Developing a College Mindset

Inquire: Who Owns Your Learning?

Overview

When we’re in elementary school, middle school, or high school, it seems pretty clear who owns our learning: the school and the teachers, and sometimes our parents. They set the curriculum. They tell us what we need to study and when. They set the schedule. All we need to do is show up and study. Our job is to learn, but the parameters of that learning are set by others.

As we move forward into college and professional education, another reality sets in. We depart from our accustomed prescribed learning environment into one in which each of us is responsible for his or her learning. This means that, as adults, we get to choose how much we learn, what we learn, and what we do with our knowledge. It is one of the biggest responsibilities we have in life.

Big Question: How can you take ownership of your learning in college?

Watch: Suppose You Could Wave a Magic Wand...

Suppose you discovered that there really is a magic wand and that, simply by waving it in the air, you could shape your life however you wished. You could choose your own identity, your profession, and where you wanted to live.

You could change the way people look at you, how they address you, and what they think about you.

You could choose a new trajectory and destination for your life.

Well, that kind of magic really exists when you go to college.

And while this magic is a little more complicated than simply waving something in the air, it is every bit as powerful.

Going to college is about assuming your rightful position in our society as an independent, contributing adult, with all the rights and privileges pertaining thereto. It can mark your first real opportunity to be in charge and make real decisions that really matter.

As comedian and talk-show host Stephen Colbert relayed in an interview about why his surname is pronounced the way it is, the act of going to college gives one tremendous freedom to make important decisions.
Colbert’s family had always pronounced their last name with an American emphasis: “Coal + Bert,” although Colbert had toyed with a change to what he called the more “pretentious” French pronunciation.

While flying to Northwestern University, where he had transferred to study theater, Colbert thought “I didn’t know Chicago. Nobody knew me there. And I thought, ‘Well, if I’m ever gonna do it, it’s gonna be now.’”

He struck up a conversation with an astronaut seated next to him. This chance encounter reinforced his decision to change his name to “Coal + Bear.” And thus the legend was born.

Just like Colbert, moving to a new stage in life offers a whole host of new opportunities.

On this new stage, you get to seize ownership of your own success or failure.

You have a chance to transform yourself into your ideal version of yourself.

Making the transition to college is its own adventure. All it takes to be successful is a willingness to assume ownership of that adventure, your learning, and your life.

Your time in college gives you the opportunities for you to position your life to be everything you’ve always wanted it to be. Carpe diem.

Read: Developing a College Mindset

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If I were in charge, things would certainly be different.

We’ve all had that thought before.

The reality is, as you transition to college coursework, you get to be in charge. Starting from scratch, you can make your learning experience whatever you want it to be... Really!

Each day, you have the ability to decide what kind of student you want to be, the quality of effort you put in, and what you actually take away from your experience.

In other words, transitioning to college coursework means you are starting a new adventure with an entirely clean slate.

You’re starting fresh. No one will judge you based on any previous work you’ve done.

So, who are you going to be?

Owning Your College Experience

The key to making a successful transition to college is realizing that you own the experience. This is really great, but it can also be challenging. Owning your learning choices and experience means making lots of decisions.
To help with that, here is a list of learning zones that you need to be ready to own.

1. Owning your thinking and intellectual development — College coursework emphasizes critical evaluation and thinking. This often entails presenting different perspectives on issues, sharing conflicting points of view, and asking you to make carefully reasoned decisions about what you think is right. Your college coursework will certainly present you with plenty of fact-based information that you need to learn, but you will also be asked to evaluate different situations and determine the best actions within the context of that information. In other words, your college coursework will ask you to think for yourself and develop a rational framework for making decisions. This type of thinking “freedom” may be a big leap from your high school experience and may seem unnatural or difficult at first. Just remember that a primary goal of college is to help you become an independent thinker who can evaluate situations and make great decisions on your own.

2. Owning your time — Owning your time is another big adjustment you’ll have to make. College coursework is not scheduled in the same blocks of classes and activities that you experienced in high school. You will be given deadlines for completing assignments, but it will be entirely up to you to get your work done on time. YOU will have to figure out the best way to use your time. YOU will need to determine how much time is required for study and completing assigned activities. YOU will need to decide if you need help from your instructor or another support resource. With those estimates in mind, YOU will make a schedule for completing your work, one that meshes well with your other responsibilities and social life.

3. Owning your technology — Technology plays an important role in your college learning experiences. You will likely use your smartphone for scheduling, research, and study. You may have accounts on multiple software platforms — a student information system, a learning management system, etc. — and have access to other online learning aids. It is your responsibility to be familiar with all hardware and software you use for your coursework. You should know how to use and take care of your devices. You should take the time to watch YouTube videos or read online resources about the software you are using. You should have a plan or application for managing your user accounts, usernames, and passwords.

4. Owning Information — In college, instructors often have the expectation that you will “figure things out on your own.” You will be presented with new information in every lesson. From the beginning, you should be prepared to hear terms, concepts, or ideas that seem important but don’t come with full explanations. It is YOUR job to write them down and learn about them on your own. Think of yourself as a detective or an explorer, someone who enjoys finding new pieces of information and putting them together for yourself.

5. Owning your mistakes — Receiving and implementing feedback is a key component of the learning process. Such feedback often involves pointing out weaknesses or mistakes in your work. Remember, this is not an attempt to criticize you or make you feel inferior. It is simply an indication of how far you have progressed and a suggestion about what you can do to continue improving. You should be glad when people point out problems in your work or thinking because it provides an opportunity to get stronger.

6. Owning your identity and character — Late night talk show host Stephen Colbert tells the story about changing the pronunciation of his last name while flying to the University of Illinois. “I didn’t know Chicago. Nobody knew me there. And I thought, ’Well, if I’m ever gonna do it, it’s gonna be now.’” His story is a good reminder that we are all in control of our identities, from how we dress to how we address others. For successful flourishing in both your academic and personal life, you will want to think about how to cultivate character traits such as integrity, respect, resilience, humility, and compassion. As you begin
your college career, pay close attention to the identity and character you are cultivating and presenting to others.

Reflect Poll

As many students begin their college careers, they become aware of areas where they need to improve, such as study habits and time management. As you think about who you are now and how prepared you feel to succeed in your coursework, what is the area where you will require the most change?

- time management
- dealing with criticism of my work
- study habits
- technology skills
- character development

Expand: Show Up on Time and Know Your Lines

Overview

Whew! Taking ownership of your learning life sounds exhausting! You feel like you’ll be so busy thinking about taking care of things that you won’t actually have time to take care of things.

That’s a natural and reasonable reaction. And the fact is, that none of us begin independent adulthood with an instant ability to manage a successful life. It takes time and effort to develop the skills we need.

So, meanwhile, how can you ensure success while you’re still learning how to manage things?

“Show up on time, know your lines, and get along with everyone.”

There’s a piece of advice actors often give people wanting to get into show business. “Show up on time, know your lines, and get along with everyone.”

Is this really all it takes to be a successful actor? Of course not. But, the advice represents the core to every professional actor’s success. In order to have a sustainable career where people want to work with you and continue offering you jobs, you have to be professional, respect others, and work proactively to make every project better through your participation.

This is also great advice to anyone beginning their college learning career. Regardless of the personal and social chaos that may reign in your life, do your best to remain focused on these three things.

1. Go to class — This may seem simple, but it is a primary reason people fail in college. They don’t go to class. This is where your success begins. Regardless of the day or time, your number one priority is to make it to class. Be a few minutes early. Be ready to take notes when the instructor enters the room. If you’re taking an online course, make it a point to log in to your course daily. It is particularly important to complete your first assignments on time and, if possible, to submit them ahead of schedule.

2. Prepare for class — Showing up is good, but being prepared will make you stand out in a good way. If there is a reading assigned, read the material before coming to class. Take a look at the course syllabus and make sure you are aware of what material is being covered. Even though you feel intimidated, raise your hand and ask questions. It’s the best way to learn. And remember, good students are never
surprised by quizzes. If you are taking an online class, preparation means keeping up with your work, reading assignment instructions carefully, and ensuring that your work contains all required elements.

3. **Be a good classmate** — In your learning life, getting along with everyone means talking to classmates before and after class. It means including yourself in group study sessions and being a valuable contributor. It means being willing to help others (this makes it much easier to get help when you need it). Finally, being a good classmate means always doing your part and more on group projects. If you are taking an online class, being a good classmate often involves providing timely and thoughtful feedback in peer-review activities. It also means posting discussion assignments promptly and engaging with others in constructive dialogue. Whether you’re in a face-to-face class setting or studying online, keep in mind that getting along with everyone also entails communicating respectfully with your instructors.

Not surprisingly, cultivating a commitment to these things also translates to being a great worker and colleague in your professional career.

### Lesson Toolbox

### Additional Resources and Readings

A list of “life zones” and specific action items for managing them well
- Link to resource: https://ace.fsu.edu/sites/g/files/upcbnu296/files/Life_Skills_for_College_and_Beyond.pdf

A video overview defining college success and how to prepare for it
- Link to resource: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6kx71y2MLVk

An article sharing important lessons about preparing for any big endeavor
- Link to resource: https://www.ccaurora.edu/blogs/fox-call/academic-support/6-things-i-learned-from-my-first-ironman-race-the-one-i-didnt-finish/

### Lesson Glossary

None

### Check Your Knowledge

1. The key to making a successful transition to college is realizing that...
   a. there are many free study tools.
   b. going to class is not all that important.
   c. good time management is.
   d. you own the experience.

2. In college, the student should take ownership of their thinking and intellectual development.
   a. True
   b. False

3. In online courses, instructors only expect you to include a minimum of 75% of the required elements for assignments.
   a. True
   b. False
Answer Key:

Citations

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