

The Choice  
Getting into College and Paying for it  
For Seniors

# 7 Things Graduating Seniors Should Know About College

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June 12, 2013 6:10 am

*As this year's high school seniors prepare to graduate, we've asked Lynn F. Jacobs and Jeremy S. Hyman, authors of "The Secrets of College Success," to update their tips for incoming college freshmen. — Tanya Abrams*

Here are some things incoming students should know about college:

## **You Have Control Over Your Courses**

You do not have to confine yourself to the standard program — a set of preselected courses that are designed to help incoming students fulfill general education requirements. As you select your courses, be sure that each one is on the right level for you (in some cases, one can substitute higher-level courses for more basic ones). Once you have picked your program, you should attend each of the classes and decide whether the professor is someone from whom you can really learn. Often, there are many instructors teaching the same course. By using the drop/add process, you may be able to get a much better teacher.

## **Every Class Counts**

There is a lot of redundancy built into high school courses. Many classes go over what was done before, some classes are devoted to preparing for tests, and, once in a while, you don't really do much at all.

In college, it's different. Professors have only 30 or 40 lectures in which to

cover the subject, so they try to make each class count. If you miss more than two or three lectures, you are likely to miss out on some content that will be difficult to fill in on your own.

### **You Are Expected to Do a Lot of the Work on Your Own**

You need to be your own boss. Figure out when things need to be done and do them, week by week. The professor or teaching assistant might remind the class when the exam is or when the paper is due, but no one will contact you when you have missed the test or have not handed in the paper.

You will also need to propel yourself to study — even when there is no graded work that week. While a recent study shows that the average college student spends about 15 hours outside of class preparing, if you poll professors, you will find that they expect two hours of preparation for each class meeting. So, if you're taking 15 class hours, the professors assume you will be spending 30 hours a week studying. That equates to four hours a day, if you are doing your homework seven days a week.

### **The Testing Is Often Done by 'Sampling'**

Exams in college are not 100 percent comprehensive — that is, the tests will not cover every topic or problem discussed in class. Instead, professors often select a representative sample of problems or topics and test the students on only those. This is because professors are looking for depth of thought on some issue, rather than the “once over lightly” on everything covered.

When preparing for exams, then, it is often a better strategy to prepare the central points in greater detail rather than going over everything superficially.

### **College Papers Are More Than Just Reports**

College papers usually require analysis and/or research. In college, you may be asked to break down some issue into its parts and offer some evaluation of your own. Or you may be asked to consult original documents and scholarly sources and offer your own assessment of them. This is in sharp contrast with what is

expected of written assignments in high school, some of which require no more than a simple summary of what others have said on Wikipedia, and articles found on Google and in newspapers and magazines.

### **You Don't Have to Pick a Major in Your First Year**

Many colleges now encourage students to declare a major at orientation; this forces students to get started on some directed course of study, and it helps colleges manage course offerings. In some cases it may be a good idea to declare your major right away, especially if yours is a four-year program like pre-med, music or a world language. In more cases than not, however, it is better to wait until you've taken a few courses — especially upper-division or advanced courses in a given field — before you commit to a major.

And keep in mind that even if you do declare a major at the outset, it is very easy to change your major if you find you don't like the courses or you aren't doing well in them. It is much better to get out of something you don't like than to languish in 10 or 12 required courses.

### **The Professor Would Like to Help You Succeed**

Professors need not be distant figures whose only job is to give lectures in large auditoriums and spend the rest of their time doing research. In addition to those tasks, professors are also teachers, whose self-conception is often invested in whether students are doing well. They are often delighted to help students construct a paper or prepare for an exam. They also have office hours throughout the week so they may devote time to helping students.

You should plan to visit each professor at least once during the semester. The office hour can be one of the few times at college for one-to-one engagement with a genuine expert in the field.

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*We'd like to continue this discussion with you. If you have advice for incoming college freshmen, please share it in the comments box.*