

How to Succeed in College in the First Three Weeks (of each Semester)

1. Realize education is not a 50/50 deal. You need to go the whole 100 yards. If you take the position that you are only responsible for half of your education, you will come up short. However, if you give 100% and the institution gives 100%, that is enough to ensure success.
2. When you begin a new course, read the course syllabus and see if you understand what is expected. There should be 'Course Objectives' that tell you what you expected to learn. Are you clear on whether the exams are comprehensive, that is, each exam covers all material covered so far, instead of just material since the last exam? Are you clear on how they will be graded? If not, ask. No one wants surprises later.
3. How to study - Prepare for class. Read the assignment in advance. Put a question mark next to everything that is not clear. After the lecture, see how many question marks you can erase, because the answer was in the lecture. If the questions were not answered, go to the professor and get the answer right away. Do NOT wait until two days before the exam to get your questions answered.

Example: You read over the notes prior to the lecture (first exposure). Then you listen to the lecture (second exposure). Immediately after the lecture, you go to the professor and get your questions answered. Then you review your notes at the end of the week (third exposure). Now when it is three days before the exam, you have had three exposures, that is, you are not starting cold. By time you take the exam, you are totally on top of the information. You go into the exam KNOWING you know the material. You go in psyched!
4. There are no rewards for going through college on your own. Your goal should not be to avoid professors. Instead go to them and get your money's worth. In high school you may have been rewarded for independence, but now it takes teamwork.
5. On a large campus you need a 'safety net' of at least three people. (But the more, the merrier.) How about an advisor, a favorite professor, and a mentor? Everyone is not available at the same time, but having several people means you should be able to reach someone who can give you the support you need when you need it.
6. Also, do not think you are supposed to give up all your mentors from high school and get new ones. They are still part of your network. Take them with you on your new venture.

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7. If you have diagnosed special needs, every college/university will have an office to address special needs and disabilities. They can provide many accommodations. Do not try to wing it on your own to see if you can get by. Stack the deck in your favor from the very beginning of the semester.

8. Or if your special needs are known to you, but have not been officially 'diagnosed', you need to still have them addressed at the beginning of the semester.

Example: If you have problems seeing or hearing, make arrangements to reserve a seat at the front of the classroom (and, of course, get your eyes checked). Also, if you have trouble getting all of the information down as the professor speaks, record the lecture Do NOT wait until after the first exam to get help.

Example: I have had students who asked that they put their tape recorder on the podium. No problem.

9. Figure out the best way for you to approach a professor.

Not everything that's on the Internet is true and not everything that is true is on the Internet. A whole bunch is in the head's of professors. Talk to professors. Talk to professors. Talk to professors.

If you are a bit on the shy side or are not comfortable approaching professors, try this warm up. After each lecture there is a cluster of students who go to the front of the lecture hall and talk to the professor. (They may be 'nerds', but then again they may just have their acts together taking 100% responsibility for their learning.)

Follow the others down there, stand on the edge of the group, and listen to the questions and answers. You will either confirm that you know the material (Yes!) or establish that you don't. If you are uncomfortable at first, wait for the others to leave and then ask your question. Or walk the professor to his/her office. In time you will be bold enough to ask questions in class.

10. Then make a point to see the professor during office hours. Professors write the exams. They even pass them! Also, professors tend to be 'leaky' right before exams. They wrote the exams. They know what's on them! So get in there and ask your last few questions.

11. Talking to professors - Never ask a professor a 'Yes or No' question. 'Yes' or

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No' ends a conversation. Instead ask them a question in a manner that requires them to answer with a sentence. Get them talking and then keep them talking. (This is the 'profess' in professor. We love to talk!)

12. There is actually an art to asking a question. (Something I did not learn until my 40s !?)

Ask a specific question and you'll get a specific answer. If you ask a vague question, you get a vague answer. (Also, remember that professors hate hearing 'Do we have to know this?' and 'Will this be on the exam?' Show an interest in the subject, rather than a need to just get a grade. Ask questions about the course material until you are certain how much detail will be covered.)

Example of what NOT to do

Student: Will the test be hard?

Professor: No. (You've learned nothing that will help you. Of course, the professor doesn't think the exam is hard. He/she wrote it!)

Example of what TO do

Student: What is the role of a mitochondria?

Professor: Professor discusses the role of mitochondria.

Student: How does a ribosome attach to the endoplasmic reticulum?

Professor: Professor discusses the role of the ribosome in channeling the newly synthesized protein into the lumen of the endoplasmic reticulum.

Student: How many microfilaments are there in the average cell?

Professor: That is interesting, HOWEVER, that is more detail than you need to know. (When you are off track the professor will redirect you.)



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13. Learn to distribute your study time wisely. Where did the professor place the emphasis? If two of ten lectures were on cell organelles, will 20% of the exam questions be on cell organelles as well. Ask her/him. Just be sure you do not spend 50% of your time on 10% of the material.

14. Choose your study partners wisely. Best friends are not always the best choice - not because you will goof off - but because you may tend to quickly validate each other's answers, rather than saying "Hey, wait a minute. Are you sure that's right? Let's look up the right answer." Look it up. Don't guess. Also, if you study with someone who has a better understanding of the material than you do, you will learn from them. And when you have a better understanding than they do, they will learn from you.

15. If you skip class, it means you can learn more in that hour all by yourself than you do with the help of the professor. (P.S. Remember who writes the exams.) Your first exposure to the material should not be three days before the exam.

Example: I had a first year medical student who routinely skipped his 7:30 AM biochemistry class. I asked him if he studied from 7:30 - 8:30 AM. No, he slept in. So he was already behind.

16. Changing majors is no big deal. It is a sign of maturity to identify what you want and change courses accordingly.

17. There is NO SUCH THING as a stupid question. If you don't believe this is true, check out one of your large classes. One individual may ask a question, but ALL heads go down to record the answer. Perhaps others just didn't have the courage to speak up. But if you are taking responsibility for your education, YOU ask the question. It is a sign of wisdom!

18. Do not think it is best to copy someone else's study habits. What works best for her/him may not be what is best for you. You are unique! Find out what works best for you.

19. Do NOT use the first exam to see if you are studying correctly (most common problem). Often times without even thinking about it, a student will go into an exam hoping they have studied correctly only to find out they have not. Instead go to the professor BEFORE the first exam to determine whether you are studying correctly. In this way you avoid the problem of having to recover from a bad grade on a first exam, while preparing for the second exam. You spiral up! Not down.

20. The best way to explain a 'C grade' is to avoid it. If you are competing with someone for admission to graduate or professional school, those WITHOUT C grades will

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have an advantage over those who do. Therefore, rather than explaining a 'C' on a transcript, it is best to AVOID it at the time you are taking the course. It is therefore necessary for you to read the syllabus, talk to the professor, and use all the tutorial help available BEFORE the exam. Only then can you say you gave it your best. Then you go forward without regret.

21. If your grade point average is not going up each semester, consider doing less better. Nine credits of A is better than 14 credits of C. It is a sign of wisdom to chose to do less better!

22. If you need to drop a course, do it early in the semester, so you can put the 'time saved' to better use.

Example: You could struggle with three courses for an entire semester only to end up with a grade of C in each of them. However, if you were to have dropped one of those courses early in the semester and applied that study time to the other two courses instead, you could achieve A and B grades in those classes.

23. Dropping a course does not mean you are dumb. It means you are wise! It is a sign of maturity to be able to assess what is best along the way and modify your path as needed.

24. Believe in yourself! I do!

A note on the Imposter Syndrome

- a psychological pattern where a person doubts their accomplishments and has an internal fear of being exposed as a "fraud".

Am I as smart as everyone else?

Do I deserve to be here?

Am I going to be 'found out'?

I definitely had the Imposter Syndrome through college and even when I became a professor here at UW-Madison. A few weeks after I became a faculty member, I wondered if I was hired just because I was a woman. I quickly decided that - even if they 'just' wanted a 'woman' - they got a highly qualified one!