
How to Make the Least of Your College Years

By Alfie Kohn

In the face of mounting evidence that college is an inherently broadening experience, it seems almost impossible to complete those four years without growing a little. Twenty-two-year-olds have been known to emerge from their chosen institution of higher learning dogged by greater perspective and even fulfillment despite their best efforts to the contrary.

This is no cause for panic, however, since there exist a few well-tested countermeasures that can be easily employed. The following ten steps, if pursued diligently, can actually help the entering student avoid getting virtually anything from his or her undergraduate years. Advance reports even suggest that some regression is possible for those who religiously put into practice all of the following recommendations.

1. Take as few courses as possible outside your major. Always stick with what you know; if you incline toward the sciences, avoid the humanities altogether. If certain unfamiliar courses must be taken, keep in mind that they are only wasted hours — something to be gotten over with. The rule of thumb here is: the more specialized, the better.

2. Let grades control your life. All decisions about how to spend your time and plan your academic schedule should be arrived at with grades in mind. Anything that increases the probability of an A is time well spent; conversely, anything that distracts your attention from boosting a grade is time wasted.

Corollary 2a. Read everything that is assigned. No matter how irrelevant or unappealing a book may seem, there may well be a question about it on the exam.

Corollary 2b. Read nothing that is not assigned. Never let yourself be seduced into pursuing some line of thought or research merely because it interests you.

Corollary 2c. Sacrifice your humanity during exam time. Abandoning your friends, ignoring your bodily needs (such as sleep), and treating yourself as if you were not a human being are small prices to pay for another point or two on the mid-term.

3. Always think of academics as a chore. If you catch yourself becoming excited about an idea, quickly shake yourself out of it. When talking about assignments, get in the habit of using such expressions as “Damn, I’ve got a five-pager to crank out by Thursday,” and “Another chapter to read? What a bummer!” Frequently count the days remaining till the weekend, the weeks till vacation, and the months till vacation — lest you begin to become absorbed in learning itself.

Corollary 3a. Keep your studies and your personal life rigidly separated. It is crucial that academic interests not be influenced by real-life experience, particularly if you hope to remain

in academia and be hired to teach. It is equally important that classwork be confined to the classroom; some growth is practically inevitable if you should ever accidentally bring these ideas to bear on your life. A handy way to maintain this division is simply to remember to do any thinking that is unavoidable during the week and never on weekends. Such disgusted remarks as “C’mon, man, what’re ya talking about that for? It’s Friday night!” will help keep your friends in line.

4. Decide in advance exactly what courses you will take next. Then stick to this decision without fail. Never shop around for better courses or compare notes with other students. It is critical also that you steer clear of professors during their office hours; obtaining a syllabus or getting to meet an instructor could unduly influence you or cause you to change your mind.

5. Join the Quest for the Perfect Gut. On every campus, students busily set about learning which of the courses require the least work. Some discreet inquiries will quickly turn up the current consensus, and you should run — not walk — to sign up for these easy courses.

6. Let the administration run the school. Your job is to attend classes, not worry yourself over the budget and policy decisions that guide the institution.

7. Choose your social affairs with anonymity in mind. The parties you will want to look for are those with deafening music, throngs of people, almost total darkness, and, of course, plenty of beer everywhere. Without these ingredients, you could find yourself having a genuine dialogue with someone, and this is naturally to be avoided at all costs.

8. When you’re not studying, complain about how much studying you have to do. You might be surprised how much time can be effectively dribbled away by telling everyone you know about your staggering workload. Your friends will be only too happy to respond in kind, and whole evenings can be spent in this fashion. By the time you get down to doing the work, something else will invariably have been assigned, and you can begin the cycle again.

9. Avoid all opportunities to make your own academic decisions. Pick classes in which writing assignments are strictly circumscribed and there is no opportunity for independent work of any kind. Tell yourself that your professor probably knows best anyway, and then simply do as you are instructed. In fact, it’s probably wise to choose your college or university according to this criterion in the first place: the more distribution requirements, the less you have to worry about, and the better the place probably is.

10. Most important of all, always think in terms of “product.” Any time you are tempted to ignore one of these suggestions by joining a club or reading something unrelated to your courses, simply ask yourself what the final payoff — the result — will be. If an activity most likely will not lead to a tangible reward (like being admitted to a graduate school or a higher salary when you get out), you’re better off without it. Under no circumstances should you allow yourself to enjoy something for its own sake; one false move in this direction and the whole carefully designed structure could collapse.

These ten rules are not foolproof, of course, but they have helped literally millions of students successfully avoid meaningful learning experiences while at college. With discipline and patience, you, too, can manage to derive nothing from your undergraduate years but a diploma.

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