

The Successful College Student

For more than a dozen years, I was an academic dean at a highly selective Ivy League college. During that time, I talked with some truly awesome students – young people who were busy doing research with faculty and co-publishing their findings; who were writing, directing and producing their own plays; who were running for public office in this capital city; who were publishing books on how to excel in college if you have dyslexia.

And indeed, if, in the midst of talking about all these activities I stopped to look over their college transcripts, they were usually stellar. By that I mean yes, they got good grades. More importantly, they had taken the opportunity to enroll in a rich array of outstanding course offerings that truly sparked their passion to learn. These kids were not driven to study – they were motivated . . . pulled by their interests, not pushed by their anxieties about getting good grades and taking the ‘right’ courses to set them on their career path.

After years of talking with students, some of whom were highly successful by anyone’s evaluation system, some of whom stumbled, and a few who failed, I have to say that motivation to learn and to contribute to a community that ‘fits’ you are the keys to success in college. That attitude and the right environment provide students with the confidence that is essential to succeed.

Here’s what I know: successful students have the courage to make choices – about their academic pursuits, about their social life, and their life in society, and about their personal life. They have the confidence and the capacity to make self-directed decisions, and that means having the willingness to take risks and even to make mistakes without feeling that they are failures.

I think one of the most important attributes I found among successful college students was the ability and willingness to ask for help. It takes a big dollop of personal self-confidence for a student to ‘admit’ what s/he doesn’t know and to turn either to faculty, deans or fellow-students for information, guidance and support. But . . . it always works! Even if the first person they reach out to isn’t the right source, even if the

response isn't all they hoped for, they are on the path to discovering and developing their own set of resources, and their own criteria for success.

Along with self-confidence has to go awareness of one's limitations, as well as one's strengths. Coming out of high school, young people who earned admission to a selective college have probably been highly successful academically in all the courses and disciplines in which they have studied. Of course they have built up an anxiety and an expectation that they 'should' be able to continue excelling in anything they take. But frankly, it's not necessarily so.

College simply pops the lid off the possibilities, the directions. Coming from a curriculum that rarely offers more than 100 course choices in the four years of high school to a college where 1000 course offerings a semester may well be the norm, students face the challenge of making decisions. Handling those choices reflects a developing balance between knowing who they want to be and understanding who they are.

The college years are a time of self-definition, self-acceptance, and self respect. Sometimes kids have to accept that they may not have been 'built with the right chip in them' to pursue Computer Science in a satisfying and successful manner. For others, the complex readings and lengthy papers in semiotics courses may prove to be inscrutable and uncomfortable.

Based on my many years of working with terrific college students, I have formulated the following 'Twelve Keys to Success'. I will expand on some of these topics in other articles, but I hope students will take these to heart, and enjoy their own successes.

A Student's Twelve Keys to Success

1. Self acceptance
2. Make choices, take risks, and learn from the results – don't fear failure
3. Balance self-confidence with a willingness to learn from others
4. Ask questions – they determine answers
5. Get to know faculty members and deans
6. Explore and develop your studying techniques and time- management skills
7. Study Groups are great
8. Set your own standard and take pleasure in the process of achieving
9. Be able to let things go and move on
10. Commit to adding value to something bigger than self
11. Learn to negotiate
12. Persevere