

# Adjusting to College Life

So you're goin' to college...

...starry-eyed and full of optimism. Or you've started, and now the honeymoon is over. Or you're on your way and full of trepidation. Your mind is filled with questions like: Will I make friends? Will I be able to keep up in classes? Will I get along with my roommate?

Well you're not alone. Nearly all new students have concerns like these and for good reasons: the first year of college is a time of great change and adjustment. Chances are you didn't take a class in high school to help you prepare for these changes and challenges, but don't despair; read on, noble adventurer. Here are some suggestions, things to know and resources that might help you.

Whether you're going to college for the first time or re-entering school after taking time off, the experience can be both exhilarating and daunting. Particularly for the first-time college student, it is normal to experience anxiety and fear among the many different emotions you'll feel in the first year. While your greater sense of freedom may in many ways be a welcome change, it can also be stressful, or bring about confusion, sadness and loneliness. This is especially true if you move away from friends and family to attend college. As a new student, expect to be challenged in many areas, both personally and academically. Your college counseling center and academic advising offices, among other services, can assist you as you deal with the new situations you'll encounter. Be prepared to grapple with things like:

## Time Management

Talk to students who are in their 2nd, 3rd or 4th years about what they've learned about the best ways to manage their time in college. Here are some additional tips:

- Schedule activities in a calendar (including appointments, exams, due dates, self-created deadlines).
- Put your schedule down in writing and try to stick to it, as much as possible, being mindful that this won't always be possible for one reason or another.
- Make "to do" lists.
- Prioritize your activities (e.g., sorting out which things are of most, moderate, or low importance). Put things that help you reach your goals or help you stay healthy and sane at a higher priority.
- Determine your optimal environment (e.g., do you work best in a quiet setting or with background noise) that is conducive to concentration and with the least chance for disruption.
- Identify the times of day when you have the most energy and schedule to do your most important work at those times

- Learn to set boundaries. Set times to study and tell friends that this is the time you'll be working.

## Stress Management

Expect some stress. Both negative events (e.g., doing poorly on a test) and positive events (e.g., a first date) can elicit stress. Sometimes stress is normal and healthy but sometimes it can become overwhelming. Look for signs that you're under too much stress: appetite or sleep disturbances; unusual (for you) degrees of sadness, worry, irritability; anxiety, panic or sense of doom; feeling that you just can't cope with the demands put upon you. In addition to seeking support services on campus, such as counseling or advising offices, take some active steps to minimize stress, including:

- Avoid caffeine and other stimulants (it might help in the short run but ultimately it can cause further irritability and anxiety).
- Be aware of using alcohol and drugs as a way to manage or "escape" from stress.
- Eat a balanced diet (keeping blood sugar stable with highly nutritious foods like fruits and vegetables can help both your brain and body function more efficiently).
- Take frequent study breaks to refresh yourself.
- Get plenty of exercise to reduce tension.
- Learn relaxation techniques (e.g., slow, deep breathing; meditation; progressive muscle relaxation; guided imagery), or make time regularly to do the things that relax you (e.g., a good novel, a hot shower, listening to music).
- Balance time for work and play. A little loafing can ease stress.
- Get enough sleep and keep your sleep schedule as consistent as possible. While cutting back on sleep may initially allow you to get more work done, chronic sleep loss may have unwanted effects (e.g., difficulty concentrating, decreased efficiency, poorer performance, irritability, decreased coping ability). Most people need 7 to 9 hours of sleep a night.
- Develop mutually supportive friendships and relationships. It can help to talk out your worries with someone you trust and respect.
- Pursue goals that are realistic and meaningful to you, versus goals that others have for you that you do not share.
- Become aware of how your expectations or perceptions of situations may add unnecessary stress (e.g., expectations of perfection, expecting to please everyone, worrying about "what if's," overreacting and viewing things as more urgent than they are).
- Focus on what you need to do to succeed, as opposed to what could cause you to fail.
- Learn to accept what you cannot change and recognize what you can change (e.g., what tasks can you eliminate, simplify, delegate, spread out over time, take a break from).

# Study Skills

Be proactive--do something BEFORE you fail the exam--get help, talk to teachers, seek tutoring, etc. Join a study group right away--you'll meet people this way as well as get a leg up on your studies. Get to know college resources; go on orientation tours if you haven't already. Talk to librarians about how to use available resources; take library tours. In general, find out what is on campus to serve you.

The office of Academic Advising and Achievement and the office of Academic Support and Achievement Programs offer helpful resources including study skills workshops, tutoring, and academic advising. For a description of all of their wonderful programs, contact these offices or check out their services on your SMCnet.

# Budgeting Your Money

Beware of those credit cards for students. While they might be effective ways to establish credit they can also be very tempting to use and often before you know it you've run up a nasty bill. Set yourself a budget to use them in such a way as to pay off each purchase as soon as possible. Try to limit use to emergencies only. Balance your checkbook regularly and keep tabs on what you spend in general.

# Getting Along with Roommates

Again, be proactive here. Initiate conversation about conflicts before they explode into major disagreements. Get help or advice about conflict resolution from resident advisors as well as older students who've lived with roommates and who might be able to give you some tips about communication. For further tips about communicating when there is conflict, go to the Counseling Center link on "Healthy Relationships" and fast forward to the "Conflict" section.

# Feeling Lonely, Sad or Homesick

Expect some of these feelings to arise as part of the normal adjustment to college life, but learn to recognize the signs that these feelings have become or are near debilitating: sleep and appetite disturbances; social isolation or withdrawal; continual thoughts of doom or feeling overwhelmed, hopeless, etc. If you are concerned about such thoughts or feelings, talk to someone--friends, family, Resident Advisors, professors, etc., and/or seek help from the campus Counseling Center, Campus Ministry or some counseling-related service.

# International, Multicultural and Diversity Issues

If you are an international student it can be anxiety-producing and stressful to have social contact when you're not familiar with the language and customs. A typical reaction is to withdraw from social situations but this only makes things worse. It creates greater isolation and loneliness. Sometimes even depression. This can also affect academic performance which feeds the whole frustrating cycle. REACH OUT! Try to talk to fellow students, professors, resident advisors, etc., as well as seek out clubs and organizations on campus to put you in touch with other international students.

Similarly, ethnic diversity and multiculturalism can take on new meanings or present you with new challenges when you begin college. Most colleges have organizations to help students with these issues by providing a place to meet other students concerned about similar things and/or act as a clearing house for local resources. Take advantage of these services, which are listed in your campus directory.

## Resources

### Helpful Books:

Field, Dennis, Gilchrist, Grand and Gray, Nancy. *First-Year University: A Survival Guide*. OISE press-Guidance Centre: Toronto, 1989.

This is a book written by students for students who are entering a university. Topics covered include leaving home, living on campus, study skills, exams, relationships, sex and general advice for coping with university life.

Grayson, Paul A. and Meilman, Philip W. *Beating the College Blues*. New York: Facts on File, 1992.

This is a book filled with suggestions about how to best maneuver through the early years of college. It explores personal and academic issues frequently encountered by college students and gives helpful hints about how to use academic resources to get the information students seek.

Monte, Christopher F. Merlin: *The Sorcerer's Guide to Survival in College*. California: Wadsworth Publishing, 1990.

Written in an informal and easy-to-read style, this book is about learning strategies and techniques to enhance study skills in college.

Rowe, Bruce M. *The College Survival Guide*. Minnesota: West Publishing, 1992.

A short book which gives practical advice to first year students about how to choose courses, set realistic goals, take notes and study for exams, among other things.