The 15 Habits of Top College Students

What makes some college students successful, while others—well, less so? Sometimes it's a question of intelligence or insight. And sometimes it's sheer good luck. But a lot of the time it's good habits: things you do on a regular basis that set you apart from the hordes of other, more scattered students. In the hopes of separating the sheep from the goats, we offer our top 15 habits of the most successful students. You'll find that these folks . . .

1. Have a goal. They have a definite reason for being in college—and know what it is. Could be a future career, graduate or professional school, or just wanting to further their education. But it's almost never because their parents told them to go to college, or because it's the next thing to do after high school, or because they're too unimaginative to think up anything else to do with their time.

2. Set priorities. For every student, college is a balancing act between going to classes, doing the homework, having a social life, and, for many students, holding down a job. But the successful student knows how much time to allot to each of these activities—and how to set limits. Maybe partying is held down on weeknights, or an employer is told that hours have to be cut back during the jam-packed midterm week, or the family Thanksgiving dinner is jettisoned in favor of extra work on the term paper. Look, there are only 168 hours in the week—and not one of them can be spent twice.

3. Divide up the work. Readings get broken 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 the paper is due, when you can barely formulate an idea, much less think through an issue).

4. Are organized. Successful students have gotten used to the fact that, in college courses, there's not a lot of redundancy or "going over." So they make it their business to make it to most of the lectures (and they don't cut the sections, either). They take really good class notes (and keep them in super-neat condition). And they always get their work turned in on time (no one-week extensions that only make it harder to complete the work in their other courses).

5. Work efficiently. Each task is done well—and once. There's no listening to the lecture a second time on their MP3 player (they paid careful attention the first time). No copying over all their notes (why would they do that if they have a good set from the lecture?). No doing the reading three times (once for a general overview, once to understand the argument or direction, and once to focus in on the finer points). In a fifteen-week semester, with four or five courses on tap, who has time to do things twice (or, in the case of some students, thrice)?

6. Are consistent. They do the work every week—even when nothing is happening on the grading front.

7. Are persistent. They know that sometimes the going gets tough. Maybe there's a problem set that requires serious hard thinking, or a paper that has to go through a number of painful drafts, or a presentation that has to be rehearsed 'til one really has it down. But whatever the case, the successful student doesn't flinch at the extra effort needed or the uncertainty of the result while he or she's still working on it. This student's mantra: I'll get this thing right if it kills me. (Which it usually doesn't.)

8. Challenge themselves. Successful students are intellectually energetic. So, when they read, they think actively and critically about what they're reading (not just slog their way through to get the plot). When they go to class, they actively think about, and question, what the professor is saying (not just taking it all
in like a giant sponge). And when they write papers, they probe more deeply into nuances of the issue (not just looking for the most basic, “yes/no” answer). Above all, they get the wheels and springs of their mind moving—and keep them moving throughout any intellectual task.

9. **Hang out with smart friends.** Successful students know that peer support is as important as getting good grades from professors. Finding friends who are intellectually engaged and eager—in some cases, taking the same classes as you—can stimulate and reinforce your own intellectual drive. On the other hand, spending lots of time with dorm mates who don’t know what courses they’re taking—or even why they’re in college at all—can create an atmosphere so toxic that any attempts to do well immediately wither and die.

10. **Are open to feedback.** The best students realize that the returned papers and exams are a golden opportunity: these are the times in the semester when the professor is giving one-to-one, customized feedback on their level of achievement. So instead of tossing away the graded papers and exams, or conveniently forgetting to pick them up, these students pore over the comments and redo the missed problems in the hopes of really learning where they went wrong and how they can do better next time. All with a nondefensive and genuinely open frame of mind. (Hard for everyone, but somehow these students manage to do it.)

11. **Engage the professor.** Successful students realize that the prof isn’t just some content-dispensing machine, pouring out what he or she knows during lectures, but is a working scholar who’s happy to work with you on the content and materials of the course. So these students go to office hours, talk to the professor (or TA) after class, and email questions about things they didn’t understand. In the best case, they forge a two-way relationship with the professor and, in so doing, learn more than the average college student and defeat the anonymity of the (for some students) alienating mega-university.

12. **Don’t kid themselves.** When they study, they’re really studying—not fitting between the e-article, their Facebook page, and the football scores. When they’ve messed up a test, they figure out where they went wrong—not just hope it’ll go better next time. And when things aren’t going quite according to plan, they diagnose the problem and, if need be, adjust their plan.

13. **Manage their emotions.** It’s difficult to excel at college if you’re feeling inadequate, bummed out, or doomed to fail. So successful students know how to focus on their own positive achievements—rather than on their failure to get a check-plus on the quiz that counts for only 2 percent of the grade. And they’re not hypercompetitive or concerned to find out how everyone else did on that just-returned piece of work. They know that, for every assignment, there’ll probably be someone doing better than they did—and many doing a whole hell of a lot worse. (And even if not, there’s nothing they can do about it, so why add negative emotions to a less-than-stellar situation?)

14. **Visualize success.** For any multistep activity—especially one that’s spread out over five years and forty-odd courses—it’s helpful to imagine the end product: that is, to really picture what it’ll be like, and to experience the good feelings that will come with it. That’s why the most successful college students repeatedly picture what will come at the end of the road for them: their dream job, their acceptance to a prestigious graduate or professional school, or simply the next stage in their life. This provides motivation and energy, especially when you’re in a rut, and makes it all seem worthwhile.

15. **Strive for excellence.** No matter what the task, successful students aim to do it well. Could be the term paper, the midterm, or even the (seemingly dumb to others) weekly quizzes, problem sets, or daily homework. No matter. If I’m going to put my name on it, top students think, I might as well do it well. Which they usually do.
Grades are the measure of college success. Like the salary at a job, a batting average in baseball, or the price of a stock, your GPA is an objective indicator of how you’re doing. And yet, there’s surprisingly little good information—least of all from professors—about just what you should do to get good grades. We go where others fear to tread. And so, here are the eleven secrets of getting really good grades in college (A’s, we mean):

1. **Take control of your destiny.** Your grade destiny, that is. There’s no teacher or parent to remind you every day what you need to do or to make sure you’ve studied for exams. It’s all in your hands. So step up to the plate and take responsibility. The grades you get will depend on what you yourself do.

2. **Don’t overload.** Some students think it’s a mark of pride to take as many course hours as the college allows. It isn’t. Take four or, at the most, five courses each semester. That way you’ll be able to devote all your energies to a manageable number of subjects, and you won’t have to sacrifice quality for quantity. (For our best tips on which courses to take, see “Do’s and Don’ts for Picking Your Courses” on p. 68.)

3. **Get your A**'s **to class.** Most students have a cutting budget: the number of lectures they think they can miss in each course and still do well. But if there are thirty-five class meetings, each class contains 3 percent of the content: miss seven classes, and you’ve missed 20 percent of the material.

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**BEST-KEPT SECRET.** Some not-so-nice professors want to penalize students who blow off the class right before Thanksgiving or spring break. So they pick an essay question for the final exam from that very lecture. End result? You can do really major damage to your GPA for the price of missing just one class.

4. **Take really good notes.** In many intro courses, the professor’s lectures form the major part of the material tested on the midterm and final. So as you’re taking notes, you’re really writing the textbook for the course—which in many cases is more important than the official textbook. Be sure to get down everything the professor says and to maintain your notes in an organized and readable form. After all, these are the notes you’ll have to study a number of times later in the course. (For primo note-taking tips, see “10 Secrets of Taking Excellent Lecture Notes,” p. 109.)

5. **Study like you mean it.** There’s a difference between studying and “studying”—and you know what it is. When you’re really studying, you’re 100-percent focused on and engaged with the material—a total immersion in what you’re doing and a strong desire to get it right. When you’re only half-heartedly studying, you’re really only 35 percent involved, with the other 65 percent of your attention divided among tweeting your friend about how much you’re studying, scouring the surrounding tables to see who else might be around (and how attractive they are), and daydreaming about all the fun things you’ll do when you finish this awful studying. Look, we know studying can be painful, but all students who get A’s do it—no matter what they tell you. (For our best study tips, see “The How Not to Study Guide” on p. 104.)

6. **Do all the homework.** You may think the homework and problem sets—each of which is worth maybe 0.1 percent of
the grade—are just busywork: something the professor assigns to make sure you’re doing something in the course each week. But really, the homework provides applications of the concepts, principles, and methods of the field to actual examples—the same sort of examples that will come up on the bigger tests. If you do well on the homework—that is, get ten out of ten on the problem sets or a check-plus on the little writing exercises—you’re putting yourself in a good position to get a 100 when it really counts: on the midterm or final.

7. **Take each test three times.** When done right, taking a test is really three activities: preparing for the test, taking the actual exam, then going over the comments to see what mistakes you made. Each activity furnishes important—and grade-improving—information: the studying gives you practice in questions very similar to the those that will be on the test; the actual test is where the A is earned (at least in the best case); and the review of the comments (often accompanied by a visit to the professor’s office hour to clear up anything unclear) is an investment in an A on the next test. (For our best advice about tests, see “12 Tips for A+ Test Preparation” on p. 166, “So What’s Going to Be on the Test Anyway?” on p. 171, and “Top 13 Test-Taking Tips” on p. 174.)

8. **Always answer the question asked.** More points are lost on tests and papers by not answering the question asked than by giving the wrong answer. That’s because students often have strong—and wrong—preconceptions about what the professor should be asking. “How can the question be so specific?” they wonder. “How can the professor not be asking a question about last week’s classes, especially since he (or she) seemed so interested in that topic?” “Can the professor really be asking about that journal article we were supposed to read, or about the discussion in section___?” Don’t try to psych out the professor or distrust what you see before your very eyes. Answer the question, as asked, head-on. (If you’re not sure what’s meant, always ask—and rescue your grade.)

9. **Play all four quarters.** Many college courses are “back-loaded.” More than half the grade is left to assignments due the last month of the semester: a third test, 15 percent; the term (or research) paper, 25 percent; the cumulative final, 30 percent. You get the idea. Pace yourself and don’t run out of gas just as you’re coming into the home stretch.

10. **Do all the “extras.”** In some courses, there are special end-of-the-semester activities that can improve your grade. Review sessions, extra office hours, rewrites of papers, extra-credit work—all of these can be grade-boosters. Especially in schools where there are no pluses and minuses, even a few extra points can push your borderline grade over the hump (from, say, a B+ to an A--; that is, an A).

11. **Join a community.** Many students improve their grades by working with study buddies or study groups. Try to meet at least once a week—especially in courses in which there are weekly problem sets or quizzes. And if your school offers “freshman clusters” in which a group of students all take the same section of some required courses, sign up for them, too. Students can improve their grades one level or more when they commit to working in an organized way with other students.

5-STAR TIP. Resolve to get at least one A each semester. Getting even a single A will change the way you think about yourself: you’ll be more confident about your abilities and more energized for future semesters. If you’re at all close in even one course, work really hard to get that A. It will change things forever.
Community colleges are hot: almost half of all college students are enrolled in one. And the 2009 American Graduation Initiative substantially boosted government funding for community colleges, and set the goal of increasing the number of community college students by five million by 2020. So if you’re enrolled at a community college—with the idea of either getting a degree or ultimately transferring to a four-year college—well, you’re in the vanguard. Here are our 10 best tips for getting started on the right foot:

1. **Figure out why you’re there.** Especially at community colleges, where there is a broad variety of students with many motivations for being there, it’s important that you figure out what your goals and aspirations are and how best to achieve them. If you’re looking for vocational training—either to start in a profession or to refine or upgrade your skills at some existing job—it’s important that you focus on that. If you’re looking in the end to transfer to a four-year college, be sure to take the courses appropriate to that goal. And if you’re just taking a few courses out of interest or to broaden your horizons, construct your program with that in mind. There’s no “one size fits all” at community college, so be sure to tailor your program to your individual goals.

2. **Know your A.A.S. from your A.A. (and your A.S.).** One distinctive feature of community colleges is that they offer both the Associate in Applied Science degree (A.A.S.) and the Associate in Arts (A.A.) or Associate in Science (A.S.) degree. The A.A.S. degree is a two-year vocational degree, preparing you for a career such as nursing or other health care, business, criminal justice, fashion, culinary, design and graphic arts, information technology, or paralegal work. The A.A. and A.S. degrees, on the other hand, provide you with basic, lower-division liberal arts coursework that parallels the program a four-year college and prepares you for transfer to that sort of institution. Be sure you pick your track appropriately. Once you start on an A.S. or an A.A. it’s very, very difficult to shift to an A.A.S. (and vice versa).

3. **Get on top of the “developmentals.”** Though almost all community colleges offer open admissions (that is, any high school graduate or GED holder can get in), they also require you to take “developmental courses” (or, as they used to be called, “remedial courses”) if you’re not up to college snuff in math, reading, or writing. For a nursing degree, for example, you might (in the worst case) have to take pre-algebra, beginning algebra, intermediate algebra, and only then, college algebra. Tip? Start taking your developmental courses right away the first semester, especially if you have a lot to make up. (For more on remediation, see “Facing Up to Remediation: Top 10 Strategies” on p. 149.)

**EXTRA POINTER.** In most community colleges they’ll offer you testing in reading, writing, and math when you enter, in order to place you in the right level course. Don’t disregard these results. You won’t be happy if you find yourself drowning in a course that’s way over your skills level.

4. **Know what transfers.** If you’re planning on continuing your education at a four-year college, make sure that all the courses you’re taking can transfer. If the course is too easy or is in a subject not taught at the four-year college, you may find that the college won’t accept your community college course(s) for transfer credit. Luckily, there are usually agreements in place for which courses will transfer, usually called “articulation
agreements.” Look for a list on the websites of both your community college and your prospective four-year college. And when in doubt, ask before you leap. (For more information about transferring, flip to our “Transfer Tips—from Community College to Four-Year College,” on p. 261.)

BEST-KEPT SECRET. In most states, the department of education maintains a tool that allows you to see what will transfer. To see one of the best, visit WWW.VAWIZARD.ORG. Then check out the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers website, WWW.AACRAO.COM (search for “Transfer and Articulation”), for a link to your state’s site (worth a careful look).

5. Expect to attend every class. One possibly surprising feature of community colleges is that classroom attendance counts a lot in the grade. Sometimes up to 40 percent. That’s because professors want to motivate commuter students to make all the classes and, in addition, tend to emphasize in-class learning over homework (because in some cases, working students don’t have all that much time to prepare at home). You can really put yourself behind the eight ball if you’ve missed 16 of the 30 classes—even if you cram before the final and somehow manage to get an A on it.

6. Prepare to be active. Community college professors often see the class as an occasion to get the students actively involved in the learning, rather than treating their students as sponges to sop up what the professor is dishing out. Be prepared to participate in discussions, make a presentation, play simulation or role-playing games, design experiments, and in some cases even do community outreach or service programs.

7. Don’t work yourself to death. Most students at community colleges are both working and going to school. Which is great. Keep in mind, though, that you can’t both work full-time and go to school full-time. And if you’re also a parent, that’s one more pressure. Make a plan that integrates your work, school, and home needs.

8. Use the college resources. One of the best aspects of most community colleges is the broad variety of services they offer. Especially good is the career counseling service—a trained professional (often a counselor, psychologist, or business person with years of experience) can help you find the career that’s right for you and will make specific suggestions about courses to take. Be sure also to check out the advising center, writing center, tutoring center, and, if need be, the health and psychological services center. Part of your tuition and fees prepay for the services, so why not make use of them?

5-STAR TIP One of the facilities you might not have thought of is the learning resource or computer center. Here people will offer you advice about how to recover lost data, how to convert data from one program to another, how to use a spreadsheet, and how to interface with the various college web destinations (registration, grade reporting, course web pages, electronic library resources, and so on). And if you don’t have a computer, you’ll usually find free computers at which you can burn the midnight oil while preparing your papers.

9. Go see the prof. One of the great things about the community college is the tremendous number of hours the professors are required to sit in their offices to help students: at many schools professors are available, without appointment, for ten hours and up each week. Take advantage of this one-on-one help before the test, before a paper or assignment, and especially when you feel lost in a course (as many students do). The profs want to see you do well and are ready to help you do so.
REALITY CHECK. At many community colleges, professor-student relations take on an air of informality. But don't think that just because your prof is friendly and nice, he or she wants to be your BFF. It's sometimes good to keep your professor posted on what you're doing in your life. It's another thing to make him or her your confidant for all your problems.

10. Join the community. Community colleges realize that most students are commuters and don't have the social benefits that they might have at a four-year college. That's why the colleges try to compensate by providing "cohort" programs and "study buddy" programs that will put you in touch with other students taking the same courses. Make full use of these wonderful opportunities to meet students with goals and lives similar to your own, as well as those from different socioeconomic backgrounds, from different countries, and with different life experiences. The melting pot that is the community college is one of the great features of American college life. Make sure that, even if you don't melt in, you join the stew.
The College Student's Bill of Rights

As a college student you don't just have responsibilities; you have rights. But figuring out what these rights are—and what they do and don't include—is often no simple matter. Here's our (semi-) humorous take on what you are—and aren't—entitled to at college:

**Article 1.** You have the right to annual tuition that is less than the price of a Lexus IS C convertible—at least the one that doesn't come with the HDD navigation system.

**Article 2.** You have the right to comprehensible, easy-to-fill-out FAFSA and Profile® forms—or at least ones that don't require a PhD from Wharton or Sloan School to get past page two.

**Article 3.** You have the right to affordable textbooks—that is, if you think $600 a semester is “affordable.”

**Article 4.** You have the right to professors who are basically knowledgeable about the material—just not ones who can hold their own against Adderall in keeping you awake.

**Article 5.** You have the right to professors who sometimes offer up something funny—just not ones making regular appearances at [www.collegehumor.com](http://www.collegehumor.com).

**Article 6.** You have the right to a professor who dresses neatly and professionally—just not one who never wears “mom jeans.”

**Article 7.** You have the right to professors who don't hit on students—just not ones who rate a chili pepper at [www.ratemyprofessors.com](http://www.ratemyprofessors.com).

**Article 8.** You have the right to adjunct instructors or TAs who are courteous, friendly, and nice—or at least would be if they were making enough to live indoors.
Article 9. You have the right to a “smart” classroom that is equipped with twenty-first-century technology—just not a prof who as any idea how to use the stuff.

Article 10. You have the right to nod off, zone out, or IM once in while during lecture—but not the right to play Pocket Rockets on your iPhone right under your prof’s nose.

Article 11. You have the right to express your views in discussion section—just not to hold court in your astronomy course on why the moon landing was a hoax.

Article 12. You have the right to an exam with questions reasonably related to what was talked about in class—just not one that covers only the classes you bothered to show up for.

Article 13. You have the right to dispute your paper grade and get a clear explanation of why you got the grade you did—just not to have your grade raised simply because “you paid good money for this stinkin’ course.” (We’ve heard this argument more times than we care to remember.)

Article 14. You have the right to get an extension on your paper if you have a serious medical emergency or a death in the family, or you wind up in jail (no kidding, it really happens)—but not if your Internet connection failed just as you were downloading page six from www.collegepapermill.com (not a real site, so don’t bother).

Article 15. You have the right to talk to a professor about the term paper during his or her office hours—just not at 5:45 p.m. on the third Thursday of the month (the one time you can make, given your jam-packed schedule of work, intramural sports, and hooking up).

Article 16. You have the right to a comfortable working environment in which to take your final exam—or at least enough space so that your classmate sitting next to you (who hasn’t showered in three days) isn’t pouring sweat onto your paper.

Article 17. You have the right to spaces in courses you need for your major—at least some time in the next seven years.

Article 18. You have the right to a seamless transfer of credits from a community college to a four-year college—in your dreams! (Get ready for hours of pitched battle when you try to transfer that graphic design 101 course you took back in 1994.)

Article 19. You have the right to a living, breathing professor—if your college hasn’t yet discovered the money-saving potential of online courses and MOOCs.

Article 20. You have the right to professors who don’t attempt to tell lame jokes—a right you can promptly exercise by turning the page.