

Interview with Danielle VanBeckum

Graduate Student of Biology, Northern Michigan University

September 9, 2009

Callie: Okay, Danielle. Where are you from? Give us some background.

Danielle: I'm from Wisconsin and I grew up in Green Bay, in a little suburb of Green Bay. I lived there until I was 12 and then I moved to a different suburb more outside of Green Bay and lived there until I came to Northern. Wisconsin is fun but it's kind of boring at the same time.

Callie: Why did you move?

Danielle: My parents are kind of protective. And the high school where I was supposed to go to, close to where I was living in Green Bay, was one of the "inner city" schools, as my mom would say, which is where she went to high school. And she didn't want us to go there because she thought it would be a bad influence on our lives. So we actually ended up moving to where my dad went to high school – which is kind of ironic because my dad is the troublemaker and my mom is not. I think I got a better education at DePere than I would've gotten in Green Bay. I think it was a good move.

Callie: Did your mom ever talk about her education experiences to you?

Danielle: Kind of. She said the school seemed pretty dangerous – it was East High School – and she said it seemed pretty dangerous when she was there so she said she couldn't imagine what it would be like in the time when I was supposed to go there.. two-thousand something or whatever it was. *[laughs]* But I had friends that went to school there and they thought it was fine. There are pros and cons because I think where I went has a better education system but at East High School, I would've been exposed to a lot more diversity. In DePere I didn't get that: it was a lot of white kids.. upper and middle class.. everyone was really the same, pretty much.

Callie: How did you come to be a student at Northern?

Danielle: I wasn't originally planning on coming Northern for my undergrad. I wanted to play volleyball in college and I had gotten some offers from DII [division two] schools in Illinois, Wisconsin and Minnesota. But I ended up not going to those because I got injured my senior year and I wasn't likely to be able to play my freshman year so I decided not to play volleyball. I came up to Northern a lot to visit my sister, who played volleyball here. And I spent a lot of time hanging out with her in the dorms and getting to know the people here and I really liked the vibe I got here. Once I decided that I wasn't going to play volleyball at a different school, I applied to Northern too. They had a lot of different majors and I wasn't sure what I wanted to do at the time. I just really liked the vibe I got at Northern. I liked that it was, like, kind of in the city but still kind of out in the middle of nowhere. It's a big change from Green Bay but the fact that I got to know some people before I came up here was definitely a big deal. I like having that sort of security to fall back on just in case I didn't like it.

Callie: Yes, I can definitely see how that would help you as a freshman.

Danielle: I really can't imagine what it's like for freshmen that are going to school somewhere where they don't know anyone and it's possibly thousands of miles away for them or something like that. I would be way too scared. Maybe I'm just a wimp but it would be too hard for me to do that.

Callie: You've had a unique experience at Northern because you were here and then you left and now you're back. Describe that experience or timeline what happened in all that.

Danielle: Oh god. So I started off at Northern and I was having a great time and really loving it up here. It was a series of events that led to me leaving.. leaving Marquette and leaving Northern. I ended up moving into a house with my sister and her volleyball roommates. We got along alright at first but then things just kind of went downhill and I hated living there and it just really got mean. I also made the decision of leaving where I was going to school for a relationship I was in with someone in Green Bay. So I left Northern to go to Green Bay, to go to school at University of Wisconsin-Green

Bay. I did three semesters at Northern and then I finished up in four semesters at UW-Green Bay. I got a degree in Human Biology and Chemistry. And I decided that I wanted to continue with school so I started applying to grad schools in December of last year – December 2008. I originally thought I wanted to go for a Ph. D. right away but none of the schools that I applied to worked out. So I had applied to Northern also just as kind of a backup plan and when I found out that none of the other schools worked out and that Northern had accepted me to come back up here for my Masters, I decided to come back because I didn't want to go to work – I'm not ready to be a big kid yet. So I came to Northern and it kind of seems like it was a last-resort sort of thing but I'm really happy with my choice. I don't think that I made a last-resort sort of decision. It's a really good option for me: Northern has a really good grad program and I'm going to get an amazing education here. I'm going to go to school here for a few more years and get some experience. I'm just really happy to be up here because the circumstances of me leaving Northern originally really weren't that great. Looking back at it, I really probably should never have left Northern in the first place. But things happen for a reason. And it's like, I shouldn't have left in the first place but now I'm back – it's like I have unfinished business up here.

Callie: Can you compare and contrast your two education experiences with going to school up here and going to school down in Green Bay?

Danielle: As far as academic stuff goes, when I first transferred to go to school in Green Bay, I didn't think that the academic stuff was going to be much of an issue. I thought that UW-Green Bay was a pretty comparable school to Northern. And when I got there, it wasn't a big deal. I did great in my classes in the beginning up here at Northern and I did really well at UWGB, too. But when I started grad school up here at Northern, I kind of realized that the academics at UW-Green Bay are not so good compared to Northern. I feel the professors at Northern take their students a lot more seriously in their last year or even their last two years of undergrad. They push them a lot harder than they do at UW-Green Bay, which kind of surprised me – I wasn't really expecting that. Northern just seems to have a larger, more developed program when it comes to Biology and the sciences. It makes me wish that I had done the rest of my undergrad here. As far as social stuff goes, I really had a great time at both places – maybe it's just the kind of person I am. I'm always going to find fun wherever I am but I loved being up at Northern. I had a great time with everyone. And going to school in Green Bay, I kind of had the I-grew-up-here thing to fall back on but a lot of my friends from high school are off going to college elsewhere so I didn't really have them. I made friends with people in my classes and made friends with people who hung out at the coffee house. You just pick up people here and there and you find things to do. Social stuff wasn't really a problem at either place but as far as academics goes, it was very different.

Callie: So you feel that Northern is meeting your academic needs and wishes?

Danielle: Definitely. I don't know about other programs in terms of other departments, but as far as the Biology Department goes, they're amazing. They're all about helping you out, especially with the grad students. I'm noticing that they want to help out their grad students a lot and make sure that they're doing well and they're getting the help that they need, that we're getting into research labs or as far as other biology students who are going out in the field to do research.. they really want to get us the experience and get us the education that we need. They want to make sure that our program is succeeding and growing, too, because the more students we have, the better. It's a great program. And Northern, overall, I feel has great programs in all the departments. But it's definitely meeting my needs academically.

Callie: Outside of being a grad student, what makes your Northern experience unique from most students? I'm trying to lead to toward your T.A. position.

Danielle: *[laughs]* When I was applying to go to school here, I found out that I could be employed by the University at the same time. So I filled out an application to be a Graduate Assistant, which they have a few different types. You can be a Teaching Assistant or a Research Assistant or an Administrative Assistant. I decided that I would like to have the Teaching Assistant position because I felt that it fit with what I wanted to do better, I guess. So I applied for it. I just had

to write some essays and get some recommendation letters, give them my transcripts. And I ended up getting it, which is awesome. It's amazing: full tuition waiver plus a stipend. They treat us well. It's awesome but you've got to work hard. So as far as me different, even from other grad students – not all grad students in the Biology Department are T.A.s – some of them are having a lot different experience than I am. I have a little office in the science building and I teach three labs, all on Friday, so I teach all day. It's supposed to be about 20-25 hours of work a week and, I don't know, I haven't really been counting how much I work but it's fun. It's easy work for how much I'm getting in return for. It's not all about the money stuff – I'd be happy if they'd just pay my tuition for me – but it's getting a good experience as far as being able to teach people. Relearning things is probably a good thing too. There's so much of that that I forgot. I'm teaching Human Anatomy and I took that in 2006. I remember some of it but not a lot of it, which is kind of crazy because it's one of my classes for my major. As you learn more things, you forget the stuff in the past so I'm relearning it again. It's fun – I like being a T.A.

Callie: Where do you think your experiences at Northern are going to take you? What's the next step? What are your goals?

Danielle: I've thought of a couple different options. Right now, as far as when I'm done with my Masters, there are a lot of doors that pretty much open up for you. I know students who have gone on to go to med school, students that have gone on for Ph. D.s, students that go for a different Masters maybe. I haven't really decided what I want to do yet – it changes every week. One week I want to go to med school and then the next week I want to get my Ph. D. and be a professor and do research for the rest of my life. And the next day I just want to go work after I'm done and be done with school because six years of school is a long time I think. I haven't really decided – there are just so many options for what I can do. Which is really comforting, to know that I have options. Even if I go to work for a while, I can always come back and do more school if I want to. I don't know yet but I feel that Northern is going to give me an education that will allow me to do pretty much anything I would want to do. Hopefully. As long as I get good grades.

Callie: Is there anything else you would like to share?

Danielle: No, I don't think so. I feel as though you know about my whole Northern experience now. Did you learn things?

Callie: I did. Thank you very much for doing this interview with me.