

# Seen Not Heard: Experience of overweight students on campus often overlooked.

by Alexandra Tashman  
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Alexandra Tashman is a third-year political science and history student at UCLA. This is a story she has been wanting to tell since she joined the Daily Bruin Opinion section in her first year.

I'm overweight. And I don't mean that in the "let-me-stand-in-front-of-my-Forever-21-dressing-room-and-have-my-friends-bolster-my-self-esteem" kind of way. I mean that in the honest to God, "I-should-star-in-a-Nutrisystem-commercial" sense.

I've been overweight throughout my over two-year journey at UCLA so far and, although it's been a happy one, this is one facet of my life I cannot ignore, even when I want to. To be overweight on a college campus is to be invisible at best, and too visible at worst. It's harder to make friends when you're overweight, but everyone notices when you fall down a flight of stairs.

The reason I want to write publicly about this is not because I'm looking for anyone to tell me how to go on a diet, or to make judgments on my life or on the lives of other overweight UCLA community members. But for all we talk about diverse points of view and experiences on this campus, the day-to-day struggle of being overweight is nearly always forgotten.

Why? Do we, as a society, look at overweight people and think that it's their fault? That it's just a matter of willpower? That someone needs to just tell them to diet and exercise and the problem will solve itself? That they're choosing to be this way?

Everybody's story is different. Some people are overweight because of medical conditions and genetics. Binge eating disorder is a leading cause of obesity for many and will continue to be recognized as such. And some people are just overweight and are perfectly healthy.

Because our campus is located practically in Bel Air, UCLA students may be more vulnerable to the pressures of Hollywood and the media. As an overweight student here, and a lifelong resident, I know that I have keenly felt the pressure to look and dress a certain way. It is because of this backdrop that I think it is especially important to let the voices of people who are overweight be heard, to share some of the less-nice aspects of being a UCLA student.

My experience here has been rich and multifaceted, but the moments where I have been reduced to nothing but my weight are just as telling as those when I have felt invincibly happy. Here are a few stories about what being overweight on UCLA's campus has felt like to me.

On my first day of classes at UCLA, I spent 25 minutes crying in the women's bathroom in Broad Art Center. I had always loved the first day of school: discovering new rooms and pathways, meeting new people, developing new routines in my head. Having fantasized about starting college since I knew it existed, my mind was full of romantic and idealized notions of what college lectures and professors would be like. I probably should have spent less time watching "Gilmore Girls" growing up.

Anyway, I was running late to my first class – European history, my favorite – and by the time I finally found the right classroom I was completely out of breath. Trying to figure out where I could sit without looking too eager, I picked an aisle desk somewhere near the front and attempted to sit down. I didn't fit. I didn't fit in the chair – I was just too big. No matter which way I leaned, which leg I crossed, I could not squeeze my way into that chair. I felt like everyone was staring at me. Eventually, I managed to defy physics and somehow squish myself into the seat before laughably trying to put the desk down over my stomach. That didn't fit either. Resigning myself to feeling uncomfortably scrunched, I looked over to see the girl next to me glaring – my shoulders and arms were taking up some of her space. At the end of class, my legs sore from keeping them in one contorted position for too long, my scowling neighbor turned to me and suggested that I find better seating during the next lecture so I wouldn't be a problem for anyone else. But what constitutes "non-problematic" seating in a lecture hall filled with identical chairs? Tired and frustrated, I walked out of the room, into the second floor bathroom, locked myself in a stall and cried. I was so embarrassed that I couldn't remember what the eagerly anticipated lecture had even been about. This was not what college was supposed to be like.

In February of my freshman year, I was sitting in De Neve dining hall during dinner. I was eating a sandwich and waiting for my friend to finish filling her tray when a blond girl I didn't know sat down right across from me at my table. I looked up, surprised, and said hello. In short, she told me that the salad bar was on the other side of the dining hall, and she wanted to make sure I

knew where it was in case I needed any help with my diet. But more importantly, I'll never forget the exact wording of what she said to me next: "Believe me, if you stick to the salad bar, you'll be looking acceptable in no time."

Sometimes, I walk the track at Drake Stadium because it's flat and well lit at night. Occasionally, I'll even make an attempt at jogging a lap. It takes a lot for me to work myself up into going over to the track. Workout clothes are enough of a nightmare, not to mention the fact that I often have to go alone if my friends are busy. One night, in the middle of my second year, as I was jogging along and completely out of breath, I heard someone laugh. Then several people laughed, before they were shushed by the rest of their friends. I looked over to see a group of guys sitting in the bleachers. They were looking right back at me. Another one laughed loudly before being silenced again. It took me about a minute to realize they were laughing at me – the idea of my jogging was funny to them. Fat people running has been a comedic trope in film and television for decades, and in an instant I had gone from normal human being to Chunk from "The Goonies." Humiliated, I slowed to a walk as one guy kept laughing. I don't think I've gone jogging since.

The point of telling these stories is not to engender sympathy. Rather, they are meant to demonstrate the ways in which everyday activities can become incidents of shame and embarrassment because of something as pointlessly divisive as weight. Why does body weight change the value and character of another human being? What is so bad about fat that it makes public mockery acceptable?

Whether I am actively trying to lose weight or not, I wake up every day with the knowledge that people are judging me on sight for something they don't understand. They don't know my story, but immediately they will make assumptions about me. And it is precisely for that reason that I devote my time to making sure people understand there is more to me than my weight – I am funny, I am kind, I drink a lot of coffee and can name every British monarch from memory – and none of that has anything to do with size. The fact that I have to consciously dedicate time to trying to prove I am normal says a lot more about our culture than my weight says about me.

Everybody has laughed at a fat joke. People every day are complicit in the public shame and mockery of those who are overweight. The reason I tell these stories, more than anything, is to raise consciousness about what it is like to be overweight every day – the small, completely undeserved injustices and indignities that are painful and often completely preventable.

It is scary to tell your stories, to fear that others will judge you or laugh at you. But I live my life undeterred – I am here, I am not invisible, and I am no less because of how big I am.