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High School to College Transition, Part Two: Academic Expectations

Posted: 07/01/2010 12:39 pm EDT Updated: 06/11/2011 7:32 pm EDT **Brian Harke Ed.D.**
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In Part One of this series, (I encourage you to [read it first](#)), I examined the freshman myth, which refers to the overly optimistic and confident mindset that many high school seniors hold about their ability to manage the challenges they will encounter at college. This article is part two of this series and discusses some of the common unrealistic academic expectations that contribute to the freshman myth, in particular, the difference between high school and college. The foundation for this article comes from research I have completed, personal experience working with freshman, and other empirical articles and research. Many new college students enter college misinformed about how to succeed academically in a college environment. In a recent study of high school seniors, 89% expected that their collegiate academic experience would echo that of high school. Other studies support this, and I've seen it play out first hand over and over again.

High schools often reinforce these expectations by unwittingly allowing students to enter college as dependent learners rather than independent learners. I say this not to place blame, but to recognize that up to this point most students have had teams of people supporting them, keeping track of their academic progress and looking out for their best interests. Since this has been their norm for 12 years, new college students are often at a loss when faced with the reality that it is up to them to manage their academic independence.

Many new college students enter college believing that (a) they can depend on faculty to keep track of them and be concerned about how well they are doing; (b) their reading skills are adequate enough for college; (c) they will not have trouble doing well in class; and (d) academically, college will be a repeat of high school in regards to their grades and their ability to handle the workload. In my previous article I stated that 34% of freshman will drop out in the first year; what I didn't share is that 15% of them drop out due to unrealistic academic expectations.

The differences between high school and college academic environments can be significant. I'd recommend that you discuss and be aware of these differences and expectations with your parents or son/daughter. Here are some examples.

Grades: Good grades are often harder to earn in college. Yes, the work is more intense and difficult, but keep in mind that instructors are not held to a uniform grading system as many high schools teachers are. Some college instructors will purposely only award a handful of A's; other instructors award them more freely. Depending on the class and particular college, Bs and Cs may be superior grades. It would be helpful for parents and students to gather this kind of information during their college search. Knowing that Bs and Cs are the superior norm will save a lot of heartbreak and tears at the end of the term.

College teaching styles and the academic demands: Many freshman classes are large lecture style classes. As such, it is much easier to slack off or even skip a class without anyone knowing or caring. I have found that missing one class in college is often like missing an entire week in high school. The subject matter discussed in college courses moves very fast and a lot is covered in a short time. Unlike many high school classes, most instructors don't follow the textbook. What they present in a lecture will usually wind up on a midterm or final. Keep in mind that some classes will only offer these two chances to earn a final grade. *Hint:* if you (student) or your son/daughter are not good note takers (and even if you think you/they are), you need to read up on college note taking methods before getting to college. Class lecture notes will be the best study guides. Good class notes can make or break a student, academically.

Another major contrast between high school and college is that many **freshman classes are taught by Teacher Assistants (T.A.s)** and the instructor plays a smaller role. Freshmen have to deal with navigating the

dynamic of working with Graduate Student T.A.s as well as the instructor. Typically T.A.s, not the instructor, will grade tests and papers.

Warning: regarding papers, please make sure you understand what plagiarism is. Many colleges now use software to scan student papers for plagiarism. It is a major issue on college campuses. I've seen many freshmen get Fs on papers, Fs in classes, and even expelled because they either lifted material or didn't cite a source.

Reading Skills: It is common for students to have to read 15-20 chapters in their textbooks, do additional readings from handouts, and complete research papers before their next classes. It's easy to see how students can get overwhelmed. Here's the thing: students don't fail because they get overwhelmed. They fail because they don't know how to read for college. Reading for college is about efficiency. I'd recommend Googling "how to read for college". You'll find many resources that discuss ways to get through required reading quickly while still gaining the insight needed for class.

Need for outside help and self-discipline: Ok, so here are two biggies. Many college students fail because they are afraid to ask for help or they get distracted from what is important. Forget about your ego. Join a study group, seek out tutors, speak to your professor or T.A. Asking for help and admitting you are having problems does not mean you are dumb or stupid! Not asking does.

Self-discipline is the other biggie. I obviously don't have enough space to delve very deeply, but one recommendation I'll make is that you schedule time to study at the same time every day. If this is booked on your daily calendar, you will plan around it. You'll develop a study habit. If you think about it, a habit is really a form of self-discipline. You automatically do it because your mind tells you to. The same goes for study time. This is one habit that you definitely don't want to break.

Relationship with faculty: For this topic, it's hard to generalize because faculty members are all very different. But, let's plan for the worse case. Don't expect anything from your professors besides them teaching the class and having office hours.

In a recent study, almost 71% of new college students assumed that their college instructors would get to know them personally. They expect their instructors to look after them and let them know if they are not doing well in their courses. Don't expect any of this. Be aware that unlike high school teachers, many college instructors teach part-time or are adjunct professors. They work other professional jobs or teach at other colleges. Full time professors are often doing research besides teaching. In short, college instructors have a number of priorities and though I hope it's not the case, some instructors will not see you as their first priority. You will have to work harder at getting to know your instructors than you did in high school-and you should.

Bonus: when it comes to getting letters of recommendation for grad school or networking leads for a job, guess whose help you'll want?

Use this article as a jumping off point to think about the differences between high school and college academics, before you (student) or your son/daughter arrive on the college campus. Since I've only touched on a few critical points of difference between high school and college academics, I've included questions below to continue the conversation with your student, family and friends. By setting realistic expectations about college, you (student) or your son/daughter will be prepared for all the good things to come.

1. Do you consider yourself an independent learner? If not, what's your plan for becoming one?
2. Do you have a system for taking class notes? What if the lecture was three hours long and the instructor talked faster, could you keep up (there is a good chance of this, better read up on how to take good college notes)?
3. Do you know how to read for college (it's different than reading for high school)?
4. How would you feel if instructors don't take a personal interest in you (some definitely won't)?
5. What is your study strategy for an exam on 8 weeks of lectures and 22 chapters of textbook reading? What if you multiply that by 5 classes and include several papers?
6. How will you deal with stress?