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Choosing Success in College and in Life

Are you taking advantage of everything your college has to offer? Do you know what resources are available to help you? What are your hopes and dreams, for your college experience, your future, and your financial success?

College is as much an experience as it is a place, and both the experience and its outcome are yours to control. No matter what your past has been, you can choose your future by making good use of the resources available to you, by developing the interpersonal skills needed to work cooperatively with others from diverse backgrounds, and by taking the initiative to learn new skills and technology.

As you think about the next two to four years of college, you might ask these questions: Will I make friends? Will I be able to manage my money? Will I graduate? Will I find a career I like? The choices you make will determine the answers, and there is room for mistakes as well as accomplishments.

Adopt confidence-building attitudes and engage in productive learning behaviors, and you will make choices that lead to successful outcomes. This chapter suggests six strategies that can help.

- Form an academic support group.
- Embrace diversity.
- Know where to find help.
- Stay informed.
- Get involved.
- Choose financial success.

Form an Academic Support Group

In a community of learners the primary function of each faculty member, administrator, employee, and department is to help you reach your goals. Everyone in your college community hopes that you will succeed. Therefore, your college is rich in resources that can guide your progress. For example, people are an important resource. If you have not already done so, form a support group: a network of people to whom you can turn for advice, answers to questions, or a boost in confidence.

Faculty

Your instructors are in the best position to advise you concerning all matters related to their classes. Instructors welcome questions because students' questions help them determine the effectiveness of their teaching. In fact, your questions are often your primary means of interaction with your instructors. Do not hesitate to ask questions or seek information. If you are having difficulty in a course, for example, don't postpone getting help or hope that your problem will go away. Make an appointment with your instructor as soon as possible.

Find an instructor with whom you are especially comfortable and turn to this person when you need advice. If your instructor is unable to answer one of your questions or to suggest ways to solve a problem, he or she can direct you to another person or office where help will be available.

Advisors and Counselors

Academic advisors and career counselors are professionals who handle academic and personal problems of every kind all day long. If you need help preparing a schedule, an academic advisor will show you how to select the courses you need. If you want help deciding on a major or choosing a career, a career counselor can provide valuable assistance, both in determining where your interests lie and in assessing employment opportunities. If you have a problem that you don't know how to handle, such as test anxiety, an advisor may talk the matter over with you or refer you to a learning specialist or other appropriate person.

Counselors and advisors know your college's rules and requirements. They may offer such services as keeping you informed of important dates and deadlines, explaining your assessment-test scores, and informing you of any skill-development courses or programs you may need. Some advisors may work only with students having unique needs, such as learning or physically disabled students, international students, adult learners, or minority students.

If you plan to transfer from a two-year college to a university, an advisor can help you select courses that will meet the university's requirements so that you won't lose credits. Therefore, it is important to meet with an advisor as soon as you decide that you want to transfer. If you need academic advice or career or personal counseling, find the office or department on your campus

that provides these services. Since department names may differ from campus to campus, check the college catalog or inquire at your admissions office—or ask your instructor.

Mentors

A mentor is an ally, a friend, someone who takes a personal and professional interest in you. On many college campuses today, instructors may serve as mentors to students in special programs funded by federal grants or other sources. Students are assigned to mentors during their first term. They meet regularly with their mentors, usually four or more times during the term, to set goals, assess progress, and work through problems. Mentors may offer tips on how to study, take tests, and reduce stress. They may also help students plan their schedules for the following term.

The relationship between student and mentor serves several purposes. It gives the student a contact person on campus to turn to for advice, help in solving a problem, or specific suggestions on how to meet course requirements. If you begin to experience academic difficulty, for example, the mentor may help you find a tutor. Mentors stay in contact with their students' instructors throughout the term, and mentors and instructors often work together to help students achieve their goals.

Many students complain that the close relationships that they enjoyed with faculty in high school are not available in college. Mentoring programs may be one way to fill the gap. Such programs may operate differently from campus to campus, but the goal of any mentoring program is the same: to help students choose success. To find out whether there is a mentoring program on your campus, call the admissions office.

Extend Your Support Group

Each subject area department, such as English or math, may have special requirements and services that pertain only to that department and the courses it offers. On some campuses, the heads of departments deal with students seeking permission to enroll in courses that are already filled. If you have a question or a problem related to enrolling in a course, see the department head. He or she will either answer your questions and help you solve the problem or refer you to someone who can.

Departmental secretaries can be very helpful, too. They can answer questions about departmental requirements and course offerings. They can tell you who is teaching each section of a course. They can also tell you where an instructor's office is and give you the instructor's campus telephone number or email address, or they can leave a message for an instructor whom you have been unable to reach.

If you live in a residence hall on campus, your resident advisor, or RA, can advise you about campus services or student affairs. RAs are easy to talk to because they are usually students like you. They have lived through some of the same problems you have, and they have asked and found answers to some of the same questions. An RA can usually point you in the direction of a helpful person, department, or office. On some campuses, a graduate assistant or fellow, house master, or faculty master may be someone to whom you can turn for advice.

If you are involved in athletics, your coach can be an ally. Your coach wants you to remain eligible to participate in sports. Coaches are well aware of grade requirements, and they keep track of your progress in your courses. Your coach wants you to do your best in class and on the team. He or she is someone you should find easy to talk to if you need advice.

Club and organization sponsors tend to take an active part in campus life. Like coaches, they share some of your interests, and they may know you as a person in a way that your instructors or advisors may not. Although a club sponsor may not be able to answer some of your questions, he or she will probably know someone on campus who can.

Don't underestimate the value of making friends with other students. Exchanging phone numbers and email addresses with a student in each class gives you someone to contact when you are absent so that you can find out what you missed. Having friends in each class may allow you to form a study group or to find a ride to campus if you need one.

Thus, your academic support group might include an advisor, an instructor, a departmental head or secretary, a coach or club sponsor, and a friend in each class. Their roles are not to provide answers to questions or solutions to problems that you can find on your own, but to support you in your effort to be successful. In a community of learners, you need never be alone.