

SUGGESTIONS FOR NEW (AND OLD) STUDENTS TO CONSIDER

Jerry O'Connor,
Oregon State University

These are just some ideas for your consideration. The university wants you to succeed and if you have the brains and talent to meet entry requirements, you have the capabilities to earn your degree. These suggestions were made by those who were successful in obtaining their degree. Apply them to yourself and your progress through collegiate studies will be enhanced.

Go to class

New students often hear that in college "... you can go to class any time you want." Not true! Yes some classes can be boring but not everything in life is interesting and collegiate studies are not a matter of you or anyone else being entertained. So learn to handle the "grunt work" and then you will demonstrate the pattern of good work habits that can only enhance your achievement.

Learn the campus

Every year many students literally got lost. And one campus tour seldom provides the geographic knowledge essential to getting around any major university. So become an explorer and spend some time learning where all the departments are located. Do not become one of those seniors still looking for the library.

Understand that the university has rules

Even if you do not memorize them, always have a copy handy (in the student handbook). Ignorance of what is required is no excuse for failing to perform. Do not become one of those who frequently state: "But no one told me ..."

Ignore rumors

Rumors of all types abound on campus. Almost all have a semblance of truth but most have an abundance of fiction. So if you hear a statement which, if followed could affect your program, check with your advisor. Acting on or putting one's faith in the validity of rumors could prove embarrassing.

Budget time

This includes having a social life but you must learn to plan your study time properly. This means you do not start to study for all that important quiz the night before it is to be given or initiate writing that report the day before it is due (otherwise known as the red-eye special). And to utter the statement: "I work best under pressure" is really a silly excuse for those who really have no choice. Just remember, your lack of foresight is not going to be your advisor's or professor's emergency.

Accept constructive criticism

Bear in mind that when a professor critiques your work, he or she is doing you a favor. Such criticism is not meant to be personal, nor should you take it that way. No matter how competent you may be, all work can be improved. Indeed if your work is heavily red-lined, it means that professor took a lot of time to show you how to improve. How would you feel if a professor did not read the paper or test and simply assigned a grade? Wouldn't you be just a little angry? If you feel free to criticize your instructors (and you will), be prepared to understand and accept academic criticism.

Being a student is a full-time job

You cannot work hard one day a week and hope your grades will be above average. In addition, you must focus on not just academics, but also on your social skills and interaction with others in university-sponsored activities; and still know when to study. Look upon college as a full time job.

Develop an appreciation for the mastery of the language

No matter what your major or discipline of interest is, the single most important skill for life success is communication. Just remember also that it is language that places you above the animals when properly used or below them when you abuse it. It is how you communicate your skills that demonstrates the depth of your education.

Become a part of the university

Becoming part of the university community is just as important as going to class, writing papers or taking exams. This does not mean you should join every group but learn to be selective and then participate. Being involved will only enhance your university experience. Do not become a hermit.

Get to know some professors before you graduate

This is hard for new students but, at least you can target some faculty you may think are worth knowing before you graduate. Your professors are the individuals who will evaluate your work, supply references for that future career post or for graduate school, and guide your intellectual development. Should you be fortunate enough to develop a bond of friendship, you will find they are invaluable mentors during the rough periods of your academic life. It is true you may develop some negative feelings towards some as you progress. This would be true at any college or university. But the majority are quite approachable and do not let the titles of professor or doctor frighten you. Those titles were their achievement and they will help you attain your goals you have set for yourself.

There is nothing wrong in being initially confused

Some students get upset when they realize they have not mastered all the facets of collegiate life during their first term. They are even more upset when they cannot answer the horrible but well-meaning question, “What are going to do when you graduate?” (and only as freshpersons yet). Bear in mind that college is a way of life. You will be learning to the way, seniors cope with it every day and that is as it should be. So if you are worried about your initial confusion, you are only acting normal. Being normal is a state you work for, not assume it will happen. By the way, seniors about to graduate frequently express greater anxiety about leaving college than do new freshpersons when they enter school. So if you think being a freshperson is tough, try being a senior.

Be patient with yourself

You will make errors or seeming mistakes during your academic career. Please be assured you are not doomed. When you realize or even think you have made a “goof,” set out to remove or correct it. If you don’t, it can fester and create other problems. This is when your advisor or counselor becomes very important.

Make your own decisions

Seeking advice is always wise. Trying to play it safe and avoid making choices can lead to serious personal dissatisfaction. You must learn to take a chance (not a needless risk) when options are available and accept responsibility for your decisions. If you can do that, you are displaying the attributes of responsible adulthood.

You are in school for your education, not for someone else’s

If you entered college just to please someone else, or anyone else, you will end up pleasing no one, least of all yourself. While parents, guardians and friends should be concerned about your academic welfare, it is your education, your degree and your life. Lead it! If you let others decide just what you are going to study and just what you are going to be, you have ignored your responsibility to yourself. Yes making decisions and worrying about the possible consequences is hard, but you can do it.

Know your academic situation prior to the withdrawal period

If you have a question or concern about how you are doing in class, go to the professor and discuss it. If you wait until after mid-terms or wait until the last week to “see how things are going” and experience failure, playing academic catch-up can be a no-win situation. Keep yourself informed about how you are doing.

Learn to communicate in the classroom

There are no dumb questions concerning subject matter. If you do not know or do not understand something, you can be sure that many of your peers do not either. Learning to ask questions is a real skill and you need to develop it.

Safeguard your physical and mental well-being

When exhausted, rest. Eat proper food and know when to relax (not sluff-off). No one is going to thank you for working yourself into a frazzle or getting ill by ignoring your body’s or mind’s basic needs. It is amazing how many students who clamber for their “independence” simply do not know how to take care for themselves.

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 allegedly “pushed” you, you really cannot claim to be an adult, just a pathetic follower.

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. So what if it takes a little longer to learn the material or even to graduate? But if you are having academic problems and can only offer a myriad of excuses or blame others for your failure to perform, you are simply seeking a “cop-out” for your ineptitude.

Locate and use all university services

Contrary to what some believe, the university does want you to succeed and will help you by means of all its services. These range from writing and math labs to personal counseling. Let the university serve you. After all, it is your school.

Write home

It may sound silly but your parents can prove to be your strongest support service. They want to know honestly and truthfully just how you are doing. They may not know how to help other than listening, but that alone is essential for your well-being. Years ago one young student screamed at his advisor about the father, “He won’t understand.” This advisor’s response was, “But he will know you are hurting so call him.” And the student used my phone. The father was on the next plane to the campus and they had a great and meaningful reunion. The student graduated cum laude three years later and confessed, “I did not know that my father had feelings.” I found that a very interesting perception.