

The Essentials for College Success

Precollege counseling, private tutors who specialize in helping students with their college admissions essays, SAT preparation classes—a mini industry has cropped up to assist high school students (and younger) with college selection and preparation. While not all incoming first-year students have access to these resources, all undoubtedly work very hard to prove their potential for success in college. Starting at a very young age—the National Association for College Admission Counseling recommends that precollege counseling begin as early as middle school and junior high—students understand that college is the goal, the ticket to a successful future. Indeed, there is so much emphasis on preparing for college that it is possible to overlook the challenges that students face when they actually get there.

What are the challenges facing today's college student? How can institutions support their incoming students, help them feel connected to their campus community, and make sure they have the tools to succeed academically and personally? After all, institutions realize that by helping incoming students with the transition into college, they can improve student success as well as retention rates.

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Student success depends on overcoming the academic, financial, and personal challenges they encounter. For instance, many first-year college students have not yet mastered the writing, presentation, and study skills they need. Outside of the classroom, they need to familiarize themselves with available campus

resources, learn how to cope with stress in a healthy manner, and figure out how to balance their academic and personal life. And, finally, they have to figure out how to pay for it all and not get mired in student loan or credit card debt. Here are more details on today's college student's ten essentials for success.



- 1 Balance academic life and personal life
- 2 Deal with stress
- 3 Participate in the classroom
- 4 Develop effective study skills
- 5 Hone writing and presentation skills to match college expectations
- 6 Know what campus resources are available and get the most out of them
- 7 Set career goals and follow the necessary steps to achieve them
- 8 Pay for college: understand available financial aid resources
- 9 Avoid credit card debt
- 10 Take control of physical and mental health



1 **Balancing academic life and personal life**

College students of all levels report that one of their top challenges is balancing their academic and personal life. (Kuo, et al.) The youngest students—those newly graduated from high school might be surprised with how much unstructured time they have all of a sudden. College classes meet less frequently than high school classes, after all, and college classes often include little or no daily homework. Such students must learn to structure their study time and activities independently. Other beginning students might have had previous experience managing their schedules, but now need to learn to balance childcare, work, and the academic demands of college.

2 **Dealing with stress**

Stress is a serious issue facing many college students. According to the American College Health Association's 2011 National College Health Assessment (ACHA-NCHA II), 27.5% of students reported that stress had negatively affected their academic performance. 19.1% of students reported that anxiety had negatively affected their academic performance. While some students learn helpful coping mechanisms for dealing with stress (such as exercise, talking with friends and family, and meditation), many are unequipped and turn to negative coping mechanisms, such as drinking or excessive computer gaming (ACHA). Students who experience overwhelming stress are more likely to do poorly in class, to drop classes, or even drop out.

3 **Successfully participating in the classroom**

One of the joys of college—engaging in class discussions and discussing ideas with classmates and instructors—is sometimes a challenge for the first-year student. In a large institution, there are often hundreds of students in the 100-level classes and therefore there are fewer opportunities to ask questions and have smaller group discussions. But even students in a small class might feel reluctant to speak out, either because they lack confidence or they have not had much previous experience as truly active participants. The National Survey of Student Engagement reveals that 59% of first-year students report that they contribute to class discussions or ask questions often or very often, compared to 71% of seniors (NSSE). This suggests that students either have more opportunities to participate in class as they get into the upper level classes or they develop confidence and participation skills.

Students not only learn more when they participate in class, they also get more out of the process and feel more connected to their learning. The earlier students see the importance of meaningful participation and gain the confidence to ask questions and add to discussions, the more invested they'll be in their learning and in the institution they attend.

4 **Developing effective study skills**

The gap between college instructors' expectations of students and students' expectations of what's required of them has made headlines recently. For instance, approximately 20% of college students report that they frequently show up to class unprepared, without having completed the necessary reading (NSSE.) According to the 2011 National Survey of Student Engagement, half of first-year college students expect they can get by spending 15 hours or fewer per week studying and otherwise preparing for their classes. (And many of those same students report at the end of their first year that they actually spent fewer than 10 hours per week!) However, most college professors expect students to spend 18 – 20 hours per week studying and preparing for classes. (NSSE.) Not surprisingly, first-year college students often find their first year's grades are not what they were used to earning in high school.

Is this lack of preparedness because students are distracted and not managing their time well? That's part of the story. Only 64% report that they stay focused while reading material for class. Just 62% manage to frequently avoid distractions when they are preparing or studying for class (NSSE). 12.4% of students reported that their use of the Internet and/or computer games had negatively impacted their academic performance (ACHA).

But those numbers still leave a lot of students who study hard but may not know how to study effectively. For example, college students tend to study alone and at home and use a limited number of study tactics (Kuo, et al.), even though educational research has proven that students learn best when they employ a variety of strategies. Also, 88% of first-year students reported frequently taking careful notes in class, but only 77% felt they frequently organized those notes in a useful way, and just 66% made a habit of reviewing their notes after class (NSSE).

5 **Honing writing and presentation skills to match college expectations**

Strong writing and presentation skills are critical for success in college and beyond. Yet professors report that many incoming first-year students do not meet the expectations of college-level writing and presentation assignments. Colleges have a plethora of resources available—such as writing and tutoring centers—but many first-year students are either not aware of these resources or not taking advantage of them. In one recent study, most students surveyed reported that they never or rarely make use of their college study skills center or other resources such as peer tutors (Kuo). Many first-year students are also reluctant to meet with their instructors outside of class to discuss ideas, seek clarification, or ask questions.

6 **Knowing what campus resources are available and getting the most out of them**

In some ways starting college is like moving to another country. Students know the basics—where they are and how they got there—but they need to get the lay of the land before they can focus on their daily academic development.

First-year students benefit academically and socially when they have a chance to get acclimated, figure out what resources are available to them on campus, and learn about the culture of their new school. Colleges also recognize the importance of guiding students through this transition. In American College Testing's (ACT) 2004 survey called *What Works in Student Retention*, colleges overwhelmingly reported that first-year programs, academic advising, and learning support were key to improving student retention (Habley).

In fact, the most common reasons for offering a first-year seminar or orientation program are to orient students to campus, help them feel connected to the institution, as well as to develop academic skills (National Resource Center).

According to a 2010 study of colleges' efforts to improve undergraduate student success and retention, 67% of students who participate in an orientation are more knowledgeable of the institution, facilities, and service, and 61% of students felt more connected to other students, faculty, and staff because they participated in an orientation (Barefoot).

7 Setting career goals and following the necessary steps to achieve them

This is a challenge that many first-year students don't even recognize as a challenge. While some students arrive on campus with a strong sense of what they want to major in and what career path they'll follow after college, many have no idea what professional path they might pursue. Both mindsets are completely normal, of course. One of the purposes of college, after all, is to explore new ideas and find a passion, which is why some 70% of those students who declare a major right away end up changing it. However, it never is too early to think about career goals and how to pursue them. Students need not commit to one path, but if they familiarize themselves with the career center and other career-building resources on campus, they'll find many opportunities that might help them discover a career goal.

8 Paying for college—and understanding available financial aid resources

34.1% of current college students report that in the past 12 months their finances or financial situation had been “very difficult to handle” or “traumatic” (ACHA-NCHA II). It's no wonder that so many students find paying for college stressful. According to the 2010 Digest of Education Statistics, “Between 1999–2000 and 2009–10, prices for undergraduate tuition, room, and board at public institutions rose 37 percent, and prices at private institutions rose 25 percent, after adjustment for inflation. In 2007–08, about 80 percent of full-time undergraduate students received financial aid (grants, loans, work-study, or aid of multiple types). About 63 percent of full-time undergraduates received federal financial aid in 2007–08, and 63 percent received aid from nonfederal sources. (Some students receive aid from both federal and nonfederal sources.)” (Snyder and Dillow). In 2008,

the average student graduated with over \$22,000 in student loans (National Center for Educational Statistics). 1 in 10 students graduate with over \$40,000 in student loans (projectonstudentdebt.org). According to a 2002 Nellie Mae Study, 55% of students who took out loans for their education feel burdened by their debt. (Nellie Mae 2002 National Student Loan Survey).

To make matters more confusing, there are private loans available to students that do not have the same kind of safeguards that government-backed loans do. With such loans, students risk having their financial future hijacked by through-the-roof interest rates.

Because student loan debt is for many people one of the most significant financial commitments they'll make, students need to understand what it is, how to obtain it, how to use it wisely, and what it will take for them to pay it back.

9 Avoiding credit card debt

Unlike student loan debt, credit card debt rarely pays off in future earnings. Credit cards are readily available to first-year students, many of whom do not have much experience managing personal debt and may not fully understand the importance of building a solid credit history. According to student loan lender Sallie Mae, student credit card debt has increased since the recession. The average undergraduate student's monthly balance is over \$3,000. In 2009, 1 in 3 students reported putting their tuition on plastic and 9 in 10 students reported charging textbooks and other direct education expenses to their cards (Sallie Mae). Perhaps not surprisingly, almost 7% of debtors applying for bankruptcy now are between the ages of 18 and 24 (Government Accountability Office).

10 Taking control of physical and mental health

Success in college depends on good health and good health education. *Life During College* starts the conversation. For many first-year students, college is the first time they've had full responsibility over their health. It's also a time of increased health risks, as students encounter new stressors and have more freedom to do as they please. First-year students between the ages of 18 and 24 are at risk for alcohol and drug abuse, sexually transmitted diseases, and eating disorders. Other health issues, such as sinus infections, don't get much press but still affect college students, who often lack the experience to recognize when they should seek medical attention and when they should just “wait it out.”

It's critical that students understand the risk factors that can cause such health issues, learn to recognize warning signs in themselves and their peers, and know where to go for assistance or advice. Incoming students need to become familiar with the health services available to them so that if they encounter a health issue they'll know how to get help—and they'll feel comfortable accessing that resource.

The American College Health Association's (ACHA) Standards of Practice for Health Promotion in Higher Education states that colleges and universities should “incorporate health promotion initiatives into... academic courses” and “disseminate research that demonstrates the effect of individual health behaviors and environmental factors on student learning.” *Life During College* helps meet these standards as it provides students with an overview of common health issues college students encounter as well as key resources—on campus and otherwise—they can turn to for assistance (ACHA).

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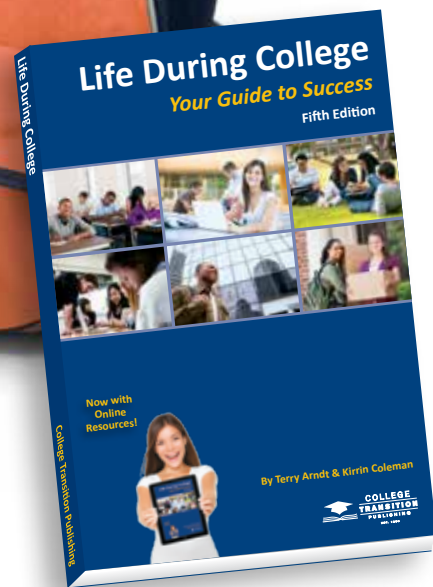
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