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THE BLOG 08/06/2014 02:01 pm ET | Updated Oct 06, 2014

A Professor's Pointers for Success in College: 21 Easy-to-Follow Tips



By Ann Marie Gardinier Halstead

It's about that time again. Sleepy college towns will begin to awaken, abuzz with an excitement that only college students can inspire. Young scholars will soon arrive on college and university campuses, ready, or not so ready, to take on the world of higher education.

I have been teaching college students for 13 years, and I've come to know a thing or two about what makes some students more successful than others. Whether you're beginning your first year or returning as a seasoned upperclass(wo)man, I hope I can provide some practical advice as you embark on a new academic year. You see, we professors want all of our students to succeed. We want you to learn and grow and thrive, both academically and socially.

So here's to ivy-covered buildings, critical thinking, independence, making friends for life, asking hard questions, becoming global citizens, and discovering who you really are.

1. Don't be anonymous. Introduce yourself to your professors and speak up in class, especially if you attend a large university with huge class sizes. I'm not saying you have to sit in the front row, answer every question and bring the instructor chocolates (did I say chocolates? I meant apples).

Just don't hide in the back of the room and be invisible. Moreover, don't hesitate to ask questions in class; if you're wondering about something, chances are that someone else is

too. If you think of a question outside of class time, visit the professor during office hours (that's the *purpose* of office hours) or send an email (see #9).

2. Read all of your syllabi carefully. The syllabus is your contract for the course. There's no excuse for not being aware of essential information that has been provided to you. In addition, check your email account daily; faculty and staff members will use email to communicate additional information to you.

3. Stay on top of your work. Try not to procrastinate. "Plan ahead" should be your mantra for your academic life. Nobody ever says "Oh shit, I started on that too early," but plenty of students regret waiting until the last minute to begin studying or working on a project. Avoid pulling all-nighters (see Dr. Pamela V. Thacher's study).

4. Turn in all assignments. It's better to hand something in late than not at all; a zero can really hurt your course grade. If you're struggling with an assignment or you fall behind, talk to your instructor — in advance, not the day said assignment is due. Professors are human too (well, most of us are, anyway) and some will consider giving you an extension, especially if you show evidence of progress on the assignment.

5. Work on improving your writing. Take advantage of the writing center and tutors at your school. You won't regret it. Learn how to use commas and semi-colons; they're important. For instance, the difference between "Let's eat, grandma" and "Let's eat grandma" is a dead grandma and my thinking you're a cannibal. In addition, 'there,' 'their' and 'they're' are three different words with three different meanings. For the love of God, please learn how to use these words, and other homonyms, correctly.

6. Always do the assigned readings, even if there isn't a quiz. Professors know when you haven't read, even if they don't call you out on it; you're not fooling anyone.

7. Be aware of each instructor's attendance policy; missing class can adversely affect your grade.

8. Be aware of your institution's academic dishonesty policy and learn how to cite sources correctly. Whether you're writing a paper or giving an oral presentation, you must cite all of your sources. If you do not give credit to the source, you are guilty of plagiarism! I recommend *A Pocket Style Manual* by Diana Hacker or *The Little Seagull Handbook* by Richard Bullock and Francine Weinberg. Do not ever, ever, even *think* about turning in a friend's paper from a previous semester or buying a paper from a web site. It's just not worth it. Trust me on this one.

9. Please use email etiquette; it will make your sweet grandma proud (if you haven't eaten her, that is- see # 5). When emailing a faculty or staff member whom you don't know, do not use the person's first name. Use his/her title, i.e. Dean, Dr., Professor, etc. (Please note that in the arts there are two terminal degrees, an MFA and a PhD; MFAs have the title of Professor, not Dr., so you may want to address arts faculty as Professor if you're unsure.) And for the love of all things good in the world, PLEASE DO NOT USE ALL CAPS, i.e. ANN MARIE, I HAVE TO GET INTO YOUR CLASS OR ELSE... See #10.

10. If you'd like an instructor to add you to a full or over-enrolled course, don't send an email pleading to be added, as s/he is probably inundated with such emails. Drop by the professor's office instead. When you arrive, do yourself a favor and don't barge in without introducing yourself, talking a mile a minute and making demands; this approach is ineffective. A more appropriate strategy is to introduce yourself, ask him if he has time to talk, and state that you'd like to add his course and why (preferably something other than "If you don't let me into your course I'll just die!" complete with tears and jazz hands). Following some basic rules of interpersonal communication will go a long way. If you can't track the professor down, send an email (see #9) and ask if you can set up a time to meet. Please don't harass or blame him for why you haven't gotten into the course in the past, because chances are, he isn't involved in a conspiracy against you and probably doesn't have the power to change the past.

11. If you enjoy a course, let the professor know. S/he will appreciate it, and it may help the instructor to remember you. You never know when you'll need a letter of recommendation or a reference for an internship, a job, or graduate school.

12. When professors write you letters of recommendation, send them a thank you note (the kind from the olden days that involve a pen and an envelope!). Writing recommendation letters is a time-consuming task and one that instructors don't *have* to do; let them know you appreciate it. And if you get into the international program or grad. school or get the internship or job, let your professor know. Nothing makes us happier than seeing you succeed. This is why we do what we do.

13. Broaden your horizons; take a course outside of your program. If you're concerned about not doing well, find out if you can take the course pass/fail so you can focus on learning for learning's sake (what a novel idea!) without it adversely affecting your g.p.a. For instance, take a public speaking course. Many instructors require oral presentations, and this is a skill that will serve you well both during and after college.

14. Show the librarians some love! Don't wander around the library aimlessly. Ask the experts for help. Librarians are some of the most resourceful people you'll ever meet.

15. Take pride in your work and in yourself. Don't compromise your beliefs for anyone.

16. Choose your friends carefully. Your friends are your family away from home. Don't choose a bunch of jackasses to be your family.

17. Don't forget where you come from. Remember the people who helped you get to college in the first place. Call your parents. (*Call* them. Texting is not the same thing!)

18. Choose your major carefully, and make sure you're choosing it for *you*, you're the one who could work in a field connected to that major for, say, 40 YEARS. Work hard for *you*. Get a college degree for *you*, for *your* future. Believe in yourself.

19. Remember that education is the key that will open many doors for you. Don't take it for granted. Take advantage of every opportunity to learn and grow as a student and person. Know that learning happens both in and outside the classroom. Join a club, attend a performance or guest lecture, volunteer. Now is the time to focus on yourself and your education.

20. Be kind. To *everyone*. Not much in this world matters more. And you never know what a difference your kindness might make.

21. Know that you are not alone. If you need support, ask for it. We who have made education our life's work want to see you succeed; let us know how we can help.

Wishing you well,

A prof. who loves her job

Follow Ann Marie Gardinier Halstead on Twitter: www.twitter.com/AMGHalstead



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