##### [00:00:01.360] - Brian Shelton

I'm Brian Shelton and you're listening to Harper Talks, a co production of Harper College Alumni Relations and Harper Radio. Today on Harper talks I'm excited to speak with Jalen little. Jalen is a 2014 graduate of Harper College and currently works as an admissions specialist. Jalen was involved with the campus activities board, student government, and the Black Student Union before moving on to complete his BA at Southern Illinois University. The Harper Radio studios are currently having a minor facelift, so we recorded this interview over zoom.

##### [00:00:37.040] - Brian Shelton

Hey, Jalen, thanks for being here. How are you doing today?

##### [00:00:39.400] - Jalen Little

Good, Brian. How are you doing today?

##### [00:00:41.550] - Brian Shelton

I'm doing fantastic. Spring is coming. I'm excited.

##### [00:00:44.990] - Jalen Little

Same. Today was the first day I was able to wake up and walk outside, and I put on my jacket. It felt so good.

##### [00:00:53.150] - Brian Shelton

It's amazing how we thaw out after the long Chicago land winter. Right?

##### [00:00:57.510] - Jalen Little

Well, I always say there's like, three winters in Chicago. There's the real winter, the maybe winter, and I forgot that we're still in winter winter.

##### [00:01:06.490] - Brian Shelton

Right. Yeah. The whole false spring thing. The whole false summer thing. Yeah. It really does pop up on you. Yeah. Well, great. I appreciate you being here. Hey, so I know you graduated from Harper College in 2014, and I found that so you would have been done in the spring. I started Harper in 2014, in the fall, kind of in the summer, fall. So we just missed each other. And so I'm kind of curious. The college has undergone a lot of changes during that time when you were here as a student, I'm curious what was campus like during the time that you were here?

##### [00:01:38.670] - Jalen Little

Yeah. When I arrived in 2011, there was still a football team, and then there was football team and campus was I experienced campus as being really vibrant at that time. And for me, coming in as a first generation student and having no knowledge of what college would be like, I experienced the campus in a way where I found myself being connected to affinity groups on campus and getting accustomed to just, like, what it meant to be a student at a community college. And the spaces at the time were really nice and welcoming, and it was a really good time getting started up. And then, of course, in 2014, when I left and I discovered that we were kind of creating kind of like the broadcasting space on campus and things like that, that's where I missed you. And I was like, I kind of want to stay a bit longer. But then I realized, going on, I'd have an opportunity to tap into that space.

##### [00:02:43.330] - Brian Shelton

Yeah, we just missed each other there. So if you'd come just a few years later yeah. So you mentioned groups on campus. I know you were involved with campus activities, student government, Black Student union. What did those student experiences, what effect did that have on you while you were here.

##### [00:02:58.400] - Jalen Little

Yeah. So initially, when I was getting connected to some of those organizations on campus, I could say, honestly had a profound effect on my experience. Honestly, my goal was to go to Harper, go to class, and go home right at first. And I just remember the first group that I was connected to was the Male Institute Group, which was hosted out of the center for Multicultural Learning, and that was also a subset of the Black Student Union. And that allowed me to feel a sense of safety on campus. Being connected to that group and able to ask people what their experiences were like. Being either being a Black male in college and talking about those components outside of the classroom, you know, that really, you know, affected my my experience, you know, because I come from a single parent, low income household, and and for me, being connected to that group allowed me to gain a sense that I wasn't alone in my journey and that I had a really strong support mechanism. And that taught me a lot about how important it is to be connected to a community on campus and how important it is to reach out for help.

##### [00:04:17.920] - Jalen Little

And joining student government and the Campus Activities Board allowed me to experience what it was like to I always say at that time, I was like, oh, I'm an adult. I feel like an adult. I'm planning events. One of the first events that I helped plan through the Campus Activities Board was our Hullabaloo event in 2011. And me and another member of the Activities Board were in charge of rallying the troops, as we called it, rallying up all of the clubs and organizations and got an opportunity to see what it was like to delegate tasks and why time management was so important. And the student government gave me the opportunity to explore my leadership abilities, what it meant to delegate with the committee of other students and talk about a topic that we felt was very important at the time and that affected all students and how we can come together to gain consensus on how we can improve the lives of students on campus and provide them with opportunities. There was one student, a part of the student government, and he would always say, we have to fight the system. I was like, no, this is different.

##### [00:05:40.350] - Jalen Little

The system is working with us on this. We don't have to fight the system. The system is here to support us. That's how those groups on campus really affected me and gave me an opportunity to really enhance just my development as a human being in all those different areas to who I am today.

##### [00:06:00.740] - Brian Shelton

Yeah, it's really great opportunities to not only get to know other people, but gives you the opportunity to take on tasks and responsibilities that, as a college student, you might not necessarily have. And those experiences help you grow both personally and professionally. I'm kind of curious, maybe since we both work for the college, we shouldn't have this conversation on a recording. But what are your thoughts? It seems that students aren't as involved in student groups and such these days. I know the pandemic took a huge bite out of that, but what do you think we can do to get students back involved in those sorts of things? It seems to be waning.

##### [00:06:39.230] - Jalen Little

That's a good question, Brian. I think one of the key components of getting students involved and getting them hyped up to just be a part of something.

##### [00:06:49.350] - Brian Shelton

Yeah.

##### [00:06:52.550] - Jalen Little

I think it really boils down to really discovering what interest students have at their core and being able to rally around them and say, hey, we can make this happen. We can help you to take this idea and manifest it into something tangible. I think students get bogged down with the idea of time consumption. I think students may feel that if I give myself to this club or organization, I won't have time to do this. I think if we develop methods where we can show them, like, hey, you can do both, and honestly, doing both will still nonetheless give you a sense of purpose and give you a sense of commitment and just a sense of belonging. I think students just want to feel a sense of belonging, and they want to know that when they invest their time and their energy, that that belonging and that community will serve them, but also serve others as well. So a lot of students that I've spoken with where I ask them right out of high school or even in the high school when I'm there, I'm like, hey, are you planning to get involved on campus?

##### [00:08:09.410] - Jalen Little

Students coming out of high school, seniors especially, they are the most hyped up group of individuals. Right. Because they're getting ready to graduate. Life is getting ready to open up. Always say the bowling ball like the bumpers are coming down and they're steering their path, and they're super hyped up. And I think that when we can find ourselves in that space and that opportunity and time to connect with them and get them connected to a group that they feel passionate about. I think that's how we can address that.

##### [00:08:47.300] - Brian Shelton

Yeah. I will say that out of all the alumni that I've interviewed for the Harper Talks podcast, almost every single one of them talks about how their involvement on campus is what led to their success in their future endeavors. So definitely encourage people to get involved. I didn't know this about you. You played in the Harper Jazz Band.

##### [00:09:07.990] - Jalen Little

Yeah, I played in the Harper Jazz Band. Such a good group.

##### [00:09:13.670] - Brian Shelton

What do you play?

##### [00:09:14.450] - Jalen Little

Yeah, I play drums.

##### [00:09:18.450] - Brian Shelton

That's cool. I had no idea. I didn't know that. I was reading through some of your background material. I had no idea that you were in the band. Are you still playing.

##### [00:09:26.190] - Jalen Little

Yeah. So I actually took a break this past semester in the fall, and then I took a break during the spring, and I plan on signing up for the summer jazz band jazz ensemble. And then in the fall, my goal is to ideally play in both the Lab band and the ensemble.

##### [00:09:41.520] - Brian Shelton

That's awesome. So you did all this really cool stuff while you were at Harper. You're a really good student, you're involved in all these things, and then you transferred to Southern Illinois University. What was that path like for you? How did Harper prepare you for Southern?

##### [00:09:55.620] - Jalen Little

Well, in full disclosure, I was one of those students at Harper that started my major as an Associates in Fine Arts for Music. Got into those classes, and honestly, Brian, I wasn't feeling it. I was like, you know what? I love music. I love music. And for me, sitting in the class, like, in music theory and in those classes, I got a glimpse that that pathway would lead me to ultimately teaching music or owning, like, a music store in my mind at the time, being 18 or 19. But I spent most of my years at Harper Undecided and taking just core curriculum classes, still being heavily involved in music, just not being interested in that career path. And it took me up until my last year at Harper, at least four weeks until I graduated to meet with our transfer specialist, Agnes Szymborski. And she gave me the kind of, like, that foundation to kind of imagine myself in different spaces after Harper. Honestly, my goal was to do Harper for two years, and I planned on just going right into the workforce and just figuring it out. I had an entrepreneurial mindset that I just wanted to just go out and make something happen in the music space.

##### [00:11:20.250] - Jalen Little

And Agnes, along with my academic advisors, Dubois and Travaris, gave me the foundation to say, like, hey, here's an opportunity to continue to enhance what you've done here at Harper, and here's a variety of different colleges. And they encouraged me to just put together a pros and cons list of each of those colleges and kind of determine which one fit my style, my interest. And SIU Carbondale really piqued my interest 6 hours south down there. And when I did transfer, I found myself entering SIU. Of course, as a junior, and now, having my experience at Harper, I found myself down there being like, okay, what do I want to do? And what happened from that summer I graduated until that start of the semester, that fall semester at SIU, I was waking up every day and I would always I had this thing, Brian, where I loved waking up early to watch the news, as crazy as that might sound. I would faithfully turn on the Channel Seven news because I was fascinated by that production. I was fascinated by how did they gather stories? Who put all this together? What's the process, like, and that inspired me to go into broadcast journalism.

##### [00:12:44.860] - Jalen Little

And I declared that major down at SIU Carbondale and started working within the broadcast journalism department and got an opportunity my first year down there to be a news writer and go out on different stories and record and kind of package these stories and then get them chopped up and edited, sent to the news director, and then have those being broadcasted by reporters on the local student news station down there, which was really cool. And there was this moment that happened down at SIU Carbondale where I was walking through the student center, and I'm like, Life is good, but it's like this little voice in my head that was like, but what about the music? What about the music and how about it? Walking through the student center and I saw this person who was just off to the side, just kind of talking to themselves, like, doing poetry and kind of rapping, and they were playing music. And I walked up like, hey, I saw you're a poet. I heard you rapping. What's going on? Tell me about yourself. And they were like, oh, yeah, no, I'm preparing for a talent showcase through a student organization called Digidog, which is a student organization based around musicians on campus, producers and engineers.

##### [00:14:08.920] - Jalen Little

And I said, oh, I've never heard of this. Is this something you can just join? They're like, yeah, it's a part of the audio engineering program. I was like, there's an audio engineering program? Literally, that next day, I walked right into my academic advisor's office at SIU Carbondale. I was like, hey, I want to take classes in audio engineering. And how about it? That school of audio engineering was also in the school of communication, and the overlap of courses was perfect. And I ended up doing a double major in broadcast journalism, audio engineering, and a minor in sociology, because I just love sociology. That conversation with Trevaris, Dubois, and Agnes really created, like, they planted the seeds for me to be able to do that versus the alternative, which was, like, just going right into the workforce.

##### [00:15:02.140] - Brian Shelton

That's really great. What was that transition like for you, going down to Carbondale? Big difference from the Chicago suburbs and Carbondale.

##### [00:15:09.400] - Jalen Little

Yeah, the best way to describe it was interesting. Because for me, I always imagined myself at that time, I was like, oh, I'm going to move to the city. I'm going to live in an apartment with some friends. We're going to make music, get a Grammy. Life's going to be great. And then a lot of my buddies who I am good friends with, a lot of them ended up going to Elmhurst, and they ended up going into the jazz program there. And so while that time for me was very interesting because there were expectations of me to go out and start working and just start doing the hustle right, there were expectations of me of going to Elmhurst and following this path that my friends were on because there was a huge group of people who I knew who were going there. I took the alternate route. I took the route that felt the most uncomfortable, which was going 6 hours south to a place I had never been before. And it completely changed the trajectory of my life. Being able to be in a space where I could be close to nature, going to a program where I don't know anybody, allowed me to really blossom and really meet some very critical and key people in my life who, to this day, I still consult with.

##### [00:16:38.270] - Jalen Little

And they've helped me to gain opportunities in the workforce, both on the music side and the higher education side. So that transition was definitely interesting. It was uncomfortable, but nonetheless, it all worked out.

##### [00:16:52.850] - Brian Shelton

That's great. That's fantastic. So somehow along the way here, you wind up back at Harper College, as so many people do, it seems. I talk to a lot of people who are alumni of the school and now work there or have worked there. You're back at Harper College, and you're an admissions specialist. What is an admissions specialist? What's the day of an admission specialist? What do you do?

##### [00:17:14.960] - Jalen Little

Yeah. So an admission specialist is an individual who is well versed in helping students to understand their next steps as they enter Harper. And as an admission specialist, I serve the community in a way where I provide information that helps them to make the best informed decision about choosing to attend Harper. And that kind of translates into what my day looks like, is meeting with students both in person, on campus, through email, over the phone, in the high school, and really in the community, to just share with them and hear from them, have a conversation with them about what next steps look like for starting at Harper. But even for students who aren't necessarily considering Harper, just talking to them and getting an idea of what their plan or what their goal or their mission is, and helping them to understand how harper can be a part of that goal. Whether they've decided that they want to transfer away or they want to go to a four year college right out of high school. Hey, that's cool. I help them to understand the bottom line of here's what's possible at Harper, and here's what's also possible at that four year, and show the similarities between the two.

##### [00:18:31.430] - Jalen Little

And then show them the differences between the two. And by giving students the most amount of information as possible, it allows them to fill a sense of trust so they can make that best informed decision of where they want to start their journey at.

##### [00:18:45.770] - Brian Shelton

That's really cool. What do you hear most from students when you go out to talk to them? Are they resistant to coming to a community college? They all want to go off someplace or what's the common thing that you hear?

##### [00:18:56.940] - Jalen Little

Yeah, it's a mixed bag, and especially post pandemic. What I most commonly hear from students that I meet with is they imagine Harper being this place where when they think of the word community college, right, they imagine, like, a community college is a space where and this is in all honesty, this is what they say, this is where rejects go. This is where students who didn't get into a four year college will go, or students who don't know what they want to do. And what I tell those students is, no matter where you go right, everyone will have their own unique experience, and I give them the light and the hope to know that Harper is an institution that is profoundly empowering for their success in all aspects in the classroom and outside of the classroom. And here's what I do, because, by the way, this is not all students. I want to make sure that I clarify that I meet with students as well who have experienced Harper's in a way where they are like, no, I am going to Harper. And a lot of the times, students end up going to Harper because they've heard stories from either family members or friends or some students have been a part of the In Zone group, or they've gone on field trips, and they've seen the facilities.

##### [00:20:32.850] - Jalen Little

Like they've been there physically on campus. And I think there's something to be said about putting yourself in a situation or in an environment where you can see these spaces, where you start to imagine yourself there, and then it just clicks. I've met with students when they were sophomores, and they weren't on campus, and they were like, yeah, I just heard that Harper doesn't transfer any classes still for you, it's like a basement, and it's like one building, because in their framework, they're thinking, oh, it's like high school. It's a condensed space. But then they take that field trip their sophomore year, they come on campus, they go into the gym. They're like, whoa. They go into Building D, and they are standing in that rotunda space, and they're like, wow. Or they go to the virtual hospital, or they go into the 3D Makers lab, or they'll go into the broadcasting space, and they go into all these unique spaces that we have on campus. And by their senior year, they're like, oh, no, I'm for sure going to Harper. I get the opportunity to experience, as they describe it, one kid described it as the luxury of what we have in our backyard.

##### [00:21:44.370] - Jalen Little

And I think that's foundationally what I hear, and then everything in between as well. I have students who, for them, Harper is a space where it's accommodating for them and being able to know what support resources we have is what made them make that decision versus going elsewhere.

##### [00:22:10.400] - Brian Shelton

The misconception about community college is probably the biggest problem, biggest hurdle that all community colleges have to get over with when it comes to potential students. But all you got to do is walk onto the Harper campus and realize, oh, my goodness, what a fantastic place this is, right? And then our faculty and staff are absolutely amazing as well. You look at the credentials of some of the people who work at Harper, and it's really quite mind blowing.

##### [00:22:32.910] - Jalen Little

Yeah. So true. So true. And that's what I encourage students to do, is have an open mind about the space that you're entering because the people you'll meet along your journey at Harper will change your life in so many ways for the better.

##### [00:22:47.430] - Brian Shelton

Well, you've kind of already answered my last question for you, but I ask everyone, what advice do you have for current Harper students?

##### [00:22:53.930] - Jalen Little

So some advice I would share with current Harper students is definitely to enjoy the journey, every ounce of the journey, and know that when you enjoy being present in the moment in that class, or you enjoy being present on campus, a part of a club or in the tutoring center or hanging out with your friends or just being on campus is the best way to really just enjoy not just their experience, but being a part of a larger experience with their peers and so many others. And that is what will make the process of getting to the destination that much more enjoyable and really to lean in on your support mechanisms, whether that's your friend, your family, your instructors lean in and know that you have a strong and very well put together support mechanism that can help you to succeed personally, academically and beyond.

##### [00:24:01.760] - Brian Shelton

That's fantastic advice. Thanks so much for taking time out of your day to come and talk to us here on Harper Talks. And I know that you and I have a project we're going to help each other out on later, another podcast project. So I'm looking forward to getting the opportunity to work with you on that project.

##### [00:24:17.680] - Jalen Little

Likewise. Thanks so much for having me here, Brian. All right.

##### [00:24:20.530] - Brian Shelton

Take care.

##### [00:24:21.120] - Jalen Little

You too.

##### [00:24:21.780] - Brian Shelton

Jalen Little is a graduate of Harper College and currently serving the school as an admission specialist. If you're enjoying Harper talks, please subscribe. And while you're at it Rate and review us so that others might find us. Harper Talks is a co-production of Harper College Alumni Relations and Harper Radio. Our show is produced by Shannon Hynes. This episode was edited by me, Brian Shelton. Our online content producer is Erica Berger. Our theme music was created by Aidan Cashman. I'm Brian Shelton. Thanks for listening.