

Academic Survival--The First College Semester

There is nothing like the first few weeks of college. It has an almost idyllic quality about it—freedom, new friends and experiences, and much less academic oversight. Then the new reality sets in. A few tests and assignments come with poor results. Then, a second round follows with the same dismal results. What to do? Each individual has his or her own response. All too often, the response is to pull back, to let the hole get deeper, until late in the semester when there are few options left. A set of failures result. For some, it's the end of school. For others, it means a reduction in confidence and lowered expectations that take time to resolve. The first semester story does not have to play out this way.

Let's not be simplistic about this situation. The reasons for the initial failures are individual. Some students just don't want to do the work. However many of the others-- students who are less prepared academically, students who never learned to work, those who don't understand the requirements of college work, those who had a personal crisis at the time—can survive this initial period and go on to solid academic achievement if they recognize the problem and take appropriate action early enough.

The first semester is a like a timed reality show. It typically lasts 13-14 weeks and once it starts, there are no pauses or time-outs. During the first 3-4 weeks, there is information going in, but few milestone tests or major projects. Then at the 3 or 4 week mark, an examination or major paper provides a measure of performance. The second major performance measure comes after the midterm results, at least 7 weeks into the course by the time the grades come back.

Similar to a reality show, the stakes ramp up as the time into the term progresses. The semester work increases during the term much faster than any new student realizes. This increase in work load is even more oppressive if the student gets off to a poor start and has work to make up from earlier in the term.

For example, if a student has to make up the work from the first quarter of the semester, he has 9 weeks to do so. However, if he waits until the end of the first half of the semester, he has to make up twice as much work to make up in only 6 weeks. The intensity of the load increases by a factor of 3 required if you wait until the midterm to remediate! That's why they call it the end of semester crunch!

Three points to help recover from a poor start

1. Recognize that the first poor performance defines the trend

The tendency is to believe that the first result is not representative and to expect improvement in the mid-term. This belief, which is reasonable in other situations, leads to serious trouble for the first semester student.

In other situations, a trend requires at least two results in order to determine the direction that performance is moving. *Only one result is needed for the new student.* There is enough experience with first year college students to indicate that a poor initial performance, with only vague intentions to do better, does not lead to improvement. Continuing the same course of action and expecting an improvement just uses up some of the ticking clock of the semester. Remember the above illustration that shows how quickly the workload increases when needed remediation is put off to the end of the semester.

2. Make the effort to identify a cause of the poor performance and begin to act immediately

The first step in addressing the problem is to have a clear statement of the cause. It is not enough to say the problem is the poor performance. The performance is the symptom. This cause of the poor performance may not be obvious initially. However, it is essential to make an effort to understand this in a more detailed way. Parents and friends can have a very helpful role in helping to specify the problem.

The most appropriate action is determined by the cause. The cause may be academic or personal. As examples, course work deficiency may mean clarifying the content and performance with the instructor; personal crisis may require contact with the counseling center; poor preparation and habits can be helped by work with an academic advisor or learning assistance programs. Further, by using available resources early, the student will also find that these resources are far more accessible before everyone else realizes the severity of their own situation.

3. The first poor result has only a minor affect on the ultimate performance outcome

There is no need to panic or be embarrassed by a poor performance. By acting early, there is plenty of time to make the effort and get on track if you begin early. The timing details are shown below.

In a typical college course approximately one-half of the course evaluation and grade occurs in the last 4 weeks (Weeks 9-13) of the semester. *The trick is to be operating at the required skill well before the last 4 weeks.* Consider the two scenarios:

1) Initial poor result at Week 4. If the student begins to identify the specific cause, and takes the necessary academic or personal actions, he has 5 weeks to prepare for the critical end of term period. You can make some real changes in 5 weeks!

2) Initial poor result at Week 4. No change in plan. A second poor result at midterm Week 7. In this case, the student has only 2 weeks to take the actions to prepare for the critical period. It is much more difficult to make these changes in only 2 weeks. It's worse than this since there is an increased work to be made up. This end of the semester crunch was discussed earlier.

So, if first semester reality hits hard, stay in the game. Taking positive control of the situation is the first step. By beginning to identify and take action as soon as a problem surfaces, the odds of resolving it are significantly increased.