest challenge reminded me of why community mattered

One of the most difficult periods of college came when I began studying for the Dental Admission Test while balancing coursework, leadership positions, and extracurricular commitments.

Without the stress of paying for tuition, housing, and meals, I was able to stay invested in the responsibilities and communities that had shaped my college experience instead of sacrificing them because of financial pressure.

But that season also taught me the importance of community. A men's group I had helped create to encourage and mentor others became the greatest source of encouragement for me. When I needed support, the same people I hoped to uplift were there to uplift me.

Sometimes, the greatest evidence that you have built something meaningful is seeing it carry you when you need help yourself.

I graduated debt-free and headed to dental school

Three years after answering that phone call, I graduated from Florida Atlantic University with my bachelor's degree in biological sciences.

As a first-generation student, I had accomplished something I once struggled to imagine for myself. I graduated in three years, debt-free, and prepared to begin dental school. But the greatest gift of the Kelly/Strul Emerging Scholars Program was not simply leaving college without student debt. It was leaving with a clearer understanding of who I was and what I was capable of becoming.

I entered Florida Atlantic uncertain about my major and hesitant to chase my dreams. I left with a degree, a community, leadership experience, and the confidence to pursue dentistry.

When I received that phone call almost four years ago, I thought I was simply saying yes to a scholarship, but I was really saying yes to a version of myself I hadn't met yet.

Another chapter of my life is calling as I begin dental school. This time, I don't need 48 hours to respond.