

The ABC's of College Success

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It is no mystery who succeeds in college. Unfortunately, being brilliant is no guarantee of a degree, and in fact may work against students who haven't had to work hard to get into college. Persistence, commitment, and good work habits are a much better predictor of success. I teach college freshmen in an orientation course, and here's what I tell them.

A. Attend class and pay Attention!

The cost of college is great, and helps pay for updated dorms and sports facilities, but the reason you are at college is to go to classes. Unfortunately, some students see classes like the vegetables on their plate. They'd rather not eat them, and instead take extra helpings of dessert. There will be many distractions and late nights that will cause you to choose not to go to class at some point. The best way to think about classes is that they are like a job. You must go, or else you might get fired. Instead, often the thinking is that no one is making me go to class, so I can afford to miss a few. The fact is that attendance is the best predictor of good grades for most students. If you miss a class, you fall behind. There may even be policies that limit the number of classes you can miss before you are withdrawn from the course.

Also, when in class, pay attention. There will also be plenty of distractions while you are in class – other students, cell phones, etc. but the bottom line is that your brain can only attend well to one thing at a time, and you miss a lot if you are texting or shopping during a lecture or class discussion. Again, if you think about classes like they are your job while in college, it is easier to see what behaviors are acceptable while on the job.

B. Be on time and Be prepared.

Generally speaking, the first few minutes of class are for attendance and important announcements. It never fails that the students who are chronically late don't know when the tests are or miss the announcements for assignment due dates. When attendance is taken, often professors will not acknowledge your attendance if you come in late. Also coming in late disturbs the class and the

professor. In addition, not coming prepared makes a poor impression on the people who are judging your work, and who also have the potential to write a recommendation for you someday. If you are chronically late and unprepared, you are less likely to get a good grade or recommendation for a job or internship.

C. Read your Course outline and Communicate with your professor.

The course outline is a map of each course which can guide you when you have questions. I have often said to students that there is no stupid question unless the answer is in your course outline. It will be helpful to keep your course outline, or syllabus, with you throughout the course since it generally gives a class schedule with assignments and their due dates, and also test dates. A course outline will explain how your grade is earned, and any policies and expectations for the class.

Secondly, it is important to communicate with your professor when any problems arise. These days, email is the best way to let a professor know that you will be absent, or if you need to make an appointment to see her or him. It is also ok to set up a time to talk to a professor during the office hours which are listed on the course outline. Having a personal conversation with your professor allows him or her to get to know you as someone more than just a name on a list. It is ok to ask questions about the course material and also to let them know if you need any accommodation in order to be successful in the class. Professors genuinely want to see their students succeed, and they will be interested in you as a person. It is your job to introduce yourself and get to know them.

D. Distance and Discussion in class.

I tell my students at the beginning of each semester that grades tend to be dependent on where they sit in the classroom. The closer they sit to the professor, the better the grades tend to be. It is harder to text and chat with your friends if you are sitting toward the front. It is also easier to stay engaged because there is more likelihood of eye contact, and opportunity to join in the conversation.

Many students would prefer never to speak up in class. They are passive receivers of information, and may be able to take notes, study and get good grades without ever venturing to speak in class. However, you are more likely to build a

relationship with your professor, and meet other students if you speak up. If you are hesitant to talk in class, challenge yourself to try to make one comment per class to build confidence. There are other students who speak too much in class, to the annoyance of their fellow students. A good rule to think about is to speak no more than once every five or ten minutes, depending on the activity and how many people are in class. Make sure that what you are planning to say fits with the topic, and try to keep it short and to the point. Ask yourself, “Is what I am saying helpful for the whole class, or only for me?” If your comments and questions are only for your benefit, you might be better off waiting until the end of class or visiting during an office hour.

E. Effort and Exploration.

Learning is not a passive process. It is an active process that requires activity such as reading, writing, researching and studying. Every effort you put towards learning will pay off. No one will be there to tell you to do your homework at night or go to the library to study. Research shows that students tend to do better if they have a group to study with, so making the effort to meet students who are in your classes can result in both social and academic benefits! Everyone has their strengths and weaknesses and a group can help when you're stuck. If you are really struggling with some of the academic tasks, it is better to get help sooner rather than later, and use the academic help center available on campus. Building academic skills is work that pays off for all your future courses, so don't be afraid to ask for help in math, writing, and studying for tests.

College is the time to explore new things and develop new interests. There are many opportunities available in college that may not be there at any other time in your life. It is advisable to look into as many as possible in your first two years before you narrow down your goals. Try a new sport, sing in a chorus, get a part in a play, or perhaps study abroad. Join a club, participate in research, or write for a publication. The more you do, the more you will learn about yourself and others.

F. Face to Face learning.

Although on-line courses can be convenient, most students learn better when they have face to face contact with an instructor. As an instructor, I feel that the dialogue I have in class helps me to see what is being understood, and what is not, in real time. Asking questions in class is one of the most important ways to learn. If you are confused, most likely others will be too, and they will be happy that you asked.

Most people learn better if they are using more than one of their senses. If you are listening, seeing and taking notes, you are much more likely to remember important information. Face to face contact also helps you to pick up what is most important in the class. If you are taking on-line course, make sure you ask questions as well, and keep up with the assignments. Due dates and times become very important in on-line courses.

G. Make Goals and Go to bed!

Most successful people are goal oriented. Starting college means that you have the goal of learning and getting a degree. Every goal has daily steps to help you get there. Make sure you are using a planner or lists to keep you on track. Try to think about where you would like to be in five, ten and twenty years, and ask yourself what you need to do each day to get there.

One of the most important needs for the brain to work properly is sleep. Freshmen are often given early morning classes, and also want to stay up and socialize. No one will be telling you to go to bed. I talk to many students who say that they keep their phone on all night and receive and answer texts until very late. Having your sleep disrupted will result in difficulty staying awake in class. Although everyone is different in their need for sleep, it is advised that you aim for eight hours each night. Coffee and caffeinated drinks will keep you up at night, so you are better off without them. It might help to keep a sleep log for a month or two to see how much sleep you are actually getting. If you have roommates who make it difficult to sleep, talk to your RA and see what can be done. If all else fails, take naps when you can get the room to yourself.

H. Healthy Habits.

The best predictor of success in college is good habits. A habit is just a choice you make over and over again until it doesn't seem like a choice anymore, like brushing your teeth. Good habits come from good choices and bad habits come from bad choices. The good news is that you can always choose something new and change your habits. I ask my students what the difference is between Superheroes and Slobs. It is quickly clear to them that the difference boils down to good or bad habits. Bad habits are easy to spot – drinking too much, sleeping too late, poor hygiene, and playing video games four hours a day. Good habits might include being on time for every class, exercising three times a week, going to bed at the same time each night, and studying for an hour each day. Although college is the time to try new things, and you might feel like you are expected to let loose a little bit, there is a long list of students every semester who lose sight of their goals by letting loose on a regular basis, who end up on probation, or sadly, leave school without anything to show for their time and money spent.

Again, if you think of college like a job, it is clear that good work habits are essential to keeping your job, and if you can keep up good choices during the week, you can leave the weekends and vacations for fun. If you think of a four year degree like a marathon, you can easily see that in order to go the distance, you can't burn out early in the race. Getting an early start on good habits will make it much more likely that you will make it to the finish line and be ready for what comes next. The fact is, a diploma is a wonderful thing to frame and hang on a wall, but it is the work habits, skills, and knowledge gained from your years at college that will get you where you want to go!