

I used to want to be a “perfect” student. Then, in the February of my sophomore year, I got a concussion. This changed my life. Everything was put on pause. I worked my hardest, through chronic pain and a screen intolerance, to finish that school year, but I couldn’t maintain my perfect standard. When I received my report card, I cried over it. It felt like more proof that I wasn’t the student—or person—I used to be.

Acceptance was a difficult journey. My GPA is no longer a 4.0, a perfect square number like the four sides of a box. I’ve had to learn to balance my desire to be a straight-A student with what is truly best for my mental and physical health. I learned to advocate for myself, to get accommodations in school. I learned how to make a system that’s designed for the masses work for the individual who doesn’t fit in the box. This was hard for me, because it meant I had to admit that I was different from the rest of my classmates.

Reimagining my education has been scary at times, but it has allowed me to truly flourish. This new path led me to Freestyle Academy, a technology and arts school that takes up half of my school day and allows me to express myself creatively through digital tools. Through Freestyle, I have discovered an accepting, close-knit community and a new passion for graphic design. My grades are no longer my main focus; instead, it's what I can learn and create. While discovering new interests, I've learned to value hard work instead of simple perfection. I can adapt to a challenge and make it work for me.

I’m finding who I am outside of my identity as a perfect student. I make more time to do things I enjoy, such as nurturing my relationships with my family members and serving in my church and community. When I got my head out of the books, I looked around and saw people with needs that I could fill. I volunteered through the Reach Foundation, offering free tutoring to at-risk students. I have learned a lot of compassion for those with varying circumstances and challenges, and I encourage them to realize, as I have, that they don’t have to fit in the box to succeed.

I never got back the “normal life” that I wanted—I still have chronic headaches to this day. But I have learned to accept that I don't fit in the box. And, freed from this expectation, I have been able to grow beyond what the bounds of a box would have ever let me imagine.