What Makes College Different from High School?

A rising university sophomore submitted a short essay to a guidebook for incoming first-year students. One sentence in the essay read, “Your professors will treat you like an adult, but they will also expect you to work like an adult.”

What does that mean? Not every first-year student takes on the challenge to find out.

Keith Hjortshoj (pronounced Yorts-hoy) writes in his book *The Transition to College Writing*, 2nd edition, that 35% of first year students either discontinue or extend their studies, resulting in the projection that only 54% will graduate within six years (2-3).

- What happened to those students, many of whom began the first year with good intentions?

According to Hjortshoj, “College teachers still complain, as they have for more than a century, that their students are unprepared for the kinds of writing, reading, thinking, and learning required in undergraduate studies” (3).

- Haven’t your high school teachers tried to prepare you?
- How will you succeed?

Hjortshoj offers answers to questions that many first-year students may not think to ask (paraphrased and adapted from 9-17):

**How will my college classes be different?**

Your college classes will not be natural continuations of your high school classes. In college, rather than being required to narrow your focus to perform well on standardized tests, you are invited to broaden and deepen your understanding of many different subjects. Your professors will invite you to ask questions, consider possibilities, and pay attention to complexities, and by doing so, they are initiating you into the academic world of higher thinking. They want you to read more effectively, write more meaningfully, and analyze information rather than simply swallowing it. **To succeed, expect to be stretched academically in ways that are not always comfortable.**

**How will my college teachers be different?**

Your college teachers will not be predictable versions of your high school teachers. In high school, teachers specialize in broad subjects such as biology, chemistry, English, history, and math. In college, professors specialize their subjects further – botany and zoology, for example; organic chemistry and inorganic chemistry; American literature, Shakespeare, and film studies; early American history and European history; history of
math and computer science. Introductory courses will invite you into a bigger, more detailed picture of their subjects. **To succeed, expect to spend time, energy, and intellectual focus both inside and outside of class.**

Colleges emphasize “academic freedom,” trusting faculty to develop individual teaching styles based on personality and academic preference. Some professors will be more spontaneous, creative, and open to diversions. Other professors will stick to their plans for courses as they would a roadmap. **To succeed, get to know your professors. Expect to enjoy some professors more than others, and learn to adapt to those whose temperaments are different from your own.**

**Why do I need to take so many required courses?**

A liberal studies education is designed to help you develop into a knowledgeable and engaged global citizen. Every academic major includes taking 42 hours of Liberal Studies (www.wcu.edu/10943.asp), which includes courses across the disciplines that will broaden your exposure to subjects and values beyond your major. However, each professor will teach his or her subject as though it were the only course you were taking. **To succeed, balance your overall workload and look for meaningful connections among your courses.**

**How can I stick to my long-term goals?**

You will need new motivation and self-discipline to stick to your long-term goals. With the freedom and academic challenge college provides, you will experience being treated like an adult and expected to work like one. Too easily, you can make choices that shift your focus away from your academic work. From the first edition of his book, Hjortshoj tells a cautionary tale about one of his students:

> Throughout his [first] year, Lloyd was continually distracted from his studies by opportunities to spend time with his new friends in college, without any of the restrictions his parents and teachers imposed when he was in high school. As a consequence, he missed classes, failed to complete assignments, and received such poor grades that the university suspended him for a year.

When Lloyd returned to college and came to see me, I immediately noticed that he had matured over his year of suspension. He was more serious and direct, and he told me he was doing well in all of his classes. When I asked Lloyd how he spent that year out of school, he told me he had taken a job as assistant to a gruff, silent mason and had spent the year loading and unloading concrete blocks, forty or fifty hours each week, without any conversation. Bored throughout the day and too exhausted at night to go out, he had plenty of time to think about the past and future. He decided that when he returned to school he should think of his academic work as a much better job than hauling concrete blocks. And if he didn’t take this job seriously and put in his forty to fifty hours each week, this time he would be fired for good. This resolve
successfully created work habits he had lacked, and in following semesters Lloyd found other, more substantial reasons for paying attention to his studies. (17)

To succeed, become a hero for yourself. Pay attention to how you manage your time (www.wcu.edu/24551.asp) and focus your mental energy. Get timely help from appropriate sources, including your professors, your advisor (www.wcu.edu/12173.asp), the Academic Success Centers (www.wcu.edu/10055.asp), and the Counseling Center (www.wcu.edu/7946.asp).

To find out more from Keith Hjortshoj on how to make a successful transition from high school to college, read the University Writing Center Mini-Courses Note Taking (www.wcu.edu/11672.asp), Better Reading Strategies (www.wcu.edu/11670.asp), and Writing as a Process (www.wcu.edu/11668.asp).


Works Cited:

Hjortshoj, Keith. The Transition to College Writing. New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2001. Print,