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CHAPTER

1

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 assess-

ment-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.

Embrace Diversity

BEFORE THE 1960S, college students in the United States typically were white males who had similar social and economic backgrounds. However, the percentage of women attending college has steadily increased since the 1960s, and they now outnumber men on many college campuses. The student body has also become increasingly diverse. Students come from a variety of backgrounds. They differ in age, race, gender, socioeconomic level, sexual orientation, and learning ability. Many are international students, and some are disabled. Some grew up in urban neighborhoods; others are from rural communities. Today there is no typical college student.

The composition of the U.S. population is also changing. By 2020, according to U.S. government projections, African Americans, Asian Americans, Cubans, Puerto Ricans, Mexican Americans, Native Americans, and others will account for one-third of the population. By the last quarter of the twenty-first century, these groups collectively will constitute a majority of the population.

Your Diverse Campus

What does *diversity* mean to you? For one thing, you are likely to have classmates and instructors who come from many different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Second, colleges have responded to student diversity by offering services and opportunities to meet a variety of needs. Moreover, diversity has many benefits. Exposure to different customs and ways of thinking challenges your ideas and broadens your worldview. Because your campus is a small slice of the larger society, it provides you with an opportunity to hone your interpersonal skills and to develop intercultural communication skills before you begin your career in an increasingly diverse workplace.

Creating a learning environment where all are treated with respect and where all are free to pursue their educational goals is everyone's responsibility. Do your part by being open to ideas and customs that may differ from your own. If you harbor any stereotypical thinking that prevents cross-cultural communication, now is the time to let it go. Look around you at your classmates and instructors. They are people—first.

Embrace diversity by reaching out to others in a spirit of friendship and community. Make all students feel welcome, just as you want to be welcomed. Accept others' differences, listen without being critical, and establish friendships based on shared interests and values. As you form your support group, think of others' differences not as barriers to communication but as bridges to understanding. Let your support group ring with the harmony of different voices.

Diverse Students, Needs, and Services

Your college probably offers a number of programs, services, and interest groups that serve the needs of a diverse student population. The Black History Association, a group found on many campuses, plans programs and events that raise everyone's awareness of African Americans' achievements. On some campuses, women's groups, international student organizations, lesbians' and gay men's coalitions, and religion-based student associations provide a place to socialize and conduct special-interest activities.

Although socializing with others like yourself is important, it is equally important to reach

out to those who differ. Getting involved in extracurricular activities can help you find new friends who share your interests. Joining a group that appeals to students interested in an art such as dance, drama, or music; a career such as engineering or teaching; or an issue such as SADD (Students Against Driving Drunk) can serve as a starting point for getting involved in campus life. By becoming active in student government or another campus service organization, you can have a voice in the issues that affect all students. All of the previously mentioned groups can provide many opportunities for you to meet people from diverse cultures and backgrounds with whom you may have much in common.

Adult Learners

A woman, now retired after many years of successful teaching, remembers her first attempts to enroll in college:

I was 35 years old and a divorced mother. My dream was to continue my education, which I had postponed because of marriage, and become an elementary school teacher. I made an appointment with the head of the education department at the college of my choice to discuss application procedures. He told me I was too old. He said it was not their policy to accept students my age. Also, I was divorced and would not be a good role model for their young women. But I did not give up. Eventually, I was accepted at a state university that admitted a few older students each year. Even so, I had to endure discouraging words from professors and students alike who did not think I belonged. That was 1962. Fortunately, attitudes about older students have changed.

Attitudes *have* changed. Adult learners are welcomed on campuses today for several important reasons. First of all, adult learners bring with them knowledge and skills that enrich the college experience for everyone. Second, most people change jobs or careers two or more times during their lives and seek additional skills or training. Moreover, learning does not end at graduation—it is a lifelong process. Despite such current positive views about adult learners, these students often enter college feeling out of place, wondering whether they will be able to catch up and keep up. Adult learners have jobs and families and may feel pressured as they add course requirements to their already full calendars. Embracing diversity means learning from each other's unique experiences and remembering that all students, no matter what their ages, face similar problems of adjustment in college.

Students with Disabilities

Most colleges provide special services for disabled students, such as note takers for blind students or extra testing and writing time for the learning disabled (students who have dyslexia, for example). Physical or learning disabilities need not prevent students from being successful in college. Many disabled students have developed coping strategies that would benefit all students. The key to successful communication and interaction with disabled students is to treat them as you would any other students. When goals and interests are shared, there are no barriers.

Non-Native Speakers of English

Even on a campus that embraces diversity, the temptation may be great for non-native speakers of English to restrict their interaction with others to those who speak their own language. Many of these students go home to families that also do not speak English. The time that they spend in class may be the only opportunity that non-native speakers of English have to use English. It is crucial for these students to make friends with and to interact with native speakers. Therefore, if you are a non-native speaker of English, seek opportunities to practice your English skills. Participate in class discussions. Join clubs or organizations in which you will meet native speakers who share your interests.

If you are a native speaker of English, reach out to the non-native speakers in your classes. Invite them to join a study group after class or take the initiative to collaborate with them in group activities within class.