



WHAT WILL I LEARN IN COLLEGE?

*What You Need to Know
Now to Get Ready
for College Success*

By Robert Shoenberg



Association
of American
Colleges and
Universities

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“Everybody ten years out of college is doing something completely different than what they went to college for and majored in. I look back at myself. I got a degree in electrical engineering. Right off the bat, I started in software and I moved into sales and then into management. The well-rounded portion of what I got in college is what really served me a lot better than anything I learned in my electrical engineering degree.”

Business executive, Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Introduction

How Do I Prepare for College Success?

After graduation, most high school students would like to attend college. In order to realize that dream, students must work hard and try their best to do well in high school. As you've probably already noticed, hard work—taking challenging classes and applying yourself—is the single most important element of success in high school. Successful college learning will require you to step up your academic game even more. And it will be worth your efforts. A college education—especially a good liberal education, regardless of your major—opens the door to a range of opportunities for those who are willing to give it their all.

High school students will be more likely to succeed in college if they know some things about college learning before they get there—rather than assuming that they can just wait until they arrive and “do what they are told.” If you are in high school and thinking about going to college, you probably already know some of the ways that college is different from high school, and on the following page and in the Appendix you will see lists of ways in which the learning environment in high school differs from college learning today. This guide is designed not only to explain those differences, but to provide high school students with advice they can use to be better informed and prepared to succeed in college.

An important difference between college and high school has to do with your time and your responsibilities. You will be responsible

for managing your time and for meeting the expectations of your college professors.

You may not realize that in addition to differences in schedules and overall rules and regulations, the ways in which you are expected to learn in college and the kind of work you will be doing there are probably different from what you have experienced in high school. For instance, the textbook is only the starting point for college course work. College instructors usually assume that students have already read and understood the content of required texts and that they arrive at class ready to apply what they have learned to new situations or to use that knowledge to raise new questions and explore the subject matter further. College instructors expect much more from those enrolled in their classes than simply providing correct answers to simple questions; they look for students to raise questions themselves and explore complex issues on their own.

If you can begin college with an understanding of the ways you will be expected to learn—and perhaps some experience with these kinds of learning—you will be able to adjust more quickly to the college environment and enjoy greater success. This guide is intended to help you begin college with a more accurate set of expectations and seek out high school experiences that will give you a strong start.

TEN IMPORTANT WAYS IN WHICH COLLEGE IS DIFFERENT FROM HIGH SCHOOL

1. You will have a lot of freedom to make choices and to decide how to organize your time. A lot of personal responsibility goes with that freedom.

2. You will be expected to read extensively and analytically.

3. You will write a lot.

4. You will deal mostly with questions that do not have single correct answers.

5. You will be expected to judge the reliability of sources of information and opinion.

6. You will consider how the point of view from which you approach a question or problem affects your answer or opinion.

7. You will be expected to question and critically evaluate claims that authorities make.

8. You will apply knowledge, not simply acquire it.

9. You will consider the ethical and moral aspects of situations you read about and activities you engage in.

10. You will learn to deal with problems that are open-ended and for which the first step is simply to ask a useful question.

In short, you will start to learn to be a “reflective practitioner,” a person who approaches work and personal life thoughtfully and with awareness of the many factors that determine action.

Being Impressive versus Being Clueless



FALGUNI A. SHETH

Associate professor of philosophy and political theory,
Hampshire College

Although I have taught in universities for twelve years, sometimes I dream of doing stand-up comedy. My routine would start something like this: *The other day, a student came up to me and asked if he needed to buy the book for the class. And I said to him: No, you don't have to buy the book, but then again, I don't have to pass you either. On the other hand, dear student, it might be an interesting experiment... you know, to see if the book might help you understand the material in class.*

As unbelievable as it might seem, I actually had that exchange with one of my students.

To be fair, most students get that they have to buy the books and do the work for the class. Still, I am often surprised at the simple things that distinguish my most impressive students from those who come off as clueless about the whole “college thing.” The key skills that distinguish my most impressive students from their mediocre counterparts do not include elements of remarkable brilliance. All my students are smart, but brilliance alone is not impressive. My “brilliant” students often fail their courses because they think that being brilliant will compensate for not having solid study skills or not being able to write good papers (which require organization and research skills). In other words, they think brilliance is a substitute for doing work.

Actually, my most impressive students are ones whose approach to school is one of curiosity. They are interested in the answers to the questions—not the right answers, but WHY the right answers are what they are. They are also self-reliant:

- they look up office hours on the course Web site or syllabus
- they find out the due date of the paper (and have it marked in their date books within a few days of receiving the syllabus)
- they are prepared for every scholarly interaction
- they bring outlines to review with me at least one week before the paper is due
- they will have looked up potential books in the library database before attending my office hours
- they have a list of questions that they have thought of before coming to office hours
- they bring paper and pen to take notes during office visits

My most impressive students are not the most “brilliant.” Rather, they come to college because they can't imagine a life without talking about books and current events, or without questioning and challenging the things that “everyone knows” are correct. But they also know that intelligence without being organized is only half the trick to doing well in college.





“Liberal education is a philosophy of education that empowers individuals with broad knowledge, transferable skills, and a strong sense of values, ethics, and civic engagement. Your specific choice of major matters far less than the knowledge and skills you gain through all your studies and experiences in college. A liberal education includes general education that provides students broad learning in multiple disciplines and more in-depth study in one field.”

The Association of American Colleges and Universities

Chapter 1

What Are the Most Important Outcomes of College— And How Do I Achieve Them?

In college, all students eventually choose a field in which to specialize—a “major.” But depending on the college, anywhere from 25 percent to 50 percent of a student’s work will be outside of courses required in his or her major. And your choice of major isn’t nearly as important as you might think. What you actually learn and how well you can apply your learning in new settings is far more important than the specific major you choose. And whatever major that is, all college students will need the outcomes provided by a good liberal education (see page 6).

Beyond the courses required in the major, some of the courses you take will be “electives”—courses chosen simply because they are of interest. A large portion of *all* college students’ required courses, however, are in what is commonly called “general education.” These kinds of courses often take up most of a college student’s schedule in the first few years, and sometimes extend throughout the undergraduate years.

Whatever form your general education might take—no two colleges are quite the same—this part of college is specifically designed to begin the process of helping students develop some basic intellectual skills and competencies that are essential to success in work and in one’s personal life. It is in these courses that students begin to develop the skills and knowledge that comprise a good

“liberal education”—the learning that all college graduates need to be successful in their jobs and responsible members of their communities. After beginning with general education courses, however, students also continue to hone these more general skills and abilities, but in the specific context of their college majors. Whatever your major field of study, educators and employers now agree that some outcomes of college are essential for all students (see the chart on page 6).



WHAT DOES A LIBERAL EDUCATION PROVIDE YOU?

A liberal education helps you achieve broad knowledge and a set of skills and capacities that you need for all kinds of careers and for the rest of your life as well.

Employers and educators call these “The Essential Learning Outcomes.” Here is what they include:

→ **Knowledge of Human Cultures and the Physical and Natural World**

- Through study in the sciences and mathematics, social studies, humanities, histories, languages, and the arts

Focused through engagement with the fields’ big questions, both contemporary and enduring

→ **Intellectual and Practical Skills, including:**

- Inquiry, critical, and creative thinking
- Written and oral communication
- Quantitative literacy
- Information literacy
- Teamwork and problem solving

Practiced extensively, across the curriculum, in the context of progressively more challenging problems, projects, and standards of performance

→ **Personal and Social Responsibilities, including:**

- Civic knowledge and engagement—local and global
- Intercultural knowledge and competence
- Ethical reasoning and action
- Foundations and skills for lifelong learning

Anchored through active involvement with diverse communities and real-world challenges

→ **Integrative and Applied Learning, including:**

- Synthesis and advanced accomplishment across general and specialized studies

Demonstrated through the application of knowledge, skills, and responsibilities to new settings and complex problems