Top 10 Confessions of an A- Student

A Guide for University

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Published July 11, 2011

A work in progress

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I finished two Bachelor of Arts degrees two days before I turned 20-years-old. So I have a BA in Economics and a BA in Philosophy from Indiana University – Southeast. I managed about an A- GPA, and I think I graduated with "distinction," winning some other award or something along the way.

I thought it was impressive at the time, until I heard about another guy who finished his doctorate by that age. Whatever. I think most students could do at least what I did. It's just a matter of setting yourself up for it — and not being afraid.

That's what I'm going to talk about. I'm going to share what I did and what I learned. Hopefully, it'll help with the fear too.

1. I started early.

I started college when I was 17. I was home schooled before that, so I had an advantage. I skipped eighth grade and worked through most of the rest pretty quickly. Actually, my mom thought I'd graduate from high school by the time I was 13. I got lazy.

Friends of mine CLEPed out of classes so they didn't have to take as many in college. Others who were home schooled took college classes while still in high school. Both are smart ideas, but I didn't take advantage of either.

Mine was all about compression – doing more than normal in a given amount of time - and starting early.

I wouldn't advise the early start for everyone, but it certainly played a big part in helping me graduate before I turned 20.

Frankly, my parents and grandparents did more for me in this area than I did. Perhaps my advice then is to make sure you're born into an excellent family.

2. I stayed undecided.

For the first year, I had no idea what I was doing. I considered Music. I considered Communications. I didn't officially declare a major until partway into my second year. Since I did the whole thing in three years, this means I was over halfway finished before I declared.

Staying undecided isn't something I'd necessarily recommend, but I do recommend keeping that mindset. A lot of students go into university thinking they know what they want to do but change their mind part of the way through it. If you keep the undecided mindset, you won't lock yourself into classes that are useless outside one major.

This is extremely important if you're trying to multitask your classes, and you should be (see page 7).

3. I began with my Gen Ed requirements.

Since I was undecided, I made sure to only take classes that counted for something – no electives. I didn't experiment around – I took what was required for the core, General Education (Gen Ed).

As I said, most people start into college with classes specifically for their major. Instead, I'd suggest taking classes that work for your major but also work for Gen Ed classes. For example, instead of taking Biology 212 for Biology majors, see if Biology 101 will count toward your major Gen Ed requirements.

Warning: If you do this, be sure the Gen Ed class will count toward your major. Sometimes, those classes won't count toward your major. If that's the case, and you end up sticking with that major, then you defeated the whole purpose of taking those kinds of classes that do double duty.

4. I made every class multitask.

The first way to do this is fairly basic. Instead of taking one class that counts for a formal reasoning requirement (like College Algebra) and another that counts for a diversity requirement (like Asian Culture), I'd take one class that meets both requirements (like Philosophy).

The second way is more complicated.

At my school, and I assume most others, the course work was roughly divided into thirds. One third of a degree was Gen Ed classes, one third was for my major, and one third was electives.

I only took Gen Ed classes that would satisfy the requirements for most majors, rather than just one specific program. So in the end my Gen Ed classes did double duty for both degrees.

Then the classes I took for my specific majors swapped as electives for each other. My Philosophy requirements counted as electives for my Economics degree, and my Economics requirements counted as electives for my Philosophy degree.

When I graduated, I had 121 units total – I needed 120 for each degree. So really, I only did about as much work as anyone would do for one degree. I just planned more effectively so it counted as two degrees.

This is actually more common than you might think. Often, though, it's just called a double major. Common examples that tend to work well:

- English and Journalism

- Biology and Chemistry

- Computer Science and Mathematics

Mine worked particularly well, though, because the requirements for my majors didn't overlap at all. Usually, you'd want them to overlap so you could get double credit (for example, an Algebra class that counts for both your Computer Science major and Mathematics major). Mine, though, were a direct swap: major requirements for elective for both sides.

Since mine didn't overlap, I got to count both as two separate degrees.

Of course at this point, some might argue I missed out on the diversity of taking different kinds of electives, which I guess is a fair point. I chose another degree over extra diversity – to me, that seems like the better option.

5. I took extra classes each semester.

Even though I got both degrees in only 121 units, I still had to knock out those 121 units.

Friends of mine attended different schools where the classes themselves are compressed. Like instead of the usual 14 weeks (or however long they usually are), their classes were maybe half that. If you can get into a school like that and enjoy the learning style, go for it.

But that's not what I did. I took classes the traditional way. I just took a lot of them at once.

I started out taking 14 units per semester (12 was considered full time, but 15 would allow me to graduate in four years). The second year, though, inspired by Steve Pavlina, I decided to try to take more classes. I jumped to 18 and did that for two semesters in a row.

I remember talking with a girl who was taking 17 units when I was taking 14 and thinking she was nuts. But once you try it, you adapt. You learn to take the pressure, and after a while, it doesn't even seem much worse than usual.

And the cool part is, the more classes you get used to taking at a time, the easier it is to add just one more. Think of it like this: if

you're only taking one class and you try to add one more, you're doubling your course load in one shot. But when you're taking 6 classes and go for 7, you're only increasing your work load by a sixth. It sounds kind of crazy, but psychologically, it's not so bad.

The key is to just do it.

6. I attended summer classes.

Okay, now these classes were accelerated. I loved them. They were less formal than normal classes, but the students seemed more serious about their education. Plus, with even smaller class sizes, I got to know the professors even better (see page 17).

Overall, I'd definitely suggest summer classes. They keep you in the rhythm of school, and unless you're doing some amazing internship or traveling abroad, you're probably not doing anything fantastic with your summer anyway. You'll appreciate your week of spring break even more too.

[Note: I overloaded my second summer also, so accelerated (quicker classes) and compressed (more at a time than usual), which is awesome. I had to get special permission for this of course, something academic advisers would never suggest (see page 14).]

7. I procrastinated on purpose.

This is the death of college students. But like many kinds of death, it's what provided life.

There's a well-known law in productivity circles that everyone seems to ignore in practice:

> "Work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion." **-Parkinson's Law**

My way around letting projects expand was to put them off. If I only had one hour to finish an essay, I'd be far more productive in that hour than if I'd worked on it two weeks before it was due.

Another method is called time boxing and works well if you have the discipline to follow-through with it. The method is that you assign a project a given amount of time, work on it for that amount of time, and then stop when your time's up, no matter where you're at in the project.

I liked time boxing for small projects. For big projects, I didn't have the discipline. I couldn't create soft deadlines and keep them, so I went with the risky, hard deadlines provided by the professors. Perhaps not the best way to do it, but that's what worked for me.

8. I didn't rely on university advisers.

I rarely ever went to my "required" counseling meetings. The idea for these meetings was to have my counselor help me map out my university courses. If you don't know what you're doing, maybe that's a good idea. But I can almost promise you, you'll do more work that way, academically.

Instead, map out your own path. You know what you want to take and what you want to get out of college more than your counselors – you have more at stake than they do.

Also, and this is crucial, they won't advise you to take classes out of order. Sometimes, your schedule will work out better if you take, say, Calculus before College Algebra. Go for it. Sometimes, you really do need the first one, but most times, nine times out of ten, you don't. Most classes will review in the beginning anyway. If you get into a class and it doesn't work out, just drop it.

Warning: Consult the catalog when planning (that's what the counselors do). You can fudge some classes into working for certain requirements. Others, though, are no go. Make sure you know what you're doing by understanding the catalog.

9. I didn't do all my course work.

If you're reading this, you might be an overachiever. And if you're an overachiever, you need to hear this.

Don't do it all. Do what they want.

This is especially true for writing. I can't tell you how many times I submitted drafts for entire research papers I'd written in a couple hours of sloppy work only for the professor to tell me to change two or three paragraphs to get an A.

Look for ways to cut stuff off. Seriously, for my math or Spanish classes, I remember turning in homework that wasn't completed all the way, but to my surprise I got 100 for turning it in. It doesn't work for every class, but it does for some.

It's all about trying and asking and getting feedback about what's really required. Showing effort doesn't always mean putting in effort.

In some cases even, it can actually be better to not turn stuff in, especially toward the end of the semester when you can know that the difference between a few points won't affect your overall grade. In those cases, you might be better off devoting the extra time to studying for a final in some other class where the points could actually make a difference. The key is just to pay attention

and be aware of what actually matters.

Oh, and by the way, I'm not talking about lying or anything like that (since I know someone's bound to ask). I'm talking about finding out what's required to get what you want (degree, grades, whatever) and accepting the consequences for your choices.

10. I stopped buying books.

This could be a whole book or short guide by itself. I'll keep it brief here.

My experience: after my second semester, I mostly stopped buying books.

My advice: don't buy textbooks. Beyond the obvious financial bonuses, I think you'll actually learn more as a result of taking an active role in what you learn.

My tactics: Take notes in class. Look up the topics and terms you hear about. Start with Google. Try Wikipedia for an overview on topics, and then consult the list of reference links at the bottom of the articles for more academic versions of the same content. Visit the Library, not just at your university but also at neighboring universities. Borrow books from friends who've taken the class already (or who are in the same class). Talk to your professors during their office hours when no one else does.

My encouragement overall: commit to it, and you'll find ways to make it happen. And by committing to it, you'll learn more productively because you're more active in the process than if you assume that since you read the book, you know what it's about.

Bonus: I friended.

Someone once said that the benefit of attending Harvard or Princeton isn't the information you learn but the people you meet.

I agree. Sure, the education is outstanding, the courses rigorous, and the professors world-class, but any student brilliant enough to get into one of those universities would manage to find the information anyway.

The information itself isn't necessarily worth the extra cost to attend.

No, the real benefit is that those universities are densely populated with some of the smartest people in the world. And by attending, you have the opportunity to connect with them, to friend them.

I think the same is true for any university (or anywhere really). As the tired, old saying goes, it's not what you know, it's who you know that matters. Professors and TA's grade papers. Get to know them if you can. They might bump up your grades because they like you, or they might just bump them up because you write better than other students as a result of taking the time to ask how to do particularly well on your project.

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And on making friends just to make friends, people often say, "I'm not here to socialize. I'm here to learn."

Learn to do what, I wonder. More importantly, why are they there to learn?

I remember spending a couple hours with friends "studying" for a particular exam. I soon realized that, for me anyway, that study group wasn't the most productive use of my time (asking specific questions over the phone was more productive for me).

But the time I "wasted" with those friends is what I remember now, not the information I was supposed to be studying.

You might say my education was a failure then, since I didn't retain even half of what I studied. But was it? Really? Two months after I graduated, I didn't care much about my GPA, but I did care about my friends. I'm not saying to be an idiot in school, but I am saying to keep perspective. The best, business investors invest in people, not ideas. I think that's a strong approach for anyone investing in college too.

At the end of your life or anywhere in between, what really matters, your grades and degrees or your friends and family?

Even if you are in it just for the grades and degrees, friend anyway – they might be the encouragement you need in the middle of the night two years into it when you feel like giving up.

Final reminder

1. Start early.

2. Stay undecided.

3. Begin with Gen Ed requirements.

4. Make every class multitask.

5. Take extra classes each semester.

6. Attend summer classes.

7. Procrastinate on purpose.

8. Don't rely on universities advisers.

9. Don't do all your course work.

10. Stop buying textbooks.

Bonus: Friend.

It's all pretty basic advice. Like I said at the start, I don't think my situation has to be that unique. Just get going. Don't be scared. Experiment.

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I believe everyone's unbelievably blessed, but most are too scared to live like it. This tension, between gratitude and fear, is what I'm all about. So I experiment. As of July 11, 2011, I'm living in Seoul, South Korea, teaching English as a second language and writing daily at MarshallJonesJr.com.