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Want to Find Academic Success as a College Freshman? Take these Suggestions to Heart

KEUKA PARK, N.Y.—“I never had to work this hard in high school.”

A member of the Keuka College faculty for 33 years, Michael Rogoff has heard that remark thousands of times.



Adapting to college-level work is a major cause of freshman anxiety.

“It isn’t unusual for students to be nervous,” said Rogoff, professor of psychology. “If you’re a bit nervous as you head into your first semester at college, you’re in good company.”

In 1997, Rogoff and former faculty member Nancy M. Bailey initiated a project designed to help optimize the transition of first semester students to the academic challenges of college life. The Assessment of Learning Styles and Study Skills is conducted each fall and gathers information about students’ learning experiences during high school and the first semester of college.

That research and other published studies on the topic leads Rogoff to believe that the key to overcoming first-year jitters and receiving your degree four years later may lie in taking the following five learning suggestions to heart:

Suggestion 1: Set the time and place for your learning

College faculty often advise students to devote about two hours for outside preparation for every hour they spend in class. However, Rogoff said this may depend on the nature of the subject, your level of motivation, and your characteristics as a learner.

“Many colleges provide students with a variety of tools to assess their time management skills,” he said. “This is because the quantity of your study time does affect how prepared you are to benefit from your classes and the quality of your learning. For instance, research indicates that students who are above-average in time management problems are more likely to report that they frequently discovered that they had “read” several pages in their course readings without knowing what was on them and that their study periods were too short for them to get “warmed up” and really concentrate on studying.”

In addition to making decisions about managing your study time, Rogoff said it is important to think about “the best place you need to promote your learning. It should be a place that provides the best opportunity for you to concentrate on your learning. Like personal requirements for

(more)

STUDY SUGGESTIONS 2

study time, this will vary from student to student.”

“You will find tools at your new college to help you assess your ability to concentrate on and understand learning material and to evaluate your personal requirements for a study place,” said Rogoff. “However, our research at Keuka has shown that students high in comprehension and concentration difficulties often state that their study time was frequently interrupted by phone calls and visitors and that they frequently got up, wrote notes to friends, or looked at other people when they should have been studying.”

Suggestion 2: Know what’s coming

No serious athlete would think of doing athletics without some sort of warm-up period. However, many people jump into intellectual work (such as studying) without any sort of warm up. They just dive right into their textbooks and they are surprised when they have trouble getting started with the studying or have difficulties in remembering what they just read.

“Previewing learning material is an important way to promote concentration and comprehension,” said Rogoff. “Most college professors have course outlines that tell you what they expect of you as a learner and give you your learning assignments for the entire semester. Many college textbooks come with study guides and include learning objectives, summaries, and review questions. You can look over these resources before you start your reading to help alert yourself to what you are expected to learn.”

Suggestions 3 and 4: Get involved with the information you are learning and make the information meaningful for yourself

Some people highlight when they read, others underline and still others will verbalize the concepts to themselves. Many students take notes on their learning material while others will pair up with classmates to study and review.

“The most important point here is to find the most useful ways for you to get involved with the material,” said Rogoff.

One way to get involved in learning material is to look for personal meaning in your reading, explained Rogoff.

“Look at the pictures and diagrams, think about the examples offered in the text, think about how course concepts and details can apply to your own experiences and your future profession, and ask instructors for examples of concepts,” he said.

Suggestion 5: Check on your learning

Many textbooks offer study questions and other kinds of checks to help you reflect on how well you have learned important concepts.

“Textbooks and study guides often include practice tests to help you prepare for the ‘real tests,’” said Rogoff. “Look for the tools available in your course that can help you check on your learning and think about the ones that are most useful to you.”