

ID RATHER BE STUDYING

The True Story of Sara Bellum

Once upon a time--October 17, 1983, to be exact--a student here at the University of Maryland died from lack of study. This is true. The student's name was Bellum. She lived on Daleview Drive in Silver Spring, Maryland. She came to the University with the very best intentions--to devote the next four years to learning all that she could. In fact, her graduating class at Montgomery Blair High School had voted her "most likely to study."

She meant to study. She just never got around to it. Soon after moving into Centreville dormitory (sixth floor south) she was elected president of her dorm unit. Sara was delighted about her election and she devoted a lot of time to her "new responsibilities." She also spent a lot of time in bull sessions with her roommates and going through sorority rush (Delta Delta Delta) and attending women's field hockey games. She went to a football game, a swim meet, and even survived a fraternity party. Sara was soon so busy with her extra-curricular pursuits that she didn't have time for her studies. With so many things to do and people to talk to and places to go, September 6 soon became October 16 and Sara walked into her mid-term exams the way most of us would walk into a brick wall.

The first exam of Sara's college career was in Professor Mack's 9:00 a.m. Introduction to Shakespeare course: English 205. She had wanted to take English 101 instead, but by the time she registered, those classes were full. So, on the advice of a wag sitting outside of McKeldin Library ("It's the same thing," he said), she registered for the Shakespeare course.

Anyway, the night before her first mid-term exam she began to panic. She went to the Library to study only to learn that the Library-After-Dark is not the intellectual ghetto she expected, but instead is a holding pen for a milling crowd of hundreds of students looking for dates. Sara got a couple of dates but studied no Shakespeare. She was so worried about her exam she couldn't concentrate; she couldn't study. She really didn't feel well. She returned to the dorm hoping that a good night's sleep would improve her health.

No luck. Sara woke the next morning flushed with anxiety. She didn't feel well. She didn't feel well at all. Six weeks into the semester and she still hadn't done any real studying. She had meant to study. She was going to study. She wanted to study. But . . .

As Sara walked from Centreville dorm over to room 101 of Taliaferro Hall for her Shakespeare exam, she chided herself for not studying.

"Why? Why didn't I study?" She thought, "if only I can squeak through this exam, from now on I'll be good, from now on I'll study." She tried to think of a way to bail out of her predicament. Maybe Professor Mack wouldn't show up for class; maybe he would postpone the exam; maybe he would forget that today was the day of the exam; maybe it would be an easy exam. She was stuck and she knew it. She needed a miracle. She should have studied. "Why?" Why didn't I study? How did I get myself in this mess?!"

As she walked past the Student Union she thought of running into the bookstore and buying the Cliff Notes for Hamlet." There were still 15 minutes before the exam. Maybe she could speed read just enough to get by.

Instead, she reached into her backpack for her Norton Anthology of All the World's Literature and Wisdom but pulled out another book she had not read. It was a book her Auntie Bellum had given her as a high school graduation present, a book entitled How to Succeed in College. She opened the book to the first chapter and read "Rule Number One: Don't

Procrastinate." "Oh rats," she said and quickly stuffed it back into her bookbag. The last thing she needed now was a lecture. She felt bad enough. She felt awful. She should have studied.

When Sara got to the classroom she sat way in the back next to Patty Harper, an exchange student from Kentucky, hoping that Professor Mack wouldn't see her. No such luck.

As soon as Sara read the first question, she knew she was doomed: "Compare any two of Hamlet's four major soliloquies showing how the two you choose differ in language, tone, structure, and the attitude towards action." It was worse than she expected. Cliff Notes wouldn't help. Whomever Cliff Notes was, he was no match for Professor Mack. Sara sat staring at the exam questions feeling worse by the minute. She began to perspire. Her fingers felt cold and clammy. Sara could only remember one soliloquy, the famous "To be or not to be."

Suddenly Hamlet's words took on an appalling relevance to her young life, as she felt her troubled mind and conscience sliding steadily away from her trembling body cramped in a hard wooden deskchair. She really didn't feel well. Dizzy. Nauseous. She was perspiring noticeably and having a hard time breathing. The harder she tried to breathe the more difficult it became. Overwhelmed with anxiety, she began to hyperventilate. She stood up to go to the women's room to lie down, but just as she did, she passed out. As she fell she hit her head—hard—on the back of a chair. Sara slumped to the floor like a sack of potatoes and her head banged, again, off the floor.

Professor Mack rushed to her side and put his sweater under her head to comfort her.

"She's dead!" a student gasped.

"No!" Professor Mack insisted, "she'll be okay, she just passed out," and he sent a squad of students to get help. "Quick!"

Dr. Bridwell arrived in a matter of minutes but it was too late. Sara was dead.

"She probably died of closed head trauma," was what Dr. Bridwell said. "When her head banged off the edge of the chair and then bounced off the hard floor it was too much."

Later, alone in the room and pondering the tragedy he had just witnessed, Professor Mack went over to Sara's desk and picked up her test booklet. Sara had written just three things: The date, October 17, 1983, her name, Sara Bellum, and her immortal last words, I'd Rather Be Studying.

The story continues. According to campus legend, when Sara got to the Big University in the Sky, the Professors there were so saddened by the tragedy that they vowed that her death would not be in vain. And so, following a heated argument over the semantics of reincarnation, metempsychosis, and transmigration, they invoked the Doctrine of Immortality and Sara was transmigrated as a booklouse and returned to the Maryland campus where she lives in McKeldin Library and helps other students avoid her fate.

This is why Maryland students are such good students. When they are in the library studying, wondering about the mysteries of life, trying to figure out the answers, scratching their heads—that's not dandruff. That's Sara Bellum doing what she can to make them curious. Sara believes that the itch of ignorance is a gift.

Sara says, "people who know everything are boring. The lucky people are the ones who don't know it all, who are still trying to figure things out, still scratching their heads."

This report was written by John Pease in 1988. Part of it was used in a column by Janet Naylor, "To Be, or to Study" ([The Diamondback](#) October 3, 1988) and much of it was included in a column by Pease, "I'd Rather Be Studying" ([Commuter Connection](#) (Spring, 1994).