

Conroy's Tips to Being a Successful College Student

Stephen J. Conroy, Ph.D.
University of San Diego

Here are a few tips for a successful college career. These are simply based on my opinion and personal experience and should not be viewed as “fact.” You may find other successful tips but these are the ones I recommend.

1. **Block time in your schedule for studying.** [General rule: 3 hours for every 1 hour in class] You will find you have lots of “free” time on your hands, but it is definitely not “free.”
 - a. **Studying means working** [Doing assignments, reading the textbook (especially pre-reading for class) and reviewing class notes should be at the top of your list.]
 - b. **Studying generally does not mean:** talking to friends, listening to music, checking emails from friends and family, texting, watching TV, shopping online, watching cool videos online, etc. Those are part of recreation time, not study time! That said, studying should not be onerous and can be interrupted from time to time for pleasant interactions.
2. **Visit your instructor at least once during his/her office hours.** Make this productive time for you and him/her, though, so wait until you have a specific question about an assignment or perhaps you may wish to ask the professor about something slightly off topic but should be generally related to the course material. Many reasons for this, here are two: letters of recommendation from professors often refer to office hours interactions and many problems can be kept “small” if professors are kept in the loop early on.
3. **Refer to your professor as “Dr. Jones” or “Professor Gonzalez”** in person and in all email correspondence unless instructed otherwise by him/her. This is not high school. Your professors worked hard for their degrees and generally dislike being “demoted” to “Mr.” or “Mrs.” (unless they do not possess a Ph.D., in which case you can still call them “professor”). Avoid “texting” style language in emails.
4. **If you are hitting a block in studying, get up and try something else for a while.** Go for a walk, take a break, hang out with a friend, call your family, go to the beach. Then, come back to studying later with vigor and energy once you think you have broken through.
5. **Categorize spaces on campus (or off) for specific purposes.** Find that place on campus (or off) where you can really relax and find yourself (e.g., Founders Chapel, Garden of the Sea, basement of Maher). Have another place where you go to zone in and study like crazy (e.g., library, a special classroom, a hidden space in an academic building). Then have another place where you do your daily activities (e.g., dorm room). Creating separate spaces can help set the mood for whatever your task at hand is.
6. **Avoid drugs completely.** Getting into a caffeine “routine” may actually make things worse in the end. There is considerable research on this going both ways, actually, but if you are sleepy or tired, the best solution is generally to get more sleep. Alcohol and other drugs can have similarly

negative effects and should be avoided. Should I throw in “addiction to cell phone” here??? If you are addicted to the buzz of the cell phone or even the lure of the computer, purposely avoid these in your study routine. Everyone else—including loved ones--needs to know you are serious about studying and they can wait for an hour or two while you focus on studying! Nowhere is it written that you must respond to a text or email within 30 seconds! ☺ Condition people to wait for your response while you are focusing on studies. Parents will understand when they see those good grades coming in at the end of the semester!

7. **Attend every class, attentively!** (According to Woody Allen, “80 percent of life is showing up.”) Make sure to show up even if you’re not in the best mood or have some other assignment coming up (this will force you to budget time better in the future). While in class, be sure to listen attentively . . . meaning don’t talk to your neighbor, don’t nervously check for texts or surf the web. Your professors can almost always tell when you are sneaking a peak at the “cell phone,” even if they don’t call you on it or claim they don’t care. Believe me, **they do**.
8. **Make friends!** The “social game” is a critical part of the “academic game” in college. Not only are friends a great resource for course material (if you miss class, wish to study together, etc.) but they also provide great moral support when things get tough and can share your good times with you when things are going great. You should get at least one phone number or email address from a fellow student in each class you are enrolled in.
9. **Check your ego at the door.** Sometimes your ego can be a hindrance to learning. Don’t be afraid to ask a question in class, to talk to a fellow classmate or your professor, or to sit near students with whom you have never had a conversation before. Bene Brown has a great TED talk on the benefits of vulnerability.
10. **Find a balance.** Life will be challenging and at times you may need to get out of balance for a while but try to maintain a balance between (a) sleep, (b) studying, (c) exercise and (d) recreation. Healthy eating is also extremely important.