Choosing a college is a huge undertaking, with many late nights spent filling out online applications, requesting transcripts and letters of recommendation, and—lest we forget—writing those sleep-depriving personal statements. But you keep your eye on the prize, thinking once you have chosen the right school for you, all that stress will fade away . . .

Or does it?

The transition from high school to the college of your choice can be stressful too. But I’m here to help you take that stress and channel it in order to become a productive, happy, healthy contributor to your new college or university. It’s really not that hard. It’s actually pretty fun! So strap yourself in and get ready.

Let’s start from the beginning
You have chosen your college. You’ve submitted your housing information, perhaps filled out a roommate questionnaire, and picked out your meal plan. Maybe you’ve even gotten letters or e-mails from your academic advisor. You’re ready to make the transition from high school senior to college freshman. So, now what?

Freshman orientation is a great way to jump into your new surroundings. Most colleges and universities have summer programs that bring all new students together for a day or so not only to break the ice but also to get some business done so you don’t have to run around in a frenzy once the semester officially starts. Make every effort to attend your orientation! This is your school’s way of helping you reach that first rung on the ladder to a successful transition. You won’t succeed in that transition unless you know what to expect. That’s what orientation is all about.

You’re in college now
It’s finally happening: you are a bona fide college student. Believe it or not, most people will consider you an adult now, which can be scary because with this “adult” label comes responsibility. Your responsibility. Professors might give you assignments, but they can’t really tell you what to do. You have an unprecedented level of freedom, with no parents, no siblings—wait, no parents?! Who will tell you when to get up? When to go to class? When your assignments are due? Yes, these new responsibilities can be a stressful part of the transition, but students have proven time and time again that they can survive it. You will too!

Time management is your friend
It’s pretty simple: If you embrace time management, you will be successful as a college student. If you don’t, well, you can guess what will happen. So what does “time management” really mean? It’s basically looking at all your assignments, events, and responsibilities and then planning your time accordingly.

A rule of thumb: for every hour in the classroom, you should plan on three hours of studying outside the classroom. This is not like high school where you might be able to study the night before and pass a test or exam. College exams come perhaps only twice a semester, which means they cover a lot. If you don’t keep up with the studying and learn to manage your time, those exams could prove to be problematic. You don’t want that to happen.

Class flexibility figures into your time management too. Your class time isn’t structured like high school; the bell doesn’t ring when you have to
change classes, and your class times will vary greatly depending on the day and between semesters. Some classes might be 50 minutes; some might be three hours! (True story. If you have to take any sort of lab, you’ll see.) These fluid class schedules are great in a lot of ways, but they also make effective time management skills even more important.

More money, more problems
Financial responsibility is a pretty new concept for most students transitioning from high school to college, especially when it comes to paying for tuition. FAFSA, Perkins Loans, Pell Grants, subsidized and unsubsidized loans—these terms may not mean anything to you now, but believe me, they will.

Part of your new responsibilities as a college student is to be financially fit and not abuse any financial aid or other funds you may receive. Students sometimes see the need to take out more money in loans than necessary so they can use it for personal expenses in college. This is not a good idea, because six months after graduation—job or no job—you have to start paying that money back. If you, like most students, need to take a loan or two out to make ends meet, that’s fine, but don’t overdo it. Remember to think long term. Be financially responsible now so you will be able to pay your debts after graduation.

A different kind of “social responsibility”
College is social. High school was too, but in college your fellow students can be a surprisingly important and influential part of your life. They will help you in study groups or with tutoring. They will be your support system when your family and hometown are hundreds or thousands of miles away. They will even enter the workforce with you as your peers and professional network for years to come.

You need to put yourself out there and be social to reap the benefits of surrounding yourself with supportive students, professors, and other staff. Do not be afraid to introduce yourself to faculty, staff, or fellow students, especially at the beginning of your college experience. Taking advantage of your college’s community is another new responsibility on your plate. This isn’t like high school, where relationships are made by the mere fact you are in the same homeroom with the same people every day for four years. In college, you may meet someone new every day for four years! You may not be able to remember everyone’s names, at least not in the beginning, but this is how the transition helps you give back. When you become an upperclassman, you’ll have the opportunity to introduce yourself to those shy freshmen you see coming in the next few years. It will be up to you to help make them comfortable in their new surroundings. It will be overwhelming at times. You will meet people from new places, new backgrounds, new ethnic groups, and new religions. You will meet people who challenge you—and not always in a good way—and people you will wish you had met years earlier. Remember, each new person is a new opportunity. You just don’t realize it yet. But you will.

“Don’t sweat the small stuff”
So said Dr. Richard Carlson in his famous book. Remember those words. Live them. You will experience so many awesome things once you leave high school, you won’t ever want to go back—and you won’t remember the little stuff that bothered you. Your college experience will comprise some of the best times of your life, memories you will carry with you for a long time. Just keep these tips in mind, and your transition will be a success!

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