

# The Key to Success Is the Ability to Adapt

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## Abstract

In this essay, I reflect on my first-year experience and share insights into what college success looks like for me. I discuss several challenges that I have faced so far, including peer pressure and burnout. I also talk about the skills I have learned and the opportunities I have taken advantage of to enhance my college experience and success. I conclude by offering suggestions for colleges and universities to enhance student success. Overall, I believe the ability to adapt, from both the student and the university perspective, is key to student success in college.

*Keywords:* first-year experience, college success, adaptation, college transition

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## The Key to Success Is the Ability to Adapt

The idea of attending college has been on my mind for as long as I can remember. Moments leading up to the heart-racing click that read “Congratulations” on my screen entailed an unworldly number of different emotions as I truly had no idea what I was going into. Engraved in my brain by teachers in high school was that everything I am doing now would reflect which college I was accepted into and my success in the long run. Little did I realize the extremely structured schedule that I was expected to follow day-to-day and so used to was going to be wiped away the moment I stepped foot on my college’s campus. Transitioning from a high school population of 1,500 to a college of about 50,000 made me realize I could finally say goodbye to cliques and now have the opportunity for newfound independence. Now with the full control of who I will become and make of myself at my fingertips, I wondered how I would achieve my lifelong dreams.

I am now entering my sophomore year in college, and with one year under my belt, I have gained a lot of insight into what success looked like for me and how I was able to shape that in a world where it seems like everybody is out for themselves. The vague definition of success is accomplishing goals that have been made, sometimes large or other times very minute. Transitioning from studying intermittently to every night without fail, in addition to the occasional all-nighters, made me appreciate the sweet feeling of my pillow even more. College students are more stressed than ever which can allow a diversion into things that can take many students off the right track. The darker side of college that many seem to gloss over is the immense exposure to underage drinking, illegal drug use, and even sexual assault resulting from these activities. These activities done outside of school life are seen as exhilarating because they are going against the rules of fitting in, yet once this lifestyle starts a student’s mentality can flip and make it seemingly impossible to break free from. Peer pressure is always looming over my shoulder as exposure to it is immense in the college atmosphere, yet a sure-fire diversion from my potential success. With all of this said I have learned the importance of time management, as success in the classroom is just as important as success in other things that one might enjoy. My love for painting, exploring, and hanging out with friends, for example, are a significant part of why I love college, so take it from me and know that you always have time for the things you love, but remember one wrong decision can cost you everything that you have worked so hard for.

Overexertion can lead to decisions that we can never come back from, but another issue that can stem from a heavy academic load is mental illness such as increased anxiety, depression, and burnout. As I strive to be the best student, it is difficult to feel successful as competition to be the best lurks, leading myself to ponder whether I am ever going to make it. The simplest answer is to take off a semester to allow oneself to have time to recoup and relax, but this is not always the answer. Personally, my major is rooted in STEM: science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, so college feels like a never-ending marathon sometimes. My longest breaks have ranged from two

to three weeks, and then before I know it, I am back running with all my might. I have found that not everything is easy, and college will surely make that apparent, so finding tips helped me along the way. My two pieces of advice for any incoming freshman stems from two different topics: strategy and studying. Being strategic with your choices of classes, as you are the one who knows yourself the best, so make sure to plan out your entire plan of study. Allowing yourself to move around classes to different semesters ahead of time leaves you with freedom of choice. A solid blend of fun classes mixed with core classes allows for diversity of both, resulting in a less stressful and more enjoyable semester. In terms of studying, we have all heard that cramming for exams is the absolute worst and take it from me that cramming is the absolute worst. Studying the night before might have worked years before, but transitioning from yearlong classes into 16, 12 or even six-week classes tests your potential success by forcing you to study every day. It has been shown that studying every day is better than cramming, so trust the facts.

Although college exposed me to peer pressure and burnout, other things helped me flourish. Exposure to a vast majority of diverse people and ideas allowed me to blossom. From as far back as I can remember I had constant exposure to new cultures around the world which shaped me into who I am today. Cultivating a diverse mindset opens new possibilities in decision-making and problem-solving in turn allowing more curiosity and engagement in the classroom setting. Extracurricular activities allowed me to interact with others with different experiences and beliefs, thus promoting personal success. While creating connections with individuals with diverse mindsets is extremely beneficial it is also smart to engage with those who have similar ambitions. As I have mentioned, my ambitions are related to science, so finding a calling in research allowed me to pursue my interests and gain experience in my free time. I recommend engaging in areas similar to your major early in college, so you are better enlightened to understand if it is truly the right fit for you. My willingness to put myself out there allowed my college experience to be a little brighter as I have a diversified and perceptive mindset.

By the time my college experience is over, I will have had upwards of 150 professors. Having so many professors can make them seem indistinguishable from one another. With only one year under my belt, I learned that truly understanding each professor has shaped me into a better student. You might question how understanding teaching techniques cultivates a better student, but this answer is simple. We all have different learning styles, some of which may be better accommodated in a smaller class environment, but in college lecture-based classes with upwards of 500 students does not make that as easy. Some professors emphasize lectures, some focus heavily on testing, and others assign gobs of homework. Allowing myself to adapt to differences and focus on what professors prioritized helped me integrate all of these into my future classes. After my freshman year, I drastically improved in developing stronger notetaking and attending class. Attending class might not seem too shocking, but as many college students know attendance is rarely taken, so this provides a stronger urge to press snooze on the alarm clock. Getting up and going to class fosters a deeper connection between

concepts in real-time and an understanding of what the professor is emphasizing. My biggest piece of advice is to take advantage of the professor's resources such as office hours, recitation, and exam prep to truly engage within the vast curriculum.

I defined success broadly, as simply accomplishing goals, but after diving into a few of my significant perspectives that I found important to mention during my time at college I now understand what success looked like for me. Success means adaptation, and what I mean by this is we all adapt by changing our capacity to handle change, no matter how big or little. Even faced with challenges such as exposure to substances or a heavy academic load, as previously mentioned, determination on focused goals has helped me push through. It is important to learn from mistakes that used to hinder my ability to see myself as successful, as this creates recovery to push forward. Creating valuable connections and not just getting through classes, but truly engaging in them, has allowed me to prosper. Our behavior is constantly changing in whatever environment we might be faced in yet modifying it to keep us on the correct path in life exemplifies what I believe defines personal and academic success.

To enhance student success, I have pondered what exactly universities should do. I relate to how I felt the first day my parents gave me my last hug before driving away into the distance. A sense of belonging is harder than one might think as that feeling I had when my parents left was like being dropped off in a maze, unsure where to begin. I know other students felt the same way, as dropping out sometimes seems to be a better option than dealing with loneliness and many times the harsh academic load. As I mentioned, success is an adaptation; therefore, I believe institutions should adapt the university environment to encourage more connections to those most important to students including classmates and faculty. Both classmates and faculty are the most significant people to help my success in college thus far as they helped me to gain my sense of belonging. I believe that schools that push connections within one's university to come easier will in turn allow the ability to achieve success much more facile.