

What 10 Years of College Taught Me

OR

What Every College Freshmen Should Know Before Classes Start

by Duncan Campbell, BBA, BTh, MA

1. Go to class. Always. Everyday. Go to class. Go to class. Go to class. You need to be in class to learn, and because you will only have 3 to 4 tests per class and little if any outside graded work, it's imperative that you learn how to take notes from your professor, whether typing on a notebook or hand-written. See, here's the thing. Grades in college are 100% subjective, no matter what 'grading system' they tell you they use. Even if you make A's on the tests, if your research paper or math assignments prove to your professor that you haven't learned, they are totally justified in giving you a C. And they're the Phd and you're the 18-year-old, so you will not win the argument about fairness. On the flip side, this means that you wield a lot of power by the impression that you make on your teacher. And the student who consistently shows up ready to learn, even when half the class is at the lake, may just find themselves wondering how they got a B when all their tests average to D. So just to recap: GO TO CLASS.
2. If it won't fit in your car, it won't fit in your dorm. You need beddings, clothes, supplies to wash beddings and clothes, alarm clock, a few pictures, your camera, your computer, iPod, and one of the following: guitar, art supplies, or stereo. Live with just this stuff for two weeks in the dorm and use that time to determine what, if anything else, you need, which you may get at Thanksgiving if absolutely necessary. Minimal is always better than cluttered. Go ahead and spring for the bigger dorm fridge. And you may wish to only pack seasonally, i.e., leave your coats at home until it gets cold. DO NOT bring anything related to high school like that tshirt with all the inside jokes and people's signatures on it; you're in college now. No one cares about high school.
3. Get a school map and walk the campus and figure out where your classes are before classes actually start. No need to look like a freshmen even if you are a freshmen.
4. Don't dress up for class. This is not high school. No one cares how crisp your appearance is. Even if your university has a dress code, cargos, t-shirts, flip-flops are totally acceptable.
5. Avoid early classes if you can help it. If your classes are at 10am, you can go to bed at 2am and still have 7 hours of sleep, and that's figuring for an hour to get ready and walk to class. And you will have LOTS of 2am nights.
6. Go see your professors in their office. Strike up a relationship with them. Some of them may be pompous and arrogant, but they're the exception (even so, the sooner you learn to deal with pompous superiors, the better off you'll be). Show up on the pretext of a question about class if you can think of nothing else. Ask them what are the common mistakes their students make that you hope to avoid. Ask them about the pictures/trinkets in their office. They are a wealth of knowledge and experience. Just get to know them so that you are not just another face in a 200-member class. Go visit every few weeks. Professors LOVE to talk about themselves and their field of expertise. Show interest in them and their field, because it's a good experience to know someone brilliant. And you'll be in their good books, because they will be excited that there is a student who is excited about what they love. Which makes them teach better.
7. Maturity demands that you not play games on your computer during class, no matter how boring the lecture. Ignore this at your peril.
8. In your English Composition classes, you will have a between 1 and 2 weeks to write each composition and turn it in. So write a draft in the first few days, then take it to your professor in their office hours and let them look over it/give suggestions/carve it up, even if you fancy yourself a good writer. Then go back to your dorm and make all the changes they suggest. Repeat this process at least twice for every paper and by the time you turn it in for real, they've already graded it/have a history with it. This is good for you.

9. Your university will have some sort of free student-led tutoring programs. Probably at the library. If you even THINK that there is a subject/class that's gonna give you trouble, like, say, Calculus, then on the first day of class go sign up for a weekly tutor (usually taught by a senior Calculus Major, for instance) to help you with the assignments. Go to your tutoring sessions for a couple of weeks or the whole semester if you need. If you decide you don't need it, you can always drop and give someone else your spot. But most students wait until they're in trouble in a class before they seek help, and by then, there's a waiting list for free tutors.
10. You probably shouldn't have a job until you're at least a sophomore, but should you need one, the absolute best on-campus job is the ID Checker at the Gym. This person just sits at a desk and makes people show them their IDs before he lets them in (to make sure they're really students and not just townies looking to play some ball). So basically you could get paid to sit at desk and study and occasionally look up at an ID. The second best job on campus is working the front desk of a dorm, which is basically the same thing, only with phone responsibilities. The worst job is anything in the restaurant industry. It's very hard work for the money and the hours are terrible.
11. Get to know you're Resident Advisor (R.A.). Sometimes they can be turds but more often than not they're there to help you/give good advice/ listen. And it'll give you a feel for the position in case you want to be and R.A., which is a campus job, meaning the university will knock off a few thousand from your tuition in exchange for keeping watch over freshmen. And by the way, the whole point of living in a dorm is to meet people. So go meet them. The first few weeks of classes will always include a variety of dorm mixers designed to help you meet your classmates. Take advantage, because lonely should never describe a college freshman.
12. Find an upperclassman you trust who shares your major and find out which professors to take and which to avoid. This plan is not full proof; but it works more often than not. By the way, you'll always have some professors that are just dreadful trolls, people who got hired because they're experts in their field not because they're good teachers. So

- rather than being 'that student' who constantly complains about their professors, just go ahead and learn how to learn from a professor you don't like, and everyone will be less miserable. And yes, you should even go talk to the trolls in their cave hours.
13. Don't walk the same way to class all the time. Change it up.
 14. Learn the best way YOU study. And figure out the best place/environment to study. The sooner the better. That might be in a carrel at the library or it might be on the lawn or it might be at Starbucks. Note: Mozart ALWAYS helps the studying (unless, of course, you're trying to compose an original piece...in which case he'll just make you feel like a failure). And while we're on studying, you should know that reviewing your notes for 20-30 minutes a day will serve you much better than cramming and all-nighters the night before a test.
 15. Don't ever get stuck somewhere with nothing to study/read. Doctors' waiting rooms, gridlocked traffic, airport gates, getting your oil changed, and subways are all great places to knock out a chapter or look over note cards, BUT ONLY IF YOU HAVE THEM WITH YOU. And after college, using this little tidbit will enable you to read a book per week if you're so inclined.
 16. On declaring a major, note well the words of Howard Thurman: "Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive and then go do that. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive." Resist the temptation declare a major until you've taken at least 60 hours, and trust me, there WILL be pressure from the university. Because it's in their best interest for you to stay in school as long as possible. So if you declare a major early, then decide to change it, you'll have to take additional classes that you didn't need the first time = more time in school = more money for the university. Everyone will have to take mostly the same classes your first two years anyway; Freshman History, Sophomore English, etc. Until then, take a wide variety of electives that are things you've always wanted to learn. Diversify your education and try to discover something that you really love, THEN declare a major. Because you don't want to declare that you are a Pre-Med major on the first day only to realize you're not

cut out for Organic Chemistry, and then change majors. Because when you realize being a Creative Writing major instead does not require Organic Chemistry to graduate, you will also realize that you will have wasted time, money, possibly GPA points, and hard work on a class you didn't need. I'm not saying you shouldn't ever change your major; just make sure that if you do it's because you are being wise, not because you are being bullied into it.

17. Take summer school if you want, just know that the teaching likely won't be as good. If that matters to you, then take the summers off and travel as much as you can, preferably outside the United States. That in itself is an education. There are all kinds of adventures you can do for very reasonable prices if you know where to look. Generally, stay away from touristy places and your dollar will stretch. Your church probably has some foreign missionaries in one country or another. Arrange for a visit with them and your lodging will likely be paid for. Also, do some hunting in the business section of the paper and figure out which country's currency is weakest against the U.S. Dollar, then go to that country. \$20 there might last you a week, which would make for some great adventures and story fodder. Just check with the State Department first to make sure you're not planning a backpack trip through a civil war zone.
18. Get/Stay connected to campus ministry group. It will be light years different from your youth group experience, but that's okay. Just go and try to meet as many people as you can, and learn about your own faith in the process. Find a safe place to ask the difficult questions. In the meantime, find a church and make friends with the grandparent-types. Up to now, your faith experience has been with people largely your age. That is about to change in college. But far too many college freshman show up at a church expecting it to be like youth group, and it's not, so they find it boring, and therefore leave. The key to overcoming this is becoming friends with people three times your age. It sounds crazy, I know, but give it a shot. Because it makes church less about entertainment and more about family, which was how it was designed in the first place. And they will have a story or two that will likely blow your socks off. Having a faith family away from home will be a tremendous blessing as the years go by, for them and you. They're

own kids/grandkids are probably far away and you will fill the grandkid role in their life too. Perk: they'll probably love to make you dinner once a week and let you do your laundry there once they get to know you.

19. Never, ever, EVER get photographed with a drink in your hand, especially a red solo cup. Because it looks really bad no matter what the drink actually is. And at some point, your future boss and your future father-in-law, will Google you. The same applies to Spring Break antics. Camera phones are everywhere, and once someone snaps a pic of you doing something stupid and posts it online ten seconds later, every future employer will see it during your interview process, not to mention your future father-in-law. Now more than ever, the choices you make in a few seconds can affect the rest of your life. Be smart.
20. Keep up your car. Get the oil changed every 4,000 miles, and have it tuned up however often the manual says. Keep the tires properly inflated. Learn how to change a flat and how to jump it if the battery dies. And learn who's a good, reliable mechanic in town. Ask the locals. They'll know best. Probably there's a good one at church.
21. Buy used books whenever possible. Or rent them. Or get them from Amazon. Or get the eBook version. Or use the reserved copies that your professor is required to put on hold at the library. Because selling back books at the end of the semester is one of the worst experiences of college, nay adulthood.
22. Avoid like the plague the thousands of credit card offers that will appear in your mail box. The rates are so outrageous they should be illegal.
23. When you do your laundry, sit with it the entire time. Do some studying. Don't leave it alone, even for two minutes. Shady people are always casing the laundry room ready to steal your favorite Banana Republic pique polo and your Seven jeans at the first opportunity to take advantage of your naivete. And it wouldn't hurt to look in the washer/dryer before you put your clothes in to make sure some jerk didn't *accidentally* leave a sharpie in there.

24. Don't leave anything in your car you're not okay with someone stealing.
25. Concentrate on being the right person before you concentrate on finding the right person. Especially at certain Christian universities, there is an ungodly amount of pressure on students to find that special someone and get married, the prevailing wisdom being that once you leave college you will not have the same opportunities. **DON'T BUY INTO THIS FOOLISHNESS.** You're not looking for the best person to marry, you're looking for the right one. Psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually you will grow more from 18 - 24 than at any other time in your life. This means if you marry someone at 20, chances are they **and you** will be different people in four years, people who may not have married each other had they waited. And it is much better to be single wishing you were married than married wishing you were single. If you happen to find that right person in college, fantastic. Just don't make it your point. Make growing up and maturing your first priority. Run as fast as you can towards Jesus. Then look who's running beside you. **THAT'S** the person you should think about marrying. Falling in love is wonderful, but make sure you're falling in love with the person and not falling in love with the idea of falling in love.
26. Some disagree with me on this next point, and that's fine. But you should go ahead and bid adieu to your boyfriend/girlfriend before you go off to college. Part ways as friends. You can always get back together later. This might be unpopular in the short term, but I stand by it as being the best policy. Difficult, yes, but it's better this way in the long run, I promise. College is one of the few times in your life you get the gift of starting with a clean slate. And having as few ties to high school as possible is a good thing. This is doubly true if your bf/gf will still be in high school while you are freshman in college.
27. At some point, the house where your parents live will no longer feel like your home. This is normal. Until that time, however, talk to your parents once a week. And when you do, make sure that you say thank you for sending you to college and that you appreciate all they do for you and the great opportunities they are giving you. (Aside: Likely they're

paying very heftily for you to go to school, maybe even working extra, which is tough anyway, let alone if you still have brothers or sisters at home. So for goodness sake, do not tell your parents that you're just so stressed and what you really need is a trip to St. Kitts because your life is really tough these days. That would be dreadfully insulting. If you wanna go to St. Kitts, buy your own ticket. End of aside.) But just know the real way you'll say thank you is by doing your best and actually graduating in less than a decade.