HOW TO BECOME A SUCCESSFUL COLLEGE STUDENT

The Tools, Habits, and Skills Needed to Foster College Readiness



SCOTTY DUNLAP
and **BRIAN DUDAK**

A **Prufrock Press** Book

ROUTLEDGE

How to Become a Successful College Student

This book is your one-stop shop for the academic tools and habits needed to make your transition from high school to college a resounding success!

The shift from high school to college can be a challenge, with many students finding the skills that had previously worked so well no longer seem to be enough. *How to Become a Successful College Student* outlines the strategies you need to "level up" your current processes in order to foster learning and retention of information in a new and rigorous environment, while also addressing topics that affect your experience outside of the classroom, such as financial literacy and career preparation. Learn how to pick a major, the benefits of getting out of your comfort zone, how and when to ask for help, and much more. Each chapter ends with a reflective activity designed to assist in creating an overall strategy personalized to fit YOUR specific higher education and career needs.

This guide is a must-have resource for anyone who wants to maximize their higher education experience.

Dr. Scotty Dunlap is a Professor in the College of Justice, Safety, and Military Science at Eastern Kentucky University where he teaches courses in occupational safety. He has served as Undergraduate Program Coordinator and Chair of Graduate Studies and Research, and has received several awards related to his college teaching, service, scholarship, and student mentoring.

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The Tools, Habits, and Skills Needed to Foster College Readiness

Dr. Scotty Dunlap and Dr. Brian Dudak

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Scotty
For Evelyn, who completes and encourages me in ways I could never imagine.

Brian
To my lovely wife, Rachel, and my kids, Jansen and Parker. Your support and encouragement have been invaluable in allowing me to achieve my dreams.



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Preface

I was a first-generation college student hailing from the Appalachian coal fields of southern West Virginia. The Appalachian Region is stereotyped as being largely uneducated, but that is greatly misleading. Though I grew up in an incredibly modest home with few luxuries, I had the opportunity to attend school in Boone County sitting under the instruction of many incredible teachers. From Mrs. Nelson and Mrs. Darnell at Lory-Julian Elementary to Mrs. Booth and Mr. Porter in high school, I was privileged to have quality educators along the way who taught me the basics as well as the importance of education. I worked hard, became a member of the National Honor Society in high school, became the editor of our senior yearbook, and graduated in the top 10 percent of my class. I focused a lot on academics and was proud of what I accomplished. But then I went to college, and everything fell apart in my freshman year.

I looked great on paper going into college. I had a high GPA from high school, a strong ACT score, and solid extracurricular activities. But college was a different world. It took me two semesters to realize that the tools that had made me successful in high school were of little use in the college environment. The primary problem was my propensity to utilize the strategy of "memorize and forget" through my K-12 experience. Memorizing material gave me the skill to be a great test-taker. I could absorb large volumes of information and keep it in mind until I was able to unload it on an exam, assignment, or project, but then I forgot the material and moved on to the next task. I developed great short-term memory and my strategy to "forget" material and move on did nothing to help me develop long-term memory. I soon found that long-term memory was critical for success in college. One course would build on another, so information learned in a class in one semester would need to be

recalled and applied in a course in a future semester. My college freshman year GPA was in the toilet. It took me all the remaining semesters to battle back and progressively improve my GPA to an acceptable level upon graduation.

Though I did exceptionally well throughout high school, I was not prepared for the rigors of academics in college. I assume that since you are reading this book you are either entertaining the notion of going to college or might currently be in college. The good news is that you can learn from mistakes Brian and I made as students in addition to what we have learned on the other side of the fence as college professors. You can develop the skills necessary to be a successful college student while in high school or as a returning student. You can also correct your course by learning and applying the necessary skills to your current experience if you are already in college. Walking through the information in each chapter of this book will help you to identify opportunities for improvement and design a path forward that can facilitate your academic success. I use the phrase "can facilitate" because there are no guarantees in life. Your success will be dependent on your personal interpretation and application of the material in your unique context and experiences.

Dr. Scotty Dunlap
Louisville, Kentucky

Acknowledgments

Scotty

I would like to express my deepest appreciation for my K-12 teachers, who worked tirelessly to build within me the skills to become a successful student. Failures to achieve such are mine alone. I thank Nancy Booth who taught me the wonders of mathematics as well as computer applications before they became commonplace. She held me accountable when I developed a severe case of "senioritis". I thank John Porter who taught me geometry. I connected with him in his style of teaching and application of math. I looked forward to each class and hearing him say, "Number next, Opie" (due to my similarity in appearance to Ron Howard's character, Opie Taylor, on *The Andy Griffith Show*).

Thanks to my college professors, who endured my transition into higher education. Particularly, I appreciate Dr. Nat Phillips who brought history alive at 7:00am each Monday, Wednesday, and Friday during both semesters of my freshman year. Though I did not fare exceptionally well in his classes, he allowed me a positive glimpse of what was to come.

Thanks to Pam Dalton, who has been a close friend, confidant, and fellow learner as we navigated college together as first-generation college students. We figured out things as we went along and experienced every high and low of the college journey.

Thanks to Norm Spain, Earl Blair, Charlie Sweet, and Hal Blythe, who mentored me in the fine art of applied college teaching and fostered my passion for developing college students.

Thanks to Tom Schneid, who patiently transitioned me into a career in occupational safety as I navigated graduate school and took a chance on me in returning to EKU as a professor.

Thanks to Rebecca Collazo and Alex Andrews at Prufrock Press for carrying the torch on this project and seeing the value

it might have in facilitating the success of students transitioning into the challenging world of college. Thanks to Shelley Strelluf for guiding our work through the production process. Thanks to Sarah M. Hall for her outstanding editorial work on our initial draft.

Thanks to John Graham for providing personal and professional insight and encouragement on the value of this project.

Lastly, thanks to my mom, Kaye Dunlap, because we worked through college together. We did not know what we were doing when the journey began, but we worked through financial aid forms, college applications, and the trauma of me attending college far from home. We did it.

Brian

I would like to acknowledge several people who believed in me, supported me, and gave me the confidence to write a book. When I was in high school, I was not thought of as an academic student. My guidance counselors would be shocked to find out that I have a doctoral degree and teach college English. To accomplish such a goal, it took the support and love of several people.

I would like to start by thanking two of my favorite elementary school teachers. Thank you to Mrs. Tracee VanArkel for showing me the impact a good teacher can have on her students. She poured into me the confidence I needed to become a good student. Thanks to Mr. Cameron who was her principal and my former third-grade teacher. I remember he was the first person to tell me that I was smart. He told my mom that I could "move mountains" if I was properly motivated. Thank you, Mr. Cameron, for getting me to see that I can be smart provided I apply myself.

I would like to thank Dr. Scott McDaniel who provided unique insight on mathematics for the development of Chapter 11.

I would like to thank my mom for always believing in me. She believes that I can accomplish any goal I desire. My mother honestly thinks I could be President of the United States of America if I just campaigned for the job. She always believed in me, and I want to thank her for making that belief apparent.

Thank you to my wife Rachel for supporting me through graduate school. When all the other graduate assistants were living on $1,000 per month, my wife worked as an elementary school teacher to pay our living expenses. I did not see her much in the three-and-a-half years I was in graduate school. I can honestly say I saw Scotty more than I saw my wife. She never complained or made me feel guilty about all the time I was gone. I could not have finished graduate school without her.

Lastly, I would like to thank Scotty Dunlap. When we were in graduate school, we were friends and competitors. Neither one of us wanted to finish the program without the other. I needed that competition to push me through all the countless hours spent studying and writing. After graduate school, our careers went in different directions. I am grateful to Scotty for showing me how to write a book and handling the "business side" of the publication process. He was the driving force behind this book, and I am very grateful to him for allowing me to be his partner.



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Introduction

A growing challenge in higher education is the ever-increasing number of freshmen who arrive on college campuses who are not considered as being "college ready". It could be assumed that a high school diploma should be a natural indicator that a student is "college ready". The reasons for this evolution and gap have been defined and are many. This book is not concerned with the reasons why, but instead seeks to provide a potential solution to address the issue.

Each chapter in this book addresses a specific topic that can help you become a successful college student. This information can be of great use to you if you are considered as not being "college ready" or are seeking to return to return college after an extended break from the classroom. You will be able to examine and understand key issues that are simple to navigate and can have a meaningful impact on your success in college. The information in this book can also be of great use to you if you are considered "college ready". There is always opportunity for improvement. You can identify certain skill gaps or areas in which you can improve upon existing skills.

You will find each chapter to be similar in format. A brief introduction will be provided to the concept addressed in each chapter followed by specific competencies that can be developed as delineated by subheadings throughout the chapter. Dialog will occur from the perspectives of both Scotty and Brian. A chapter will close with a section titled "Develop a Strategy". A list of questions will be posed to you that will provide you with the opportunity to reflect on each competency and how you might be able to improve. Though you can do this as a mental exercise, it is recommended to record your responses to each question so that you can go back and review your responses once you have completed reading the book. Writing responses will provide you with a physical record of valuable insights you had, lessening

your dependency on your memory to resurrect things you can do to become a successful college student.

The material in this book is not overly complex, so do not fear being overwhelmed with a large amount of technical information. We chose a conversational format for this book so that it serves as a conversation with you rather than dropping a large volume of academic voodoo on you. Our goal is to simply talk with you about things that are achievable for you and to periodically share successes and failures that we experienced along the way when we were in your situation. It was not pretty at times for either of us and we hope to do our part as educators to help you avoid some of the pitfalls that swallowed us whole.

We would like to define some terms for the sake of continuity throughout the book. Below are some general usages of words that you will encounter throughout the book:

- The words "college" and "university" will be used interchangeably and will refer to the primary institution you might choose to attend, such as Eastern Kentucky University. Students at Eastern Kentucky University attend a "university" and are also considered "college" students. We will not concern ourselves with the technical definition of the words, but rather focus on the words "college" and "university" to refer to your experience in a four-year institution of higher education or community college.
- In some cases, the word "college" might refer to a unit within a "university". For example, Eastern Kentucky University is comprised of several colleges such as the College of Justice, Safety and Military Science. We sought to clarify the use of the word in this context in the narrative where it is used.
- The words "course" and "class" are used with distinct meanings throughout the book. The word "course" refers to a course for which you might register, such as English 101. The word "class" is used to refer to specific

meeting times that will occur throughout a "course", such as a class you might attend on Monday evenings.

You might experience periodic echoes throughout the book. This will be a natural effect of certain topics overlapping with information presented in different chapters. Topics may be primarily introduced in one chapter and reinforced in other chapters.



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You Can Do It

Scotty

I grew up in one of the poorest areas of our country … southern West Virginia. My home in Boone County has the historic significance of being the most coal-dependent county in the United States. Life in Boone County has been made even more difficult as of late due to the global transition to renewable and environmentally friendly energy sources, which has caused an exodus of a great deal of the coal industry. Folks in southern West Virginia and our neighbors in eastern Kentucky have suffered greatly due to the subsequent downturn in jobs.

After graduating from my master's degree program in occupational safety, my career took me across the country, and I have returned to my regional roots as a graduate professor at Eastern Kentucky University. I teach in the same program from which I graduated in 1994. Many of our students are first-generation college students from the Appalachian Region.

Though the Appalachian Region covers a geographic swath of 13 states ranging from parts of New York to the north to parts of Georgia and Alabama in the south, southern West Virginia and eastern Kentucky tend to bare the negative brunt of the stereotype of Appalachian culture. A culture, which, oddly enough, appears to be defined by folks who do not live in the region. Thoughts of rednecks carrying shotguns in their trucks, Mountain Dew-drinking toothless kids, older gentlemen rocking

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on the front porch and spitting chewing tobacco juice into the yard, and uneducated shoeless children might come to mind. Do not be embarrassed, the media has been more than helpful in saturating you with inaccurate information about the region.

In his book *Hillbilly Elegy*, J.D. Vance took things mainstream when he focused on his extended family's experience in eastern Kentucky, portraying his family as impoverished, foul-mouthed, gun-toting, drug-addicted, and with violent tendencies. The book further exacerbated a negative stereotype of the region. One criticism of *Hillbilly Elegy* is that it emphasized the need for you to "pull yourself up by your bootstraps". This is the only thing I like about the story. I do believe we need to take control of our environment and make decisions that can set us on a path to success. Regardless of what the media tells us we deserve, we can examine the current landscape of our existence, determine where we stand, and decide the most productive path forward.

However, I do realize there are environments where individuals need assistance. Regardless of how hard some individuals in difficult situations try to improve their situation, they find it difficult to overcome the hurdles life has placed before them. As financially limited as my home was, I at least had a mother who could afford to drive me in her used car along with her best friend to drop me off at college for my freshman year. Though such an event might appear to be basic, it required a few immediate financial obligations beyond expenses to enroll in college:

- Gas for 16 hours of highway travel
- Two nights in a hotel
- Food on the road for two days

Many families in our country do not have the expendable income to cover these basic costs. They need support for these expenses or direction to local access to higher education where such costs are lessened. The hard reality is to come to terms with what we are owed in our current environment. I will boil these down to the basic opportunities as I perceive them.

- Access to higher education through numerous avenues (though the avenue that we can financially manage is not what others can experience)
- Access to financial support (in order of preference):
  - Grants – Pell Grants and other grants that are available based on the college and academic program attended (these funds do not have to be repaid)
  - Scholarships – similar to grants, unique funding organizations can be identified that provide scholarships, whether academic, athletic, or professional (these funds do not have to be repaid)
  - Get a job – this point deserves a list of its own:
    - Find employment to work your way through college in order to pay as much of your tuition and living expenses as possible
    - Seek employment opportunities on or close to campus that do not require investment in transportation costs (you might even find employment in food service, housekeeping, or groundskeeping at the college you would like to attend; you might find employment opportunities as a tutor or in other academic support positions as you advance in your degree program)
    - Ride a bike or walk to work if you must go off campus to gain employment (invest in a motorcycle or car only if it makes financial sense as I did … this will be discussed more fully in another chapter)
  - Student loans – this point also deserves its own list:
    - Avoid student loans like the plague … the long-term result can be crushing debt that you will need to repay when money you earn after college graduation can be better spent on things such as a home mortgage, getting married, and raising children
    - Student loans are made easily accessible through the basic process of completing the FASFA documentation that will also assist in determining

your Pell Grant (free money) options; just because you qualify for a large number of loans does not mean you should accept them…pay as you go as much as possible

- Manage student loans, do not allow them to manage you … utilize student loans in a financially responsible manner … DO NOT USE THEM AS A WAY TO FULLY PAY FOR YOUR DEGREE … you are smarter than that
- Student loans should ONLY be used to pay for expenses directly related to obtaining your degree, such as tuition, textbooks, housing, and food … not for a new vehicle, gaming system, large flatscreen television, or other useless expenditures (reference "Get a job" above for these expenses, which should be reserved for after you graduate)
- Your only financial goal during college should be to pay the immediate expenses related to getting through your degree. Having the most recent cell phone, gaming console, or vehicle (students have made all these poor decisions) will be irrelevant once you obtain your goal of actually getting a rewarding job after graduation. Then you will earn a salary of which little will be committed to repaying student loans. You can be free to pay in full for things you need based on the salary you will earn.

You can do it. You can make wise decisions and successfully navigate things the current system permits, which is access to higher education and financial assistance that can be managed responsibly. Beyond that, you are on your own and you need to make wise decisions based on the large spectrum of variables that should be considered to navigate higher education responsibly. If you are fortunate, you live in one of the few states where community college is free. You can attend two years at no cost and then transition to a four-year college that is a good fit for the direction in which you would like to explore a career.

Brian

I grew up in the great state of Iowa in a very small town called Grinnell. The town sits on interstate 80 about halfway between Des Moines and Iowa City. Over the years, the town's population has stayed relatively consistent at approximately 10,000 citizens. It is a middle-class town with a small liberal arts college called Grinnell College, which serves as the town's main employer. My town was so small it had two stop lights and no major highways going through it. When I ran cross-country as a senior in high school, our coaches had us run from one side of town to the other and back during practice. I could walk anywhere in my town. As for major chain restaurants, we had a Hardees, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Pizza Hut, Subway, and Taco Bell. We had three or four mom-and-pop restaurants, but not much in the way of a diverse menu.

My father worked as a lab technician at Grinnell College and my mom was a teacher's aid at the local elementary school. Neither parent made much money at their jobs, and it seemed like money was a weekly struggle in our household. As a child, I was given free and reduced hot lunch by our school because of my parents' poor economic situation. I will never forget the embarrassment I felt when I realized my lunch ticket was a different color than my friends' lunch tickets because my color told the school to charge my parents less money than my more affluent friends' parents. I never ate at a sit-down restaurant (except Pizza Hut) until a sixth-grade field trip to Chi Chi's Mexican restaurant in Des Moines. I did not even eat at McDonalds until I was in high school. As a family, we went on summer vacation like everyone else, but we camped everywhere we went. We never flew in airplanes, and we never stayed in hotels. We stayed at various KOA campgrounds across the Midwest as my parents tried to travel as cheaply as possible. We almost died while camping during a tornado in South Dakota, and I got lost with my 12-year-old twin sister and 8-year-old little brother in the Michigan woods for the day (a day that permanently scarred my brother and sister as well). My new shoes for the year were that year's track shoes (my old track shoes became elevated to

my new school shoes), I hardly ever had name-brand clothes, and I bought my first car with the money I made from my part-time job as a grocery store bagger. Money was tight.

When it was time for college, my parents directed me to attend a religious private college in Searcy, Arkansas. It would have made sense for me to attend a cheaper state university, but my parents were intent on me receiving a Christian education. They were concerned I would make poor decisions in college, so in my senior year of high school it became very important to them that I attend a private religious college. As we will discuss in the financial literacy chapter, they did not have the money to pay for me to attend this private school, so we took out student loans to pay for college.

While I owed a sizeable amount of money for my college degree, I did not have to take out any loans for graduate school. My parents could not direct me to attend a religious graduate school, so I was free to choose graduate programs that offered me scholarships to attend. I earned a bachelor's degree, a master's degree, and a doctoral degree without taking out any large loans for any of the graduate degrees. About 98 per cent of my student loans were from my bachelor's degree.

As you read this book, you will come to learn that I spent nine years of my career teaching community college in the Delta Region of America. It is one of the poorest economic areas in the country. I've seen students rise out of poverty and become college graduates. Scotty and I have done it as well. What we hope to accomplish with this book is to share with you how you can avoid the same mistakes we made and benefit from some of the things we did well. There are things that might be beyond your control. But where possible you can take control of your situation by realizing that you can make decisions that can set you up for success.

Develop a Strategy

- What am I owed with respect to higher education?
- What avenues exist for me to pursue funding for higher education?

- How can I avoid going into debt as I navigate higher education?
- What distractions exist that can cause me to make poor decisions as I define a strategy to navigate higher education?
- What financial avenues exist that will allow me to pay for higher education as I go?
- As a last resort, how should student loans be used in my strategy to navigate higher education?