

# **How to Succeed in College**



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# How to Succeed in College

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1.

## Why You Should Read This Book



## Who Is This Book For?

This book is for people who want the inside scoop about how college works, for people who don't want to go through college the hard way.

Whoever you are, this book is for you if you are a student who hates

- Panic
- Confusion
- Depression
- Loneliness
- Feeling pushed around

It's for you if you want to

- Get the most out of your classes
- Do well on exams
- Get to know your professors
- Make friends and have time for fun
- Get a good job or go on to grad school

As you can see, this book is meant for just about every college student. It suggests answers for problems like those listed above and others (such as getting through the maze of college requirements and taking lecture notes) that are shared by almost all students. Now, you also might be special in some way—returning after years of working or raising a family, handi-  
capped, trying to overcome a poor high school education, or commuting to and from campus. This book can help you if you have one or more of these special problems.

Whether you are a high school student about to enter college for the first time or starting your junior year, whether you are in a four-year university or a two-year college, whether your college is large or small, this book can help you get off to a good start, get back on the right track, or simply make a good thing even better.

## What Makes Us Think We Can Help You?

We've helped lots of other students. We are three professors. Together, our experience includes almost 30 years of teaching—everything from large lecture courses with 600 students down to small seminars with only 10. We figure we have had contact of one sort or another with at least 3000

undergraduates. In our years of teaching, we've spent many hours talking to students about the sorts of problems and pressures they face and how they deal with them. All professors do some of this, but we've spent even more time than most because each of us has been in charge of an advising program at a large university.

In addition, we were all undergraduates once ourselves. We went to college on the East Coast and on the West Coast. Our living arrangements included living at home with parents, as well as in dorms, a sorority house, a boarding house, and an apartment. Among us, we went to a community college (both day and evening classes), an Ivy League private school, and state universities. One of us had a nearly straight-A average, and one of us had a somewhat more "colorful" record. We were financed by parents. We worked. Two of us went straight through in four years. One of us "stopped out." Obviously, we were all students who eventually mastered the "system."

For a long time we have felt it would be helpful to put in writing the information we've collected and have been sharing with our students. Some of the information is straightforward fact, and some is a little more subtle. For example, many students don't know how to approach a professor about a change of grade. They feel they deserve more credit on an exam, but they don't know how to handle the situation and so deal with it awkwardly or not at all. (See Chapter 7 to find out how to do it right.)

Some problems, though, don't have such simple solutions, for example, how to balance personal and academic pressures. One-to-one counseling for any problem can be useful, if only because it helps to tell someone about your troubles and to feel someone cares about you in particular. However, many students do not seek out this kind of contact with faculty, and many colleges and/or professors are not able to provide it. And even if you do have a chance to talk to a professor or counselor, that person may not have the time to explain some things in detail (such as how to study more effectively) or may never have given much thought to certain other problems (such as what to do if a professor makes a pass at you).

We felt that if we combined our experience in a book, we could offer some ideas about how to approach the kinds of problems you run into at college.

Take a few minutes to look over the Table of Contents and read through the first paragraph of each chapter. This is the best way to find out what we have included, so you can decide what you want to read (and in what order).

Most of the book will apply to almost everyone, but there are special sections you will either want to read or leave out, depending on your needs.

For example, new students who are about to enter college may want to start with Chapter 9, "Away or at Home—Where Should You Live?," because it gives some useful tips about things to think about in advance. Continuing students who are thinking about a change in their living arrangements might also want to read this chapter, because of the way it compares different housing options. Finally, commuting students will benefit from the sections dealing with the special advantages and disadvantages of living at home while going to college.

If you're not sure what to read, start at the beginning and read right through. That's the best way to make sure you don't miss anything.

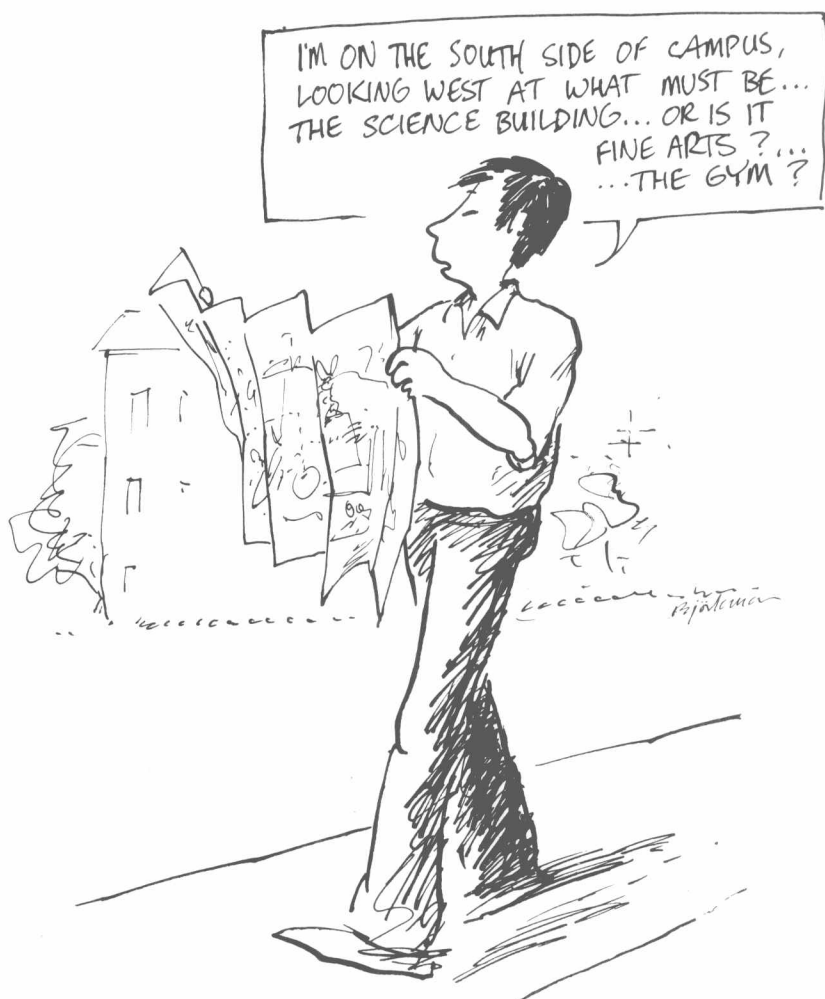
## **Is There a Basic Message Here?**

Yes. You can have more control over what happens to you at college than you may think. Read on.



2.

## Getting Started



The few days just before classes start and the few days right after are probably the busiest and most important of the school year. It's a time to get settled in and to make decisions about your program that will affect you the entire term.

If you are a freshman, everything will be new to you. If you are a transfer student, you've had some experience, but there are still many things that will be different and unfamiliar at your new college. This chapter will help you get off to a good start. In fact, it contains a lot of information and hints that can be of help even to a student who has been around for awhile and plans to stay at the same college.

## Survey the Terrain

Spend some time walking around the campus to get a feel for the place. The catalog will usually have a map of the campus—use it to find out where the important places are. Go by the cafeteria and the student union and note the hours. Find out where there is a check-cashing service and when it is open. Another place you should visit in advance of classes, if possible, is the bookstore; it can be a great help to you in choosing your courses (see pages 14–15 later in this chapter).

Locate the buildings where the courses you want to take are being given and develop a plan for your first day of classes. If you know in advance how to get from one place to the next, you will be there on time. If you arrive on time and there's a first come, first served basis for allowing students into class, you'll be more likely to get in.

Part of your tour of the campus should include looking for notices about orientation meetings. Special sessions are usually advertised for freshmen or transfer students where a faculty member, administrator, or advanced student explains requirements and gives out useful information. Go to these. It's worth the time and effort, and it's an efficient way to find out what's going on. Also look for notices of parties and "mixers" for freshmen, commuters, or other groups; they are a good way to meet people.

## Visit the Library

Go to the library and find out if tours on "how to use the library" are given. Your campus may even have more than one library. On some campuses, there are separate libraries for many of the different departments,



## Planning Your Program

You've settled into your dorm, met your roommate(s), and taken yourself on an informal campus tour. The place seems friendly enough, and you are looking forward to classes starting. You have one problem, though. You don't have a good answer to the question you're being asked with alarming frequency—What courses are you taking?

Actually, you are not alone. Over half of the freshman class would probably answer, "I don't know. I don't understand the catalog or the requirements. I don't know what I'm majoring in, and I can't read the computerized course schedule. I have five pounds of preregistration material, and I don't know what to do with any of it." Because so much else is going on, you might be tempted to sign up for whatever your friends or roommates are taking and to put off any planning until some other, less busy time. This is a mistake. It is really worth spending an hour or two planning your first year and looking as far into the future as you can.

In this section we will discuss some of the things you should consider in your planning, as well as define some terms everyone assumes you know but that may sound like Greek to you. It will help you concentrate on what is important in working out a program and how to go about doing it. We don't advise, though, that you plan your program your first term (or any term, for that matter) entirely by yourself. All colleges realize that new students need some help, and they provide it in the form of freshman or orientation counseling.

Your college may have a program of large orientation meetings, or perhaps they set up appointments for students to meet with counselors individually. Some do both. Take advantage of these. There will be an opportunity to ask questions. Our hints are good ones that should apply anywhere, but we can't give you all the detailed information you'll need since colleges differ.

## Distribution Requirements

Many colleges have a list of required courses that must be taken by everyone who expects to get a degree. These are sometimes called "college wide" or distribution requirements and are usually listed in the college catalog. Although these requirements are less rigid than they were in the past, most colleges still list certain courses or categories of courses that you must take.

The idea behind these college-wide requirements is that there is certain knowledge that all educated members of a society should share, regardless of what they do for a living. This knowledge, which includes a background in (among other things) history, philosophy, literature, and basic scientific principles, is often referred to as a “liberal education.”

One or two of your courses each semester should help you fulfill these college-wide requirements. If a math course is among the possibilities, consider taking this your first year. A basic college math course is often required before you can take many other courses. If you are afraid of math, your college may have special courses for you.

## Requirements for Your Major

In addition to fulfilling distribution requirements, most colleges require you to choose a major. A **major** is a field you have decided to study in depth, such as biology, physics, or French, and each major requires specific courses. Some colleges let you plan a major that cuts across the traditional lines that divide knowledge into “departments.” For example, you might be able to major in “social science.” The major, of course, is not the only thing a student studies at college, but it is his or her area of concentration. Some colleges also require the student to have a **minor**. The minor is an area of concentration in which the student takes fewer courses than they do in their major but where there is still a substantial amount of course work. It is a good idea to become familiar with the kinds of courses required by different majors. Few students are ready to choose a major during their first year, but it is not too soon to start thinking about possibilities. Chapter 13 will go into choosing a major in more detail.

In your first term you might want to take an introductory course in a field that might become your major. Most majors have an introductory freshman-level course (or courses—sometimes it is a two-term sequence). In some departments there is also a freshman course for non-majors. Don't take a non-majors course unless you are *sure* you won't want to major in the field or take further courses in it. A course for non-majors is usually not a satisfactory foundation (or “prerequisite”) for advanced courses in that field. Pay careful attention to the prerequisites listed for all the courses you are thinking of taking. **Prerequisites** are courses you must have taken in the past before you can register for a course. The list of requirements gives you important information about the kind of background the courses will require. Most introductory courses, however, do not have any prerequisites—they can be taken by anyone.

When you take an introductory-level course in a field that may become your major, keep two things in mind. One is that you should put the most work into this course since your grades in your major will be important later. The other is that this is a chance to take a serious look at an area to see whether you might enjoy it for four or more years. Students often do not know what kind of course work a major involves. People majoring in psychology study statistics and rat learning as well as abnormal human behavior. Music majors often spend more time in composition and appreciation classes than they do playing instruments. Premedical students take organic chemistry and physics; they rarely have anything to do with hospitals as part of their official program.

## Class Size

You probably won't have much choice when it comes to class size. Freshman courses are usually the largest on campus and the most likely to be taught with multiple-choice tests and little contact with the professor. Fortunately, small classes aren't essential for good teaching in all subjects. Often, large classes are taught by people with a flair for teaching large groups, so the instructor's ability may make up for the lack of personal contact. If personal attention is important to you in a large class, sign up for one that breaks up into discussion or lab sections on a regular basis. Your section leader can frequently provide you with the personal attention that is lacking in a large course.

## Professors' Reputations

Most schools have some type of student course evaluation form to be filled out at the end of each term. In some schools the results are published, and you can read what last year's students thought of specific courses and professors. If evaluations are not available, you will have to ask around. Unless you find several people agreeing that a professor is superb or horrible, don't let casual comments influence you too much. If, however, a course you want to take is being taught by someone everyone agrees is terrible, consider waiting a year (if it's not the introductory course in your major or otherwise essential). Sometimes professors take turns teaching courses, and you may be able to take the course from someone else.

## Your Other Interests

Take some courses that are of interest to you even if they are not “useful.” Not everything has to relate in an obvious way to your major, a future job, or graduate school. You have four years in which your “job” is to become as well-rounded and broadly educated as possible. If you know nothing about art, consider taking an art appreciation course. If political science is a mystery to you, think about an introductory course. If you’ve always been interested in dinosaurs and cavemen, take physical anthropology or archaeology.

Unless you are very lucky, very wealthy, or very organized, your college years will probably be the last time in your life that you will have this much time and energy to spend on developing yourself as a person. Don’t stick to your narrow professional field or what you did well in during high school—take a chance on something new. If you are worried about your grades, think about taking some courses on a **Pass-Fail** (or **Pass-No Credit**) basis rather than for a letter grade. Many colleges let you do this to encourage you to explore new areas. A schedule with too many courses from the same area is like a meal where the food is all alike—you get full fast! Taking courses in a variety of areas each term may be good for your grades by helping to stimulate you and keep your interest up.

## Keeping Doors Open

This is probably the most important point of all. If you don’t know what you want to major in, take basic courses that leave you as many options as possible (and take them for letter grades, not Pass-Fail). Even if you do know your major, you may change your mind. Leave yourself that option. If you don’t take calculus your first year, for instance, you may eliminate many majors unless you are willing to take calculus later. This may keep you in college longer. Are you so sure that your intended major is what you want or that the way it is taught at your school makes it your best choice? Give some thought to what your second choice might be and leave it open.

## How Much Work Are These Courses?

Try not to overload yourself at any point, but especially not in your first year. Some common overloads are:

## Too Many Labs

A laboratory course takes more time than many other courses. It is constant work, preparing, running, and writing up the experiments. You usually have a lab report due every week; these may be ten pages each and may have to be written in a particular style. Learning this style can take several weeks, during which time you may have to rewrite your old lab reports. One lab course per term is all most people should take.

## Too Many Courses Directly Related to Your Major

Yet another good reason to take courses unrelated to your major (aside from broadening your education) is that if you need to put less effort into one course, it's nice to be registered for some subject in which a lower grade won't hurt you. Of course, you may start by aiming for A's all around, but if you break an arm or your heart halfway through the term, you will be glad that it's clear which course has the lowest priority.

## Unbalanced Workload

Different courses offered by different instructors have different amounts and types of work. Choose courses that look fairly easy in terms of formal requirements to mix with those that require three papers and three exams. Check the syllabus or course outline. If the papers for two different courses are due the same day, obviously you won't be able to wait until the last week to write them both.

## Seek Out Challenging Courses

You may not have the nerve for this your first term, but if all has gone well then you should certainly try to find courses that challenge you. It is particularly important to find courses that let you write a lot. Writing is one of the most important skills you will learn or practice in college; it is useful in any career. Don't wind up with a tremendous skill in taking multiple-choice tests and nothing else (they don't use many multiple-choice tests in the "real" world—but they do ask you to write). The writing you do does not have to be in creative writing courses. Your goal should be clarity, and you can learn that from writing lab reports, term papers, or take-home essay exams.

There are other kinds of challenges, of course, besides writing well. Take some courses in fields that scare you a little—math or sight-reading



music or French conversation or new-criticism English courses. Learn karate or how to swim. Take the courses Pass-Fail if you can and want to so that you don't have the excuse of worrying about your grade. Try new things—you'll be surprised at yourself.

## Scheduling

Suppose you're at a school where students typically carry four or five three-credit courses per term. Using the advice above, you've identified five courses you would like to take. What's the next step? At this point it is important to consider when the courses you want will be given. Obviously, you can't take two courses offered at exactly the same time, and you should allow yourself some time during the day for lunch or a break if at all possible.

Fortunately, many courses are offered in multiple sections—the same course taught at different times by different instructors. In planning your schedule, take into account any commitments you may have both on and off campus. Also, consider when you might study or go to the library. It might seem like a good idea to cram all your classes into two days a week so you can spend the other three days at the library. This doesn't work out well for most people because it is difficult to listen to four lectures in a row and to study for eight hours at a stretch. (Some suggestions on scheduling are given in Chapter 6.) Once you have the schedule that seems best for you, you have what we might call your “preferred battle plan.”

## Now You Must Develop Alternatives

Very few students, especially in their first semester, are able to get the schedule they have planned. When you go to **register** (sign up for your courses), you might be **closed out** of a course that you want to take. This means that the section you are interested in is full before your request has been processed. At many colleges students who have been there for previous semesters are able to **advance register** or **preregister**, and they sometimes take up all the spaces in popular courses. In this case you may have to wait until the next semester when you are a continuing student and can preregister.

Another reason you might not be able to take a course is that there may be some last minute changes in the schedule, and the course may not be offered. You might also go to the first meeting of a class and decide you're not interested in it after all.