

On Course

Strategies for Creating Success in College and in Life

Seventh Edition

SKIP DOWNING

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in College and in Life, Seventh Edition**
Skip Downing

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20 Channel Center Street
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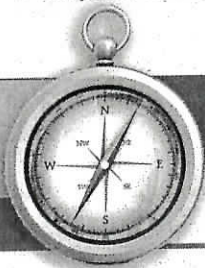
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Wise Choices in College

COLLEGE CUSTOMS

Keept reminding yourself that entering college is like crossing the border into another country. Each has new customs to learn. If you learn and heed the following college customs, your stay in higher education will be not only more successful but more enjoyable as well.

1. Read your college catalogue. Catalogues are usually available in the registrar's or counseling office, and many colleges post a copy of the catalogue on their website. This resource contains most of the factual information you'll need to plot a great journey through higher education. It explains how your college applies many of the customs discussed in this section. Keep a college catalogue on hand and refer to it often. It's an essential guidebook for your journey through higher education.

2. See your advisor. Colleges provide an advisor who can help you make wise choices. Sometimes this person is a counselor, sometimes an instructor. Find out who your advisor is, make an appointment, and get advice on what courses to take and how to create your best schedule. Ask your advisor to help you create a long-term academic plan that charts your path all the way to graduation. Students who avoid advisors often enroll in unnecessary courses or miss taking courses that are required for graduation. Your tuition has paid for a guide through college; use this valuable resource wisely.

3. Understand prerequisites. A "prerequisite" is a course that must be completed before you can take another course. For example, colleges require the completion of calculus before enrollment in more advanced mathematics courses. Before you register, confirm with your advisor that you have met all of the prerequisites. Otherwise you may find

yourself registered for a course you aren't prepared to pass. Prerequisites usually appear within each course description in your college catalogue.

4. Complete your general education requirements. Most colleges require students to complete a minimum number of general education credits. Typically, you need to take one or more courses from broad fields of study such as communication, natural science and technology, math, languages, humanities, and social and behavioral science. For example, to fulfill your requirement in science, you might need to complete 4 credits by taking any one of the following courses: biology, chemistry, astronomy, geology, or physics. Find a list of these required general education courses in your college catalogue, and check off each requirement as you complete it. Regardless of how many credits you earn, you can't graduate until you've completed the general education requirements. Depending on your college, general education requirements may be called core requirements, core curriculum, or general curriculum.

5. Choose a major wisely. You'll usually choose a major area of study in your first or second year. Examples of majors include nursing, early childhood education, biology, English, mechanical engineering, and art. You'll take the greatest number of courses in your major, supplemented by your general education courses and electives. Even if you've already picked a major, visit the career counseling center to see if other majors might interest you even more or be a better stepping stone to your chosen career. Your career counseling center can provide you with assessments to help you find a career that fits your interests and personality, and you can complete career inventories prior to choosing a major to help you narrow the

best major for your intended career. For example, majoring in English is great preparation for a law degree. All majors and their required courses are available in your college catalogue. Until you've entered a major, you're wise to concentrate on completing your general education requirements.

6. Take a realistic course load. I once taught a student who worked full-time, was married with three small children, and had signed up for six courses in her first semester. After five weeks, she was exhausted and withdrew from college. There are only 168 hours in a week. Be realistic about the number of courses you can handle given your other responsibilities. Students often register for too many credits because of their mistaken belief that this choice will get them to graduation more quickly. Too often the actual result is dropped and failed classes, pushing graduation further into the future.

7. Attend the first day of class (on time). Of course it's wise to attend *every* day on time, but whatever you do, be present on the first day! On this day instructors usually provide the class assignments and rules for the entire semester. If you're absent, you may miss something that will come back to haunt you later. For example, find out each instructor's attendance policy and be sure you adhere to it. In some classes, it is possible to pass all tests and assignments and still fail a course because you didn't fulfill the attendance policy.

8. Sit in each classroom where you can focus on learning. Experiment. Try different places in the room. Many students focus best when sitting up front. Others prefer sitting on the side about half-way back, where they can see all of their classmates and the instructor during a discussion. Most students find that sitting in the back (especially in a large class) is the least desirable. Once you identify the place that best supports your learning, sit there permanently . . . unless you find that changing seats every day helps you learn better.

9. Study the syllabus. In the first class, instructors usually provide a syllabus (sometimes called a "first-day handout"). The syllabus is the single

most important handout you will receive all semester. Typically, it contains the course objectives, the required books and supplies, all assignments and due dates, and the method for determining grades. This handout also presents any course rules you need to know. Essentially, the course syllabus is a contract between you and your instructor, who will assume that you've read and understood this contract; be sure to ask questions about any part you don't understand.

10. Buy required course books and supplies as soon as possible. College instructors cover a lot of ground quickly. If you don't have your study materials from the beginning of the course, you may fall too far behind to catch up. To get a head start on their classes, some wise students go to their college bookstore or an online bookstore weeks before the semester or quarter begins and purchase course materials. If money is tight, check with the financial aid office to see if your college provides temporary book loans. Or, as a last resort, ask your instructors if they will put copies of the course texts on reserve at your college library. As you will see later, having your own books for each course makes it much easier to gather and organize the knowledge you will need to learn.

11. Introduce yourself to one or more classmates and exchange phone numbers and email addresses. After an absence, contact a classmate to learn what you missed. Few experiences in college are worse than returning to class and facing a test that was announced in your absence.

12. Inform your instructor before a planned absence. Think of your class as your job and your instructor as your employer. Professional courtesy dictates notifying your employer of an absence you know about in advance. The same is true with instructors. Usually a quick email will do, and most likely you'll find your instructor's email address in the course syllabus.

13. If you arrive late, slip in quietly. Don't make excuses. Just come in and sit down. If you want to explain your lateness, see the instructor after class.

14. Ask questions. If the question you don't ask shows up on a test, you're going to be upset with yourself. Your classmates are equally nervous about asking questions. Go ahead, raise your hand and ask one on the first day; after that, it'll be easier. Additionally, asking good questions demonstrates to your instructor that you have intellectual curiosity, which is a great reputation to have in higher education. Later, I'll show you how to arrive at each class with nifty questions to ask.

15. To hold an extended conversation with your instructors, make an appointment during their office hours. Most college instructors have regular office hours; these times are usually included in the course syllabus and may also be posted on the instructor's office door. You can make an appointment in person before or after class, or you can call the instructor's office. Be sure to show up on time (or call beforehand to reschedule). Arrive with a clear goal, such as clarifying a comment the instructor wrote on your English composition, or learning how to correct a math problem that you got wrong on the homework, or discussing how you could better prepare for your next test in history. You'll find most instructors very receptive to meeting you during their office hours. At a minimum, plan to make one appointment with all of your instructors each semester.

16. Get involved in campus life. Most colleges offer numerous activities that can broaden your education, add pleasure to your life, and introduce you to new friends. Consider participating in the drama club, school newspaper, intercultural counsel, student government, athletic teams, band or orchestra, literary magazine, yearbook committee, science club, or one of the many other organizations on your campus. There's probably a list of options in your college's catalog, student handbook or on its website. Such options are usually

referred to as "extracurricular activities." "Extracurricular" simply means that the activities are not part of an academic class.

17. Know the importance of your grade point average (GPA). Your GPA is the average grade for all of the courses you have taken in college. At most colleges, GPAs range from 0.0 ("F") to 4.0 ("A"). Your GPA affects your future in many ways. At most colleges a minimum GPA (often 2.0, a "C") is required to graduate, regardless of how many credits you have accumulated. Students who fall below the minimum GPA are usually ineligible for financial aid and cannot play intercollegiate sports, or, in some cases, are in danger of academic dismissal, particularly for students who are already on academic probation. Academic honors (such as the dean's list) and some scholarships are based on your GPA. Finally, potential employers often note GPAs to determine if prospective employees have achieved success in college.

18. Know how to compute your grade point average (GPA). At most colleges, GPAs are printed on a student's transcript, which is a list of courses completed (with the grades earned). You can get a copy of your transcript from the registrar's office. Transcripts are usually free or available for a nominal charge. You can compute your own grade point average by using the formula in the following box. Or you can do it online at <http://www.back2college.com/gpa.htm>. Figuring your GPA could be tricky if you're taking one or more developmental courses. At many colleges, grades in developmental courses do not offer credits toward graduation, so they may not be used for calculating a GPA. For example, if you were taking three courses and two were developmental, your GPA would be determined by the grade you received in just the one non-developmental course. To check your school's policy about this issue, read your college catalog or ask a counselor or advisor.

Formula for Computing Your Grade Point Average (GPA)

$$\frac{(G1 \times C1) + (G2 \times C2) + (G3 \times C3) + (G4 \times C4) + \dots + (Gn \times Cn)}{\text{Total \# of Credits Attempted}}$$

In this formula, G = the grade in a course and C = number of credits for a course. For example, suppose you had the following grades:

"A" in Math 110 (4 Credits)	G1 ("A") = 4.0
"B" in English 101 (3 Credits)	G2 ("B") = 3.0
"C" in Sociology 101 (3 Credits)	G3 ("C") = 2.0
"D" in Music 104 (2 Credits)	G4 ("D") = 1.0
"F" in Physical Education 109 (1 Credit)	G5 ("F") = 0.0

Here's how to figure the GPA from the grades above:

$$\frac{(4.0 \times 4) + (3.0 \times 3) + (2.0 \times 3) + (1.0 \times 2) + (0.0 \times 1)}{4 + 3 + 3 + 2 + 1} = \frac{16 + 9 + 6 + 2 + 0}{13} = 2.54$$

19. If you stop attending a class, withdraw officially. Students are enrolled in a course until they're *officially* withdrawn. A student who stops attending is still on the class roster at semester's end when grades are assigned, and the instructor will very likely give the nonattending student an "F." That failing grade is now a permanent part of the student's record, lowering the GPA and discouraging potential employers. If you decide (for whatever reason) to stop attending a class, go directly to the registrar's office and follow the official procedures for withdrawing from a class. Make certain that you withdraw before your college's deadline. This date is often about halfway through a semester or quarter.

20. Talk to your instructor before withdrawing. If you're going to fail a course, withdraw to protect your GPA. But don't withdraw without

speaking to your instructor first. Sometimes students think they are doing far worse than they really are. Discuss with your instructor what you need to do to pass the course and make a step-by-step plan. Be sure to discuss your plans with your advisor as well. He or she might have insights about what will be best for your general education or major requirements and when courses are available for you to retake. If you discover that failing is inevitable, withdraw officially.

21. Keep a file of important documents. Forms get lost in large organizations such as colleges. Save everything that may affect your future: course syllabi, completed tests and assignments, approved registration forms, scholarship applications, transcripts, and paid bills. If you're exempted from a college requirement or course prerequisite, get it in writing and add the document to your files.

22. Finally, some college customs dictate what you should *not* do. Avoiding the following behaviors shows respect for your classmates and instructors.

- Don't pack up your books or put on your coat until the class is over.
- After an absence, don't ask your instructor, "Did I miss anything?" (Of course you did.)
- Don't wear headphones during class.
- Don't let a cell phone disturb the class.
- Don't side-talk with a classmate while the instructor or another student is talking to the class.
- Don't read or send text messages during class.
- Don't make distracting noises in class (e.g., clicking pen, popping gum, drumming fingers, and so on).

COLLEGE CUSTOMS EXERCISES

1. Find someone who has been at your college much longer than you have. Ask him or her, "What is one thing you learned about college customs that you wish you had known on your first day? How has knowing this college custom helped you?" Be prepared to report your findings.

2. Figure out a student's GPA who got the following grades:

"C" in Math 110 (4 Credits)

"D" in English 101 (3 Credits)

"C" in Sociology 101 (3 Credits)

"B" in Music 104 (2 Credits)

"A" in Physical Education 109 (1 Credit)

You may assume that all of these courses count toward the student's GPA.

3. For class discussion:

- Which college custom surprises you most?
- Which custom do you think will be most challenging for you?
- Which custom would you like to hear more about?