

Questions and Answers About Getting Started in College

by Wes Beach

Here are some things to consider if you're planning on college studies. Of course, you are completely free to go at your studies in ways that make sense to you; follow my suggestions only if they are fitting.

What classes should I take?

My answer to this question, and to the ones that follow, is based on the fundamental belief that the most important thing as you get started in college is to get settled in, find ways of approaching your class work that make sense to you and that work for you, enjoy what you're doing and be successful. For this reason, I recommend that you take whatever classes seem interesting to you. It's safe to do this for at least one term because, unless you take several courses in the same exotic discipline 末 three courses in advanced cake decorating, for example 末 it's very hard to "waste" a semester. Anything you might take will count for something down the line - admissions requirements at a four-year school, part of your certificate program or major, breadth requirements, etc. Besides, how can you "waste" a semester when you're learning things you want to learn? Even three classes in advanced cake decorating could be rewarding and fulfilling, and might even lead to your vocation or an important hobby. Of course, if you have a clear and certain goal, find out what you need to do to reach it and plan accordingly.

What requirements do I need to meet?

None at all until you decide on a goal. You may want a certificate in vocational gardening or criminal justice, or a two-year degree with a major in history, or you may want to prepare to be admitted as a junior biology major at a four-year university. (But don't worry if you don't have such a goal 末 see below.) Until you decide what your goal is, there are no requirements of any kind, except that you follow the general rules of the college and maintain minimum grades.

It's a good idea to have a copy of the college catalog (you can get one at the bookstore) so that you know what the college rules are.

And you can probably find the requirements that you'll need to meet in the catalog when you decide on a goal. You'll also probably find, if you do some browsing in the catalog, some goals you didn't know existed. You can, of course, talk to a counselor at the college.

How many classes should I take?

I don't know. But you may want to consider these questions: Do you want to accomplish something academically in a given period of time? How hard do you want to work during the school term? Will you need time for other things, like working?

Some of my students have gotten off to a good start in college with one class; others have taken six or seven. (Don't do this unless you're very devoted to your schoolwork.) If going to school will be your main focus, and if you want to be more or less a full-time student, you might want to consider taking three, four, or five classes. If you can't come to a firm decision, sign up for more rather than less. You can take a very good look at the workload in each class during the early days of the term and, if you've overloaded yourself, you can drop a class or two. (Be sure you take care of the paperwork before the

deadline, found in the schedule of classes.) It's much easier to drop classes than to add them because many are filled by the time classes begin. You are completely free to drop any classes you want; this isn't high school, and there aren't confining rules telling you how to live your life.

What if I don't know what I want to study?

No problem. While some people find their calling early in their lives, many others begin college knowing that they want formal education but not knowing what they want to focus on. One student, who contacted me a few days before I wrote this, attended Cabrillo College for three years (rather than two because she needed to work), transferred to San Jose State thinking she wanted to be a physical education major, studied with an inspiring chemistry professor, and changed her major. She graduated with great distinction in chemistry and went on to earn a Ph.D. in biochemistry from the University of California, San Francisco.

Ellen Goodman, whose column appears in over 400 newspapers, didn't write her first story or know that she would be a journalist until after she graduated from college. My view is that it isn't necessary at any point in your life to have a specific goal. What matters is being actively engaged in your own life and having some sort of direction. Your direction can be very general, such as attending college with your eyes wide open to see what you can find there.

Another of my students, who became an English major only after she was well into her college studies, wrote, "Time's passage leads to change, and if you are open to these changes you will undoubtedly grow." If you want to grow into a college major, you will; it's just that you may not be able to predict what inspiration will come your way or when it will arrive. One of my students wound up in a doctoral program in high-altitude physiology as a result of watching the movie "Top Gun."

If you want to keep open the possibility of going on to a four-year college or university (I'm assuming you've begun at a community college), you should plan for this from the beginning. No, I'm not contradicting myself; you can take what you please during your first semester or quarter and pay attention to how your course choices fit into a college admissions scheme. By your second term you will probably want to choose most of your courses according to this scheme.

If you do settle on a major early, this will make your planning more straightforward and insure that you spend your time efficiently at your community college (although efficiency isn't necessarily the highest priority).

Will I be OK?

Yes. I have come to believe, based on both my extensive experience and on research I've read, that your success will have to do with your optimism, confidence and sense of independence. It's hard not to feel independent when you're in college because you don't have anyone looking over your shoulder telling you not to chew gum, or that you're bad because you're seven seconds late to class, or that you should do your homework each night instead of leave it to do in big chunks (or vice versa). You will be treated as an independent and responsible human being, and you'll act accordingly.

Confidence and optimism may be a bit trickier. You may or may not think of yourself as a confident person, but do realize that you've had the courage to resist tons of pressure from our society to go to high school, do all the usual high school stuff, and earn a traditional diploma. And I'm assuming you're somewhat optimistic about going into college or you wouldn't be going.

You may be scared, but that's not the same thing as lacking confidence. It's possible to be afraid and get on with things anyway.

Lots of people who have had the experience that you're going to have have been scared, but they've succeeded, and the fear goes away very soon.

If you're having any trouble with confidence and optimism, consider this advice from David G. Meyers, professor of psychology at Hope College and author of *The Pursuit of Happiness*.

Do we wish to change ourselves in some important way? perhaps to boost our self-esteem? to become more optimistic and socially assertive? Well, a potent strategy is to get up and start doing that very thing. Don't worry that you don't feel like it. Fake it. Pretend self-esteem. Feign optimism. Simulate outgoingness...

Dr. Myers cites research that leads to the following conclusion.

Yes, telling people to act or talk positively sounds like telling people to be phony. But as usually happens when we step into some new role 未 perhaps our first days "playing" the role of...[college student]未 an amazing thing happens: The phoniness gradually subsides. We notice that our uncomfortable sense of being [a young student in college] no longer feels forced. The new role 未 the new behaviors and accompanying attitudes 未 have begun to fit as comfortably as our old jeans and T-shirt.

Anything else?

Yes. There is important stuff in the college's schedule of classes and in the college catalog 未 READ IT! In particular, you can wind up with undeserved poor grades on your transcript if you don't know what the rules are. There are deadlines for dropping (and adding) classes and signing up for different kinds of grading, such as credit/no credit. If you decide not to carry through with a class, do the necessary paperwork - and do it before the deadline. If you simply stop going to a class, or wait too long to withdraw, you may end up with an "F" instead of no grade at all (and no record of your being in the class--if you withdraw early) or a "W" if you drop later but before the deadline. There are other important facts, dates, policies, and procedures you need to know about. READ THE RULES!

You can, of course, talk with a college counselor if you need to. There may be other sources of information, such as an office to support transfer students. Each of your instructors will explain class assignments and procedures. Of course you'll read these too, and ask questions if you don't understand.

Take good care of yourself by knowing what the rules are. (Yes, I know, I'm repeating myself, but it's important advice that some students have regretted not following). And take good care of yourself by finding learning opportunities that nourish your real self.

Wes Beach directs Beach High School, which offers teenagers the freedom to pursue their authentic interests and develop their natural talents outside of a traditional high school. Wes has been doing this

kind of work in one form or another for over 20 years. Prior to working independently, he had 32 years experience in grades K-14 in public and private schools as a teacher and alternative education program director.

The website for Beach High School is: <http://members.cruzio.com/~beachhi/home.html>