

**Achieving Academic Success  
At Colgate University**

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Associate Dean of the College  
For Administrative Advising, Retired**

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## Introduction

Over a 35 year career in Student Affairs at Colgate University, I met with thousands of undergraduate students in my role as a dean of students and Administrative Dean to an assigned caseload of up to 1,000 students per year. Many of these students came to me seeking advice on how to improve their academic standing or more specifically how to achieve higher grades in their courses. Some of these students were in good academic standing and simply wanted to make improvements while others were on a formal academic warning (probation) and needed to achieve a specified grade point average or face academic dismissal at the end of the semester. To prepare myself for advising these students, I read available literature on the topic, attended conferences that dealt with the topic, and interviewed Colgate faculty who had expertise to share. For the most part, there seemed to be some consensus on which behaviors worked and which didn't, but there were some gaps and disagreement even among the experts. I was left to conclude that:

- a) *Academic success at Colgate seemed to have very little to do with native intelligence, however defined.* Most students who were accepted for admission to Colgate had the mental "horsepower" to achieve good grades, and it was usually non-intellectual factors that led to academic difficulty and low grades.
- b) The student's *observable behavior* was the key to a student's academic success. While attitudinal and other intangible factors might play a role in a student's degree of success, it was what the student actually *did* on a daily basis that spelled success or failure.

Therefore, on the assumption that observable behavior was the key, how does one determine which behaviors work and which do not?

## **Method**

Conversations with faculty who had attended or taught at different colleges convinced me that no one set of behaviors worked at all colleges. For example, a set of behaviors that work at a college in Europe might not work at a college in the United States, and to a lesser degree, what might work at a large state university might not work at a smaller liberal arts university like Colgate. *At some point, it dawned on me that I should be talking to very successful Colgate students to see if they behaved in similar ways.* To that end I asked the Colgate Registrar to give me a listing of all of my advisees rank/ordered by cumulative grade point average. I took the list and screened out some students whose pre-admission credentials would probably predict academic success (very high SAT scores, being the valedictorian at a good public or private school, or being selected as a Colgate Alumni Memorial Scholar, Benton Scholar etc.) What was left was a group of students whose admission credentials were closer to the norm for their cadre of admitted students but whose academic achievement was considerably above the norm. In a sense, these students were posting higher grades than we might have predicted, and I wanted to find out why. I scheduled individual interviews with this group of high achievers and when they arrived in my office, I simply said: “You are doing very well at Colgate and I wonder if you can share what you do on a daily basis that you believe may have contributed to your success?” Then with very few follow-up questions, I simply recorded the students’ responses without analysis. It wasn’t long before I had hundreds of raw responses scribbled on yellow paper. Following the first round of interviews, the next task was to do an informal cluster analysis of the responses to see if there were common threads, and indeed there were. Last, I compared these common responses with other information I had gleaned from articles, books, conference presentations and informal Colgate faculty input and came up with the following set of behaviors.

## **Class Attendance**

At a college like Colgate, *class attendance is vital to academic success* and is the clear, number-one key to achieving high grades. Faculty and students both told me that *students who attend all of their classes almost always do well and that those who miss a lot of classes almost always do poorly.* Why is class attendance so important?

- First, not all of the material that a student needs to know is covered in the readings and other assignments. *Some faculty have told me that up to one third of the material they expect students to learn is available only in class lectures and discussions.* Further, faculty tend to test students on things that they believe are important, and these items are usually stressed in class lectures. Murphy's Law will suggest that a 50 point question on a final exam will probably be based on a topic covered heavily and maybe exclusively in a classroom session and not attending class on the day when this topic was covered might well doom a student to a low mark on the exam.
- Second, *attending class faithfully signals to a professor that the student is serious and engaged,* and in classes where the professor values or expects class discussion, students who are absent lose class discussion credit.
- Third, *students tend to learn material by reading about the material, hearing others discuss the material and then actually reiterating the material in some hands-on mode* like writing a paper, or a lab report or taking a quiz or an exam. Each of these learning modes tend to complement each other, and regular class attendance ends up being the glue that binds the other modes together.
- Last, *students who attend class faithfully tend to be more prepared for the material to be covered in each class session.* Students who have not done the readings or other out of class work tend to cut classes out of fear that they may be called on and will not be prepared to answer. This non-attendance pattern can result in a downward spiral that can ultimately lead to a failing grade for a course.

100% class attendance is a great goal to shoot for, but if you cannot attend a class for any valid reason (e.g. illness or other emergencies beyond your ability to predict or control) let your faculty member know the reason for your absence and then get good lecture notes from a trusted classmate. If you need to be absent for more than one or two days, contact your Administrative Dean who may be willing to contact your faculty in order to help you arrange appropriate academic accommodations to unavoidable absences. Colgate faculty are, for the most part, very accommodating when a student needs to miss a class for a valid reason, but in the absence of a good explanation, most faculty are left to conclude that the student is not

taking the class seriously.

### **Prepare adequately for quizzes, exams, and other graded exercises**

*Keep a detailed calendar showing the deadlines for all graded exercises and have all of your readings and other assignments done well in advance of each quiz or exam.* If your professor uses Moodle or some other electronic interface, and/or has a class website, bookmark your computer browser and check these sites often for any changes in assignments, due dates etc. Then review all of your readings, notes and other material over a period of days leading up to the quiz or exam. “Review” literally means “see again” (rather than seeing the first time on the eve of a graded exercise!)

*Know what kind of quiz or exam you will be taking and prepare appropriately.* If the exercise will be in the form of essays, review the material looking for general concepts or ideas that you can weave into a narrative that you can support with specific facts and events. If the quiz or exam is going to be objective (true/false, multiple choice, identification or short answer, etc.) review the material looking for specifics with less regard for general concepts.

*Consider the merits of group study for mid-term exams and final exams.* After you have completed your individual exam preparation, organize a study group of classmates. Agree to meet for an hour or so on the eve of the exam and agree to come to the review session with several questions that each student believes will be covered on the exam. When you meet, compare your questions. Where these questions overlap, there is a high probability that the question will appear on the exam. Four of five students trying to focus on material that may be asked on a closed book exam will almost always be more successful than any student working alone.

### **Submit papers and other assignments on time**

*Again, keep a calendar and check your class websites so you know when all assignments are due, and complete work on time to avoid being marked down for late submission.* There is nothing more frustrating than receiving a

low grade on assignment with the comment: “This is ‘A’ material but I had to mark it down to a ‘C’ because of lateness.” If you have a valid reason to seek an extension (illness, family emergency etc.) request the extension *before* the deadline comes due as professors are usually more inclined to approve an extension before the fact rather than after the fact. In some cases, the professor may refer a student to his or her Administrative Dean to validate the basis for an extension and/or to seek guidance on how to handle the circumstances surrounding the request.

### **Prevent procrastination**

*Understand the peak-and-valley nature of workload in a semester and try to work at a steady rate all semester to dampen out the highs and lows.* Again, keeping an accurate calendar noting when all work is due is key in avoiding procrastination. Most large papers and projects are due toward the end of a semester, but to avoid a disastrous situation at the end of a term, it is important to get an early start by:

- a) Selecting a topic early in the term
- b) Clearing the topic with the professor to make sure it is appropriate and fulfills the requirements of the assignment
- c) Breaking the project down into smaller components
- d) Working on the components on a regular basis all semester
- e) Combining the components into a final draft several days before it is due and
- f) Completing final edits and submitting the paper on time.

Major papers and projects that are compiled over the length of the term are almost always better than papers written in a hasty fashion just before the deadline. Professors can usually tell the difference and will grade the paper or project accordingly. Also if you wait until the day before a project is due and then get the dreaded 24 hour stomach “bug”, the project may not get finished on time and you may not get an extension despite a valid illness. Also, starting a project late increases the chance that you might accidentally take shortcuts and end up submitting plagiarized work that could result in an Academic Honor Code violation and a failing grade in the course.

Procrastination generates an inordinate amount of stress for college students and may well be a student's primary time management challenge. Learning how to prevent procrastination is one of the most important life skills that can be achieved during the college years.

### **Take advantage of help and guidance offered by professors**

Most Colgate faculty offer generous office hours and other opportunities to meet one-on-one with students seeking assistance. Some faculty also allow students to submit work in draft form and others may offer review sessions before mid-term and final examinations. *Take advantage of these opportunities, but if you meet with a professor for assistance or clarification, do your homework before the meeting and arrive with specific questions.* Always attend a professor's review sessions because the professor will usually indicate where to focus your review efforts and may note with favor that you made the effort to attend the session. Also check for on-line review sessions that the professor may post.

### **Devote enough time to the task**

There are 168 hours in a seven day week, plenty of time to do your work and still have an enjoyable college experience. A typical class meets three or four times per week for about an hour per class session. Not counting labs, this means that the typical student has somewhere between 12 and 16 contact hours per week. Most faculty believe that students need to devote somewhere between two and three hours of preparation outside of class for every hour in class, *so for the majority of students, the total workload comes down to around 40 hours per week*, or eight hours per day, five days per week. Keep in mind that your primary job right now is being a full-time college student, and 40 hours of work per week is not too much to ask. Note: Workload may vary from student to student and semester to semester, but one of the major reasons observed for academic failure is simply too few hours devoted to the task at hand.

### **Find an optimum place to study**

Most successful students report that *it is difficult to study effectively in the same room where they sleep as there are simply too many distractions* (TV, computer games, friends popping in and out etc.) Consequently, it may be worth the effort to throw the materials you need into a backpack, leave your residence and find a less distracting area to do your work. The area should be well lit, not too cold or hot and offer a desk or study carrel where you can sit and do your reading and other class preparation work. Of the students I surveyed, the top study areas included the study carrels in the stacks of Case Geyer Library, the atrium of the Ho Center, or anywhere in the Cooley Science Library but you may find other lounges or nooks that are equally attractive. There are successful students who seem to be able to do quality work in their residence hall room, fraternity or sorority house lounges, etc., but most report that they need to find a less distracting environment so they can focus on their work without undue interruption or distraction.

### **Find an optimum time to study**

Despite the fact that many college students say that they are “not morning people,” *humans are actually creatures of the light, and tend to do their best work during the hours of daylight*. We can work at night, but many studies in industrial settings show that we are not as efficient after the sun goes down. It is no surprise that the standard work day is 8:00 AM to 5:00 PM. Using these findings, it makes sense to do your most demanding work during the hours of light and reserve the evenings for less demanding work and housekeeping chores. If you find yourself doing laundry at 10:00 AM and doing Calculus problems at 10:00 PM, consider the merits of switching these tasks. Many of the best students I surveyed said that they went to bed by midnight and got up around 8:00 AM (even if they didn’t have morning classes) and tried to complete all of their academic work by 6:00 PM. The phrase “I treat college like an 8:00 – 5:00 job” was one of the most common responses I heard from the high achieving students I surveyed.



## **Physiological factors**

**Sleep.** Somewhere between seven and eight hours of sleep per night seems to be the optimum for most students. *Regular sleep will help ward off illness and other stress related problems and help you do your work more efficiently.* Sleeping between midnight and 8:00 AM is a good place to start. Try to avoid the “roller coaster” pattern of sleeping late one day and then getting up early the next. If you want to treat yourself to a late night and a few extra hours of sleep the following day, pick Friday night and Saturday morning, but then resume your 8:00 AM (or close to it) wake up routine on Sunday morning. Note: Normal sleep patterns do vary somewhat from person to person, but disordered sleep makes it difficult to be a successful student. Find what works for you, and then try to stick with this pattern.

**Eating** *Eating healthy and nutritious food in a somewhat regular fashion is essential to being a successful college student.* While three meals per day is the norm for most students, some find that their class schedules and other demands on their time make it difficult or even impossible to have a regular sit-down breakfast, lunch and dinner. That said, try to work out a regular meal schedule and stick to it as best you can. Consider the radical notion of (gasp!) eating breakfast daily. If you are on the 8:00 AM wake up schedule, take a few minutes for a light carbohydrate breakfast to refuel before the start of the demands of the day and ward off the mid-morning slump that many students who do not eat breakfast report. A modest amount of a caffeinated beverage (coffee or tea) is fine with few if any health risks reported. For your other meals, eat a healthy balance of protein, vegetables and carbohydrates and avoid too many treats and saturated fats. You can probably live on pizza and fast food, but you won't thrive on it.

**Exercise** There is a lot of debate about how much exercise adults need to stay healthy, but the minimum seems to be at least three or more half-hour aerobic work-outs per week. *The easiest way to get regular aerobic exercise at Colgate is walking briskly up and down the many hills that define the landscape of the campus, but a few hours per week in the gym, pool or fitness center are so much the better.* Regular exercise helps to improve mood, attention and general sense of well-being and helps alleviate stress

and ward off illness. While regular exercise helps a student sleep better, exercising too late at night may make it difficult to wind down and go to sleep at a desired time.

**Alcohol and other drugs** Alcohol (legal if you are 21 or older) and marijuana (not legal in New York State at any age) are the two main drugs of choice for college students. *Alcohol is a central nervous system depressant, and if you choose to drink alcohol, drink legally and in moderation and not on evenings before a class day.* Never drink and drive as being arrested for driving with a blood alcohol level of 0.08 or higher results in an automatic disciplinary suspension from Colgate for the balance of the semester with loss of all academic credit.

*Regardless of your views on marijuana, use of it does not appear to enhance academic achievement in any documented manner.* Many marijuana users report short term memory problems, and the effects of using marijuana products can last for up to 72 hours. In addition, many report that marijuana use seems to rob them of their motivation to perform academic and other work.

For students with a medically documented attention deficit, prescription stimulant medication can be a godsend, *but using or abusing “street” stimulants or prescription stimulant medication without a doctor’s guidance can be dangerous, counterproductive and illegal.* As noted above, moderate caffeine use does not appear to be harmful and may be used to advantage, but avoid the super caffeinated “power drinks” and caffeine powder as they can cause problems that may outweigh any benefit derived. Further, some people are very sensitive to the effects of caffeine and will need to avoid it altogether. If you do drink caffeinated beverages, don’t drink them after mid-afternoon as evening use may interfere with the ability to get to sleep at a reasonable hour.

**Disease** *If you suffer from a chronic disease of any kind, take your doctor’s recommendations to heart and stick to your treatment plan to lessen the impact of the disease on the quality of your academic work.* If you are otherwise healthy, follow the sleep, diet, exercise and alcohol and other drugs recommendations above to maintain good health. College students live in close quarters and are prone to sharing colds, flu and intestinal

illnesses with their classmates. Unless there are valid medical reasons to the contrary, get the meningitis vaccine before coming to college and get an annual influenza inoculation. Be sure your other doctor-recommended inoculations are current. If you are sexually active, adhere to established safe-sex practices to avoid sexually transmitted diseases or an unwanted pregnancy. Try hard to avoid contact with sick classmates and don't share eating utensils or cups under any conditions. Wash your hands frequently to avoid the most common cause of disease transmission. If you do become ill go to Student Health Services for proper diagnosis and treatment. Similarly, contact Counseling and Psychological Services if you have any mental health or emotional concerns that may be hindering your general sense well-being and/or academic achievement.

### **Have some fun!**

*All work and no play can lead to academic burnout, and it is important to balance work and play.* The college years are a wonderful opportunity to try new things and to develop new interests and hobbies. Successful students socialize, participate in sports or other enjoyable activities and have learned the value of a positive blend of daily activities. Identifying what helps you relax and have fun is a valuable life skill and not just a diversion.

### **Sources of help**

If you have read this pamphlet and want to learn more about ways to enhance your academic achievement, you have a variety of options to consider. Colgate is blessed with caring and knowledgeable people, and if you have any questions about these and other ideas, you should feel free to consult with:

- Your individual faculty members
- Your faculty adviser(s)
- Your Administrative Dean
- The staff of the Writing and Speaking Center
- The staff at the Center for Learning, Teaching and Research (CLTR (which includes the Office of Disability Services and individual tutoring)

- The staff at Student Health Services
- The staff at Counseling and Psychological Service
- Academic Department Offices (that often offer tutorial assistance)
- The staff of the Case/Geyer and Cooley Science Libraries
- The staff of the Shaw Wellness Institute

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