

WILL THIS BE ON THE TEST?

**What Your Professors Really Want You
to Know about Succeeding in College**

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With Jennifer E. Price

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PREFACE

Over my four decades of teaching, I've noticed many misconceptions on the part of students that affect their ability to be successful in college. Many believe that colleges operate the way high schools do, with teachers who decorate the bulletin boards in their classrooms, check homework, and review intensively to get all of their students to pass the end-of-course exams. But colleges and college professors are different.

If freshmen had a better understanding of the higher education system, they could make more effective use of their four years and thousands of tuition dollars to set themselves up for a lifetime of success. This book is a guide, from the perspective of your professors, about how to get the most out of college courses, create academic relationships, and develop valuable skills for the future.

There are other books that give advice about other aspects of college life, such as how to get along with your roommate or how to manage your college loans. This book focuses on academics, which is the primary reason that colleges exist. A book came out a few years ago called *My Freshman Year: What a Professor Learned by Becoming a Student*. The author, Rebekah Nathan, was an anthropology professor who went undercover as a freshman at the large state university where she taught. As she suspected, she found that students did not understand the process of teaching and learning in the ways instructors wish them to. That's when I realized that a professor can go undercover as a student to see the student perspective, but no college freshman can go undercover as a professor to see the professor's point of view. This book is my attempt to show students the professors' perspective and how we expect our students to perform.

In 1996, I taught a math course for master's students who were preparing to be elementary school teachers. One of the students was a bright young woman, Mindi, who had recently finished her bachelor's degree at a large, prestigious state university. She told me the story of her initial experience there and how she nearly dropped out. She was the first person in her family to go to college. She didn't understand the workings of the college environment and assumed it would be an extension of how high school worked. She was overwhelmed by the complexities. She didn't know how to structure her work without daily deadlines and reminders. Or that she could go to the instructor's office to discuss her concerns about her progress or her cluelessness about expectations. She didn't know other students in her classes, so she felt alone. She didn't know about the support systems offered by the college, such as a writing center or tutoring services. Her response was to crawl into bed and pull the covers over her head.

Mindi was saved by four students who lived on her floor of the dorm. They recognized her plight and pulled her out from under the blankets and helped her figure it all out. Mindi said she was eternally grateful to these friends. We talked about how many other students were in her situation but weren't as lucky. The focus of her high school had been on getting her into college. She said she wished that someone had mentored her to know what to expect once she got there.

Some aspects of Mindi's experience are typical of every student's introduction to college. Until students get familiar with the expectations and customs of the new environment, they can be uncomfortable and feel out of place. College is the on-ramp to a competitive job market where not everyone can be a big winner. Using college to develop professional skills and cultivate relationships with professors whose letters of recom-

mendation are crucial to the next step in life can make a big difference.

The stories and cartoons in this book are all based on my experiences and those of hundreds of other professors from all over the country. Colleagues, both friends and strangers, have shared their stories in academic hallways, at conferences, on airplanes, on Facebook, and via email. I have had many messages with the subject line, “Here’s one for your book!” The common thread in their stories is their concern that too many students do not understand the culture and expectations of their college environment—and that this misunderstanding is affecting their academic success.

Our hope is that by reading this book you will be better prepared for the challenges of college classes when you start. If you are clueless, this book will help you get off on the right foot. If you already know a bit about the ropes, it can make you even more accomplished. If you are already in college courses, this book can also help you optimize your efforts. We all want you to be successful while you are in college and for a lifetime afterward.

This book may also be of interest to others, such as parents, professors, college admissions personnel, high school counselors, and others working with students who are college bound. We all share a goal of success for students.

There is a tremendous range of experiences across various colleges. This book will focus on typical experiences at four-year programs. Community colleges sometimes provide more structured support for students than most four-year schools; however, the information in this book is useful for students at all colleges, including two-year programs.

Although this book is based on experiences at American colleges, much of the information is applicable to higher education

in other countries. But there are certainly differences in classroom culture and academic expectations in various countries. For non-US students wishing to apply to American colleges or to come to the United States for a study-abroad experience, this book should be especially valuable.

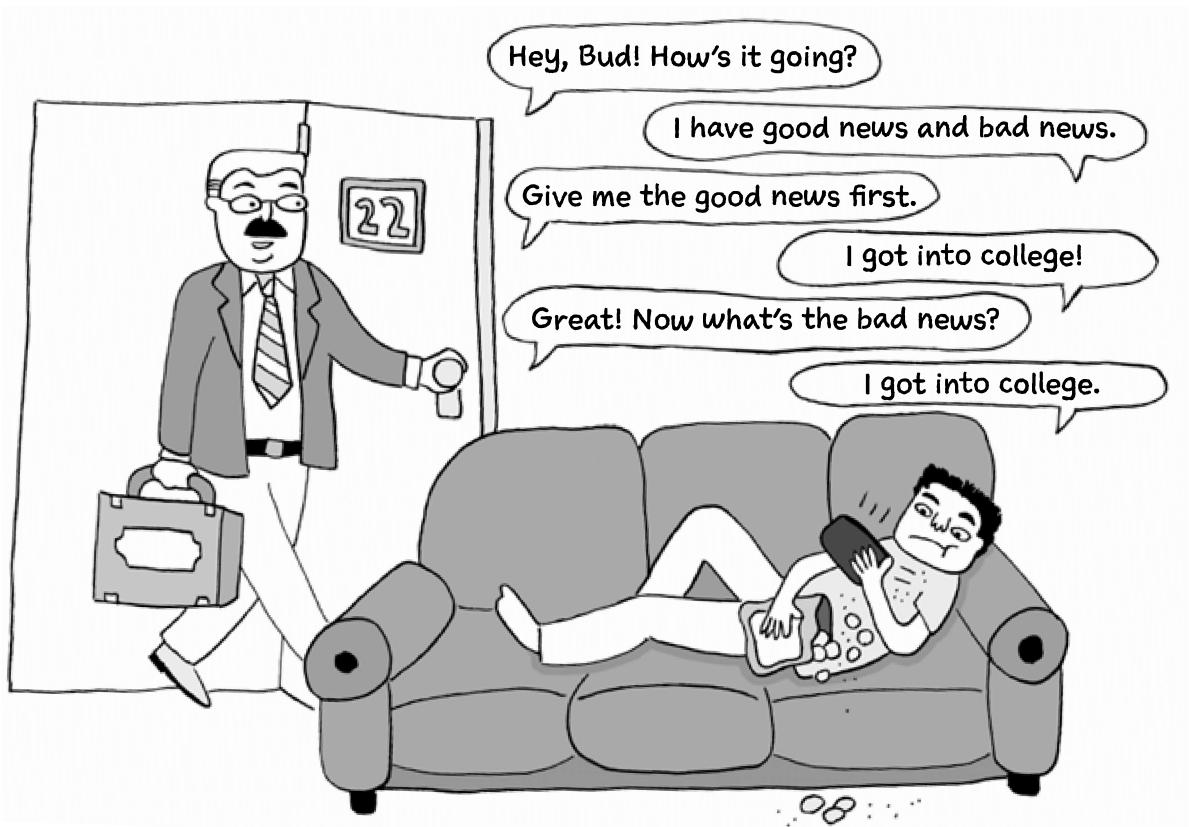
Notes to the reader:

My daughter, Jennifer Price, has written chapters 7 and 12 for this book. She is a biologist and a college instructor with a great deal of experience in teaching online courses.

There is a glossary at the end of this book that defines some academic terms. If you encounter a word that is unfamiliar to you, please check the glossary. Reading the glossary in its entirety may also be a good source of information about college.

Prior to publication, this book was reviewed by high school and college students, professors at a variety of institutions, college admissions personnel, high school counselors, parents, and SAT prep tutors. All were supportive of our mission to provide this sort of good, practical information for college students.

WILL THIS BE ON THE TEST?



INTRODUCTION

Why Are You Going to College?

Not long ago I met a young man who was painting a friend's house. I guessed he was about thirty-seven years old. He was very pleased to tell me that he would be paying off his college loans in a few months, and then he and his fiancée were going to get married and buy a house. I learned that he had only attended college for two and a half years and didn't get a degree. He had spent all that time and money (in school and years more with monthly payments) and had only debt to show for it.

Before you head to college, you need a clear purpose. You should be able to state it. For example, "I'm uncertain about a major, but I am interested in film production or environmental science. I will go to community college for two years to take general requirements. Once I decide on a major, I will transfer to a four-year state school that offers a program that matches my interests." Or, "I would like to major in engineering. I don't know exactly which flavor yet, but I intend to explore the various options by taking courses in different branches of the field." Or, "I would like to become a high school biology teacher so I plan to major in biology and take the courses required for a teaching certificate." Or, "I plan to major in business. My life's dream is to open my own restaurant someday. I hope my courses and an internship in the business world will inform and support me in that plan." Or even, "I want a well-rounded liberal arts education. While I am taking college courses I will explore my options." You can always change your mind, and

you probably will, but you should have a tentative plan. You also need a good attitude and determination to reach your goal.

You must sincerely want to be successful in college, not just go because someone else expects you to.

Unlike high school, college is not mandatory. If you don't have a purpose for going now, consider alternate plans. You might work, enlist in the military, or volunteer for a while.

Taking a "gap year" is increasingly popular. A major source of disappointment for professors is students who are not seriously committed to making the best of their time in school. The National Center for Education Statistics reports only 60 percent of full-time students who began college in 2010 with the intention of achieving a bachelor's degree graduated within six years of entering college. Spending all those years in college is a waste of time if you simply don't know what else to do.

College is also a big financial investment. You can spend \$20,000 or more on your first year of college, but if you don't know how to make the investment work for you, it is a waste of money. Would you spend \$20,000 on a new car and then drive over nails? Or leave it in the garage for a year? Your college dollars need to be invested wisely.

To make the most of your college experience, you should understand what to expect when you get there. This book is intended to help. It can boost your confidence if you know more about what is expected of you and how to navigate the system to your advantage. If you travel to a foreign country, it is prudent to read a guidebook about that country before you go. Think of college as foreign travel (it can feel rather foreign at first). It is better for you to be informed and forewarned before your college transcript records any stumbles and fumbles.



How about taking some notebooks and pens?

Oh, yeah. I guess I could do that.



PART I

GETTING THE BIG PICTURE



Where am I?

CHAPTER 1

It's Not All about You

It was the first day of classes in the fall semester and I was erasing the boards after my calculus class. A student entering for the next class sat down in the front row. I asked him, “Who’s the professor for your course?” He told me and then he added, “I’m surprised that in college the professors don’t have their own classrooms.”

“Hmmm . . .,” I thought. “Clearly this is a freshman, and he doesn’t understand how college is different from high school. He doesn’t know that college professors don’t spend all of their working time in the classroom.” Not surprising, though, as we often assume that everything is the same as what we have already experienced.

How Is College Different from High School?

High schools are all about the students. In high school you are scheduled all day into classes. Even your “free periods” and lunch breaks are scheduled. Attendance is taken in every class. If you’re absent, you’re reported to the attendance office, and a staff member will call your parents if they haven’t already called the school to say you will be out that day. There are rules about what you can wear to school. In many schools you can’t bring aspirin to school and must go to the nurse’s office to get one. You need a note to leave class early and a hall pass to go to the bathroom. Teachers may collect daily homework or pass up and down the aisles to check that you did it. Teachers call your

parents if you don't keep up with the homework. If you fail a test, you might be allowed to retake it. If your grade is low you can often boost it with extra-credit work.

The primary responsibility of high school teachers is to teach. They teach a lot, about twenty-five in-class hours a week. Their classroom is their office. High schools and teachers might be rated on how many of the students pass the end-of-year tests. High school teachers try to get to know you pretty well. They might even know your siblings and your parents.

High school is required for most students and teaching them is the sole focus for high school teachers during the school day. New college students might assume that once they start classes, their professors will hover over them in ways that their parents and high school teachers did. But college is not required, and college professors have many responsibilities other than teaching. High school staff members operate as though they are your guardians and colleges assume that you function as an independent adult.

In college, the number of class meetings is far fewer than in high school. Courses for freshmen may be in large lecture halls with hundreds of students. You might not know any of the other students. The instructor might not know you by name. You might have to bring an ID to take an exam.

If you took AP classes in high school, you may feel that you have an insight into how college courses work. But AP courses meet many more hours and have more activities, assignments, teacher support, and explicit information about passing the exam built into the course. College professors will expect much more independence and resourcefulness from you. In high school you might have gotten extensions on some of your work when you were running behind. In college courses the usual policy is "Deadlines are deadlines!"

One of the big differences between high school and college is that the responsibilities of a college professor may not be primarily teaching. Professors may teach only six hours a week. Does this mean that they have lots of extra time to devote to you? Maybe, but usually not. Some colleges are very small—maybe a few hundred to a thousand students. In these, you are more likely to get personal attention. Professors have professional or administrative responsibilities such as being on committees both in their department and college-wide. They might serve in leadership positions for national professional organizations or journals. They also spend a huge amount of time doing research.

The Difference between a College and a University

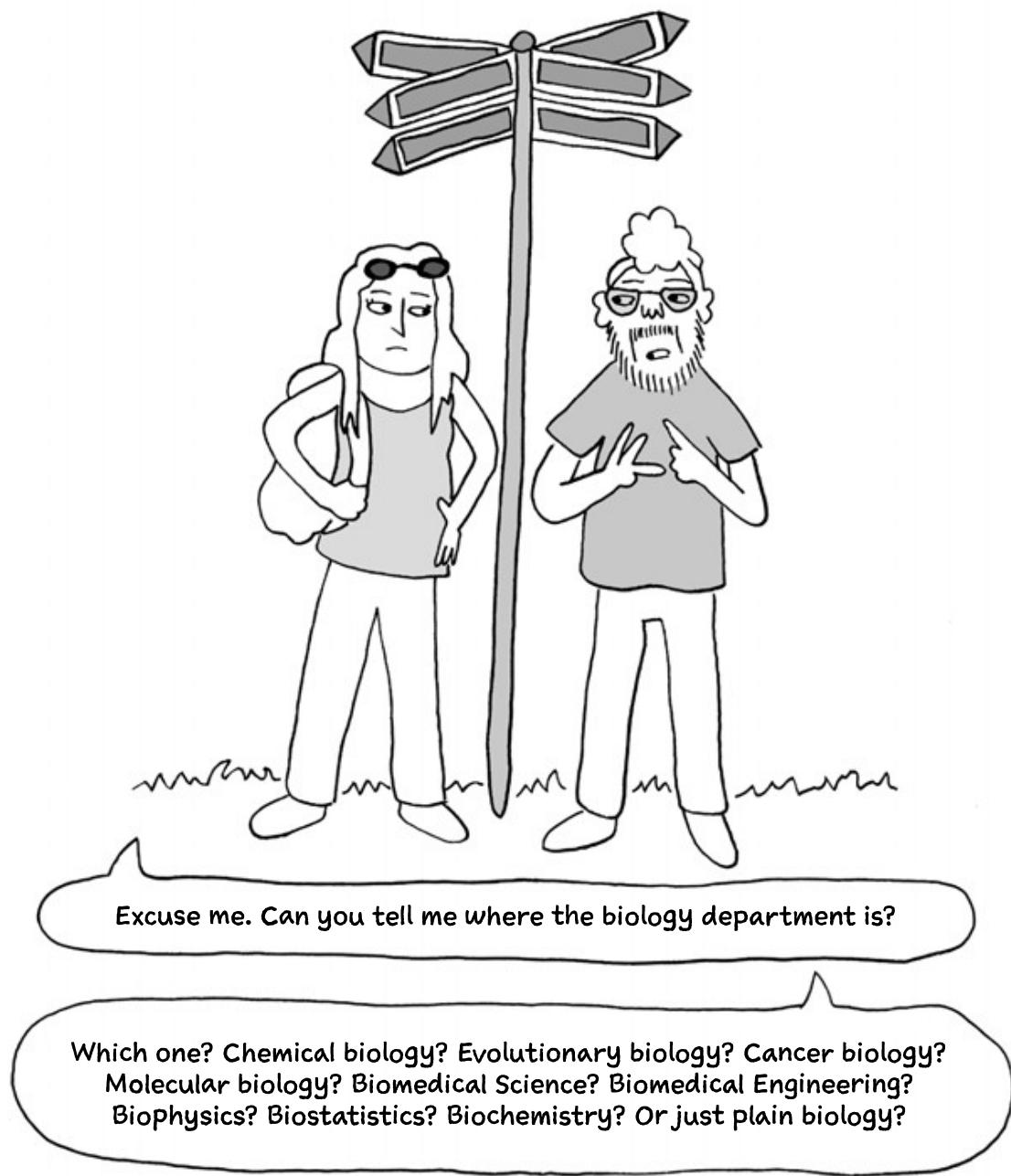
You may have noticed that some “institutions of higher learning” are called colleges and some are called universities. What’s the difference? Colleges usually provide a four-year education that leads to a bachelor’s degree. Students working on this degree are called undergraduates. Universities have graduate programs, most commonly master’s and doctoral programs, but also specialized professional degrees in subjects such as law (LLD or JD), business (MBA), or medicine (MD). Students in these programs are graduate students. At a university, many professors have responsibilities for teaching and advising graduate students as well as teaching an occasional undergraduate course. Take the example of Harvard College. Founded in 1636, the college is part of Harvard University and offers undergraduate education. With the later addition of graduate education, such as the Kennedy School of Government or the famous law and business schools, Harvard University was formed.

A two-year community college will be closer to the style of high school as there may be more attention to attendance

and more safety nets for academic performance. A university, however, will be a huge change in culture for many students, and a four-year college is somewhere in between. A large university is composed of a web of content-specific entities called “schools” or “colleges.” These might include a School of Business, College of Agriculture, School of Public Policy, School of Communication, Law School, College of Arts and Sciences (which usually has departments such as English, Chemistry, Kinesiology, Theater Arts, Sociology, etc.). There may also be what are called professional schools—such as law, medicine, or pharmacy—which do not offer courses for undergraduates. If there is a medical school, there is a teaching hospital. There might be more than one campus in the same city since universities are always expanding.

Beyond classrooms for all these programs, there are large support systems. There are vast IT and technology support systems, development offices (they raise money from people outside the university), publication offices, student support programs, dining halls, an office of alumni relations, an admissions office, recreation centers, huge athletic departments (some universities are better known for their sports than their academic programs), a police department, and a post office. Besides a main library, there are departmental libraries for subjects such as music, physics, or agriculture. There might even be an art gallery or a museum.

There are extensive administrative personnel for all of these components. For the academic side of the university there are people with extra duties and titles such as chair, dean, associate dean, provost, vice-provost, and director. They are all professors of something and may be teaching a course or two, but teaching is not their main responsibility. They all have offices and assistants. This means more buildings, so there is a huge maintenance staff and often new construction going on.



Differences between Colleges and Universities	
COLLEGE	UNIVERSITY
Four-year school	A collection of schools, one of which is an undergraduate program called a college
Offers only bachelor's degrees	Offers both bachelor's degrees and graduate degrees such as master's degrees or doctoral degrees
All students are undergraduates ("undergrads")	Includes students who are undergraduates and graduate students ("grad students")
Professors may or may not be required to do research in their field of study beyond their teaching responsibilities	Professors must be engaged in significant research
	May include professional schools such as law, business, medicine, or education

What Is Research?

This term is fuzzy for most people. If you want to buy a new laptop, you might “research” laptops on the internet. And when many students are assigned a paper, this is what they think of.

They use their favorite search engine or online library sources to find information on a topic. But real academic research is strenuous work. Professors are not usually hired at universities or prestigious colleges until they have a body of research already published, usually resulting from their graduate school work or earlier work experience. A professor's job requires producing original pieces of work that expand the boundaries of knowledge in their field. Other experts in the field must review the results to judge whether they are substantive and *new*. Then they can be published in an academic journal.

The responsibilities of a college professor may not be centered on teaching.

Professors in all academic fields do research, not just the ones wearing goggles in labs with beakers. A political scientist might study public opinions in a foreign country to see how they affect the actions of that government and its relationships with the United States. A horticulturalist might be assessing the effect of agricultural chemicals on bee populations. An education professor might be studying the value of homework to math achievement. An engineering lab might be experimenting with how to make an alloy of certain metals that must be strong but lightweight. An English professor might be analyzing poetry of a certain time and place and its relationship to cultural perspectives of the society. A chemist might test materials that could be used to shield space vehicles or humans from cosmic rays. The possibilities are endless.

Sometimes research professors work alone. Or they may work with one or more colleagues, maybe at their own university, but maybe at another university, in another country, or with their grad students or even undergraduate students.

After professors do the research, they need to share the results of their work. They write articles for journals and books that go through a rigorous review process. It is a proud moment for a professor to have a paper or book manuscript accepted for publication.

Faculty members give research talks in their own departments, at other universities, and at conferences. Their publication record can govern their job security, salary, and promotions. High school teachers are usually paid according to an established scale that reflects the highest degree they hold and the number of years they have been teaching. In colleges, there is no set salary scale. Research that is published in peer-reviewed journals makes a big difference in salary and promotion and so faculty spend a lot of time at it. There is an old saying about this—“Publish or perish!”

The balance between research and teaching is different in various departments and for individual faculty members. While some teach more courses, others may be more active in research.

Special Centers, Institutes, Consortiums, Councils, Laboratories (and More)

There may be groups within a university that receive special funding to support activities such as research projects, professional development, and community outreach. They are not departments that offer a major, but organizations designed to promote advanced and collaborative research and particular projects. They may employ graduate students to assist in the research. Here are some examples from the University of Maryland:

- Maryland Population Research Center
- Joint Space Science Institute
- Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy
- Center for Research on Military Organization
- Consortium on Race, Gender, and Ethnicity
- Council on the Environment
- Center for Heritage Resource Studies

What goes on at the centers? Research. The centers design and implement projects that seek answers to questions or problems. Faculty members who are involved with these centers of intellectual activity may teach fewer traditional courses to accommodate their responsibilities in the center.

If you watch television news or commentary programs, you might notice guests who are university professors who are invited to contribute information or opinions. Under the name of the professor, it might say something like “Director, Center for Politics at the University of Virginia.” These people are considered the “go-to” experts in their fields.

Who Pays for Research?

The primary means of support for research is grants. A grant is a sum of money that is given to an individual or group to support research. The grants may come from government programs, such as the National Science Foundation or the National Endowment for the Humanities; big corporations, such as ExxonMobil; or privately funded foundations, such as the Howard Hughes Medical Institute.

External funding for research is *big* business at a research university. At large universities hundreds of millions of dollars

a year might come from external sources. A professor's grant could pay some of his salary, buy equipment, pay for travel, or hire some help for the project. A percentage of grant money goes directly to the university so the university loves it when professors get grants.

Professors write proposals to apply for these grants. If your professor says she is really busy because she has a grant proposal due soon, she means *really* busy. These grants are competitive and may be essential to an increase in salary, getting a promotion, or remaining employed. If your professor has a grant, it takes a fair amount of time to do the research and manage the administration of the grant as well as write up the results.

Where does a college freshman fit into all of this? College can be a complex web. If you are a new student who is not used to the system, you may feel like a blade of grass on a football field. You need to learn how things work and how to get the attention you need. Read on for some advice.

CHAPTER 2

Just Kidding! It Is All about You

Personal Responsibility

I once had a former calculus student flag me down across the lobby of the main campus library. Tyler ran over and breathlessly told me that he was getting As in all his classes! He said it was because he was doing what I had told his class to do the year before.

“What did I tell you?” I asked in amazement. Had I really stumbled onto a secret for success that was more effective than I knew?

“Do all the homework and don’t miss any classes!” he said. “Hmmm . . . , what a secret formula!” I thought.

“And,” he added, “I am so sorry that I didn’t do it last year in your class, but there were so many clubs to join, new people to meet, late night conversations in the dorms. . . .” Yes, I was sorry too, but not surprised.

You have worked hard to get to college. Once you understand the system you will realize that it is up to you to make the most of your time there. It can be sink or swim. No one is keeping track of you the way they did in high school. There are many rules and expectations in college that are different from high school. It is your job to figure out what they are and use them to guide your efforts.

It may help you to think about the assumptions that you and your professors might have about each other. Here are some examples.

False Assumptions That You Might Make about Your Professors

- Their only responsibility is to teach classes.
- It is their responsibility to tell you everything you need to know and make sure you understand it.
- They all know your name and will take a personal interest in you.
- They will remind you of deadlines.
- They will scaffold every major assignment so that you can inch your way to the final product.
- They will check to see if you completed every homework and reading assignment.
- They will provide an academic safety net and opportunities to recover from fumbles, such as extra credit and extensions on assignments.
- They will review in class for every exam.

Unfortunately for you, these are not valid assumptions. You will be disappointed if you expect all of the supports that you had in high school.

Assumptions That Professors Will Make about You

- You are an adult and can take care of yourself.
- You attend college as your own choice.
- You developed organizational and study skills in high school that will help you be successful in college.
- You will complete all the assignments and readings even if they are not graded.
- You care about learning. You want to learn rather than just “be taught.”

If you don't live up to these expectations, your professors will be disappointed. But you don't mean to fall short—you just don't understand the system.

What Do You Need to Do to Be Successful?

You need to do much more *on your own* than you did in high school. This is a key idea that can lead to success in college. The following are some suggestions that can help you.

Locate your classrooms early. Find all your classrooms at least a day before classes start. Most campuses have many large buildings and possibly some strange configurations inside. Make note of the time needed to reach each class so you get there on time. If you are riding a bike, you can scope out the bike racks in advance for each building.



You do not want to be late on the first day, as you may miss important information about the course. Arrive early and check with another student to make sure you are in the room for the course you are registered for.

Be ready to catch up on your own if you add a class after the first day. Go to see the instructor to introduce yourself and get the syllabus so that you are prepared when you go to class for the first time. This will get you off on a positive note with your professor.

Attend every class. Often attendance is not taken and it is up to you to go or not. Students often think they can read the material rather than attending lectures, or cram at the end of the course, but this doesn't usually work. You are the customer so if you want to pay for classes and not attend, you may. No one will call your parents. But the single most important thing you can do to be successful is go to classes. In my own experience, I have never had a student with a poor attendance record do well in a course.

Read the textbook. Even if the same topics are covered in class, the readings will reinforce and extend your understanding.

Do all assignments and homework. If your college professor does not collect all assigned work, it doesn't mean you don't have to do it. The assignments are designed to assure that if you do them, you will be prepared for work that *is* graded. Since no one is looking over their shoulders, I find college students do not do all the assigned problems, readings, and studying. This works to their disadvantage—not everything that will be on the test will be covered in class.

You need to spend more time outside of class than in class on coursework. College courses have much less class time to cover material than high school courses do. Topics will not be discussed for long periods of time in class, and then reviewed for

multiple days. There are not many activities, reports, worksheets, and so on that are completed during class time. You will need to spend your own time completing assignments, reading texts, preparing for class, and reviewing your notes. Make sure you understand what was covered in the previous class before the next class arrives.

Read the syllabus thoroughly. Use it to guide your work and deadlines. Keep a calendar and mark all deadlines. You should not need a reminder to complete any requirement. See chapter 5 for details on the syllabus.

Check all posted announcements. If your instructor posts announcements and assignments on the course web page, you are responsible for reading them and following any directions given.

Go to office hours. Though this is entirely optional, talking with your instructors outside of class can be a big help. It takes some initiative on your part, but it is well worth the effort. See chapter 8 for details on how office hours work.

Form a study group for each class you are in. Meet regularly with at least one study friend in every course. Others may have different perspectives that will help you.

Get notes from a friend if you miss class. If you are absent, get notes, handouts, announcements from your study friend. Don't expect your instructor to help you catch up. Even if you think you have a good excuse for not being in class, you are never excused from knowing what happened during that class. Further, you cannot assume that you will be allowed to make up graded quizzes or labs you missed.

Come to class prepared. Mark the text or homework with comments and be ready with questions. Make class a real learning experience, not just a time to sit and hope to passively soak up some knowledge.

Some instructors use a technique called the “flipped classroom,” where students are expected to read a text or watch a video as preparation for class. Then more advanced activities, such as analyzing and applying the material, are done in class. If you have not done the preparation, you will be lost in class. Even if the class is not in “flipped” format, you can still read ahead so that you have a preview of the lecture material.

Bring all the right materials to class. That means paper, pen, calculator, or anything special that the syllabus says you need. In high school your teachers may have provided materials for you, but in college you are on your own. Carry supplies in your backpack. Paper and pen are essential. A few paper clips or a mini stapler help keep things organized.

Follow directions. Read the directions for each assignment before you start. Then reread them when you finish to make sure your work matches the task demanded. Not following directions makes you look disorganized or careless and can affect your grade. If you are marked down for not including a particular element of the assignment, you usually will not be given a chance to resubmit your work.

Start early on long-term assignments. In high school you may have waited until the last minute to write a paper and gotten a reasonable grade on it. But those habits may backfire on you in college courses where expectations may be higher and standards tougher.

Ask for help if you need it. If you start a paper early and need some guidance you can go to your instructor’s office hours or the writing center for help. But you can’t take advantage of these resources the night before the paper is due.

Learn when and how to ask questions. If you travel to a new place, would you ask for directions? Hopefully so. College courses are worthy of even more questions as they are new

territory, too. Even small questions. For example, if the professor says he has a copy of an out-of-print book on reserve at the library and you don't know what "on reserve" means, just ask. If you are timid about asking during class, linger and ask at the conclusion.

Be specific in your questions. You can't just email your instructor the day before a test and say, "I don't understand anything." Ask early. Lay out exactly what you are confused about and show that you have worked on understanding it but you need some help. Do this as soon as you are in trouble and the following assignments will be easier. Otherwise confusions will continue to pile up.

Don't spend time spinning your wheels on work you don't understand. Sometimes personal responsibility means knowing when you are being productive in your work and when you are not. I have students come in and say they spent hours on a problem. More than about fifteen minutes may be unproductive. You need to stop and try something different. Contact a classmate to talk with, go to the tutoring center, or see the instructor.

Be ready to study more outside of class. Don't expect class time to be used for a review session before every test. There may be an optional review session offered by the professor outside of class time. You don't have to go, but it is wise to get there. You may be given a study guide or practice exam, but you might not be given answers. Professors do not want you memorizing answers they have given to you.

A rough rule of thumb for college work: You should be spending two hours outside of class for each hour in class.

Start studying for exams early so that you can find help if you need it. Some professors will not reply to questions sent

ASSIGNMENT #1
DUE: SEPT. 12

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-
-

Are there any questions?



When's the first assignment due?



by email within a certain number of hours prior to an exam to discourage students from bombarding them with last-minute questions.

Hard work can make you shine. High SAT scores predict little about your success in college. The students who are the most successful are the organized, conscientious, diligent, and hardworking.

When a student says, “I need an A in this class because I am pre-med,” my reply is, “You will have to work hard.” Successful students do not tell me in advance that they need a good grade nor do they say, “What do I have to do to get an A in this class?” They just do the work conscientiously and earn the good grade.

If you are concerned that you are not doing well and you need to get a certain grade to keep a scholarship or stay off academic probation, you should have a conversation with your instructor. Often she can help you analyze your academic behaviors and give you some suggestions to help you from falling through the cracks. The earlier, the better. After the final grades are assigned, it is too late.

Take advantage of help that is offered. If a professor does offer you a break, make it work for you. If he gives you an extension on a paper and you fail to meet the new deadline, you will not get a break next time. If she offers to read your rough draft if you give it to her three days before it is due and you don’t take advantage of this offer, then you should not complain about negative feedback on the final version.

Be careful about blaming others for your shortcomings. At the conclusion of each course, students have the opportunity to give feedback on the course and the instructor. Professors frequently comment that when students do not do well they are more likely to blame others rather than themselves. They may write, “If she had required us to turn in the homework, I would

have done it.” Or, “He never told us that we needed to proofread our papers.” Or, “She did not remind us of the deadline for the paper.” Or, “His tests were too hard.” Excuses, such as “my alarm clock didn’t go off,” “I had a problem with my email,” or “I was sick and was not in class for the announcement,” are not justifications for failure to meet expectations.

If you start off on the wrong foot, you can recover. There may be a period of adjustment for you in getting used to how things work. You can expect some bumps in the road, but if you are determined to overcome them, you will be fine.

There is a 1973 movie, *The Paper Chase*, in which a beginning law student at Harvard finds himself in an uncomfortable position on the first day of a course called “Contract Law.” He is unaware that readings are assigned and posted on a bulletin board in advance of the first class. The professor calls on him to react to a case covered in those readings. He is caught surprised, unprepared, and embarrassed. His options:

- a. Complain that it is unreasonable for him to know about the assigned readings before classes have begun.
- b. Drop the course.
- c. Work hard for the rest of the course to prove to the professor that he is not the slacker that he appeared to be on the first day.

If you said *c*, you are right. You may have these moments in your undergraduate courses, where there will be no coddling and you will need to swim (rather than sink) by your own efforts.

In summary, it is not up to the professor to make you successful in your coursework. Your personal habits of taking responsibility can make or break your college experience. Even though you are paying for the opportunity to get a college

degree, there is no customer satisfaction guarantee. What you get out of it will depend on what you put into it. There is a great deal of freedom in college and many enticing distractions, but you need to balance your priorities to put yourself in control of your academic success.

CHAPTER 3

Who Are Your Professors?

I was supervising a student teacher at a local high school. During my first visit to her classroom I took a seat in the back of the room, and she introduced me to the class as her professor who was there to watch her teach. A minute later, the student sitting in front of me turned and whispered, “What’s a professor?”

A simple answer to this question is that a professor is an instructor who teaches college courses. The collection of instructors is known as the faculty. A much more complicated answer lies in the next section of this chapter.

Types of Professors

There are many kinds of instructors with different backgrounds, responsibilities, and statuses within a college. They can roughly be divided into two groups, often referred to as “tracks.” Here are some common ones.

Tenure track and its three “ranks”	Non-tenure track (no ranks)
Professor (or Full Professor)	Instructor or Lecturer
Associate Professor	Adjunct Professor/ Adjunct Instructor
Assistant Professor	Visiting Assistant Professor

Tenure track: *Tenure* means the professor is a permanent member of the faculty and can be fired only for very serious misconduct. Professors who are on a tenure track spend a number of years (usually about six) trying to get tenure.

Assistant professors are not yet tenured but hope to be some day. This means they are working hard to publish research, get good teaching evaluations, serve on college committees, and attain some recognition in their field in the academic world.

Associate professor rank is usually attained along with tenure through a process that is referred to as “going up for tenure.” If the process is not successful and the individual is denied tenure, neither does he get a continuing contract at his institution. This can be devastating. Some might look for a new academic position but often they leave academia and try a new profession. If you know an assistant professor who is going up for tenure soon, understand that she may be quite stressed. Every university and department has different ideas about what the criteria for promotion are so decisions can be subjective. And you thought getting accepted to college was stressful!

Professor (also called “full professor”) is the highest rank in the tenure-track line of professors. It is a badge of honor to be promoted to this rank. Usually an outstanding research and publication record, good teaching evaluations, and bringing in grant money are required for this promotion. Even more prestigious is to hold an endowed chair in a department. Not all associate professors become full professors no matter how many years they continue to be employed at the college.

Non-tenure track: Other instructors are on temporary contracts. They may be full time or part time.

The title of instructor or lecturer is usually given to a person who is hired on a yearly contract that may or may not be renewed. An adjunct professor or instructor is a fancy term for “part-time with no benefits.” The pay is set by how many courses the person teaches, and these people are generally underpaid and have no job security. They may be asked to teach for only a semester or two. Sometimes an adjunct is a person who is extremely professionally qualified and is brought in to teach one course as an expert, such as when a state legislator teaches a course on public policy or a superintendent from a local school district teaches a course on leadership in education. It could be a retired professor who enjoys teaching and is doing one course “for the fun of it.” Or, most commonly these days, it is a person who has not been able to find a full-time position and so teaches whatever courses he can find in order to pay his bills. He often hopes that getting his foot in the door somewhere will lead to a full-time position at that institution. Colleges often hire adjunct faculty to save money—they can cover many more courses with adjuncts for the price of a full-time professor. Adjuncts are not required to be on committees or do research. Their only focus is teaching. This could work to your advantage, but on the flip side, adjunct instructors might not be on campus much outside of class time so they might be harder to find when you need some help. Adjuncts often teach at several different universities or have full-time jobs in other fields in addition to teaching a course.

A visiting assistant professor is not in a position that can lead to tenure. This may be in a temporary position, for example, filling in for someone on leave for the year or being paid through one-time funding. The visitor might stay an additional year, but it is not a long-term position. If you want a letter of recommendation from an adjunct or a visitor, you

may not find her at your school the next year so ask for it before the end of the course.

A graduate student may be working as an instructor. At universities there are many grad students who receive financial support in return for some responsibilities. This often entails teaching sections of introductory courses such as freshman composition, college algebra, or science labs. Some schools provide guidance to grad students to help them in teaching but many are on their own.

For the remainder of this book, I will use the terms “instructor,” “professor,” and “faculty member” interchangeably to mean the person who is teaching your course.

Do you know which of your professors are tenured and which are not?

No, I just thought there are the younger ones and the older ones!



What Should You Call Your Professor?

This can be very confusing. If an instructor has a doctorate (PhD, EdD, etc.) it is always appropriate to call her “Doctor.” But not everyone who teaches courses in college has a doctorate. If they don’t or you are not sure, calling your instructor “professor” is safe. At some colleges, all faculty members are called “professor.”

With luck your instructor will tell you on the first day of class what to call her. Some instructors are very formal and some are quite casual. Faculty may ask grad students to call them by their first names, but it would be a mistake for undergrads to assume they should. The exception is if a professor insists (this is rare). If you are not comfortable with that, it is always acceptable to lean to the more formal side. Do you call your coach by his first name? Or your doctor? Or the police officer who stops you for speeding? Or the judge? Titles are tokens of respect.

One place where first names might work is in labs or small discussion sections that are staffed by grad students. They themselves are students and may not feel comfortable with a title. They will tell you what to call them. They may be close to your age and the environment of the classroom may seem informal, but beware of getting too casual with a teaching assistant. He is still your instructor.

I once heard a complaint from a female grad student who asked the freshmen in her lab if they had any questions. A young man blurted out, “Yes, what’s your phone number?” Not only will this kind of behavior get you in trouble in class, but also it might get you fired from a job in your later life. Again, err on the side of formality as it conveys respect.

How Did Your Professor Get to Be One?

Professors have chosen a field of study for which they have a passion and to which they have devoted many years of schooling (maybe six or more) beyond their undergraduate major. When they were students, they were the ones who loved rich classroom discussion, who came prepared for class, who viewed their professors as mentors, who were challenged by the academic environment. They may have sat in the front row of every class and never missed one. They earned good grades or they would not have gotten into graduate school. They did not just get by.

Most college faculty have a “terminal degree,” which means the highest degree in their field. In most fields it is a PhD (doctor of philosophy). In fine arts and performing arts a master of fine arts, or MFA, is considered a terminal degree. A master’s degree in other areas may qualify instructors in non-tenure track positions.

The majority of your professors are engaged in research in their discipline. They are, in a sense, still students. They don’t merely look up information and summarize it. Their mission is to move the boundaries of knowledge forward. Their field of study is not just English, sociology, or art history, but a special slice of the field, such as poetry of the Victorian era, immigration studies, or Italian Renaissance art. The best professors are the ones who want to share their passion about these academic subjects with you and the rest of their students. If the CV (academic résumé) of your professor is posted on her web page, take a look at it to see what she has done and what she is working on now.

**Professors know and
love their subject and
they want you to take
it seriously too!**

What Are Your Professors Like as People?

Many instructors hold high expectations for their students in terms of background knowledge, effective study habits, and proficiency in verbal and math skills. They may not appreciate some of the trends in popular culture that spill over into academic work. For example, spelling matters to them. They may be dismayed by inappropriate and overuse of the word “like.” The professor may not allow you to use a calculator for a test. You may think these things are old-fashioned, but if you want to succeed, pay attention to the professor’s preferences.

The university environment tends to allow professors a flexible workplace culture. There are no standard “business hours” for college instructors. Some arrive on campus very early and some are leisurely about getting there. High schools have some standards of dress for faculty, but not so for colleges. I know one professor who walks the halls in shorts and bare feet no matter what the season. Another wears a sport coat and bow tie every day.

Dedication to helping students varies widely also. One instructor might happily advise student honors projects or schedule special review sessions before exams, even staying late to do so. Unfortunately, there are also professors who are hard to find, even during their office hours. Some return graded papers by the next class meeting, while others are very slow in grading.

Some are sticklers for details, such as never accepting late papers, while others are more flexible. One may allow students to eat breakfast during class, while another may snarl if you unwrap a granola bar.

College culture changes over time. But older professors may not keep up with the new trends, especially relating to technology. I remember the first time a student showed up in my office

with a document on a USB flash drive and I didn't know what it was. All of my students had cell phones before I did. I once sent a whole class an email meant for my daughter because I did not understand the new email software. But just because they are not technologically savvy does not mean professors don't know what they are doing in their field.

Younger faculty can seem more approachable and understanding of all your personal idiosyncrasies. But sometimes they are tougher because they want to command the respect that older faculty seem to have. It is not wise to try to endear yourself to younger faculty by inviting them to your fraternity party, no matter how cool or friendly they seem. It is best to maintain some space between student and instructor.

Professors as Teachers

Sometimes a professor really motivates well and explains clearly while others are frustrated when students don't understand everything they say. I once knew a math professor who just copied the textbook onto the chalkboard. Another refused to answer questions. If you don't click with an instructor, it may be because his teaching style does not suit you. Early in the semester you may drop courses and add others, so don't stay too long in a situation you can see is not comfortable for you. You might visit two sections of the same course on the first day of classes to see which section seems to suit your style better. Then try to change your schedule based on what you find.

You will experience many different levels of skill in college teaching. High school teachers may be subject to many requirements that certify them for teaching. With luck, your professor has an intuition about teaching and maybe had some training while in grad school, but there are no certification

requirements for teaching at the college level. A graduate student may be an even better instructor than a full professor.

Professors at American colleges come from all over the globe. Unlike doctors and lawyers who need to be tested and licensed to practice their profession, the only requirement for college teaching is a graduate degree in the subject matter.

Sometimes accents of non-native speakers of English can be challenging. I heard the story of a math professor from Eastern Europe who pronounced certain words in ways that were difficult for students in the class to understand. Then during a class a student figured out one of the words and blurted it out in the middle of class, “Variable! Variable! That’s the word!” Class members reacted with high-fives and thumbs-ups. The misunderstanding could have been corrected earlier if a student had politely asked the professor to write the word on the board. But students sometimes think it disrespectful to ask.

Your best bet in dealing with the diverse styles and expectations of college faculty is to pay strict attention at the beginning of each course. Read the syllabus thoroughly (see chapter 5) and follow all the rules you find there. The professor gets the last word, so figure out what the expectations of each are and try to meet them. You should note their preferences and respect them.

In the end, professors are people with highly varied backgrounds and personalities. They can be very interesting, so don’t hesitate to talk with them outside of class. Someday you may be asked in a job interview about a professor who inspired or informed your academic or career path. We hope you will be able to think of several that fit that description.

CHAPTER 4

College as a Springboard to the Workplace, the Military, or Graduate School

A student came to my office after a calculus midterm to complain that there were problems on the exam that were not just like problems that had been assigned before. I explained that in the post-college world there is little that will be exactly like anything one did in college. Everything will be an application of skills, knowledge, and abilities that were acquired while in school, but the situations will all be new.

After years of fielding annoying emails and dealing with odd student behaviors, I started asking myself how these things would play out in the workplace. For a while I thought maybe I was being too harsh or that I was not flexible enough to change with the times. However, I have read many articles and have spoken to many employers about their disappointment in the attitudes and habits of young employees.

I found it to be very helpful to translate student behaviors into post-undergrad situations. After all, a bachelor's degree is a stepping-stone to something, so shouldn't we correct behaviors that are inappropriate in that next stage of life? I figured that the workplace, the military, and graduate school would cover most of the destinations for students after graduation.

When students are sending texts during class, I think about how the boss or the client would feel about texting during a meeting. When a student asks for extra-credit opportunities

because he does not like his test score, I think about how an army officer would respond to a request for an extra-credit assignment when one of his soldiers does not meet the standard for the biannual physical fitness test. When a student makes calculation mistakes and does not notice that 200 cubic inches is too large to be the volume of a bagel, I think about her working as a graduate student in a research lab where accuracy is critical.

This chapter relates back to the introduction, which talks about knowing one's purpose for attending college. If you look at the big picture of where you are heading, you will understand the need to develop good habits that will pay off in the next stage of life and avoid bad habits that could derail the post-college career.

One of my colleagues often says to her students, "You need to find your mistakes before I do." This also applies to employment, the military, and grad school. In 1999 the Mars Climate Orbiter became disabled in space due to a programming error that used the wrong units of measurement. If a professor is hard on you because you used the wrong units in your homework solution, she is helping you improve your skills and avoid future disasters.

What Do Employers Want?

Once a student, who was a music major, told me about a job interview question: "How many golf carts are in the United States?" She was rattled by the question and thought it was unfair. I talked her through it, suggesting that the purpose of the question was to see how a prospective employee might approach a problem for which she does not know the answer.

There are no multiple-choice tests in the workplace. You will need lots of skills, attitudes, and knowledge that employers



assume were mastered in your college work. Even more than content knowledge, employers want skills that should be developed in college. Here are some examples:

Problem solving. New problems will need to be solved. A dramatic real-life example can be seen in the movie *Apollo 13*. The film documents the 1970 lunar mission where the crew members of the damaged spacecraft were about to expire due to rapidly increasing carbon dioxide levels. With minutes to spare, the ground crew scrambled to design a makeshift filter and describe its construction to the astronauts for on-the-spot manufacture in the space capsule. This was not a problem they

had ever seen before, but they figured out a solution and it worked.

Work ethic. Employers want employees who are dedicated to doing a good job and getting it done on time. This may mean putting in extra time and effort. Employers want you to take pride in your work, not just view it as the source of a paycheck.

Conforming to an expected schedule. College students are sometimes sloppy about getting to classes, an on-campus job, or appointments with faculty on time. Timeliness is essential in the workplace. One employer told me, “I want to hire someone who can get out of bed and get to work on time and not just do the work when he wants to.” If you run your own business you can set your own schedule, but most people who own their own businesses work longer and harder than anyone else. The military has exact schedules that need to be followed. If you are told to be in formation at 6:30 a.m., you do it. The system cannot work otherwise.

Teamwork. Employers want to hire people who can work on a team. Teamwork is also essential in the military. An army colonel told me, “A squad is only as good as its weakest member.”

College students often do not like working in groups. They prefer to maintain control of their own schedule and products.

**Be open to learning
in group settings.
Employers are looking
for teamwork skills.**

There is much to be learned, however, from interaction with a group. Make the most of these experiences. Be sure to set an early meeting with your group as students have

many competing demands on their time as the semester goes on. Meeting in person is best, but video or telephone conferencing can work also.

Positive attitude. Students who complain about deadlines and the difficulty of assignments may be disadvantaged in the workplace. If employees make excuses, such as “I did not sleep well last night” or “The expectations are too high on this project,” they might not last long on the job. Taking constructive criticism from others is also part of a positive attitude.

Oral communication skills. These might include presentations, expressing ideas in meetings, explaining products to clients, or radio communications while in the field in the military. Conversations in person or on the phone can require good listening in order to be effective.

Writing skills. Make every comment and correction by your college professors a learning experience. Care in revision and proofreading can help. When I read assignments written by students who are studying to be teachers, I correct (in red) spelling, grammar, and usage errors. Since I teach math, sometimes they complain that I am being too hard on them as there is no grade for technical elements in their writing. I explain that when they are practicing teachers, they will be role models for students and will be criticized by parents for flaws in writing. It is far better for you to get feedback from your professor and learn from it than to be corrected by your boss.

Ability to meet deadlines. Employers want self-starters. You will need a set of skills that jump-start the process and get you where you need to go on time. Many college students are masters of procrastination. They can pull an all-nighter at the last minute to meet a deadline, but the product is not always the best. Or they ask for an extension. These habits will not fly in the workplace.

Small deadlines are important also, such as coming to meetings on time without a reminder. This seems like a small part of personal responsibility, but it can pay off in both college and

beyond. Keeping a calendar and being punctual, whether you have an appointment to see a professor or a meeting with the boss, make a big difference.

Social skills. Learn your professor's name and use it. In the working world knowing names will pay off for you. Networking is the name of the game once you leave school. Before cell phones, students used to meet their classmates. They would chat before class started and talk on the way out. Now they seem less willing to interact in person. Put the phone down once in a while. Meet your classmates and use their names to say hello when you see them.

Willingness to learn. I have asked job recruiters what they look for in prospective employees. They say they want smart people who have demonstrated that they have the ability to learn and apply their learning to new situations.

This includes being able to learn new technologies on the job. When I was in college, we entered computer code on punch cards that were submitted to a central server. There were no personal computers, word-processing software, spreadsheets, digital cameras, internet, or cell phones. Personal technology meant calculators and they were very expensive. Your post-college lifetime will hold many more technological changes of this magnitude, and you will need to learn to adapt.

Creativity and leadership. Students who want to be told by professors exactly how to do an assignment will be lost in the working world if they need to be constantly given instructions. It is fine to discuss ideas with others, but make sure that you are contributing some of the ideas.

Be prepared. Think ahead. Anticipate what could go wrong. A colleague told me about a student who walked into his office and asked if he could have a piece of paper. The professor asked why he needed one. To do his homework, the student said. My

friend was shocked that the student was in an academic building but not equipped to do academic work. Suppose you are in the military and you have to ask a fellow for ammo or batteries because you forgot to bring yours. Or on the job you meet with a client and you don't have a way to write notes about the client's requirements.

Heading to Graduate School?

Grad school admissions are competitive. Only the best students from your undergraduate program will get into a master's or doctoral program. There is some demanding coursework required in these programs, but there is also a lot of independent research, writing, and teaching required. Many grad programs will offer competitive assistantships that cover tuition and some extra compensation. You will need great recommendations from professors to be accepted and to get financial support. If grad school is your goal, you need to be developing and applying all the skills employers want as well as good academic skills.

In order for a professor to recommend you, he will need to know more about you than just your grades. Visit office hours; ask for advice on what courses to take and whether there are internships available in the field. There may also be opportunities in your undergraduate years to work on a research project with a professor so that you get an idea of how you like research and what kinds of ideas you would like to work on. Research experience will also enhance your appeal as an applicant to graduate school.

You might consider working for a few years before heading to graduate school. It will give you a better idea of what your next goals are. After a break from years of school, you will probably appreciate the grad school experience more when you get there.

Keep Your Eyes on the Horizon, Even If You Don't Know the Exact Path Yet

You may not know what you will be doing once you graduate from college, but your education is intended to prepare you for financial independence. If you treat your college years as your job and do it well, you will be ready for the next step.

Internships are great learning experiences. You can take advantage of the career center on your campus to help you locate some possibilities. Check departmental bulletin boards (physical and virtual) as well. If you are able to engage in these opportunities while you are in college, they will enhance your understanding of various career paths as well as help you develop some of the skills and habits that employers are looking for.

Older college students who have had some work experience and who are no longer supported by their parents tend to appreciate the trajectory of college work to a career more than students who enter college directly from high school. Since they have been self-sufficient in the working world, they tend to have a post-college goal and actively work toward it.

Think of criticism and suggestions from your professors as mentoring for your future life.

A good instructor will push you, criticize you, and hold you to high standards. Instead of complaining, learn from these experiences; they will help prepare you for the future. Embrace criticism as a

chance to improve. You will be investing a lot of money in your college education. It will pay off for you if you learn the lessons the experience offers.

Though you may be taking some courses that you do not see as directly related to your intended career, there is much that can be learned from a broad range of study. You may develop skills, ideas, and ways of thinking that will help you in the future. You just don't know exactly how yet. For example, a friend told me that studying geology taught her quantitative reasoning skills, to think about patterns that cannot be seen by the naked eye, observation skills, analysis of data, and logic and rational reasoning with some creativity and problem solving thrown in. Though she has a degree in geology, she works in advertising technology and those skills pay off.

When you graduate you will need recommendations from professors in order to move to your next stage (see chapter 10). They will write about the skills and habits that you demonstrated while in college. They will be thinking about whether your past performance gives evidence of success in your next endeavor. Make sure you give them some solid evidence to write about, especially a positive work ethic.