

Dear Fiamma,

I can't believe August is only four months away. It's so hard to think about having to leave my best friend. I don't want to live hours away from you or leave you on your own with Mom and Dad. I want to be here for your next three years of high school and help you with anything you need. The only solution I've come up with is writing to you. I want to leave you with as much advice as I can. Of course, I know you will end up deciding for yourself whether you will take any of it, but I will offer it to you anyway. You really have an advantage being the younger one because I test the waters for you and all you have to do is decide whether to do the same things or try a new path!

I'll write to you about the social aspect, including boys and friends, some other time because yes, you should have fun in high school, but you should be most worried about your academics and extracurriculars. Sometimes, it will definitely be hard to stay focused on school work and you will want to find distractions, so I'm going to recommend that you find good distractions! Find activities that you can get positive things out of like sports, clubs, jobs, or possibly the best one: volunteering opportunities.

I think you are off to a great start for your Freshmen year! I am really glad you've joined the Educators Rising club at Freedom. I know there are days that you have second thoughts about it, probably because you have to wake up earlier than usual to go tutor, but trust me, push through and stick with it. I promise that the help you are providing every Tuesday morning is very much worth it. You're not only tutoring the students that need your help and patience the most, but you're also helping the teacher of the class so much. One of the things I've learned through my four years volunteering in Mrs. Kott's classroom is that elementary school teachers really have it hard. Most of their time is taken up at school with their class, and then when they get home they have to plan and grade, all while trying to take care of and spend time with their families. It's a job that never ends because even when they do get home, they are still thinking about the kids in their class. So even if it seems like your hour of assistance in the classroom every Tuesday morning doesn't do much, it does make a difference, Fi, and I hope you continue to be part of Educators Rising for the next three years.

There is one volunteer activity that I will specifically recommend for you. It has defined many things in my life and I want more than anything for you to have the same opportunity. Volunteer at church. Yes, it means getting up earlier than you already do to go to service on Sunday, but I promise you that it is worth it. Since our church is in a school building, you know how much help they need to set up everything before and then tear down at the end of it to leave the place ready for school on Monday. If I'm honest with you, I hadn't noticed how much work goes into a single one-and-a-half-hour service every Sunday morning. I didn't know that all the volunteers get there at 8 in the morning, 2 whole hours before the service even starts, and then don't leave until 11:45, sometimes 12. Volunteering as a part of the production team has made me become more observant and appreciative of any event that I go to because I know how much work goes into trying to make something run smoothly. With me graduating, my spot will need to be filled by someone and who better than my sister? Jan would be so happy if you told her that you could start running the Mac next year! I can even start training you now; you already know that what I do is put up the slides that go along with Brad's message and put up the lyrics that go with the

songs. The best part about it is that it may seem like a small detail, but it plays a huge role in making everything else work the way we need it to.

It's a very simple commitment, Fi, but you get so much out of it. If you don't believe me, think about Echo! I am convinced that my volunteering at church in the morning is what made us attend youth group every Sunday night. Do you remember that day Josh invited me to go to Echo band practice when he found out that I play guitar? That was because I was there early on a Sunday morning volunteering! Because the band practice is 2 hours before Echo starts, I was always conveniently already there for Echo every week! Then when you were old enough to start coming, I made you sure you got in the car with me every Sunday and eventually got you to be part of the band as well. Take a minute and try to imagine what our lives would be like without Echo. Imagine not knowing the youth pastor and his wife, or Josh, or the Matts and Kylie. Imagine not playing on stage with the band. Imagine not participating in any of the summer events. Imagine not going to Fall Retreat or Spring Fling. Echo has done so many great things for us both. We've established so many good, healthy relationships and found a safe community with them. Not to mention, Echo has helped us both grow in our faith, especially through the retreats. Just think about the fact that we were at Spring Fling this past weekend! I think we can both agree it was the best retreat yet, but we wouldn't even have gotten the chance to experience it if we didn't go to Echo! I can't imagine what that would be like! What would we have done instead? We would be missing out on so much! Or yesterday, I went out to lunch with Maggie because I really needed an adult to talk to that wasn't my parents. She was so quick to say yes when I asked her if we could hang out. I don't know who I would have to go to if I didn't get the chance to meet the youth pastor or his wife. I hope you can see how big this is, Fi. We have this great part of our lives now and it's crazy to think that it's all thanks to my volunteer work Sunday mornings.

As you can see, volunteering has done many great things for me. I have become more aware and appreciative of the work of others, as well as have been able to find an amazing community of people. I really want you to have the same opportunities. Please be open to giving your time to others, but don't do it expecting something in return. Volunteer just for the sake of helping and let everything work itself out because I promise it will, and you will thank yourself for it later.

This is just the first of many letters to come while I am away at college. I hope you enjoy them :)

From,
Your sister