

## Welcome to Life in the Postsecondary Lane!

You are about to leave high school behind (finally!) and you are ready for the next step – University or College. If you feel excited and eager to start, that’s normal. If you feel anxious and unsure of yourself, that’s also normal! Most students arriving on campus in September have never attended university or college before, so they have no prior *experience* to draw from. And even if you are familiar with the layout of the campus, or have sat in a lecture hall before, knowing is not the same as experiencing. Everyone is starting again at square one on day one.

So, how do you prepare yourself and gear up for what lies ahead? One way is to sort “university-college life” into three main groups – the Head (academic), the Heart (social / emotional) and the Body (physical health), not necessarily in that order. Your priorities will shift back and forth from month to month, semester to semester, year to year, depending on your circumstances at the time. That, too, is normal!



## I. The HEAD – Academic Life

Everyone wants to do well academically. Your hard work in high school paid off in good grades, and there is no reason why the same should not be true for University. But, how can you be sure? Although there are no guarantees, there are some things that you might want to think about as you start creating your building blocks for academic success in the postsecondary world.

### 1. Grades.

- a. In your first year, the steepest learning curve is adjusting to the *change in expectations, not the level of difficulty* of course content. Some of the expectations include ...
  - i. Identifying what the instructor is asking for (perspectives, approach to problem-solving, amount of detail, presentation, flexibility, etc)
  - ii. Putting in as much time, if not more, working independently *outside* of lectures (readings, assignments, practice problems, studying, review, exam prep, etc)
  - iii. Monitoring your own learning, identifying gaps in knowledge, knowing when to ask for help, and where to go for help.
  - iv. Managing your work load (course load, course work, deadlines, etc) with minimal input from your instructor.
- b. Although grades are important, they can also be a distraction when you already have a lot on your plate. Use your first year to examine other factors that contribute to your university experience, as well as your grades ...



- i. Is this the right course / program for me?
  - ii. How am I coping with the volume of school work? Do I need to consider taking fewer courses per semester?
  - iii. What kind of feedback (grades, comments) am I getting about my performance?
    1. Positive – keep doing what I’m doing (courses, strategies, studying, etc)
    2. Negative – something needs to change – what, and how?
- c. Do not set such a high standard for yourself that you leave little room for error or improvement. Focus more on the process of learning, understanding and applying what you learn. Pay attention to what works, and more importantly, what *doesn't work*. Then ask yourself, why isn't this working, and what needs to change? If you don't know, ask for help.

### 2. Failure.

- a. Failure is an important part of learning, not something to be avoided at all costs. Expect that there will be times when you fail or come up short - use that as feedback, an opportunity to learn so that you do not repeat your mistakes.

- b. If you find yourself experiencing persistent academic difficulty throughout your first semester, it suggests that there are underlying concerns that may need to be addressed before you can successfully move forward with your studies.
  - i. Program mismatch → Academic Advising
  - ii. Unaddressed / undiagnosed health or disability issues → Student Wellness

### 3. Skill development

- a. There may be some skills that were not needed as much in high school (eg. note-taking) as they are in university. Look for workshops, campus resources (eg. SASS, Start-UP) that can help you develop or strengthen specific academic skill sets.
- b. The skills and strategies that worked for you in high school may not be as effective in university, especially with the sudden increase in volume of work. Be prepared to adjust, try out new strategies that reflect the change in demand or expectations. Again, seek out campus resources or work with your instructors, TAs, or friends to explore new ways of managing your schoolwork.

### 4. Pacing.

- a. Pacing is critical at university, and can be the difference between coping and becoming overwhelmed. Time tables only capture fixed commitments such as lectures, labs, and tutorials; they do not reflect all the other work involved with individual courses. It is easy to be lulled into a false sense of time management, especially when there is no-one telling you to do your homework or reminding you to study! By the time you realize how much time you need for readings, revisions, lab work, assignments, group work ... you have fallen behind, and mid-terms are around the corner!
- b. Think of your first day of classes as the first day of a new job – you know what needs to be done, but you have to come up with a system that works for you. Create a rough schedule around your fixed commitments for “office work” that has to be done to stay on top of your work. This would include times for readings, lab reports, assignments, or studying when necessary. Remember, as with any new job, there is a short adjustment period, *but you are expected to start work on day one.*



### 5. Resources.

- a. The hallmark of any good student is knowing when they need help, and where to go for it. Asking for assistance is not a sign of failure or lack of ability. On the contrary, it reflects good insight into yourself, your capabilities, and the awareness that there is a weakness or a problem that needs to be addressed. During Orientation, student tours will include an introduction to a wide range of services and resources on campus, including academic supports. Take note and keep a list in your room for easy access, should you need it.

## 6. Academic Accommodations.

- a. Students with disabilities are encouraged to register with the Student Accessibility Office on campus to receive academic accommodations while at university. All universities have an accessibility office, and staff advisors are knowledgeable about campus resources and university life that pertain to accessibility and other disability-related concerns.
  - i. Find out where the Student Accessibility Office is located
  - ii. Ask about the registration process, and documentation requirements
  - iii. Do not assume that your accommodations in high school will be automatically transferred to university by the registrar's office or residence if that is where they were originally submitted.
  - iv. Register as early as possible. Do not wait until a problem arises.

## II. The HEART – Social & Emotional Life

It is always easier to cope with a challenge when we feel more comfortable in a new environment, and the people who share it with us. Most first year students move away from home to attend university, leaving family and friends to live among thousands of strangers. BUT, remember you are not alone, hundreds of others are in the same boat. Try to see it as a great opportunity to forge new friendships, and take advantage of the rich diversity of experience that has opened up for you. Keep in mind - a healthy heart is as important as a healthy brain!

### 1. Residence – your home away from home

- a. Many of your fellow residents will also be in their first year, maybe in the same or similar programs. They may have the same concerns about courses, programs, how to talk to their profs, and insecurity about grades. It is important to view them as potential allies, study buddies, or supports and not rivals for grades, even in highly competitive programs. This is the next step towards Independent functioning, an opportunity to create new support networks while maintaining contact with old (parents, family, friends) as you transition.
- b. Every residence has Dons who have been selected and trained to provide support, advice, and mentoring for incoming students. They are familiar with challenges faced by students, and have successfully navigated university life in their chosen programs. They are a wonderful source of information about campus life, resources on campus, and where to go for support.



### 2. Campus groups – meet with others who share the same interests or experiences

- a. There are many groups on campus where people with common interests get together. These may include varsity or league sports, Clubs (eg. Drama, Music), Interest and Faith groups, the International Centre, Four Directions Aboriginal Centre. You can find more information through the Queen's Student Government, or Alma Mater Society (AMS).  
<http://myams.org/clubs/>

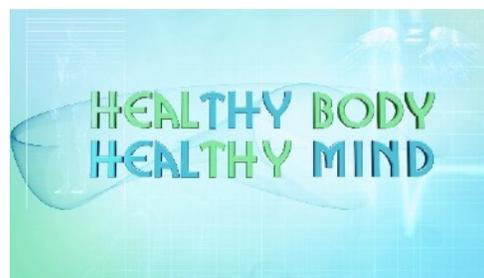
- b. Volunteer opportunities may exist on campus, or in the community. Several programs offer students the chance to volunteer with various community agencies as part of their court credit or placement. You get valuable “real life” experience, and something to add to your resume.
3. **Ownership** – transfer of responsibility from others (parents, teachers) to yourself
- a. Self direction:
    - i. Permission to learn from failure
    - ii. Independent problem-solving
    - iii. Independent goal setting
  - b. Self-monitoring
    - i. Performance (academic / social-emotional / physical)
    - ii. Reality check
    - iii. Goal adjustment



### III. The BODY – Physical & Healthy Lifestyle

To pull everything together and maintain good performance over time, the brain and heart need to be supported by a healthy body. This requires balance and perspective, keeping sight of the bigger picture while working through the details.

- 1. Physical health
  - a. Healthy body → healthy mind
- 2. Healthy Lifestyle
  - a. Encourages healthy cognition
- 3. School-life balance



#### 1. Physical Health

- a. A lot of students feel that their busy class schedule keeps them from being as active as they would like to be. Some may have been involved in extracurricular activities in high school but have discontinued to “focus on school work.” This may be true, but there are still ways to keep health and active while at university:
  - i. Get together with a group of friends to cycle on weekends in good weather
  - ii. If you like going to the gym, schedule it into your time table during the week

- iii. Walk as much as possible between campuses rather than taking a cab / bus
- iv. During long study or group sessions, encourage everyone to take regular stretch breaks – it eases the kinks, and reboots your tired brain!
- b. Pay attention to your body – know where the Health Services / Clinic is located in case you need to see a doctor or nurse.
  - i. Let your friends know if you are not well enough to go to class – they can check in on you later, if necessary. They can also take notes and fill you in on what you missed.
  - ii. Check the Health Services website periodically to see if there is anything going around campus, such as Mono, or the Flu – forewarned is forearmed!
  - iii.

## 2. Healthy Lifestyle – Eat, Sleep, and be Healthy!

- a. It is not always possible to get a full night’s sleep, especially in a busy program or during exam periods. When things are particularly hectic, *learn* how to power nap during the day, or take regular “time-outs” and “brain breaks” that allow you to recharge your brain and your body.
- b. Chronic sleep deprivation is as cognitively impairing as too much alcohol; it takes a physical toll on the body, often leaving you vulnerable to getting sick. If all-nighters are becoming the rule rather than the exception, there may be something else going on that needs to be addressed.
- c. There is a strong association between what we eat to fuel ourselves, and how we perform physically and cognitively.

## 3. School-Life Balance

### Healthy Lifestyle

What do students think they know; What do students need to know; How to prepare; Once on campus; How to monitor performance / adjustment; Is it normal to feel lonely; Is it normal to feel overwhelmed; Making friends; What are supports on campus; When / how to disclose; Academic Accommodations; Life in Res