

# Chapter 1 – Get Success



Imagine you are getting ready to graduate from college and a recruiter asks you, “Please describe your college success”—what would you say? Would you describe a high-grade point average (GPA), a large circle of new friends, or quantify success in terms of parties attended?

By itself, “success” is defined as the “accomplishment of an aim or purpose” but remains vague. This implies that each student should individually envision a successful college experience. Our question becomes, “Would now be a good time to consider the meaning of your college success?”

There are benefits to reflecting on success early in the undergraduate process. Among other reasons, more opportunities and time are available to accomplish your goals. Many students do realize they have not adequately developed success criteria until they find themselves in the middle of job interviews late in their studies.

This implies that success is going to include more than simply picking up a diploma, although even this is not as trivial as some new students expect. Student attrition, including both voluntary withdrawal and academic dismissal, is a vexing concern for college administrators, who consider it unacceptable to lose even one student unnecessarily.

Let’s revisit the question: Should success be defined simply by receiving a diploma, or should it also include securing a job after graduation? Further, is *any* job the goal, or should a successful college strategy be expanded to include earnings, (a) The job you want, (b) At the compensation you want, and (c) In the area you want!

Although perhaps ambitious, this expanded goal is quite realistic. In fact, there is absolutely nothing wrong even setting “stretch” goals (i.e., setting a high goal). Each year, many students graduate from college while also accomplishing rigid career objectives. What these successful students have in common, and what you might want to consider, is defining objectives early on, followed by taking steps to accomplish them, and monitoring their progress.

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But wait—what if you still have no idea what to major in, or what career might interest you? Relax—you are not alone, and the situation is not desperate. In fact, even if you are certain of your chosen major and career, you should allow for and expect a bit of change.

Part of the early college experience is exposure to different opportunities that can clarify and even supersede previous intentions. Penn State students have access to over 275 majors<sup>1</sup> and 200 minors. You were probably not aware of so many paths.

For example, Industrial Engineering is one of highest nationally ranked majors in the College of Engineering although likely not discussed during career days in school. The major “Security and Risk Analysis” is quite popular in the College of Information Sciences and Technology. Graduates from both majors are highly

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<sup>1</sup> For a complete and current list of majors, visit [psu.edu/academics/undergraduate/majors/](https://psu.edu/academics/undergraduate/majors/).

sought by their respective recruiters. Have you ever considered them or even heard of them before?

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Information on selecting a major, or mapping personal interests, is beyond the scope of this book. However, some introductory thoughts and resources are available in the Appendices. Remember, choosing a major does not confine you to one career, and selecting a career does not restrict you to a single major.

We believe the most important requirement is that students thoroughly (or at least generally) enjoy their chosen major or find one that they can enjoy. We often compare completing an undergraduate degree to running a series of mini marathons (semesters), within a major marathon (the four-year undergraduate, or “baccalaureate” degree). Without enjoyment, it would be difficult to endure this undergraduate “race” to completion.

Sport preparation offers useful lessons for successful undergraduates as well. Athletes spend weeks and months steadily preparing for a big event in manageable chunks. To sharpen both body and mind, skills are practiced while also monitoring nutrition and rest. The night before the contest, however, is spent resting and contemplation.

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Students should mirror this approach by regularly studying in manageable chunks (i.e., the “training”), monitoring nutrition and rest, and only lightly reviewing the evening before exams (i.e., the “big event”).

Imagine how ridiculous it would be for a football team to spend weeks hanging out and not practicing and then scrambling the night before a game to learn plays and positions!

Doing very little, panicking, and then “pulling all nighters” for students is similarly not recommended. Students attempting this have actually crashed and fallen asleep during exams. Cramming leaves students (i.e., those who stay awake) ill-prepared to be assessed, with wits dimmed and logic incapacitated. Cramming also reduces the intended long-term effectiveness of education and leads to poorer performance in the follow-on course.

## **Pacing**

Like a marathon, the key to success in college is finding a “pace,” or semester credit load, that you can tolerate. A baccalaureate degree requires on average completion of eight, fifteen-week semesters. Students average fifteen credit hours each semester, ranging from twelve (the minimum to be considered full-time), to eighteen or more. Most courses are three-credit hours, so a regular semester is approximately five courses. If you do the math, eight semesters translate closely into the ideal target of 121-credit hours for many majors. For more information, see “Selecting a Major” in the Appendices.

Finding the appropriate load each semester is a challenge due to differences between students, majors, and the courses themselves. Individual circumstances such as initial preparation, work, family issues, and illness may vary the acceptable load from student to student and semester to semester. Courses vary in terms of number and type of assessments and group work required.

Also, not all courses challenge students equally, and others may have misleading credit values. For example, the Smeal College of Business replaced four four-credit “junior core” courses with three-credit versions. Students have reported the resultant workload “felt” closer to four credit hours in each.

Students pacing at lower semester averages often supplement their credits with summer coursework. Penn State courses may be completed via the web<sup>2</sup> or by transferring<sup>3</sup> credits earned while attending colleges closer to the student’s home. Meet with an advisor to learn Penn State requirements before taking any course you intend to transfer!

## **Balance**

Besides pacing at an acceptable semester credit-load, it is important to balance studies with recreational, social, and special interest activities. For one thing, balancing makes more productive the time spent on coursework. Ritter’s father, who was director of a student center and student activities, often noted that half your education comes from outside the classroom. Too many students do not use that half to learn, develop, and have long-term fun.

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résumé, recruiters look for balance as well!*

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<sup>2</sup> Penn State’s “World Campus” online course offerings are described at [worldcampus.psu.edu/](http://worldcampus.psu.edu/).

<sup>3</sup> Requirements for transferring credits are detailed at [psu.edu/resources/transfer-students/eligibility/](http://psu.edu/resources/transfer-students/eligibility/).

Access to upper classmen that can act as mentors and provide advice is another benefit from balancing coursework with student activities. Because GPA is only one line on the résumé, recruiters look for balance as well!

Activities<sup>4</sup> available to students include:

- Musical performances (giving or attending, such as opera for the first time)
- Student government (participating and leading)
- Academic and professional interest clubs (learning, participating, and leading)
- Special-interest groups (all the above activities)
- NCAA athletics, club sports, and intramural teams
- Expanding or starting a new organization

Starting a new organization is a unique opportunity to fulfill a passion. The process of forming your own student organization begins by visiting the Office of Student Activities located in the HUB Robeson Center. Rights and privileges for recognized student organizations include:

- Use of the Pennsylvania State University name
- Web space
- University facility use
- Involvement Fair participation to recruit members
- Rights to request student activities funds

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<sup>4</sup> Penn State clubs are listed at [studentaffairs.psu.edu/get-involved/student-organizations/](http://studentaffairs.psu.edu/get-involved/student-organizations/).

For example, one of Glantz' students expanded an existing club by finding corporate sponsors. This allowed the members to travel and compete with other universities. Another student created a unique marketing club at Smeal College of Business.

College is a long process that can be more successful by using pacing and balancing techniques. The bottom line is that you will be more successful, whatever your goal, if you are enjoying yourself in your studies. The many activities available to students, including those specifically created and managed by students, are a great way to meet people, to take a break and lighten learning, and to provide learning outside the classroom.

### **Working With Your Professors**

Finally, remember that professors are people too. Each reserve three hours every week to meet with students. Unfortunately, professors often feel like the appliance repairman in the old television commercial waiting idly 'for the telephone to ring,' but only a few students calling or stopping by, and then only when there is a crisis.

If possible, introduce yourself to your instructors early in the semester. This is especially true if you find yourself in a large section. Some instructors, including the authors, value the opportunity to chat with students and get feedback on the course. Students who take the time to meet with professors may also develop valuable job references. This does not have to be formal. Saying hello and asking useful or related questions during or after class counts.

But whatever you do, please do not wait until the end of the semester and email the instructor with emergency pleas to raise your grade or to create extra credit assignments! Instructors have an obligation to treat all students equally. It would not be fair to offer special opportunities to just one student. If you are not doing as well as you think you should, bring your notes and study guides

to office hours *early* in the semester for evaluation and suggestions.

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## **Why Intelligent Students Sometimes Fail**

Ironically, we suspect that “intelligence,” as commonly perceived, correlates to success better in high school than college. For one thing, everyone in college has been categorized as “intelligent” by some measure. Penn State, as with most colleges, actively selects the best and brightest from their applicants.

What does this mean to the new college students? As shown in Figure 1-1, the bottom two-thirds of high school performers—students who may have ‘elevated’ their performance—have been removed. It may now seem that all your college peers were high school superstars earning a 3.8 GPA (out of 4.0), multiple varsity athletic letters, and passing AP exams! Ritter’s father called this process a pyramid, where the number of candidates at each level gets smaller and more elite as the levels increase.

According to one university’s advising center website, there are many reasons why intelligent students fail<sup>5</sup>. The first three listed are lack of motivation (e.g., are you sure you want to be in college at this time?), poor time management, and giving up too easily.

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<sup>5</sup> Penn State provides academic progress advice and guidelines at [registrar.psu.edu/academic-progress/](http://registrar.psu.edu/academic-progress/).



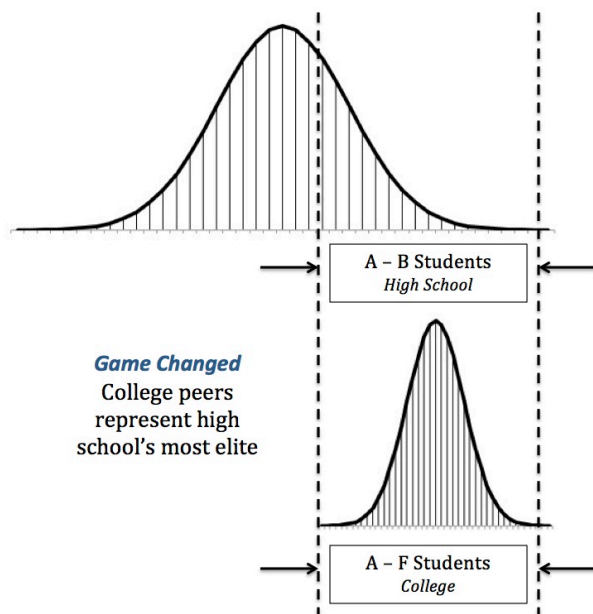


Figure 1-1. Grade distribution is more competitive in college than in high school.

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So, how do you succeed and avoid failure in a room where everyone is as gifted as you? College classroom success is better measured with a clock (i.e., “time-on-task”) than any standardized test. For example, how many hours do you sit in a chair each week completing assignments and reviewing material? Do you track the time invested each week in academics?

Can you develop a routine to regularly work on academic work?  
Can you divide your time among various opportunities?

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## College Success Quotient

We use “College Success Quotient” as a concept to qualitatively describe a student’s return on investment from the time and money invested into a four-year undergraduate degree.

The least desirable return is for students who withdraw from college after the first or second year. Attrition rates vary across the country, and can be quite high (e.g., 49%) at less selective state systems<sup>6</sup>.

In these cases, there is a minimal—or even negative—return on the money sunk into college, including tuition, books and housing. Further, society has lost the benefit from the individual’s increased work potential.

Ironically, those not even attempting college would have achieved a slightly better return. Although these individuals have no return on investment, they also have no offsetting sunk costs (e.g., tuition, books, and housing).

Individuals that manage to graduate should earn higher returns. For the sake of argument, however, we divide these students into two groups. The first group is those that proceed through college with minimal goals and direction. This group is “falling across the finish line” at graduation. They run the race and in the end are spent. Unfortunately, it is at graduation that the race really begins, including job placement and career development!

The group that earns the highest, and most desirable return, includes those students with longer-term goals that see graduation

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, *Crossing the Finish Line: Completing College at America's Public Universities* (2009), Princeton University Press, by William G. Bowen, Matthew M. Chingos & Michael S. McPherson.

as an important milestone. These students successfully complete college with an increased probability of earning the job most desired, in the area they want, and in the compensation range they want.

Because good colleges only extend offers to students they believe will graduate, it is the student that most controls his or her College Success Quotient. Developing a good College Success Quotient begins by putting into practice a vision and desire to succeed. Students should quickly forget any strategy based on simply going through “motions” to minimally complete degree requirements.

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Students who see college graduation as a milestone to a longer-term goal will hopefully use that understanding to take advantage of resources found uniquely at colleges to maximize their return on investment while they are in college. At the same time, students who are still exploring—yet remain engaged and curious—also tend to thrive. We expand these concepts in later chapters.

Table 1-1 shows some of the implications for new students as they adapt to a more competitive setting. Students should enjoy their time in college and continue to develop socially while simultaneously working to meet academic requirements. We expand these concepts in later chapters.

Table 1-1. New students should expect to adapt to a more competitive classroom setting in college.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR NEW COLLEGE STUDENTS

- Know that everyone accepted into college has the skills and background to succeed!
- Students must significantly increase effort from high school (e.g., high school courses might cover one-chapter per month, while college courses will cover one chapter per week).
- High school success is biased towards “intelligence.” College success, where everyone is “intelligent,” is biased toward “effort” (e.g., expect to invest one to three hours every week for each hour spent in-class and track it!).
- Don’t fall behind. Manage your time and plan ahead.
- Take notes and read assignments several times.
- Rewrite and integrate reading and class notes.
- Take advantage of tutors and peer support.
- Find a balance: Get involved in activities, clubs, athletics, etc.
- Create a schedule (e.g., anticipating course requirements will keep you from falling behind or having to sacrifice important requirements such as sleep, hygiene, and fitness).

### S.M.A.R.T. Goals

Students surveyed in class often state their goal as, “To get an A.” Although earning a good grade is important, this does not represent a complete goal. Better goals at the course level are more detailed

and might reflect learning new material, ideas, and techniques to help in future careers, for example.

Glantz teaches project management students to use S.M.A.R.T. (i.e., Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Time-Constrained) criteria. This advice applies to creating expansive student goals as well.

Specific goal criteria address the six “W” questions:

1. What do I want to accomplish?
2. Where is the location?
3. When is the time frame?
4. Which requirements and constraints exist?
5. Who is involved?
6. Why (reasons, purpose, or benefits) accomplish the goal?

Measurable criteria describe exactly what is to be done by answering, “How will I know it when it is accomplished?”

Achievable criteria help visualize opportunities that might otherwise have been overlooked.

Realistic criteria imply that you are willing and able to invest all that is required, while meeting other commitments and interests.

Time-Constrained criteria ground the goal to a specific time frame and make clear the need to accomplish interim steps at certain intervals. In business, Glantz (the one with the MBA) never needed to wait until an assignment’s due date—he only needed to monitor the steps leading to completion. This permitted needed intervention to keep on track.

For example, a general student goal might be, “To graduate from college.” A more expansive goal might be, “To graduate by 2028 in accounting from a four-year degree granting institution and gain employment at a major public accounting firm in the Philadelphia area.”

It is never too early to begin developing, revising, and expanding goals for each course, college, and life. Longer-term goals embody many necessary shorter-term goals that do not contradict either each other or your values. There are many sources available in the library and on the web to help turn dreams into goals using development and tracking.

To practice visualizing short-term goals, pretend it is the beginning of the next Fall Semester. Compose an email to your parents “bragging” about what your top three academic, work, or extracurricular accomplishments will be from the previous year.

Longer-term goals can similarly be investigated. For example, while completing his M.B.A. at Wharton, Glantz was asked to write a one-page biography documenting work, education and family accomplishments twenty years after graduation. These projections considered job, title, salary, degrees, certificates, living location, and personal details such as family life (boy was surprised!).

Follow the advice that was given actress Jean Simmons, when she was told, “Never be afraid to fail. Every time you get up in the morning, you are ahead.”

## **Grade Point Average**

Finally, it is worth repeating that while a reasonable grade point average (GPA) is necessary, it is not sufficient alone. GPA represents only one line on a résumé.

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GPA is, of course, an important metric used by recruiters to gauge student intellect and ability to master new material. Unfortunately, it is incomplete and misleading to simply equate college success with a grade average. Recruiters know that GPA only estimates but does not guarantee workplace success. Otherwise, recruiters would simply review résumés to only offer jobs to the highest GPAs.

During decades spent in industry, including senior management, we have reviewed thousands of résumés, and hired hundreds of new employees at all levels. For both of us, we are “suspicious” with extremely high GPA as well as lower ones. Here “suspicious” simply meant that we had to ask a lot more questions regarding the tradeoffs that might have contributed to either extreme GPA. This included identifying, for example, sacrifices and investments with extracurricular activities, social development, and academic rigor.

Still, as GPA is important, we wish to help students improve. At Penn State we help transition recent high school graduates through special summer entrance programs, such as LEAP (Learning Edge Academic Program) and study skills courses that create early awareness of increased expectations among new cohorts.

To summarize, the standard is raised in college where everyone is “smart” and GPA is based more on commitment than raw intelligence. The high school strategy that relies on intellect is no longer sufficient when college grades are distributed over a more elite group. Students with this awareness can begin to develop advanced approaches based on accepting responsibility, focusing on time management and task completion, managing goals, and health.

Besides improving GPA, we also want to help students develop an appreciation for extracurricular experiences. Typically, students do not realize the importance of the résumé “Extracurricular experience” section.

For example, our university may have 300 students graduate every year in a specific major and yet have less than ten invited to interview for a particular job.

Extracurricular activities include volunteer, entertainment, social, leadership, and experiences that improve specific skills. These experiences in the résumé provide powerful insight into the character and values of an applicant. As one recruiter told Glantz, “I know they can do the job, but the ‘Skills and Interest’ section tells me whether I want to be around them forty to sixty hours a week!”

It is important to begin this process as early as possible. Reality sets in for everyone when, as seniors, students begin to document and share undergraduate experiences with recruiters.

Andrew, for example, fell into this group. His lack of preparation was immediately visible at placement events where he was nervous, fidgety, and sweating profusely.

How should Andrew reply when the recruiter asks the simple, but powerful, opening question, “Tell me about yourself?” It was unfortunately too late when he realized that his minimal focus to “just graduate” had created lots of blanks in his résumé. Experience meeting people, introducing himself, and participating in activities (not even leading) would have helped in this situation.

We hope this book will help all students replace senior year anxiety with a makeover the first year, the second year, or as soon as possible. The makeover begins with the suggestions provided in this book and continues with those provided by you!



We invite you to share your comments with the authors. With your support we can continue to develop and share helpful ideas together.

Ultimately, the responsibility for success falls to each student, but will benefit through encouragement and mentoring from the entire Penn State community, including parents, guardians, and other support persons.

### **Closing**

College is a wonderful opportunity to develop, gather knowledge, and create personal strength. Pace yourself and use balancing techniques to make this a solid first step in your future.



**Book Tip:** *Major in Success: Make College Easier, Fire Up Your Dreams and Get a Very Cool Job.* 5<sup>th</sup> ed. Patrick Combs (Ten Speed Press, 2007).