

Notes from a Soccer Dad



Surviving First Year at the University

Richard A. Gershon, The Digital NavigatorEG

<https://www.digitalnavigatoreg.com/>

I was talking to my niece Rachel who is a first year student at the University of Vermont. She was troubled by the fact that she was finding her science courses a lot harder than anything she experienced while in high-school. She was already questioning whether she had what it takes to be a pre-med student. That comment (or questioning) reminded me of my wife's experience at UVM some 30 plus years earlier where she too loaded up on too many science courses in the first semester and found that her grades did not match her aspiration to become a Veterinarian. She was told by an advisor that she probably wouldn't have the grades to be admitted into Vet school. This, after her first semester. I wonder how many promising doctors, teachers and artists were dissuaded from their desired career path because of bad advising or no advising.

College and University life can be overwhelming at first. There's nothing quite like sitting in a two hundred person lecture hall filled with students whom you don't know. Enter stage left, a Professor with an accent whose lecture skills are less than ideal. Add to it the challenges of wearing a face-mask, taking notes, death by PowerPoint, complicated formulas and getting a 78 (or worse) on your first exam - and you have the entering Freshman or newly arrived transfer student who immediately starts to feel lost. Enter stage right the helpful friend

who says something like “well everybody gets 70’s in Steven’s class” or the equivalent phrase. Cold comfort for the student who is used to getting As and Bs in high school. Let's take a moment to consider how to best navigate the challenges of being a first year student at a College or University.

Getting Started

College life presents a unique opportunity for self-discovery; specifically, learning who you are, what you enjoy doing, what you’re good at while developing a professional career path.

One of the most exciting parts of a student’s first semester at college is experiencing the campus environment for the first time, meeting new people and being exposed to a wide range of new ideas. It’s important to take advantage of first-year orientations and campus tours since it saves a lot of time in terms of learning how things work at the University and where to go for help.

Most Colleges and Universities host a one or two day welcome back festival (or what we call Bronco Bash at WMU) which gives students an opportunity to check out various clubs, intramural sports, fraternities/ sororities, as well as special music and art events on campus. Some of the best learning comes outside the classroom. This is an opportunity to network; find people with common interests, make new friends and feel more connected to the larger University mission. Sometimes the friendships you build here last a lifetime.

The first challenge for many incoming students is knowing what they want to study. Some students arrive at school and know immediately what they want to be, I want to be an engineer, an artist, a business person and so forth. That’s great if you’re that person. But it’s also OK to be a generalist in the beginning stages, permitting yourself to study a variety of things. I often use the symbolic letter **T** as a way to explain the academic mission and self-discovery part of a student’s learning. The major, whether it be chemistry, history or nursing, has a prescribed set of courses for the student to take. This is the vertical part of the **T**. and offers up the opportunity to be skilled and trained in that discipline. But a good University education should also give you breadth and depth in a variety of areas that span the arts and sciences. As I often tell my students, you need to be more than your major. This is the horizontal part of the **T**. Be proactive by selecting general education and related course work that truly engages you. As a

well-educated person, you should be able to talk about things in science, history, literature and art that goes beyond your major. After all, when you're the manager in the Paris office, you want to know where to take the boss when he/she arrives in town for a meeting.

Knowing the Basics of Time Management

The second challenge for many incoming students is knowing the basics of time management. At issue, is the fact that there is nobody telling you how to organize your day; when to get up, when to study and when to relax and have fun. The first order of business is making sure that you go to all classes and avoid the temptation to skip. It may be tempting at times to skip class; especially, following a late evening out with friends the night before or because you're exhausted from your job outside school. I never quite know how to respond to a student email when asked via email, "did I miss anything important?" Putting yourself in catch-up mode is never a good strategy. If the class has an available on-line recording, then you may be good to go. But if not, you're having to reconstruct the class presentation; not to mention the intangibles; answers to questions about the reading, changes in project due dates, exam study guide tips and so forth.

The challenge of time management becomes all the more complicated for the student who is holding down a part-time job. Over the years, I have had students who have tried to work as many as 20-30 hours with varying degrees of success. There is very little time left for school since they are often exhausted with few remaining hours to get their work done. At some point, deep into the semester, we have the talk about grades. They ask me; is there anything they can do to improve their grade? Sometimes yes, sometimes no; a lot depends on their situation. But what I often find myself saying, is that when you graduate; you want to be able to say that you did more than survive school. If that means, taking fewer courses per semester in order to make it work financially -- then that may be part of the tradeoff. More to the point, a student should be able to look back at his/her time at the University or College and know that they did more than survive school. There are a number of indicators that show whether your time management system is working, specifically:

- High Stress
- Poor performance, no one project or task ever feels fully complete
- Missing deadlines and appointments

- A feeling that you're living in crisis mode; constantly putting out brushfires
- A growing resentment towards the course, Professor or yourself for being put in this situation in the first place

Organizing Projects, Tasks and Assignments

The solution, of course, is being better organized. "Time management is the process of organizing and planning how to divide your time between specific activities. Good time management enables you to work smarter - not harder - so that you get more done in less time, even when time is tight and pressures are high."ⁱⁱ The first order of business is to create a calendar (electronic or paper) and prioritize projects, tasks and assignments - putting first things first. This has the added benefit of preserving contingency time to handle 'the unexpected' while lessening your stress level.

The second order of business is to develop a reliable work routine. In practical terms, this means establishing a regular time each day (or week) to read, study and work on various assignments and tasks. This includes building into your schedule time to exercise as well as other extracurricular activities. Part of developing a reliable work routine presupposes knowing your own work habits. By that, I mean when do you do your best studying, writing and research? Are you a morning, afternoon and/or evening person? Do you have a comfortable place to work that won't allow you to be distracted? Good friends and family members never intend to distract you, but they can. It also means shutting off your phone or at least put it on vibrate.

Handling the Results of a Bad Exam

The third important challenge is knowing how to handle the results of a bad exam. The first thing you need to know is that you're not alone. It may seem like you're the only one who did badly on that exam; but trust me when I say that is certainly not the case. This is where office hours come in. I am sometimes amazed at the number of students who don't take advantage of office hours. If there is something in class that you don't understand or needing to trouble-shoot on a past exam, office hours is the time to get help. This has the added benefit of the Professor getting to know who you are as well as showing that you're committed to doing

well. Strategizing and making a course correction early in the semester can be a huge difference maker in terms of your overall success in the course.

But it sometimes happens that a course doesn't work. There are a number of reasons that can account for this. Sometimes the course material isn't what you thought it would be. Sometimes, it's your level of effort and approach to the subject matter. And sometimes, it's the Professor himself/herself. Whatever you do; don't panic and don't feel like you have to make a major decision about your future. It never comes down to the first semester. An average or bad grade in a course doesn't mean that the overall field or major isn't right for you. On the other hand, if you truly don't like the material or subject matter (or you're not good at it) - you have to honor those feelings as well. This is where the self-discovery part comes into play. A good conversation with an advisor can go a long way in hitting the reset button and starting over. I have had many a student who was grateful that they discovered an altogether new field after originally thinking that they wanted to be an engineer or business major. Dad or Mom may be disappointed. But this is not about them. This is about you. Take your time and enjoy exploring your options.

Finding Your Passion

One of my favorite types of students is the person who is undecided or starts out badly after their first year in school. But somewhere in that second or third year they find the right major and everything, thereafter, starts to fall into place. They steadily create a vision of excellence for themselves by getting good grades and working towards developing "experiences" that will build breadth and depth to their leaning. This can take a number of forms from meeting with Professors and working professionals who can make a difference in that person's success to seeking out internships, foreign study and various kinds of work/study practicums. Sometimes, the creative next step is an accelerated Master's degree where the student transitions in her/his senior year to Master's program, or sometimes its finding that first job with the right organization that lays the foundation for a promising future. I often tell students that when they walk through the graduation line, no one will remember, and no one will care about your struggles of the first year. All that matters is that you graduate with a working

degree in hand and the knowledge that you did it well and made the most of your time while being a student at your College or University. Welcome to the adventure of a lifetime.
