Student Success Tools

Experts Offer Tips to Help Students Succeed in Their First Year in College

Andrew Koch, director of Purdue University's Student Access, Transition and Success Programs, and John Gardner, author of "The Freshman Year Experience: Helping Students Survive and Succeed in College", offer these tips for making a successful transition to college.

1) Make friends with people who share similar goals.

"The first item on your to-do list should be to make friends," Koch says. "Not to party, but to make relationships with your peers. You should attend as many orientation activities as possible, and if your school has an academic learning community where students in similar majors are housed together, you should join that. There, you'll find students who are going through the same things, taking the same classes. As I tell students, serendipity is too important to leave to chance."

Gardner points out that the single biggest influence on students is other students. "You should pay attention to who you associate with because you are going to become like them. If they like to party every night, you will, too."

2) Don't go home for as long as you can.

Although students may think that going home on weekends and staying in touch with high school friends is a way to ease the adjustment, the experts say the opposite is true.

"We have research that shows the more frequently you go home the less likely you are to survive the first year," Gardner says. "The worst thing you can do is stay in your room and text old friends from high school about what you are going to do that weekend."

3) Join a club or group.

Research has shown that students who joined at least one co-curricular activity were more likely to be successful in their freshman year.

"This is part of finding people who share your interests," Koch says. "This gives you a reason to be on campus on the weekends and gives you a group of new friends to enjoy. You have to find your niche, but it's also a great opportunity to try new things."

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4) Take care of your physical health, including managing stress.

The enormous amount of life change that accompanies the transition to college produces stress, and often students try to deal with it in ways that actually increases the stress - by sleeping less, eating more or drinking alcohol.

"Overeating and drinking alcohol are not only damaging to your health, but they also lower a student's self-esteem," Gardner says.

5) Go to class and do the homework.

"Academics should be your first priority," Koch says. "This is why finding friends in your classes or through learning communities is important for student success. They'll literally drag each other out of bed to attend class."

Koch and Gardner point out that even the best high school students find they need to learn new academic behaviors in college.

"Students may be brilliant, so they never had to study in high school or really pay attention in class," Koch says. "They can find themselves on academic probation at the end of their first semester in college. They need to know they have to go to class, take good notes and read the assigned materials, even if they could get good grades without doing that before."

6) Attend help sessions.

In high school, help sessions may have been seen as unnecessary and may have even carried a stigma. University freshmen need to quickly understand that college is different.

"Students have to learn a new set of rules about getting help," Gardner says. "No one is going to tell your parents, and it doesn't mean you are a bad student or person. Ironically, it's the top students, the real fast burners, who seek out help first."

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7) Maintain your personal standards.

Life away from home has many opportunities and temptations, and many of these are exaggerated by immature peers. Students who put their personal values at risk can damage their self-esteem, which will have an impact on their college career. Poor decisions about drinking alcohol, sexual relationships or overspending and credit card debt can put students at risk.

"Students are going to be confronted with choices about doing things to belong, and they should not compromise their values," Gardner says. “If they do compromise their values, this can cause tremendous damage to their self-esteem.”

8) Parents should be prepared for a text or e-mail message saying things aren’t going well.

Parents have a role to play in students' success, too, Koch says, although it is less direct than when the students were in high school.

"You have to allow the student to grow and to let go, but not let go completely," Koch says. "Read the resource material for parents the college provides so that if the student calls and says they are struggling, you can offer good information about resources as well as emotional support. Both are important."

Adapted from an article by Steve Tally of Purdue University, 2009.

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