

Millersville University
New Student Orientation

Academic Survival Skills

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Introduction

Welcome to the University! The move from high school to college represents one of the most significant steps you'll ever make. College is the time when you will form new friendships that will last the rest of your life. It is the time when you establish what it is that you want to do with your life, then complete a program that prepares you for that career. It is the place where you can have fun without Mom and Dad looking over your shoulder. It is also the place where most of you, for the first time in your life, will become true adults – responsible for your own lives.

However, as you first walk through the doors of the university, you may be feeling some apprehension, fear, or even anxiety about what is around the corner. For many of you, those apprehensions or fears center on the academic challenges you will face. And indeed, the academic challenges here are many. However, this packet of materials gives you some practical tips on how to survive academically, and covers subjects including the syllabus, getting to know your professors, and effective studying strategies. If you apply some of these techniques you'll not only alleviate some of the anxiety about entering the university, you'll also become a more effective and better-equipped student.

CAVEAT: Please realize that everything contained in this packet are my own thoughts and from my own perspective. Other professors may have entirely different approaches, and therefore almost everything I say here will not hold true all of the time. Throughout the packet, I try to point out where opinions may vary on particular items, but you should be aware that there are many different approaches out there to many of these subjects. Having said that, I hope the following is helpful to you.

Straight Talk

Before we move on to the specifics, though, it's time for some straight talk about what being at the university is all about. I'll do that by pointing out the differences between your high school experience and what your experience may be like here at Millersville. I'll also point out, in honest terms, what these differences mean.

- ❖ In high school, your classes usually met every day of the week, back to back, filling up your entire day. In college, very few classes meet every day and there's much more time in between classes. You might, on the surface, think that the college structure is therefore easier, since there's much more free time during the day. However, that's not the case. Instead, because college demands much more from you, you have to structure into your schedule good, solid study time. Without concentrated study time, you will probably not do very well in your classes. Be prepared for this new type of structure!
- ❖ In high school, you probably had mandatory attendance for all of your classes. In college, the attendance policy is different in different classes. Some professors do not have rigid attendance policies, and some do. In those classes where there is no set attendance policy, it will seem very easy for you to skip. However, skipping classes will mean that you're missing a lot

- of important materials, which undoubtedly will show up on tests later. It's a good personal policy to decide now that you'll do your best to never miss class, no matter the attendance policy. In those classes where there is a strict attendance policy, missing class will often affect your final grade in a negative way. Again, it's your responsibility to get the most out of your education – be in all classes, and be there on time.
- ❖ In high school, your teachers were able to work with you very closely, and most high school teachers genuinely care about you. In college, professors don't have as many face to face hours with you, and that's one reason why some may think that college professors don't care as much as your high school teachers did. Actually, college professors tend to care very much about how you're doing – they just care in a different way. Part of what the college experience is all about is that it gives you the chance to be responsible for yourself – to live and act as an adult. Therefore, professors won't be looking over your shoulder making sure everything is all right. Because you'll be treated like an adult here at college, if you fail to do the work in the class you will not receive a good grade. It's as simple as that. Your grades are almost entirely up to you. Receiving a poor grade for poor work doesn't mean that the professor doesn't care. He or she probably cares very much, and is disappointed that they have to give you a poor grade.
 - ❖ In high school, you had the safe structure of teachers at school and parents or guardians at home to help “keep you on track.” In college, you're expected to keep yourself on track. You won't be babied or coddled here. Your education, in many respects, is in your hands.
 - ❖ In high school, you generally had many graded assignments per class -- perhaps as many as two or three grades per week. In college, you may often only have a few graded assignments for the entire semester. In other words, getting a bad grade on any one assignment in high school was probably no big deal. There were enough graded assignments in each class that, as long as you did well on most of them, you were able to easily overcome one or two bad grades. In college, however, assignments tend to be bigger, and there tends to be far fewer of them for each class. Getting a bad grade on one assignment can affect your final grade for that class.
 - ❖ In high school, class sizes were kept at a fairly consistent student to teacher ratio. In college, some of your general education classes may have 150 or more students in them. And some of your upper level classes may have less than 10. Each of these types of classes are structured this way for particular reasons – the large classes are usually introductory, lecture classes designed to give you lots of basic knowledge about the subject. The upper division classes are smaller so that discussions and project work can be done easily.
 - ❖ In high school, you were often expected to give back information (on tests or papers) that you learned in class. In college, you are expected to do this too, but you're also expected to be able to think critically, discuss intelligently, and develop your own thoughts and opinions on the subject matter. This type of critical thinking, which involves the ability to synthesize material and make connections between things, is at the heart of a college education.

- ❖ In high school, you probably knew most of the people in each of the classes you took. In college, you may enter a class and not know anyone there. There will also be upperclassmen and non-traditional students (older students who are coming to school later in life) in your classes. In other words, there will be a much wider range of experience, interest, and age in your classes. While that may seem intimidating at first, it actually makes your classes much more diverse and interesting.

One last word before we move on to specifics. Understand that you don't go to college simply to get a degree. You go to college to get an education. There's a big difference between the two. You'll have a lot of personal freedom here, with no one breathing down your neck making sure you're eating right and doing your homework; however, with that freedom comes a great deal of responsibility. If all you're interested in is doing the bare minimum to get by and get the degree, then you can certainly do that. It doesn't take a lot of effort to be mediocre. However, if you really want to get an education, which means truly learning the subject matter, being able to think critically, being able to express yourself well (both in oral discussions and written work), and excelling in your college work, then that takes a sense of discipline and responsibility. If you begin now and determine to really apply yourself to the academic work here at college, then you will find new ways of thinking, new avenues of interest, and new ways to look at the world. That's what a liberal arts education is all about.

Survival Skills!

The rest of this packet will contain information, definitions, and practical tips about some of the academic requirements at the university. It is not meant to be exhaustive, but instead is meant to highlight a number of different things that may help you survive academically. Again, remember that each class, and each professor, is unique. If you have any questions about what is expected of you in a particular class, you should ask your professor.

The Syllabus

In college, your classes will all have syllabi (the plural of syllabus), which is a document that gives you all the pertinent information about a class, including reading assignments, test dates, attendance policies, etc. Here are some suggestions about getting the most from the syllabus.

What is a Syllabus?

- ❖ **A syllabus is an outline of the content and policies for a particular class.** This is one of those areas where professors differ greatly. Some professors provide simple, one page syllabi with very few specifics included, while others write long, detailed syllabi detailing all the assignments in the class. If you are unclear about what is expected, and the syllabus doesn't address your concern, then ask the professor.
- ❖ **A syllabus is a contract between you and professor.** The class is governed by the policies the professor provides, and these are usually (but not always) included in the syllabus.

- ❖ **Usually, the professor will go over the syllabus on the first day of class.**
- ❖ **By staying in the class you implicitly agree to the class contract.** This is a very important point. If, after having read the syllabus, you stay in the class, then you are saying that you agree to accept the standards in the syllabus. For example, if there is an attendance policy in the syllabus that clearly says that your final grade will be dropped one full letter grade on your third unexcused absence from class, then don't complain if you miss class three times and receive a lower grade as a result. Also, you **MUST** pay attention to the policies in the syllabus throughout the semester. You will get very little sympathy from a professor if you, for example, mess up on an assignment that was clearly outlined in the syllabus. The syllabus is, quite simply, the bible for that particular class.

Reading a Syllabus

- ❖ **Note the professor's name.**
- ❖ **Note the professor's office hours.**
- ❖ **Note the professor's phone number and e-mail address.** All four of these things, with the possible exception of an e-mail address, should be on all syllabi. This is the information you need in order to get in touch with your professor easily.
- ❖ **Attendance and Tardiness policies.** Very important information. Note it.
- ❖ **Policy on assignments turned in late.**
- ❖ **Class schedule, reading assignments, and assignment due dates.**

Getting to Know your Professors

One of the greatest problems some incoming freshmen have experienced is being intimidated or afraid of their professors. This is not only unnecessary, it's counterproductive to your education. Your professors can be a great source of help, and a wonderful resource for you. Here are some tips on getting to know your professors.

- ❖ **Professors care about how you're doing.** While they won't baby you, most professors are interested and caring. If you come to them and ask for assistance, most are more than willing to help you out.
- ❖ **Take advantage of office hours.** It's amazing how few students do this. Each professor will have regular, scheduled office hours that are set aside for students. If you need to see your professor, just go by their office during their office hours. That's what they're for.
- ❖ **Ask questions, engage in discussion, and ask advice.** In other words, talk to your professors. You'll get to know each other as people, rather than just lecturer/listener.
- ❖ **Approach us as one adult to another.** There's really no reason to be intimidated by professors. That's not to say that some professors aren't intimidating. They can be. But, if you allow that to keep you from

approaching them or getting to know them, then you may not get the help you need. You're an adult now, and you certainly can approach another adult and talk to them. However ...

- ❖ **Don't waste our time by being unprepared.** Realize that professors tend to be very busy. If you do need to go see a professor, then by all means go. But, go prepared. If you need to ask about advising for classes, but you've done nothing to prepare for that discussion, then you wind up wasting your time and the professor's. Everyone (students and professors alike) is too busy for that. Be prepared!
- ❖ **Professors have heard it all before – coming to them with flimsy excuses about why you don't have an assignment done probably won't work.** Often, students never come by during office hours until they've messed up on an assignment and are then trying to save their grade. They sometimes come up with the most amazing excuses about why they don't have their paper done, or why they were late for class, etc. Just know that professors have heard all those excuses hundreds of times over, and they rarely impress them.. It's much, much better to just be honest about the problem. And, if you've established some kind of dialogue with the professor instead of waiting until crisis time to talk with him or her, then it's much easier for the professor to be sympathetic to the problem

Managing Your Time

Without a doubt, one of the biggest challenges facing new students is time management. With what, on the surface, seems like a lot of free time, it's easy to overlook how much time needs to be planned into your schedule for studying and other work. In addition, it's very healthy to make time for extra-curricular activities and time to have fun and enjoy the social life that comes with college. Here are a few tips:

- ❖ **You have more free time during the day than you did in high school.**
- ❖ **However, you should use the "2 for 1" rule.** The "2 for 1" rule says you should spend at least 2 hours studying for every hour in class. In other words, if you're taking a course load of 15 hours, you should be studying an additional 30 hours a week.
- ❖ **Get a calendar and plan out your semester.**
- ❖ **Making good use of your time means you'll have time left over for extra-curricular activities.** There are certainly lots of things on campus to get involved in – everything from vocal choirs to theatre to sororities and fraternities. Getting your studying done in a timely way means that you'll have time for these other things without them negatively impacting your academic work. It is possible to do both.
- ❖ **Don't forget to make time to have fun!** I'm a big proponent of balance. I think you should study hard, but I also think you need to make time to have fun. Your social life here is also very important. This is where you will make life-long friends, and part of the college experience is social.

Effective Study Habits

Because you will HAVE to study in order to do well in college, you should realize that some study habits are actually counter-productive. What you want to do is get into good habits that will make your studying truly effective. The following is a list of tips that you can pick and choose from.

- ❖ **Find an appropriate place to study (not in your room).** There are lots of distractions in your room, especially if your roommate is there. You should find someplace you can go on a consistent basis (the library is a good suggestion) that is neutral and provides a minimum of distraction.
- ❖ **Find an appropriate time to study (not at 3:00 a.m.).** Some people are night owls (as I am) and do their best work late at night. But, in general, really late night studying means less retention of the material.
- ❖ **Dedicate specific time to studying.** This is important. You should plan study time into your weekly calendar, then hold yourself to it. You'll get a lot done that way.
- ❖ **Look ahead, and start studying early.** Try not to procrastinate or let assignments slip up on you. The syllabus should have all the assignments listed for the entire semester. Start early!
- ❖ **Study in shorter bursts over a longer period of time, rather than cramming the night before a test.** You will retain knowledge longer and better if you don't cram. Studying for an hour or so every day for a week is MUCH better than studying for four hours the night before a test. Plan it in your schedule.
- ❖ **Identify the most important material from lectures, readings, etc.** This is a difficult thing to do, and I address it more fully in the section on taking notes below.
- ❖ **Outline your notes from class.** Also see the section on taking notes below.
- ❖ **Consider using note cards (i.e., 3x5 cards) to help organize your notes.** Using note cards (flash cards) is a good way to study definitions, names, dates, etc.
- ❖ **Don't throw your notes away after you've taken a test – the same material may come up on later tests also.** Actually, don't throw your notes away, period. I'm amazed that some students will do this. Again, you're here to get an education, not just a degree. Keep your notes, not only in case you're tested on the same material later in the semester, but because your notes are a record of the information from the class.
- ❖ **Join or form a study group – usually no more than 4 or 5 people.** If a study group gets much bigger than 4 or 5, it is hard to keep everyone on track. Also, a study group gives you a chance to divide the material up and actually "teach" it to the others in the group. You'll learn the material very well if you have to present it.
- ❖ **Take advantage of any reviews or study groups the professor might form or suggest.**

Effective Note Taking

It seems that taking notes in class would be easy, but many people have a hard time organizing the material from class into a form that is easily understood. Again, pick and choose from the following list to find the techniques that work best for you.

- ❖ **Learn to know what materials you're responsible for.** Here's the paradox: not everything said in class is equally important; at the same time, you can legitimately be tested over anything said in class. So, your job is to identify what is important and what isn't. It's not an easy skill, but one you'll get better at as time goes on. And remember, each professor is different.
- ❖ **Learn to listen well to class lectures.** Listen to not only what is said, but what is meant by what is said.
- ❖ **Especially note anything the professor writes on the board.** Or projects on the screen. Also, videos are often used. The professor would not include things like this unless they were important.
- ❖ **Put your notes in outline form as you take them.** Some professors will obviously be lecturing from an outline. With some professors, their outline will not be all that obvious. If you listen well, however, you should be able to hear the major points of the outline. Organizing your notes this way will help you come test time.
- ❖ **Leave a wide margin on the page as you take notes.** See below.
- ❖ **Review your notes as soon as possible after class.** Very important!!!
- ❖ **Write out the major points in the margin.** Take the major points and place them in actual outline form in the wide margin you left. Any important names, dates, etc., can also be moved over to the margin.
- ❖ **Form your notes into a clear outline.**
- ❖ **Retype your notes in outline form.** Some people find retyping their notes helpful.
- ❖ **Synthesize the outline into one easy paragraph which covers the material.** If you do this, it will become very clear whether or not you understood the lecture. If you struggle with this step, you might need to do more review.
- ❖ **Identify anything you don't understand, then either ask the professor about it or go to the text and try to find the answers.**

About Reading Assignments

You will have reading assignments in almost every one of your classes. Sometimes the reading is an integral part of the actual class time, and sometimes it's used as background reading or supplemental reading. Either way, you should take the reading seriously and try your best to get the most out of it.

- ❖ **If it's assigned, then read it.** Obvious enough, isn't it?

- ❖ **Even if you've read it before, read it again.** Even if you're already familiar with the material, you've probably changed since you read it last. That means you have a new perspective, and that perspective may illuminate the reading in ways you didn't expect. Plus, refreshing yourself will prepare you better for class discussion.
- ❖ **Outline the main points of the reading.** The main point of each paragraph is usually in the first sentence or two, and the main point of each section is usually in the first paragraph. Writing these points out will help you understand the reading.
- ❖ **Be prepared with questions and thoughts for class discussion.**
- ❖ **Readings are viable test materials, even if the professor doesn't deal with them directly in class.** Some professors will assign reading, then never mention it in class. Usually that's because the professor is using the reading as background material that he or she then builds on in the lecture. It is always viable test material, however.

Critical Thinking

A good education involves more than just memorizing facts and giving them back on a test. The best education is also about learning how to think critically about a subject. That involves being able to make connections between disparate ideas and the ability to synthesize materials. It also means that you are able to understand and appreciate opinions and thoughts that are entirely different from your own. Even in objective, multiple-choice tests, there is still a need to be able to think critically in order to make the best choices on tests. Critical thinking is extremely important for a well-rounded college education.

- ❖ **Critical thinking is the basis for a college education.**
- ❖ **Critical thinking involves assessing information and ideas by exploring the underlying biases, checking facts, and having knowledgeable discussion.**
- ❖ **Critical thinking is NOT the same as opinion.** Critical thinking, in fact, means evaluating your own opinion to check its viability. Just because you hold a strong opinion about something doesn't mean it's the only, or even the best opinion. Critical thinking will help you be evaluative about what you believe.

About Writing Papers

One major means of evaluating your work in college is your ability to write papers. While not all of your classes will have this requirement, many of them will, and it is important that you learn to express yourself well in writing. Here are a few writing tips.

- ❖ **Every professor has his or her unique requirements for writing papers.** Try to give the professor what he or she wants. Some professors like certain styles that others don't.

- ❖ **Closely follow any directions for the paper that the professor may provide.**
- ❖ **If you are given a specific topic to write about, then make sure your writing is directly related to that topic.** Often students will write a very good paper – on the wrong topic. Make sure you understand the topic and stick to it.
- ❖ **If you are able to choose your own topic, then find one early in order to give yourself plenty of time.**
- ❖ **Talk to the professor about any possible topic to make sure it fits the assignment.**
- ❖ **Always, always, always write a first draft.** If you hand in a first draft for a grade, chances are the grade won't be very good. Write your first draft early enough that you have plenty of time to rework it, edit it, and make it better.
- ❖ **Many professors will gladly look over a first draft and give you editing ideas.** Many, but perhaps not all. If the professor doesn't offer to do this, then ask. Professors with large classes will probably not have time to do a lot of editing, which means you may have to look elsewhere.
- ❖ **Always use proper grammar and spelling.** It's such an important aspect of writing, and yet many students turn in papers with numerous spelling and grammatical mistakes. That is truly unacceptable for college work.
- ❖ **Read your paper out loud to see if the sentence structure makes sense.** Again, many sentence structure problems could be alleviated if students would just take five minutes and do this step. Reading the paper aloud will let you know whether the paper "sounds right." If it doesn't, then it probably isn't.
- ❖ **Ask a friend to read the final draft.**
- ❖ **Use proper style for the paper.** The professor will usually tell you if there is a particular style you should use. If the professor doesn't give you an indication of this, then it's just important that you're consistent throughout the paper. There are a number of style manuals that will help you out, and these are usually available in the library or the bookstore.
- ❖ **Don't plagiarize!** Always cite all your sources and give others credit for their work.
- ❖ **Don't procrastinate until the last minute.** It's a simple statement. But, many students wait until the night before and try to whip out a paper. Except in those rare cases, this usually doesn't work. Start early. Plan well.

Conclusion

Hopefully, some of these suggestions will be helpful to you as you begin your studies here at Millersville University. As I said in the introduction, there are a lot of academic demands here, but with a few good skills and discipline it is possible to not only survive, but to thrive. I hope your freshman year proves to be exciting, enjoyable, and academically satisfying. Do your best work. Rise to the challenge.