This is different, isn’t it?

It certainly *seems* different.

Sure, you may have left home before for summer camp or an extended visit to family or friends and you will probably be returning home for summers and holidays, but this time you have actually *moved out* of your home.

And sure, you have taken classes and tests before and you may have attended many different schools in your lifetime, but this seems very different. It’s you and your alarm—no one else will be helping make sure you get up and have everything you need for class.

There also seems to be a vague, mostly unspoken belief amongst everyone that things will never quite be the same again. Before you left home, you packed most of your clothes, iPod, and a lot of photos, but then you and your parents went out and bought lots of new stuff, an ironing board, clothes hamper, shoe rack, space organizers, a small television and refrigerator, sheets, pillows, perhaps even a computer and a multi-purpose printer.

Then, when your parents and the Move-In Day volunteers helped you move into your Baylor residence hall, the process was organized, but exciting chaos. But despite everything that you brought with you, it was still necessary to make a mad dash to Target or Walmart to buy more things to decorate your room. Before leaving, your family may have helped you create a collage of your favorite photos on the wall beside your bed and your Mom bought your favorite cookies and gave them to you. Why was all that necessary? Because when our environment has been so dramatically changed, we must claim and personalize our space, we need to re-establish our identity, we need to feel a connection to our past, and we need the comfort of the familiar. That collage of photos on the wall tells our story; who we are and whom we are connected to; the important and special people and events in our life.

During Orientation and since arriving at Baylor, you have also been handed dozens of brochures and pamphlets and you have met a lot of people and everyone seems nice and you have been told “Welcome to Baylor” a thousand times. At the same time, it seems that these people are a bit concerned about your “transition.” The discussions with your Welcome Week Leader, CL, and your New Student Experience instructor seem to imply that you are inevitably going to be greatly challenged by college, perhaps even fail, and they really want you to know that “resources and counseling are available . . . ”

You might be asking yourself, “Why all the concern?”

The answer is because *this is* different and many questions remain: Just how different is this experience really going to be? How well prepared are you for the college experience?
Will you be as successful in college as you were in high school? What habits should you keep; what habits should you immediately discard; and what new habits do you need to develop? What does a 15-hour course load really mean? How hard is it? How are courses graded? What are the exams going to be like? You may ask yourself: How well do I need to know the information to do well in my classes? Will my professors help me? Will the relationship with my professors be the same as with my high school teachers or will they be vastly different? What should I call them? Professor? Doctor? Mr., Ms., or Mrs.? How will this college experience change me? Will this experience open new doors? Will I meet interesting people? Will I be successful?

These are all really good and very important questions. In fact, the New Student Experience is designed to help you get your feet on the ground here at Baylor.

In a recent CBS news story, it was reported that “More than 45% of this year’s national college freshmen say that they graduated from high school with an “A” average” and also that “a new study finds that this year’s college freshmen have the worst study habits in 15 years.” The story also reports that University of Delaware freshman Abby Shutter learned almost immediately that her relatively lax high school study habits were not going to cut it at her university: “I took a lot of Advanced Placement (AP) courses in high school and I thought I was prepared for college. I didn’t know how difficult it was going to be,” she said.

Similarly, in the Spring 2011 survey of our graduating seniors, one of the students wrote this in response to a question that asked for their most important experience as a Psychology/Neuroscience student at Baylor:

“Receiving a 64 on my first ever Psychology test. That was the wake-up call of my life. From that point on, my academic focus went to a level I did not know I had. Thankfully, Intro dropped one test and I still earned the A. But that D showed me that I was unprepared for Baylor. Psychology was something I enjoyed and had a passion for, but here it was showing me that I needed to and could do better in all my other courses, too.”

This problem is largely due to the fact that the skills that served you well in high school will be inadequate in college. You and most of your classmates may have experienced a level of success in high school that created exaggerated expectations about college academic success and a false sense of confidence in the study habits that worked in high school as sufficient for college success. College is not a “right”; rather, it is a privilege and requires hard work and dedication.

The sad fact is that many college freshmen experience their first-ever “C”, “D”, or “F” and are then left wondering, “What am I doing wrong?” The answer is that your high school experience may not have trained you for college-level success. It is likely that your active listening and reading skills have not been adequately developed, nor have your study habits or time-management skills been finely tuned. You may also be distracted by the many activities and social events that are being presented to you, and you may not know, at least not as well as you should, how to manage effectively your priorities and responsibilities.

In high school, the typical student goes to class six to seven hours each day; but in college, a 15-hour course load literally means attending class for only 15 hours each week. As a result, you will have a lot of time on your hands. Further, your high school classes often required
daily homework or weekly graded events, but your college courses are often characterized by just three or four exams. The “homework” that must inevitably be done to succeed in college courses has to be initiated and completed of your own will and it means really studying and comprehensively knowing the information. There are no daily deadlines to keep you on track; and remember, Mom and Dad are not going to be around to ask if you've done your work.

The fewer number of exams in a typical college course means that there is much more information to comprehensively know for each of those exams and also that each of those exams have a lot of influence on your end of course letter grade. Unfortunately, there is a strong tendency to put the “homework” off until just before the exam and that results in late nights, all-nighters, skipping or sleeping through class, and failing to engage in what cognitive psychologists term distributed or spaced practice. Rather, you and your classmates will turn to “cramming” the night before the exam (what cognitive psychologists would call "massed practice").

Imagine an athlete or a musician that failed to practice on a regular basis and pulled an all-nighter before the competition or performance. How would you imagine that turning out?

Massed practice does not lead to success in athletics or the performing arts and it doesn’t work for academic success either.

Although you might achieve what you would consider an acceptable grade by cramming, your comprehension and retention of the course material will be shallow. As a result, this cursory and ineffective treatment of the course material will cause you to think that the exam was full of “tricky multiple choice questions.” The problem is magnified a hundred-fold on the comprehensive final exams that often occur at the end of the semester in a college-level class.

So … how does one succeed at this seemingly daunting task?

The good news is that it does not have to be daunting. In fact, learning is fun and learning how to learn can be very rewarding. Here are some steps to start with:

It is critical to realize that doing well in college, while consummately achievable, will not be quite as easy as you initially thought or perhaps wanted.

You actually have to attend class. However, just showing up is not sufficient.

Successful students are serious about going to class and about keeping their priorities clear. If you want to succeed at Baylor:

- Prepare for class by reading the materials before class and participate actively in the learning process during class.
- Take ownership of your academic journey by taking responsibility for your own successes or failures.
- Be rested for the day ahead. To do this, you may have to make hard decisions to ensure you get enough sleep. Research shows that our thinking processes are diminished when we are tired.
- If you are worried about oversleeping, set two alarms!
Certainly make time to be with your friends because that is important too, but also set aside time every day to get all of your reading and studying accomplished. The difference between children and adults is that children just play while sensible and successful adults both work and play. But doing that requires effective time management skills, which we will discuss in depth during another session.

- Understand that almost everything we experience in life is a result of our choices, behaviors, and perceptions; and that we are entirely in charge of all we do and how we respond to all that faces or occurs to us.

Doing well in college then is simply a matter of intentionality.

To do something intentionally means that you acted purposefully in order to achieve a particular and desired outcome. This of course means that you have to set goals; you have to track your progress toward those goals; and you have to analyze and modify behaviors that might be interfering with accomplishing those goals.

So yes, this is different, wildly different and extraordinarily exciting. Without a doubt, the demands and expectations of university life are unlike those experienced in high school.

If college is doing its job, you should be challenged by the experience. You will of course learn many things, but more importantly, you will learn how to learn and you will discover many things about yourself in the process.

So, for the 1,001st time: Welcome to Baylor and enjoy the journey.

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