

WORD COUNT: 597/650

My hand hovered over the buzzer, ready but restrained. Although my four friends and Academic Bowl teammates were prepared to answer questions on history, geography, and literature, I hoped for a math or science prompt. Despite years of practice, I doubted my ability to face the situation. Would I wait too long in my response, letting the other team get in ahead, or answer incorrectly, allowing them to steal the question? Then I heard the words “This type of star system is the most common in the universe,” and my apprehension vanished as I realized I had gotten my wish.

If the question had read “What is a common challenge for a young student?” I would just as confidently know the answer: transitioning from middle school to high school. The self-doubt I felt in that critical moment in Academic Bowl reflected my passage into a new school environment. I originally joined the club in 6th grade, but had a two-year gap, as the private middle school I attended didn’t have a team. I was excited to join an Academic Bowl team again in high school, but anxious about transitioning to a large public school. The twelve people in a single grade would balloon to 500, and following COVID, I would have to get used to going to school in-person again. Furthermore, many of my classes would be with students from the grade above mine that I never had a chance to interact with.

It didn’t help that my surroundings resembled the cold, empty vacuum of space. The first period trailer’s air conditioning sucked away what little heat the early morning atmosphere had, and the surrounding desks sparsely populated by strangers made me feel small and disoriented. As I waited for the class to start, I felt like a Voyager probe, leaving the familiar solar system and beginning an arduous journey through the unknown universe of my new high school. Like that moment at the Academic Bowl years later, I didn’t know if I could succeed.

Fortunately, the walk to the bus stop and subsequent bus ride that first morning had given me a chance to reconnect with friends that my private school years and COVID had kept me away from. As reassuring as it was to talk to them again, I knew that it was only part of the journey to feeling at home in my new social orbit.

As luck would have it, since it was the first day, almost every class had some sort of icebreaker to introduce everyone. I made sure to take advantage of the opportunities, whether by making (mostly) good puns or taking the lead in class, and made connections that, over the course of the year, would solidify into friendships. Soon after, the first meeting of Academic Bowl cemented the idea that my high school experience could be both academically and socially engaging.

As for the most common star system? “Binary!” I jabbed the button eagerly, quick enough to score extra points for our team, leading to an eventual second-place finish. With the confidence I gained from successfully confronting uncertainty, I continued exploring outside of my comfort zone. That year, I only joined two clubs, one of them Academic Bowl, but this year I am in six—everything from Tabletop Games to Improv—and was elected President of Academic Bowl.

As I get closer to my next major transition, from high school senior to college freshman, I know that I have the skills to adapt to and thrive in an unfamiliar environment. No matter the question, I'll always be ready to buzz in.