

The 15 Habits of Top College Students

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Now that the semester is just about over, we thought we'd take a look back and see what makes some college students successful. Sometimes, it's a question of intelligence or insight. And sometimes, it's sheer good luck. But a lot of the time—unbeknownst to some students—it's a question of good habits: things you do on a regular basis that set you aside from the hordes of other, more scattered students. In the hopes of separating the sheep from the goats, here are what we've found to be the 15 habits of the most successful college students. You'll find that these scholars:

1. Plan ahead. Not only do they know when the tests and papers fall in the semester, but they have a pretty good sense of what work needs to be done each week. Nice and balanced: no panic attacks or all-nighters come the tests or papers.

2. Divide up the tasks. Readings get divided up into manageable chunks (not 200 pages in one sitting). Quizzes and tests are studied for over the course of a week (not at 3 a.m. the night before). And paper ideas start gestating when the assignment is handed out (not two days before it's due when you can barely formulate an idea, much less think through an issue).

3. Manage their surroundings. It's hard to do any real work without the tools for the job: a working computer with the right software, a printer, and even ink and paper to go with it. Not to mention the materials of the course: a full set of lecture notes, the textbooks and articles, and course handouts and assignments.

Likewise, hanging out with friends who don't know what courses they're taking—or why they're even in college—can create an environment so toxic that all attempts to study immediately wither and die.

4. Don't kid themselves. For instance, when you think you're studying but you're really tweeting about how you barely survived your bonfire-jumping last night. Or when you're alternating between reading the E-article and checking out your friend's Facebook page every eight seconds or so. Or when the only thing being studied in your

study group is the other members of your study group. You're the easiest person you know to deceive. Don't.

5. Manage their feelings. It's difficult to excel in a course if you're feeling inadequate, bummed out, or doomed to fail. Students who know how to focus on their own positive achievements—rather than on what they got on the quiz that counts about 2 percent of the course grade—have a leg up on the rest.

6. Challenge themselves. Successful students are intellectually energetic. So when they read, they think actively about what they are reading. When they go to class, they don't zone out or text (at least most of the time). On tests and papers, they pounce on the questions and answer them directly and fully. This distinguishes their work from that of their cohorts trying to BS their way through the question.

7. Are persistent. In some courses, some of the work is tough. Maybe it's a problem set that needs really hard thinking, or a paper that has to go through a number of painful drafts, or a presentation that has to be rehearsed repeatedly. The successful student doesn't flinch at the extra effort needed or the uncertainty of the result. His or her motto is: I'll get this right if it kills me. (Don't worry, it won't.)

8. Don't cut corners. Tired or hung over? "I'm still going to make it to that 9 a.m. lecture." Late-night review session? "Like the owl, I do my best work at night." Three-hour final? "I'll stay to the bitter end. Maybe I can touch up my essay and collect a few extra points."

9. Are open to feedback. While it's easy and more fun to throw away your graded papers and exams or conveniently forget to pick them up, the best students carefully study the comments and go over any mistakes they've made. And then when the next graded piece of work rolls around, they take another look at the previous set of comments to see if there are any mistakes that they can correct on the new piece of work.

10. Engage the prof. No, not in preparation for marriage but by demonstrating a genuine interest in learning the material that the professor has devoted his or her life to

mastering. Like going to an office hour, talking to the professor before or after class, or even sending a short E-mail asking some erudite question. People like someone who shares their interests.

11. Keep themselves in tip-top shape. Never underestimate the value of sleeping and eating right. As basic as it may sound, staying healthy is a crucial part of a successful semester. For some reason, being sick as a dog just isn't conducive to mastering topology, Russian history, or international finance.

12. Look out for No. 1. While some students are willing to blow off a week of school to satisfy the needs of others—for example, a demanding boss during busy season or an Uncle Dick who schedules his third wedding two days before finals—successful students know that college is their job and make doing well their highest priority. Especially during the *college* busy season, the last month of the semester when those big-ticket items like the term paper and the final exam roll around and two thirds of the grade is won or lost.

13. Visualize success. It always helps you achieve a goal if you devote some time to visualizing yourself achieving it. Not just vaguely daydreaming but seeing yourself a success and experiencing the feelings that go with success. This will give you the motivation to go out and do what you have to do to make it happen.

14. Learn from experience. Instead of coming unglued if something goes wrong in a course—say, bombing a test or paper—the best students view any setbacks as learning experiences that, in the end, teach them what they need to know to do better in this course—and all their other courses too.

15. Aim high (or at least to a decent level). In college, simple regurgitation of the basics doesn't cut it. Top students know that the minimum gets a B minus, at best. And that, in many courses, a B minus puts you toward the bottom of the heap.

Comments from readers

I am 49 years old and just started college for the first time; my first semester was the first scholastic endeavor since I left high school 31 yrs ago. In the first two or three weeks of school I realized I needed to learn some study skills along with note taking skills, so I started asking around to other students and got their feedback and digested it all to compile my own new ways of studying and note taking, I bought a handheld recorder and recorded my lectures so I could go back and fill in my notes, not to count I could listen to the lectures over and over, it helped me in more ways than I would believe. I attend Mount Vernon Nazarene University, and I love it, I have 3 and 1/2 years to go, but after volunteering to work the Graduation ceremony this past week, I sat in the crowd and actually pictured myself as a graduate. I feel I have a bright future as an educator, and I hope to be able to inspire my students the way I have been. I'm majoring in Math and History as a Middle Childhood Education Major, and I can't wait.

Becky Maxwell of OH

May 28, 2009 08:15:48 AM [\[permalink\]](#) [\[report comment\]](#)

Habits of Top College Students

The following are some of the strategies that contribute to outstanding academic and intellectual experiences in college:

- 1) Excellent nutrition, consistent meal times and vitamin supplements as needed
- 2) Maintaining relationships with close friends from high school (especially those attending the same college)
- 3) Recognizing when other students coming to you for advice need to seek more experienced support personnel or administrators
- 4) If spiritual or religious opportunities are important and meaningful to you, seek groups and communities that can help fulfill your spiritual growth and potential. Do this early in your undergraduate years.
- 5) Determine what your top priorities are and use them to direct your daily activities

College life will offer many remarkable options but, unlike your high school years, you will need to prioritize and focus your involvement on a much more limited number of activities and groups

Hillcroft of MI

May 28, 2009 02:58:41 AM [[permalink](#)] [[report comment](#)]

Reward yourself!

A hard week of exams and/or deadlines for papers needs your complete focus and a clear set of priorities. Stay away from the party people and Facebook when you are in crunch time. This may seem difficult, but when the grades come in, you'll be proud of your diligence. Then you can reward yourself by hanging out with friends or visiting online. It's also good to have like-minded friends who will engage in these strategies with you.

Gara Strong of TN

May 25, 2009 22:00:48 PM [[permalink](#)] [[report comment](#)]

Sleep

Sleep I think is what distinguishes those top students who do well and seem engaged from those who do well only because they pull all nighters. I sleep about 8 hours a day during the week and have no problem getting all my work done before 1am while some of my friends sleep 5-6 hours a week and stay up until 3-4am getting that paper done. Memory has shown to increase with those who get enough sleep so staying up those extra few hours might do more harm than good.

Pratik of VA

May 25, 2009 00:54:58 AM [[permalink](#)] [[report comment](#)]

Culture

It seems more important than ever that students take these principles seriously. There is an incredible gap between the expectations of generation Y, and their knowledge of what makes success possible. A net result of globalization is the fact that international schools have identified the sorts of attributes that are valuable in a technological society and have built their curriculum around these virtues in a rigorous way. American's to some

extent have been lulled into complacency by affluence and a media culture that doesn't reward hard work and does everything it can, intentionally or unintentionally, to focus on the trappings of wealth to the detriment of work ethic. If students want to be successful, they need to learn how to be balanced mentally and competitive intellectually. These are the basic standards to live by. American schools should instill this ethos from the elementary schools through the University system. If a person is properly taught and encouraged to value learning, it is highly likely that the individual will concentrate their energies on academic rigor and analysis.

Mike of FL

May 15, 2009 22:29:03 PM [[permalink](#)] [[report comment](#)]

Habits of Top College Students

Top students also

- 1) Always first try to solve homework problems without looking at a solutions manual or following the example in the textbook.
- 2) Check the knowledge of a topic by practicing "teaching" the material so that they can discover what they don't totally understand.
- 3) Analyze all returned tests to see why they missed what they missed, and then work to understand those topics.
- 4) Form study groups with their peers so that they can discuss the course material.

Sandra McGuire of LA

May 15, 2009 21:50:46 PM [[permalink](#)] [[report comment](#)]

Student success

To quote a line from the movie Animal House

"Son, fat, drunk and stupid is no way to go through life"

karl anglin of CA

May 15, 2009 12:50:55 PM [[permalink](#)] [[report comment](#)]

The top students focus on their knowledge instead of the grade they got

It seems to the top students, the grade is just a paper which can not represent their ability and knowledge they have got from their courses. The paper term and the final exam are kinds of formalism, which they need to challenge themselves and have a check on what they have learned in the semester, which is necessary but not integrant.

Wang Yi of MN

May 15, 2009 08:00:47 AM [[permalink](#)] [[report comment](#)]

Habits of Top College Students

The top students also

1) Prepare for their classes and prepare the questions that they need answered from the reading assignment when the class does not provide the answer.

2) Pay attention in class and question what they don't feel they understand.

3) Do the assigned problems as soon as possible so you can question what you don't understand about them in the next scheduled class. Professors can spot lazy students quite easily by the number of classes since their question would have been appropriate.

Exception: the question concerns what you consider to be a conflict between subjects covered in more than one previous class. Reasonable questions in this category are a mark of top students regardless of grade averages from the professors POV.

Toni Stimmel of FL

May 14, 2009 17:34:58 PM [[permalink](#)] [[report comment](#)]

