

## **Being Successful as a First Generation College Student: 5 Tips**

As a first generation college student, you face issues that some other students and professors might not understand. Generally, you might face issues of acceptance and belonging, not understanding the processes and policies of colleges, and having trouble building relationships with instructors and staff in positions of authority. Knowing and anticipating some of these problems is an important first step in being a successful college student, as well as a successful college-educated professional in the world beyond school. With this proactive approach, you're much more likely to succeed.

### **1. You Belong!**

If you're the first in your family to attend college, you might feel a bit out of place, especially if there aren't many other students in the same boat. Your high school may or may not have prepared you as well as some other first year students, and that can make it hard to be comfortable in classes. The transition from high school to college is hard, but with perseverance and planning you can be as successful as anyone else.

Remember that even if you're behind on some subjects, that doesn't mean you don't belong. Sometimes students who seem to have it all together don't actually; they just hide their struggles very well. Besides, four years is a long time. There's a lot of time and space for you to grow as a student. The admissions process at the school picked you to attend. That means they believe you have what it takes to succeed.

### **2. Don't Worry About Comparisons**

This sound advice is as old as the hills: *don't get caught up in the comparison game*. This can be a brutal pitfall for college students of all backgrounds. Focus on yourself. There will always be someone you think is better than you. Don't forget that someone is probably thinking the same thing about you. Academic competition can be extremely stressful or it can be a motivating factor. It's up to you to determine how it affects you.

### **3. Be Patient With Your Family**

Your family might not understand what you're going through either. The stress of college work is something that you have to experience to understand. Remind them that being a full-time college student is like having a full-time job, and be patient as they learn to adjust their expectations of you. You might not be able to come home as often as they want, or speak on the phone when they'd like. Try to strike a balance if your family is especially needy— it's a hard time for both of you, but patience and understanding goes a long way. Talk about what you're going through with other first-generation college students, and with others who might have a better understanding of your circumstances.

#### **4. Assert Yourself**

Students with college-educated parents are usually taught to advocate for themselves. That is, they are taught not to take no for an answer, to speak up when they have an opinion, and generally to be vocal about their needs and expectations. While this type of privilege can be difficult to encounter, know that it's OK for you to ask for what you need, to admit to needing help, or to ask for clarification of processes and procedures when they seem to work against you. Whenever you enter a new phase of your education, be it starting at a new institution or moving forward in your educational goals, be sure to study up on the school's expectations and processes beforehand.

Classroom participation can also be tough for first-generation students. Know that it's okay not to participate in every discussion (unless the instructor requires it). It's a good idea, however, to come in with some notes from the reading – one or two things that you found important or interesting. If a thought comes into your mind that's related to the discussion, try to push yourself to participate when it happens.

#### **5. Build Relationships With Professors / T.A.s / Counselors**

There are a slew of people in school who are there to help you. From academics to student life staff, there are people there to guide you. Take advantage of their knowledge and advice, as it can help you in and out of school. Once you graduate, you'll need to ask professors for recommendations, if you intend to further your education. Some employers will want recommendations as well, but they won't necessarily need to be academic.

First-generation students have a harder time doing this because they tend to disappear in class. Fight against that impulse, and try to build relationships with teachers. See if you have an interest in any of their research, visit their office hours, and ask them for advice in choosing classes and possibly in looking for career paths (if they teach the subjects in your major).

Once you graduate, *send the professors you wish to keep in touch with yearly/ periodical updates* so that they remember who you are. Always keep your old assignments and syllabi so that you can send them an example of your work, and possibly discuss something from the class with them in the future.

Academic counselors are a great resource as well. Speak to them early on about your academics and possible career paths. They can also give you advice on which classes you need to take and how to stay motivated.

Teaching Assistants can also be good resources – they've gone through undergrad more recently and probably have more insight into the issues you're dealing with. They can also relate to you on a more personal level because they're closer to your age. If you live in a dorm, know that your RAs and other leaders in student life and housing are there for support as well.