Hi, I'm René! I'm a rising junior studying Civil and Environmental Engineering. I want to kick off my story with a funny anecdote. I'm from Puerto Rico, and back home everyone wears Crocs. You wear them to go to Mass, you wear them to go shopping at Walmart, you wear them to your cousin's quinceañera, the point is they're popular. The first time I came to the US for an extended period, let's just say I found out the hard way that Crocs are not very fashionable in America.

I say this occurrence, not only because it's funny, but because it prefaces an important problem I faced coming into MIT: fitting in has always been difficult for me. Growing up, I went to a K through 12 catholic school, which for me it meant that I had to make friends very few times. I never went through the process of being put into a new middle school or high school, and I actually stuck with the same core group of friends from sixth grade all the way to graduation. Still, being the overzealous freshman I was, I figured that I would feel right at home at MIT, surrounded by people who shared my passion for hard science and technology.

The reality, though, was disappointing. I was placed into a dorm that was full of nice and cool people, but not people that I meshed well with. Unfortunately, this time it wasn't just the Crocs. I awkwardly floated around long nights of playing Dungeons and Dragons and felt sidelined as people sang their hearts out to musical soundtracks. Nothing against *Hamilton* fans, but you can only hear the song *My Shot* so many times before you start to wish that someone actually shot you. I joined a great fraternity, but the long distance from my dorm meant that I did not spend much time there at all. It made for a lonely living experience: I generally ate alone, studied alone, and spent my free time scrolling aimlessly through Facebook.

Perhaps even more unexpectedly, that feeling of isolation started trickling into my academic life as well. While my peers geeked out over the latest development in machine vision or blockchain or whatever the newest buzzword at the time was, I went through a very unexciting life in a department that I was good at but didn't enjoy, and working at a UROP where I felt like my only contribution was breaking not one, not two, but three glass instruments worth more than $500. My extreme apathy stuck out like a sore thumb in a place where passion seems to grow on trees. I started asking myself, do I even enjoy science or engineering? And at MIT, that is a very stressful question to be asking yourself because, unlike many other universities, there's not all that much else for you to do. This extreme disconnect I felt towards the Institute, coupled with a bunch of other mental health difficulties I was experiencing, led to me taking a medical leave from MIT in November of my sophomore fall.

My first two months back home were full of introspection. It was the first time that I felt that being at MIT would be a choice: if I did not want to return, I could simply not do it. In the meantime, though, I needed to figure out what to do with my time. I ended up teaching Computer Science in the school that I graduated from. Without a doubt, that was one of the most formative experiences of my life. Since programming is not a very widespread topic in Puerto Rican schools, I was bringing this new set of skills to students who were like me: financially disadvantaged, struggling back home, interested in rap or reggaetón or making art, and going to bars and clubs to have a good time. Oh, I'm sorry, were you not able to drink legally in high school? That's a shame…

The direct impact I was having on students, the classic Hispanic culture and the familiarity of many of the common problems faced by Puerto Ricans forged a strong sense of connection. For the first time in years, I felt at home. I felt that I could just walk up to someone and start talking to them and they would in some way, shape or form understand me. I wondered, is it possible for me to feel this way

at MIT? ~~To feel like I belong here, along with everyone else I saw walking down the Infinite?~~ I figured I'd take a stab at it, so I requested a return and came back last Fall.

And quite honestly, I think I did a 180 on my entire MIT life. I moved into my fraternity, which has been a great source of support for people like myself: ~~minority, low-income, etc~~. It has been a place where I've been able to embrace an artistic side of myself that I hadn't previously found people who shared in it: in Senior Haus-like fashion I actually spent the entirety of last week painting a massive mural while listening to all the trap remixes I had missed while abroad this past summer. And it's a group of people that not only has supported me in my decision to wear Crocs, but actually went ahead and bought some of their own. Which, by the way, *looks at Crocs* they may not be pretty, but they're comfortable.

My newfound sense of belonging stretched far, far from my living group. In my year back, I helped found a student group called CASE, which helps tackle socioeconomic issues faced on campus, much like the ones I faced back home. The group has already touched the lives of many on campus, including a lot of you: we were the ones that made the #MoneyMatters photoshoot that was shared among many of you the week before your CPW. I also joined the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering, which is delightfully full of people like myself, who do not necessarily want to be engineers but care mostly about the long lasting, broad impact of their work.

And here I am, sharing my story to a group of people I barely know personally, but am excited to see what they can bring to this amazing community. If you can take away anything from my story, it should be that MIT can be a lot of different environments for a lot of different people. It's almost mind boggling how diverse in ideas and tastes this Institute can be. Regardless of where you are right now, know that there is a place for you here somewhere, and it's a place that will be better because you're a part of it.

Say something about your word.