

Skills Needed to Succeed...in School, in a Career, in Life

Success in college takes a lot more than just factual knowledge. If you recognize that there are many types of skills that you will develop in college, and that they apply broadly to many areas of your life, then you will be way ahead of the game. I want to emphasize that these skills don't come over-night; they require an investment of time and effort, and can in fact be improved throughout life.

I believe there tends to be a positive feedback effect when one begins to use and strengthen any of these skills: the increased success in meeting your goals will encourage greater development of the skills and even more success!

I. Basic Skills for Success: Organization, Time Management, Learning Skills

These skills make us more efficient and productive. I know that these skills are not new to you - you come to college with some experience and even strength in these areas - but please realize that they can always be improved. In fact, any new challenge will require improving these skills to achieve success in a new area. These skills directly serve our personal needs to get things done. They make us more efficient and productive in our everyday activities, as well as in school work.

Here are some simple examples of ways in which we practice organization, time management, and learning skills in order to get things done:

Organization: make a grocery list before shopping; maintain a desk or work area with needed supplies (even if it's just files organized on your computer)

Time Management: keep a calendar of appointments; schedule classes around employment schedule

Learning Skills: driving to a place you've never been before, it takes a lot of concentration and map referral the first time, but each subsequent time it becomes easier, until finally you "could do it in your sleep"; after downloading a new app to your computer/phone, it takes several times using it before you begin to feel proficient, and maybe much more time and use to learn all of its tricks

One of my recent challenges to my organization, time management, and learning skills was when I put my class online. It was a whole new way of organizing the class, and I had to learn a lot of new computer skills. It took many cycles of work over several years to improve the class to get it where it is today. And I still work on it every year to improve it!

II. Advanced Skills for Success: Professionalism, Team Work

These skills not only increase efficiency and productivity beyond that enabled by the basic skills, but they also boost morale, which can have a tremendous effect on the success of everyone in the group. These are also skills that many of you have experience with but they may be regularly challenged by new situations. These skills require interaction with others and serve personal needs as well as group needs. I find the following terms useful in describing professionalism and teamwork:

Attitude: is positive, helpful

Behavior: is respectful, considerate

Actions: are cooperative, oriented to group (common) goals

In some courses, professionalism also means developing certain attitudes, practices, and skills unique to that profession. For instance, in science, computer, and art labs, these may revolve around safety, proper use and care of equipment and supplies, etc.

Here are some simple examples of ways in which we practice team work and professionalism, and the traits that contribute to them:

In a family, team work gets housework done faster; considerate friends can more easily make group decisions about where to go for a night out; cooperation on a group project for class makes it more successful and enjoyable; most jobs require interacting in a respectful, professional manner with both co-workers and the public. New situations in any group environment can challenge these skills and require an "upgrade" in professional behavior or team work.

Many of you may think of college as "just school", but it is in fact career training, and a certain level of professionalism is required and should be developed during your college "career". The classroom is a group environment in which the instructor and students are trying to achieve common goals of success in the class. Respect, cooperation, a positive attitude, and team work all make the classroom a place where everyone can succeed.

A recent challenge to my professionalism in the classroom happened when I inadvertently embarrassed a student by asking her to sit up front so she could see the board better. I hadn't considered her need for privacy regarding that matter, so I now try to be more respectful of student's needs. There are constantly new situations in the classroom that challenge me to work on my professionalism - we are all works in progress and sometimes we all make mistakes and fall short. Don't beat yourself up over mistakes, but try to continually improve.

III. Enemies of Success

The most common factors that I see limiting the success of students in my classes are:

Unrealistic expectations, Over-commitment, Fatigue, Under-preparation

These often combine into a perfect storm for students who have 1) unrealistic expectations about their school or employment requirements and how much they can accomplish in a given period of time, so they 2) over-commit to family, work, and school responsibilities, which leads to 3) fatigue and inadequate time and energy to get school work done, which results in 4) lack of preparation for subsequent work in the course. Lack of prior preparation for current coursework can feed into the beginning of the loop by contributing to unrealistic expectations.

The common results I see in those who fall prey to any of these enemies of success are:

Anxiety, frustration, low morale, and poor performance

I feel frustrated and helpless in these situations, because there is nothing I can do to address the root situation. I can spend extra time helping you learn our course content, but in the end you are responsible for making the necessary commitment in time and energy to be successful in the course.