

Tips to a successful freshman year

“The freshman year of college represents a new and exciting chapter in life for many young adults. However, for many first-year students, the transition to college can be an intimidating experience. This can be for a variety of reasons — being far away from home, making new friends, adjusting to a college workload, or just adapting to the pace of university life. Experts offer steps a student can take to aid in a smooth and successful transition into college life.

Go to class. No matter your measure of success, one key aspect of achieving it is by showing up. In terms of academic success, showing up to class and during office hours can impact your overall success in a number of ways. First, class is often the primary place of learning. If a professor is going to introduce a new topic, they’ll often detail that topic in class and may include information not covered in the textbook. Attendance is your best opportunity to get all of the information presented. At the very least, establishing yourself as a constant presence in the class can demonstrate to the professor that you care about doing well. Professors and advisors have a wealth of knowledge—use that knowledge to move closer to your goals. And later, as you prepare for life after college, whether that involves grad school or applying for jobs, these are the people you might one day ask for a letter of recommendation.

Find ways to stay focused in classes. As a first-year undergraduate in the physics program at McGill, I often found myself having a hard time understanding material the professor was teaching in class. Either I was tired and found myself drifting off to sleep or else I felt lost and unable to even come up with a cogent question, if I even had the nerve to speak up—and at first, I did not. I eventually found two solutions (apart from trying to get more sleep) that were helpful. One was to realize that if I was lost, probably others were too, and they really appreciated someone having the courage to speak up. Also, a very effective trick was to take some time before class to read a little ahead in the textbook. This primed me for class and I found I could get far more out of the professor’s lecture. I could follow better, and I developed enough confidence to ask questions, since I had already given the material some thought. Reading ahead was an investment, but it paid off by making the classroom experience a valuable use of time. I was more engaged, and I found staying awake was that much easier.

Prioritize deadlines and results. While many students may be accustomed to deadlines and completing homework, the freedom and flexibility in structure that college provides can trip some students up unless they are diligent in keeping their tasks and responsibilities in line. Being responsible for the syllabus, due dates, reviews, and asking for help may all be new to first year college students. When tackling assignments and studying, focus on the nearest due dates. It can help productivity and relieve the panic and stress associated with rushing to do last minute assignments. Make progress on high priority course work early to avoid procrastination and to yield the best results.

Become familiar with on-campus resources. There are many resources and people on campus that can provide strategies, support, and services that will help a student get what they need and get right back on track to working toward their goals. Gaining an understanding of the resources offered through the college or university can allow students to make informed decisions and be intentional when it comes to their freshman year. Seeking opportunities that are available will establish a knowledgeable foundation for one’s entire undergraduate experience.

Get to know classmates. Getting to know classmates can be a great way to build connections and make friends. Introduce yourself to students that sit by you in class and ask them where they are from,

what they are studying, where they're living, and other introductory questions. Trying to meet classmates can benefit a student socially and academically. Forming a study group can be a favorable way to meet new people. It can also be advantageous as students matriculate through their undergraduate years together.

Take advantage of research opportunities. The self-discipline you develop in your university years will pay off tenfold in the future. By attending classes regularly and staying on top of things, you will learn new and creative ways of solving problems and hear about all kinds of wild things not found in textbooks or online notes. You will also meet new people who share common interests with you, plus be able to interact with your profs and learn about their research. Many profs hire students to do research over the summer months, and I encourage any student to jump at this opportunity if it's available.

Work on your meta-cognitive skills. A layer of meta-level skills that will help you in any career path and in contributing to the world as a functioning citizen is very important. Two essential skills are good time management and the ability to pay close attention to detail. These are skills you will need for all your courses, and for your jobs later. Overall, there is the ability to deal with complex issues: to think your way through a maze of opinions and information, decide what is relevant, make reasoned and evidence-based decisions, then communicate and defend those decisions. These critical-thinking skills are what higher education should give you, and they are essential to survival in a fast-changing world.

Find people who are helpful and motivated. Share notes and help others freely.

Remember that mental and physical fitness and health go together. Pay attention to your nutrition and make sure you get enough sleep, especially before exams. Your first year at university should be a time when you explore new ideas, strengthen existing hobbies or discover new ones, make lasting friends, and join and actively participate in clubs and societies. These non-academic activities will sharpen your ability to competently use your time, make you more efficient and effective in learning your academic material, and make your university experience more fulfilling and rewarding.

Stay curious and learn beyond your assigned course load.”

Sources:

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