Think about the butterfly effect. It’s the idea that a single decision, conversation, or experience can create a cascade of effects – that one small change can create larger, more dramatic change later on. For Katie Baker, that shift happened during the winter of her sophomore year while attending Leadership Camp, a week-long educational opportunity designed to spur meaningful personal growth. To understand the distinct impact this made on Katie’s life, one has to understand who Katie was when she first stepped onto UNH’s campus.

As a first-generation college student originally from Bowling Green, Ohio, Katie didn’t know anyone when she arrived in Durham and she had little personal framework for how to effectively navigate her new life here. “No one can tell you what you don’t know you don’t know as a first-generation college student.” Katie’s first semester was riddled with learning curves as she struggled to find her community. Being 800 miles away from her familial support system, Katie was forced to be independent and become her own advocate to negotiate new systems, like financial aid and academic resources.

It wasn’t until joining Alpha Phi Omega (APO), the co-ed community service fraternity on campus that she began to feel more at home. At the core of Katie’s values is service to others, particularly those of marginalized populations. In joining APO, Katie not only got to live out her values but began to shape her community and find her people.

That same year, in an effort to become even more integrated into the UNH community, Katie applied for both Leadership Camp and to become a Residential Advisor. When neither worked out, she was undeterred, applying again the following year, when was accepted into both. “I think about that decision a lot. If I hadn’t decided to take that step to apply again, I wouldn’t be where I am today,” said Katie.

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During Leadership Camp and the semester that followed, Katie made her big life pivot, one that undeniably changed the course of her time at UNH and her future. During her first and second years at UNH, Katie was a declared genetics major. It was a subject that, while interesting, did not light a fire in her. At Leadership Camp, she had a conversation with friends about the variable and limited state of sexual health education in America, a subject she’d been deeply thinking about. It suddenly dawned on her that in order to study and work toward change within sexual health education, she needed to change her major to women’s studies. One of her friends, already knowing that this made all the sense in the world, responded, “Well, of course.” The following semester, she took a class on the Sociology of Gender and found her fire. While in the class, Katie took a deep dive into learning about sexual health and sexual education and found her calling in developing and disseminating medically accurate, comprehensive, and inclusive sexual education.

This new focus opened Katie to a slew of experiences that otherwise could have eluded her. As Katie so astutely observed, “Not taking opportunities that get you out of your comfort zone stops you from doing things you didn’t even know you wanted to do.” During her junior year, Katie served as the co-director of the Vagina Monologues, a powerful play that celebrates the strength and sexuality of women, giving a voice to the all too often silenced experiences of women. That same year, Katie began an internship with UNH Health and Wellness as a sexual health intern. In this role, Katie educated students, staff, and faculty on a number of issues around sexual health.

After graduation, Katie will be moving to Chicago to work with City Year. The experience will allow her to work with communities that are most directly and adversely affected by the cycle of poverty, a population she deeply cares for. She hopes to then apply this experience to her work for universally comprehensive and inclusive sexual health education.

To be around Katie is to be with a self-assured, self-aware, value-driven, and deeply committed young adult. A fierce and loyal friend, Katie gets up every morning knowing that the treasured community she has built for herself has given her the courage and support to step outside her comfort zone. This has allowed her to take advantage of a number of opportunities, putting her on the path to finding the work she was destined to do.