

College 101 - Tips & Tricks

As you embark on your college career, it is important to understand your first year of college and the tips and tricks to be successful and thrive during the pursuit of your educational goals.

You start college with a clean academic slate, along with a lot of independence and a myriad of critical decisions as you begin the transition. The decisions that you make and the actions you take during this first year of college will have a major impact on the rest of your college experience.

According to American College Testing (ACT), one in every four college students leaves before completing their sophomore year – and nearly half of all freshmen will either drop out before obtaining a degree or complete their college education elsewhere.

But wait! This is not meant to scare you or take away any of the joy, excitement, and anticipation you feel about going to college. Quite the opposite. This is all about the things you need to do to not only survive your first year of college, but to thrive in college.

The first few weeks on campus are extremely critical for all new students. It is during this time that you make critical decisions that will have an effect on the rest of your life. Some of these tips are critical during your first weeks, while the others are meant for longer-term guidance and survival. Whatever you do, be sure to be yourself and try to enjoy your college experience as much as possible. Expect to feel some stress and homesickness, but don't let these issues wear you down.

Go to all orientations.

Do you really need to go on yet another campus tour? Yes. The faster you learn your way around campus — and around all the red tape — the more at ease you'll feel and the better prepared you'll be when issues arise.

Get Organized.

In high school, the teachers tended to lead you through all the homework and due dates. In college, the professors post the assignments — often for the entire semester — and expect you to be prepared. Buy an organizer, a PDA, a big wall calendar — whatever it takes for you to know when assignments are due.

Find the ideal place for you to study.

It may be a cozy corner of the library; find a place that works best for you to get your work done — while avoiding as many distractions as possible.

Go to class.

Obvious, right? Maybe, but sleeping in and skipping that 8 am class will be tempting at times. Avoid the temptation. Besides learning the material by attending classes, you'll also receive vital information from the professors about what to expect on tests, changes in due dates, etc.

Become an expert on course requirements and due dates.

Professors spend hours and hours preparing course syllabi and calendars so that you will know exactly what is expected of you, and when. One of the lamest excuses a student can give a professor: "I didn't know it was due today."

Meet with your professors.

Speaking as an adjunct faculty member, I can assure you there are only upsides to getting to know your professors, especially if later in the semester you run into some snags. Professors schedule office hours for the sole purpose of meeting with students — take advantage of that time.

Get to know your academic adviser.

This is the person who will help you with course conflicts, adding or dropping courses, scheduling of classes for future semesters, deciding on majors and minors. This person is a key resource for you — and should be the person you turn to with any academic issues or conflicts. And don't be afraid of requesting another adviser if you don't click with the one first assigned to you.

Seek a balance.

College life is a mixture of social and academic happenings. Don't tip the balance too far in either direction. One of my favorite former students always used to say her motto was to "study hard so she could play hard."

Get involved on campus.

A big problem for a lot of new students is a combination of homesickness and a feeling of not quite belonging. A solution? Consider joining a select group — and be careful not to go overboard — of student organizations, clubs, sororities or fraternities, or sports teams. You'll make new friends, learn new skills, and feel more connected to your school.

Strive for good grades.

Another obvious one here, right? Remember the words of the opening paragraph; while good grades could have come naturally to you in high school, you will have to earn them in college — and that means setting some goals for yourself and then making sure you work as hard as you can to achieve them.

Take advantage of the study resources on campus.

Just about all colleges have learning labs and tutors available. If you're having some troubles, these resources are another tool available to you. Another idea: form study groups.

Make time for you.

Be sure you set aside some time and activities that help you relax and take the stress out of your day or week. Whether it's enlisting yoga techniques, watching your favorite television shows, or writing in a journal, be good to yourself.

Don't feel pressured to make a hasty decision about a career or a major.

It doesn't matter if it seems as though everyone else seems to know what they're doing with their lives — believe me, they don't — college is the time for you to really discover who you are, what you enjoy doing, what you're good at, and what you want to be. It's not a race; take your time and enjoy exploring your options.

Take responsibility for yourself and your actions.

Don't look to place the blame on others for your mistakes; own up to them and move on. Being an adult means taking responsibility for everything that happens to you.

Make connections with students in your classes.

One of my best students said his technique in the first week of classes was to meet at least one new person in each of his classes. It expanded his network of friends — and was a crucial resource at times when he had to miss a class.

Find the Career Services Office.

Regardless of whether you are entering college as undeclared or have your entire future mapped out, seek out the wonderful professionals in your college's career services office and get started on planning, preparing, and acting on your future.

Don't procrastinate; prioritize your life.

It may have been easy in high school to wait until the last minute to complete an assignment and still get a good grade, but that kind of stuff will not work for you in college. Give yourself deadlines — and stick to them.

Stay healthy/Eat Right.

A lot of problems first-year students face can be traced back to an illness that kept them away from classes for an extended period of time that led to a downward spiraling effect. Get enough sleep, take your vitamins, and eat right. If you haven't heard the jokes about college food, you soon will. And without mom or dad there to serve you a balanced meal, you may be tempted to go for those extra fries or cookies. Stay healthy and avoid the dreaded extra "Freshman 15" pounds by sticking to a balanced diet.

Keep track of your money.

If you've never had to create a budget, now is the time to do so. Find ways to stretch your money — and as best you can, avoid all those credit card solicitations you'll soon be receiving. The average credit card debt of college grads is staggering.

Don't cut corners.

College is all about learning. If you procrastinate and cram, you may still do well on tests, but you'll learn very little. Even worse, don't cheat on term papers or tests.

Be prepared to feel overwhelmed.

There's a lot going in your life right now. Expect to have moments where it seems a bit too much. As one student says, be prepared to feel completely unprepared. The trick is knowing that you're not the only one feeling that way.

Final Words of Advice:

You've done all the prep work so enjoy all your hard work while laying the groundwork for a successful college career. Don't be a statistic; be determined to make it through your freshman year and beyond. Take advantage of your network of new friends and professors, have fun while learning as much as you can, and get the most out of your college experience.

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