

Tips for First-Year Students

Adapted from <http://www.smu.edu/alec/tips.html>

Tip #1: Go To Class

New students often hear that in college you can go to class anytime you want. NOT TRUE. Some classes may seem less interesting than others, but college is not for entertainment. Experienced students often say that the more time they spend in class, the less time they need to study outside of class.

Tip #2: Learn the Campus

One campus tour seldom provides the geographical knowledge needed to get around a major university. Become an explorer and spend time locating where major academic and service departments are located. Don't become a senior who is still trying to find the library!

Tip #3: Know the University Has Academic Rules

No one memorizes all the rules--but everyone should have a copy available. Academic policies are found in the General Catalog and on university web sites (like this one!). If in doubt about a rule or policy, contact the Office of Advising Services for help. Do not become one of those who says, "But nobody *told* me..."

Tip #4: Check Out Rumors

Rumors of all types fly across a campus. While almost all rumors contain a particle of truth, most are largely fiction. Check program or academic rumors with professors or advisors before changing anything related to class preparation or scheduling.

Tip #5: Budget Your Time

Have a social life, but plan your study time properly. Do not begin to study for a test or write a paper the night before either is due. Read all syllabi early for dates and note them on a calendar. Remember, sleep is also needed, so budget for that as well!

Tip #6: Accept Constructive Criticism

Keep in mind that when a professor critiques your work, he or she is doing you a favor. This is not personal; any work can be improved. The more "red lines" you see on a paper, the more time that the professor took to point out ways for you to improve. It is very frustrating to see a grade assigned to a paper or test with no comments or feedback as to how that grade was determined or how you can do better next time.

Tip #7: Realize That Being a Student Is A Full-Time Job

You can't work hard only one day a week and earn acceptable grades. Look at college as a full-time job for this stage of your life. Focus on good academic habits, social skills, and balancing priorities. Now is the time to develop skills that will be expected after graduation in your selected career.

Tip #8: Develop an Appreciation for the Mastery of Language

No matter what your major or discipline of interest, the single most important skill for life success is communication. Understand what language is acceptable and in what situations. How you

communicate your knowledge, skills, and opinions demonstrates the depth of your education. Even if your grades in technical courses get you that first job, it is your communication skills--usually in writing--that will get you a promotion.

Tip #9: Become Part Of University Life

Becoming part of the campus community is just as important as going to class, writing papers, and taking exams. Don't join every group; selectively participate in activities that will offer balance to your life. Take advantage of the wide variety of university experiences. You may never again encounter the broad range of interesting and challenging opportunities that a university education offers.

Tip #10: Get To Know Your Professors Before You Graduate

Begin by targeting some faculty that you think are worth knowing before you graduate. Who are you likely to have in more than one course? These are the professors who will evaluate your work, supply references for future career options or graduate school, and help guide your intellectual development. Most faculty members are very approachable; don't let titles of "professor" or "doctor" frighten you. Those titles represent their achievement, and these are the people who will help you attain the goals you have set for yourself.

Tip #11: Have the Courage of Your Confusions

In high school, a "good student" is supposed to know all the answers and get everything right. But in college, you take on more difficult challenges and more demanding material. It is no longer possible to have "all the answers." Beyond college, that kind of high school perfection isn't even remotely possible. Learn to be patient with others and with yourself. Learn to function well in situations where 100% success isn't possible. Seek out and value the big questions that are more important than answers.

Tip #12: Be Patient with Yourself

You will make errors or mistakes during your collegiate career. Be assured that you are not DOOMED. When you realize, or even think, you have goofed, set out to correct it, learn from it, and keep moving toward your goals.

Tip #13: Make Your Own Decisions

Seeking advice is always nice. Trying to play it safe and avoid making decisions can lead to as many problems as making uninformed or risky choices. Weigh options and gather as much information as possible. Accept responsibility for your decisions.

Tip #14: You Are in School for Your Education, Not Someone Else's

If you enter college just to please everyone else, or even ANYONE else, you will end up pleasing no one. If you let others decide what you are going to major in, where you attend college, and what you are going to be, you have ignored your responsibility to yourself.

Tip #15: Know Your Academic Situation Before the Withdrawal Period

If you have a question or concern about how you are doing in a class, go to the professor and discuss it. Keep yourself informed and record all grades received for each assignment. Read each syllabus carefully, and pay attention to the weight of all assignments as they determine the final grade in each course. Keep all grades updated.

Tip #16: Learn To Communicate in the Classroom

There are no dumb questions concerning subject matter. If you don't know or don't understand something, chances are several of your classmates don't either. Learning to ask questions is a skill. Develop it!

Tip #17: Safeguard Your Physical and Mental Well-Being

When exhausted, rest. Eat proper food and know when to relax. Plan exercise into your schedule. No one is going to thank you for working yourself into a frazzle or getting sick, let alone for staying up all night. It is amazing how many students demand their independence yet simply do not know how to take care of themselves.

Tip #18: Accept Responsibility for Yourself and Your Behavior

If what you say and do is prompted by others, or if nothing is ever your fault because others "pushed" or "misguided" you, you cannot claim to be an adult, just an immature follower.

Tip #19: It Does Not Help to Blame Others for Your Academic Problems

If you are not doing well academically, get help. Very few students get through college without some assistance. If it takes you longer to learn material or even to graduate, so what? Remove distractions when studying. Go to review sessions and use tutoring services. GO TO CLASS and participate. Don't blame your professors, your roommate, your counselor or your teaching assistants. Get their help to eliminate the problems.

Tip #20: Locate and Use All University Services

The university DOES want you to succeed and will help you by means of all its services. These range from math and writing skills centers to personal counseling. Let the university assist you. You are paying for these services in the form of tuition and fees.

Tip #21: Write Home

It may sound silly but parents and family can prove to be the best support service. Families honestly want to know how you are doing. They may not be able to do more than listen, but that act alone is essential to your well-being. Siblings, grandparents, and neighborhood friends are in your corner and want you to succeed. Let them share in your new life.

P.S. E-mail works great!