Keys to Success In College

Beyond the typical advice of working hard, using your time wisely, and staying calm, recent research is stressing the importance of working with other students both in and out of the classroom. Summarizing the results of interviews with hundreds of students at Harvard University, Richard J. Light concluded1:

The biggest challenge for me is to ask what the details all add up to. Do the many suggestions that interviewers get from their long conversations with undergraduates drive toward any broad, overarching principle? Is there any common theme that faculty members can use to help students, and indeed that students can use to help themselves? The answer is a strong yes. All the specific findings point to, and illustrate, one main idea. It is that students who get the most out of college, who grow the most academically, and who are the happiest, organize their time to include interpersonal activities with faculty members, or with fellow students, built around substantive, academic work.

Following thousands of students in 195 colleges and universities to determine what factors contribute to students' academic development, personal development, and satisfaction, UCLA professor Alexander Astin's research2 has shown that two factors—the frequency and quality of student-student interaction, and the frequency and quality of student-faculty interaction—make the most difference. Student-student interaction produced significant effects on 18 of the top 22 outcomes and student-faculty interaction produced significant effects on 17 outcomes. How students approach their education and how the faculty actually deliver the curriculum is far more important than the formal curricular structure. More specifically, the findings strongly support a growing body of research suggesting that one of the crucial factors in the educational development of the undergraduate is the degree to which the student is actively engaged or involved in the undergraduate experience.

Cooperative learning researchers and practitioners3 have shown that positive peer relationships are essential to success in college. Isolation and alienation are the best predictors of failure in college. Two major reasons for dropping out of college are failure to establish a social network of friends and classmates, and failure to become academically involved in classes4.

Working together with fellow students, solving problems together, and talking through material together has other benefits as well:

Student participation, teacher encouragement, and student-student interaction positively relate to improved critical thinking. These three activities confirm other research and theory stressing the importance of active practice, motivation, and feedback in thinking skills as well as other skills. This confirms that discussions are superior to lectures in improving thinking and problem solving5.

---


5McKeachie, Wilbert; Pintrich, Paul; Yi-Guang, Lin; and Smith, David. 1986. Teaching and Learning in the College Classroom: A Review of the Research Literature. Ann Arbor, MI: The Regents of the University of Michigan.