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Starting Thoughts...

BY TOM GARRISON

It seems to me that an increasingly (and disturbingly) large number of our students, especially in fall classes, have almost no idea of how to go about tackling the academic realities of college. A couple of years ago, I put together a handout that has become a standard first-day gift for all students in our department. Your students might find it useful as well.



Beginnings are always inspiring. No matter how many semesters you've begun, you can't help but feel the enthusiasm of a college campus at the beginning of a term. This may be your first time experiencing this emotion, or your fifth. As always, there are new classes, new books, new teachers, new routines, new clothes—*let's go!*

But where? To the same old place? To that four-weeks-into-it feeling of “so what?” Remember those semesters when initial enthusiasm was replaced by anxiety, boredom, and a foreboding sense of “what am I doing here?”

Not this time. Not again. This is your chance to break free.

How? If you'll permit an old college professor to pontificate a bit, here are some thoughts:

Have a plan. You and your academic advisor should be carefully arranging your education for effectiveness and efficiency. Even if you're not sure of a major,

make sure you make early contact with a counselor who has interests similar to your own.

Pick your instructors with great care. Have you selected your teachers mainly because their classes fit neatly into your schedule? Don't! Try to interview prospective professors—never forget that we work for you. (Would you engage a surgeon for a delicate operation without ever having met him or her?) At the very least, consult professors and students whom you respect, and heed their opinions.

Be serious about coursework. Your classes are your main job, and should be treated as such. Give an honest eight hours each day to the university, and you'll shine. Do you have an outside job and other obligations? See the next point.

Budget your time. Yes, there is time for everything—but only if you build a personal schedule that arranges the efficient use of that time. Budget recreational time

too, but your first obligation is to make sure all your coursework is up-to-date.

Stand out from the beginning. Your classes are filled with go-getters. Be one of them. Ask questions, contribute to discussions, visit your instructors during office hours, don't be in a rush to leave, hang around the department, befriend the department secretary, invite yourself to lunch, do a little extra.

Don't miss classes. It's fatal to your grades. So is procrastination: do it *now*, and you'll have time to buy a new printer cartridge when the old one runs dry.

Remember that your writing represents you in your absence. You can't say, “But what I *really* meant was...” Learn clear and concise writing, always turn your assignments in on time, and make them legible (please, no odd colors or fonts).

Listen actively. If you've picked the right instructors, they'll have something to say. Don't let your mind wander in class. Ask questions. Take good notes.

Learn how to use a textbook. Yes, you need the assigned text (your professor would not have specified it had it not been essential to your understanding of the material). If you start at the beginning of the chapter, you should have little trouble understanding the concepts as they unfold. But, if you find yourself at the bottom of the page having only scanned (rather than understood) the material, stop there and start that part again. Look ahead to see where the author is going. Write marginal notes, underline *occasional* passages (underlining whole sections is seldom useful), *use* the book!

Vote with your feet. If you're not getting value from a class, or if the instructor is not doing his/her job, drop that class and find one that works for you. And no, you don't want easy classes.

Watch deadlines. Make sure you know when transfer applications are due, when registration begins, when drop dates happen, etc.

Exercise. Eat properly. The Greeks were right about a healthy mind in a healthy body. Schedule rowing, running, weights, surfing, etc., alongside your academic work.

Read voraciously! Have a bunch of books going simultaneously. Read magazines (no, not *People!*). Stay up with world events.

Become part of "The Great Conversation." College is about educated discourse and seeing connections between areas of knowledge. If you choose to become a member of the educated minority of this country, you have a responsibility to lead us toward the greatest good for the greatest numbers. Volunteering in public service is more than just a résumé item.

Remember, you're doing this for you. In the end, your efforts are not for relatives, or friends, lower car insurance rates, or because your parents will make you move out if you don't go to college. You're actually doing this for *yourself*.

Enjoy yourself! Circular but true: life is more fun if you're having fun. Be positive; encourage a good attitude. As Don Quixote reminds us, it's *doing*, not *having*, that fulfills us most completely.

Let us help you. Most faculty members truly love their jobs. Come to our planned events. Drop by our offices and tell us how you're doing. Students, instructors, and authors all work together toward a common goal: an appreciation of the beauty and interrelationships a growing understanding of the world can provide.

And, yes, we really do care.

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