

How to Learn and Succeed in College

The Importance of Your First Year

In addition to general advice (e.g., exercise regularly, get plenty of sleep, eat healthy, etc.), here is some specific advice about how to succeed in your first year in college.

1. Know that college is not high school. Compared to high school, the pace and level of difficulty in college is much faster and greater, respectively. High school policies and structures are designed for controlling the thoughts and behaviors of minor teenagers. For example, you write papers using a rigid structure and following schoolmarm rules that limit autonomy and independence of thought. You perform science labs on well-established results by following a detailed manual. Such high school experiences help you learn the basics of academic fields, but they do little to prepare you for the types of authentic learning experiences in college. Professors will expect you to adapt quickly and effectively to your new learning environment.
2. Know that your college classes will be heavily populated with talented, hard-working peers. You may have been at or near the top of your high school class. Colleges are filled with such students. Worry less about competing with such students and focus more on cooperating with them to enhance your learning.
3. Make positive personal connections with your professors. Express a genuine interest in who is teaching you. Talk to your professors before or after class. Go to their office hours, especially if you are struggling with course activities, readings, exams, etc. Such conversations allow you to learn more about your professors' expectations, standards, etc.
4. Effectively manage your time to accomplish tasks well before they are due. At the beginning of each semester, map out your weekly work schedule of when you will be in class, when you will study for each class, when you want to participate in extracurricular activities, and when you need downtime or leisure time. Add to your calendar all of your course deadlines throughout the semester. Day-to-day and week-to-week, revise your schedule as deadlines come and go.
5. Manage your time effectively. Learning, defined neurologically as the creation of enduring neural tissue and/or connections, requires what educators call "distributive practice": giving your full, concentrated attention to some task for some nontrivial amount of time over an extended period. Thus, the best thing you can do to learn a subject is to study regularly (each day or every other day) and stay on top of your readings and assignments over the course of weeks or months; the worst thing you can do is procrastinate, fall behind in the readings and assignments, and then try to cram in the day or two before an exam.
6. Did I mention effectively managing your time? Performing simple muscle-memory behaviors (e.g., shooting a free throw, sinking a putt) is quite hard in stressful situations under time pressure, and these don't require you to really think that much. Effectively performing higher-order thinking skills (e.g., successfully solving complicated calculus problems, writing researched essays with sophisticated arguments, etc.) is next to impossible under the same conditions. College is hard enough. You don't need to make it any harder by procrastinating, mismanaging your time, and creating unnecessary stress for yourself.
7. Establish peer study groups to learn collaboratively. In addition to studying on your own, you should participate in study groups to review readings, work through homework problems, study for exams, and support each other. Working with peers provides you with additional opportunities for distributive practice.
8. Cultivate a healthy balance between coursework (and paid work) and leisure activities. You need to do well in your courses, increase your knowledge, enhance your skills, accumulate credits, and graduate. But you should also be growing and maturing as a person. Expand your social networks by meeting people who are different from you. Participate in activities you have never done before. Attend interesting talks and panels featuring people invited to your campus. Be a conversation partner with someone from another country. And just as important, give yourself opportunities for solitude to reflect upon all of your experiences.

Selected Tips for Succeeding in Courses

Here is some specific advice for your maximizing your performance in college courses.

1. Always be on time (i.e., early) for your class meetings. Be in your seat with all of your materials ready to go before class starts.
2. Try to sit near the front in the middle of the classroom. Especially in large classrooms where it is hard to attend to students past the first 10 to 15 rows, professors typically focus on the front third of the middle section of seats. Sitting in this area will help you pay attention to your professor and assures that your professor interacts quite often with you and those immediately around you. Skilled professors seek instantaneous feedback from their students to see how they are dealing with the course material. If students look confused, frustrated, or distracted, we change our pace/approach/etc. accordingly. You want to be in the group of students that the professor uses as a sounding board.
3. Never miss a class meeting, even if some professors don't grade attendance or participation. Class attendance (and attentiveness and participation) is strongly, positively correlated with performance on quizzes, papers, and exams. Another way of thinking about this is that you (or your family) are paying a lot of money for your courses, and so you should try to get every last bit of worth out of them. Yet another way of thinking about this is that being a student is your full-time job; you shouldn't show up late to your job or skip it entirely. Yet another way of thinking about this is that through daily behaviors you are establishing your work ethic, dependability, and good habits that will serve you well in almost every other walk in life.
4. Follow what is known as the *Carnegie Mellon model*. According to this model, a typical college student has a high likelihood of passing a course of medium difficulty (i.e., earning a C or 2.0) when studying two hours each week for each one hour of class. For a 3-credit course (approximately three hours of class a week), a student studying six hours a week outside of class will likely earn a passing grade. This 2:1 ratio of study time to class time may vary depending on the difficulty of the course, the student's background in the course topic, and the student's motivation to earn a higher grade. If you are taking 12-15 credits, then you can do the math and quickly realize that being a student really is equivalent to a full-time job.
5. Get to know your course syllabus intimately. The answers to most of your questions about your course (e.g., due dates, required materials, rationale for assignments, etc.) are in your syllabus. Professors typically spend weeks or months preparing the course outline, objectives, and activities that are listed in the syllabus. They take their syllabi very seriously, and they expect the same of you. You should avoid asking your professor questions about your class that are so clearly answered in the course syllabus. Your professor will interpret such questions as evidence that you did not read the syllabus (bad), don't take it seriously (worse), or don't respect his/her authority (even worse). You want to avoid your professor having these impressions of you.
6. Focus your concentration and pay close attention during all course activities. We only have the potential to learn that to which we attend. If we do not pay attention to something, we have no reasonable chance to learn it. Attempting to multi-task in the classroom (e.g., texting friends, doing a crossword, checking e-mail) reduces your attention capacity and stresses the limits of your cognitive load, thus greatly reducing the likelihood of learning.
7. Take careful notes in class. Learning is enhanced when we engage multiple sensual pathways (sight, sound, touch, taste, and scent). Actively listening to your professor and classmates is important. So is annotating your course readings (e.g., highlighting/underlining) and taking notes during class. In your peer study groups, you can compare your class notes with those of others to hone your note-taking skills.
8. Over-prepare for your first quiz, exam, and paper. Until you know how difficult your professor's assessments are, your best strategy is to over-prepare to be ready for anything.