

How to succeed at University: 12 tips for undergraduate students

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About a year ago I wrote a post about “[10 tips to success at University](#)“. Since that time, this list has increased, and it’s also clear that these tips don’t just apply to incoming students. Therefore, I thought it appropriate to update this post ... and it’s now **12 Tips for success!** Hope you find this helpful!

The start of term is an exciting time for those of us involved in Academia – new students are arriving on campus, full of enthusiasm, hope, and questions. As a Program Director, I am asked a lot of these questions, and I am sometimes asked for advice. I thought it worthwhile providing some tips for incoming and in-course students, and perhaps some of these will help make your time in college a little easier..

1. Work hard. At the end of the day, hard work pays off. You made it into college, which suggests you have the fundamental skill set required for higher education, but don’t forget to keep your eye on the ball and buckle down and get the work done! It’s easy to get swayed by social life, engagement in students clubs and activities, and by trips home to see family. These things are all important, but success largely rests with a student’s ability to develop and maintain a strong work ethic. Make lists, prioritize, and focus on getting the “job” of being a student done well.

2. Meet your academic advisor: Most academic programs have an ‘academic advisor’ associated with them. These individuals are there to help students get through their program, and advisors typically help students with course selection, and help plan a student’s academic program. When arriving on campus, you should book a meeting with your advisor, and more importantly, listen to their advice! Advisors know the ins and outs of your

program, and paying attention to them will help you in the long run. You don't want to end up messing up your academic program because you decided to avoid taking required courses early on in your program!

3. Have an agenda, and use it: This seems like pretty obvious advice, but you would be surprised how many students don't have a good system for managing time. University is a lot about managing your time: getting to classes, dealing with e-mails, assignments, planning for exams, facebook, and squeezing in a social life, or a part-time job. It's a struggle to manage all these tasks, and to help with this, develop a clear and straightforward system of 'calendar + tasks'. Under calendar, include your class schedule, important dates and meetings, and most importantly, LOOK at the calendar regularly! For tasks, include short-term tasks (with deadlines) and long-term tasks, so that you are reminded of deadlines. I use a small notebook for my task list, and it is always with me – for me, the act of physically writing down a task list helps me remember what I need to work on. A good system for your agenda and tasks will make your life a lot easier. Furthermore, effective use of an agenda and task list will help you refine your time management skills, and these skills are truly essential to success in college (and for your career, beyond...).

4. Show up on time and don't miss deadlines: Again, this seems pretty obvious, but it's also pretty easy to mess up. Treat college like a professional job – you need to be mature, you must be on time, and you never miss deadlines. In fact, aim to have everything done early (with good time management skills, this is very possible!). Being late to lectures, or having to ask for extensions on papers or projects, does you no favours. At some point, you may need to ask your Professors for a letter of reference, and it is much better to be remembered as the students who hands in papers early.

5. Go to lectures: Lectures are there for a reason: they provide you with value-added content. It's true that some of the content may be available online, or with a textbook, but in most cases, lectures will help to draw connections between different content, and/or provide

a valuable context to the material that might be in the textbook or online. Professors take a lot of pride in lecturing, and work hard to make the lectures engaging, interesting, and thought-provoking. You will soak up an amazing amount of material by just being in lectures, and paying attention.

6. Keep up! This point is closely related to the previous few ideas – but is important to keep in mind as a separate item. Assignments do tend to sneak up on you – deadlines seem so far away, until you realize that there are three written reports due within a two week period, with Thanksgiving in the middle! Similarly, lecture content builds upon itself, and assuming you will just naturally be able to keep up may not be the best idea. Try to build some habits in your life so that you review the content soon after each lecture and/or spend a bit of time each morning prepping for your day and keeping an eye on the week ahead. Do your best to stay on top of the material: in my experience, if students start to fall behind a little bit, this quickly spirals as the weeks pass by, and the stress level increases as you try cram for an assignment or final exam.

7. Ask questions: In most of my classes, I tell students that there are no stupid questions (except for “*Will this be on the exam?*”). This is very, very true. If you are confused about a concept, or failed to get the point of a slide, or discussion, you **must** ask for clarification. Although it can be intimidating to ask a question in a large lecture hall, it’s important to try. If you are confused, it’s highly likely that other student’s are also confused. You are helping yourself, and your peers, when you put your hand up.

8. Get to know your instructors: Whenever possible, get to know the instructors of your courses. Most instructors have office hours, and these hours are there for good reason – they provide time to meet your instructor, ask questions, and have a personal connection with them. Don’t be intimidated by the Professors: we are people, too, and most of us recognize that life as an undergraduate student can be stressful and difficult. We can provide you help with course content, but also help direct you to other resources. Getting to know your

instructors also helps when you might be seeking a summer job in the future, or when you need a letter of recommendation.

9. Get help when you are struggling: At some point in your college career you will likely need help, whether it is with difficulties with a personal relationship, failing a course, or getting sick. Don't hesitate to seek help when you need it – visit health services when you are sick, or talk to your academic advisor if you are having difficulties with your program. Most importantly: **know what services are available ahead of time**, so when you need assistance, you know how to get it.

10. Avoid 'grade panic': I am living proof that it is possible to do poorly at undergraduate courses yet still have a successful career! When I was an undergraduate student at the University of Guelph, I just about failed my first year physics course and I was terrified that this would make it impossible to succeed in any kind of career. Of course this was not the case – a University education is much more than a single course, or a single quiz or examination – an academic program has many components and even if some of the components slow down occasionally, this does not mean the program is broken. Aim for excellence in your academics, but also remember that EVERYONE has bad days, performs poorly on an exam, or just can't seem to figure out a particular subject. This is normal, and you must keep everything in perspective! **Your college career is not defined by a single moment of failure** – keep the bigger picture in perspective, and don't sweat the small failures. In a college environment, success at everything is nearly impossible to achieve. Keep a level head, keep calm, aim for excellence, but don't panic when things go wrong.

11. Stay healthy: Your mother was right – eat your vegetable and get some sleep. Your best line of defense against illness is a healthy immune system, and part of that includes nutrition, sleep, and exercise. I think it's more important to be less prepared but well rested than over-prepared and exhausted – and if you attended lectures (see point 5, above), your rested mind will be in a good position to access the course content.

12. Have fun! Life as an undergraduate student is incredibly enriching on intellectual, emotional, and social levels. Slow down every now and then, breath deeply, and **remember what an amazing environment you are in**. College provides a wealth of opportunities (student groups, sports, lectures, laboratories, and more), and these are all extremely rewarding in many ways. Don't forget to take it all in – in the future, you will remember a lot of details from your college days and you want these memories to be more than sweating over deadlines.