

Adjusting to College or University: Tips for Students

Post-secondary education is a big step in your life. It is an exciting, exhilarating time. Yet like any transition, it won't all be easy. The first few months may present challenges as you meet new people and face new responsibilities and choices. The transition will be easier if you are aware of and prepared to handle possible trouble spots.

Making the transition

Moving from high school to post-secondary is an enormous change. Almost overnight, you become responsible for making most of the major decisions in your life. You will choose new courses, activities, and friends. You will structure most of your own time. By understanding the changes that are taking place in your academic, social, and emotional life, you can settle in more quickly to your new life and strike a good balance between studying, campus activities, and a social life.

During the summer before you start college or university, tour the institution's website and social networking sites where new students can contact one another. Look for people who share your interests. Maybe you'll find other students who play in the orchestra, who are from your city or town, or who want to be involved with groups that interest you. You'll feel more comfortable being in a new place if you have already "met" some new friends who share your interests.

If you are living on campus, contact your roommate (or roommates) to talk about what each of you will bring. You don't need two stereos in a dorm room, for example. These conversations can help you feel more comfortable before you arrive on campus and allow you to get to know your roommate(s) before school starts.

Academics

Many freshmen are surprised by the new academic life they face and find it takes some time to adjust. Most post-secondary institutions offer workshops or orientation sessions at the start of school -- or even a full course -- to help with academic adjustment. Take advantage.

Even if high school seemed easy to you, post-secondary will be quite different. And be aware of your learning style. Everyone learns in different ways. You can talk to your professors, teaching assistants, and freshman advising office about strategies for making the most out of your academic career.

- *Classes.* You can choose many of the courses you take and when you take them. Classes often meet only two or three times a week and compared to high school, you will feel like you have so few hours of classes. Some of the classes are so large you likely won't be missed if you don't show up. However, many professors take attendance -- either formally or informally -- and will notice if you're not there on a regular basis. Even if they don't take attendance, you will find yourself lost quickly if you decide not to attend classes.
- *Studying.* Many freshmen are overwhelmed by the amount of studying they must do the first semester. It may take a while to understand what is expected of you academically -- how to read assignments, how to take notes that are helpful, how to write papers, how to prepare for exams. Find a couple of places on campus that are conducive to studying and use those

places as part of a regular studying routine. Take advantage of group study sessions if those work for you, but if you find them unproductive and too social, find another group.

- *Time management.* With your new, relatively unstructured schedule, you will need to learn to manage your own time. No one will be there to remind you what to do and by when -- and there will be plenty of distractions. You will need to set priorities, create your own study schedule, and discipline yourself to stick to it. Get a good weekly organizer or other system for keeping track of classes, papers, exams, and important events. Plan a study schedule. Use a notebook or file system to help you organize notes, handouts, exams, and papers. You can expect to spend two to three hours studying for every hour you are in class. So if, for example, you have 15 hours of class per week (a typical post-secondary schedule) you will have 30 to 45 hours of reading, writing, and research outside of class. As you organize your time and your day, keep in mind that you may not have as many day-to-day assignments as you did in high school. You may only have a research paper due in the middle of the semester, then a final exam and final paper due at the end. You can't depend on your faculty to remind you of due dates. You will need to pace yourself and look down the road to figure out what you need to accomplish each week to ensure that you can successfully complete long-term assignments. Keep up with the reading assignments and follow the course textbook. And make sure to stay organized.

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- *Grades.* In your first semester, you may find that your grades are not up to your previous level of accomplishment. The competition is tougher and the material more difficult. Getting a C or D on your first chemistry exam or English paper can be very disturbing, but be aware that most students go through this. After a period of adjustment, your grades will improve as you learn to manage your time, prepare more effectively, choose courses that are closer to your interests, and feel more comfortable in your new surroundings. In the beginning, you may want to lighten your course load to give yourself time to adjust. Additionally, even though you will probably have fewer required classes than you did in high school, you will most likely still have to take some classes that you are not passionate about. Don't dismiss these classes right away -- many students change majors -- and you may enroll in a class that sparks an interest in an area you had never considered before! Your grades in all classes matter, not just your major, if you hope to go to graduate school (and sometimes even for a job).

If you're feeling overwhelmed by papers, exams, and all the reading, find out where to go to for academic support services. You may need extra help with writing skills, or a student tutor to help you with math or language classes. Don't be afraid to ask for help. Finally, follow the honour code. There are so many resources available to you -- cheating is just not worth risking your entire post-secondary career.

Relationships

In your first semester, you'll make new friends, and you may find that old friendships and relationships with family members change. Remember that good relationships take a long time to develop. Be patient.

- *Old friends.* You won't be in touch with old friends as often as you used to be, at least in person. When you do see them on vacations or over the summer, you may find that you have both changed. Old friends can be a connection to your past and can help ground you in your new life, but it's also normal for old friendships to change over time. Yours may evolve in ways you didn't expect as you adjust to your new situation and they to theirs.
- *Your parents.* Once you enter college or university, your relationship with your parents will likely change, too. What has always been a parent-child relationship will start to grow into an adult-to-adult relationship, but the transition won't happen overnight. There will be times when you want your parents to still act like parents, and others when you'll want them to treat you as an adult. They may have a hard time knowing what you want when. They may not know how to act in some situations and may try to parent you when you want to be independent, or let you stand on your own when you want a parent to lean on. Extra patience, understanding, and communication will be necessary on both sides. If you're living away from your parents, before you go home for your first school break, make sure to talk about rules and expectations for living together once again. The dynamic will change within your family and you should talk about how things may be different.
- *Roommates.* If you live in a dormitory or share an apartment, you may have to share a small space with someone you've never met before. You may differ in how neat or noisy you are. If you're used to having your own room, you may need to get used to having less privacy. You will need to learn to get along and resolve conflicts in this new relationship. Come up with some basic rules together with roommates to avoid problems later on. Talk about overnight guests, cleaning up, borrowing each other's clothes and other possessions, and other rules for living together. One of the best pieces of advice about living with roommates is that you don't need to be your roommate's best friend. It may turn out that way, but you may also be very different people. All you need to do is form a working relationship of mutual respect. Figuring out how to live with roommates is one of the most useful life skills you may learn during this phase of your life.
- *New friends.* You will be surrounded by people from different provinces, countries, and cultures. You will probably find it a fascinating chance to build rich, new friendships. At the same time, these new people in your life may have different values, tastes, morals, and priorities. You may find that in learning about them, you take a fresh look at your own values and experiment with different ideas. This is a normal, healthy part of developing your new adult self.
- *Faculty/staff.* Get to know your professors, faculty advisor, and resident advisors. They can help you choose courses, give advice on majors, secure internships or research positions, and help steer you in the right direction. Take advantage of your professors' office hours and ask questions. Also take advantage of other departments on campus like Career Services, Writing Centres, tutoring, and counselling offices.

Extracurriculars

Getting involved in extracurricular activities is another great way to meet people and explore new interests. In many ways, your post-secondary education is a fresh start -- you can try things

that you always wanted to try in high school but didn't have a chance to. Activities outside of class also help you structure your time better. Instead of having seemingly endless free time, you can apply more structure to your day.

- *Find something you are passionate about or continue with a hobby or activity you enjoyed in high school.* Focus on the quality of the activity, not necessarily the number of activities in which you participate. If you were a varsity athlete in high school and you aren't going to play on your college's team, you can still do club or intramural sports. If you didn't do drama in high school, you could start participating in drama now.
- *Consider finding a job.* Visit your campus' student employment office or look at restaurants and stores near campus for part-time jobs. It can be nice to work to make spending money, but typically you should not work more than 10 hours per week, at least initially, until you figure out what your schedule is really like.
- *Don't over-commit in the first semester.* Give yourself time to understand your workload and the demands on your time. You'll have four years to get involved. Start slowly.

Money

This may be the time in your life when you learn how to manage your money -- and it may be through trial and error. You may have a fixed amount of money that needs to last you for the entire semester. You may have a part-time job or work-study arrangement that gives you a regular paycheck. No matter where it comes from, your money is yet another part of life that you will need to manage.

Develop a budget

Like most adults, you'll have to learn to live on a budget. The first step is to figure out how your monthly income matches up to your expenses.

- *Add up what's available to spend.* Start by adding up the money you have to live on. Figure out what you have available to spend each month or during the semester from scholarships, loans, family contributions, savings, and work.
- *Figure out how much you're spending.* Add up how much you will be required to spend on tuition, books, lab and equipment fees, school supplies, housing, and meals. Figure out how much you spend each month on transportation, going out, groceries, snacks, postage, phone calls, clothing, and other miscellaneous items like hair cuts and personal care.

It can be helpful to keep a log of your spending for a week or two to get an accurate picture of your expenses. Little items like sodas, snacks, magazines, and video games can be an important factor in your budget.

Once you see what you have available to spend and where your money actually goes, you can begin to make choices about what's important to you and the unnecessary spending you can eliminate. You may want to get help in planning your budget. Your parents may be able to give you ideas from their own experience. Here are some steps you can take to get your budget under control:

- *Look at your buying habits.* Do you buy items on impulse? Do you buy things on sale that you don't need, just because they're a good deal?
- *Look at ways you can save money,* such as buying used books or cutting back on restaurant meals. Buy an online version of a textbook, or find out if a book's publisher allows textbook rentals. At the end of the semester, sell your textbooks back to the campus bookstore or directly to other students.
- *Watch your phone bills.* If you've moved away from home to attend college or university, you may find it comforting to talk with or send text messages to your family and friends frequently to help you adjust. Be aware of what this may cost. To help control phone costs, try the following:
 - Phone during low-rate periods. The most expensive time to call is usually during the week between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m.
 - Check your plan. Check with your long-distance provider and your cell phone contract to make sure you have calling and texting plans that match your phone use.
 - Take advantage of free nighttime and weekend minutes if you have a cell phone.
- *Beware of credit cards.* As soon as you begin your post-secondary education, and perhaps even before, you will receive offers for credit cards. Some will have attractive introductory interest rates. While these years can be a good time to establish a positive credit rating, credit cards make it very easy to spend money you don't have on items you don't need. Low interest rates only last about six months, and then the rates can go up to 19 per cent or more, depending on the type of card and your habits. You might get a credit card to use only in emergencies -- if you can trust your self-control -- or get one and use it sparingly. Once you run up a balance, it can take years to pay it off. Either way, be sure to pay off your full balance each month, on time, to establish a good credit rating. If you think you'll have trouble doing this, rely instead on cash, and wait until you're working full-time and have a steady income before you take on the temptation of a credit card.

Feelings

With all the changes that will happen in your first months of post-secondary education, you may have emotional ups and downs -- exhilaration at meeting your new roommate, panic at seeing your first lab assignment, or loneliness if you haven't heard from your family in a while. All these feelings are typical and part of making the transition.

- *Disorientation.* Many freshmen find that they go through a period of disorientation at first. It's almost like being in a foreign country, where you feel disconnected from your old life, but don't yet feel at home in the new place.
- *Sadness.* You may feel sadness due to separation from your family and friends, and at not being able to communicate with them as often as you once did.
- *Disappointment.* Some students say that in the beginning, they find themselves feeling disappointed because the experience hasn't lived up to their expectations. They may feel as though they made a mistake choosing the institution they did. Or, they thought they would still be at the top of their class, or make the team, or that the school would just somehow be different. They may feel they want to transfer or just drop out.

Many students find that this emotional roller coaster evens out later in their first year as they settle in to the new environment. Almost all change creates stress in our lives. These feelings, while they may not always be comfortable, are part of the process of growing into adulthood and independence. You will learn to deal with these feelings and move forward as you begin to form a new support system of relationships. It's also important to take care of yourself by eating right, sleeping enough, and exercising. And remember to find time to be alone if that's important to you.

All post-secondary institutions offer some type of counselling services. If you are feeling overwhelmed, seek professional help. Talking about your feelings and experiences may be very helpful in making a successful transition.

Remember that the program that provided this publication also offers resources that can help both students and their parents.

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