

# How to Succeed at College: Students' Rights and Responsibilities

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Veronika Tait (She/They)

When I was in high school, I was required to take a gym class. I reluctantly signed up for Weight Training and wondered how I would survive it. I dreaded each time I had to learn a new exercise. I didn't want what I considered to be a "fluff class" to drop my GPA, so I did the absolute bare minimum to get an A. I'd pick an easy weight, do the required reps, and mark it on my sheet. It seemed as if the teacher was intentionally wasting my time since I effortlessly got an A without having improved my strength at all.

Looking back on this experience, I cringe. I realize now that it wasn't the teacher who was wasting my time, it was me. I had my goal of getting an A and nothing else. Here I was given a free hour every period to improve my strength. What a luxury! I could have gleaned the many benefits of exercise such as relieving stress and anxiety, improving my self-esteem, and aiding my attention and decision making<sup>1</sup>. All of these would have made my high school years more enjoyable. Yet I actively resisted.

In this chapter, I'll discuss some of my blunders and things I wish I'd known in high school and college. I'll pose a series of battling mindsets and potential hurdles to growth. Finally, I'll address the benefits of taking control of your learning and present the tools and resources that can help you on your path.

## **Transforming Grades to Growth**

### *Mastery-Oriented Goals VS Performance-Oriented Goals<sup>2</sup>*

Perhaps you've had a similar experience where you focused solely on outward achievements such as certificates, trophies, or diplomas. These are called *performance-*

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1470658/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.pearson.com/uk/educators/higher-education-educators/program/Ormrod-Human-Learning-Global-Edition-7th-Edition/PGM1088832.html>

*oriented goals*. While much of life requires us to “jump through hoops” to get the reward, how we view the task can make a big difference in the outcome.

Those with a performance goal shy away from feedback. In my gym class, I would avoid the teacher. If they gave me advice on how to improve my skills, I saw it as a threat to my grade. I hated it. Given the option to challenge myself, I always resisted to maintain my perfect score.

What if my goal had been different? What if rather than simply wanting an A, I had wanted to get stronger? To destress? To get more energy in my day? This would have transformed my performance-oriented goal into a *mastery-oriented goal*. I could have *sought* advice and coaching. I could have found meaning in how my time was spent and viewed mistakes as opportunities to learn. Heck, I could have even practiced what I learned outside of required class time! (A foreign idea to my teenage self.)

Students who can foster mastery-oriented goals enjoy the material more, gain more practical knowledge and understanding, and often discover natural curiosities and passions.

### *Fixed VS Growth Mindset*<sup>3</sup>

Related to the types of goals we set, is how we view our abilities. Do they change incrementally with experience? Are they fixed innately from birth? In a past life when I taught eighth-grade math, I noticed that how students viewed their math ability had a huge impact on their learning. Those with a *fixed mindset* had determined that they simply didn’t get the “math gene” and didn’t put in any effort. Each mistake they made, especially compared to the successes of others, was viewed as evidence that their math ability was unchangeable. Not all students with a fixed mindset were the struggling ones. Some had such an intense fear of no longer being viewed as the “smart kid” that they held back from challenging themselves.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.mindsetworks.com/science/>

Students with a *growth mindset* viewed their abilities as malleable. They knew that it was effort that led to math skills, not some nebulous talent that handfuls of students miss out on. Students with this mindset sought feedback on how to improve, more readily accepted challenging material, welcomed mistakes and failures, and the success of others inspired them to keep trying.

#### *Learning Styles VS Learning Strategies*<sup>4</sup>

I once had a course evaluation comment that read, “I don't really learn from just reading the textbook and being quizzed on it. I don't remember things very well that way.” While I could have taken this comment to heart and revised my course to better suit the preferences of this student, I wonder how many of their other professors would have.

Unfortunately, in school, work, and life, there are times when we need to learn something new and the training doesn't match our learning style. At one point you may have been labeled as a *visual* learner or perhaps a *kinesthetic* learner. Other labels include auditory, linguistic, interpersonal, etc. Once you find how you learn best, it may be hard to switch to a different way.

However, there has been no substantial evidence that matching teaching style with a student's learning style improves learning outcomes<sup>5</sup>. Rather, what better determines success is using effective learning strategies. These include applying the information to yourself, spacing out your study (rather than cramming the night before), and self-quizzing to gauge how much of the material you remember.

Rather than my student viewing their ability to learn the material as fixed, they could have explored other ways beyond rereading the chapter to better remember the material. Perhaps the student didn't learn from chapter quizzes yet. If the student had evaluated their study habits and adjusted as needed, they could have taken control of their learning

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.pearson.com/uk/educators/higher-education-educators/program/Ormrod-Human-Learning-Global-Edition-7th-Edition/PGM1088832.html>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-problem-with-learning-styles/>

process. Having ownership over your learning will make courses more manageable and help you adjust to difficult tasks in the future.

### *Healthy Attributions VS Unhealthy Attributions*<sup>6</sup>

Think of a time you got an especially bad grade on an assignment or exam. What were your thoughts when you saw your score? How did you explain the poor outcome? Was it because of a fixed genetic trait (fixed mindset)? Was it because your teacher was out to get you? Was it because you stayed up all night catching up on *Squid Game*<sup>7</sup>?

How you make sense of your past experiences can influence your future goals and choices. If you attributed the bad grade to factors that were outside of your control, you likely felt discouraged, opted for easier material, and exerted less effort afterward.

Attributions, or causal explanations of an event, can be:

- *Internal* (e.g., low effort) or *external* (e.g., the teacher was in a bad mood)
- *Stable* (e.g., no “math gene”), or *unstable* (e.g., misread instructions)
- *Controllable* (e.g., studied the wrong things) or *uncontrollable* (e.g., the test was too hard)

If you believe you did poorly on an exam because your horoscope said, “The stars will not be in your favor,” you are attributing your grade to factors that are external, unstable, and uncontrollable. These types of attributions often lead to low expectations for future performances, avoidance of challenging material, giving up faster, or engaging in self-sabotaging behavior to save face.

You will likely be most successful if you attribute outcomes to factors that are internal, unstable, and controllable. This creates ownership over your education where effort leads to growth, and failure is impermanent. You’ll be more motivated to try again, while still protecting your self-esteem.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.pearson.com/uk/educators/higher-education-educators/program/Ormrod-Human-Learning-Global-Edition-7th-Edition/PGM1088832.html>

<sup>7</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Squid\\_Game](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Squid_Game)

### *System 1 VS System 2 Thinking*<sup>8</sup>

Let's say you have successfully managed to create mastery-oriented goals, develop a growth mindset, practice sound learning strategies, and attribute your success to these internal, unstable, and controllable factors. That was a lot of work! Yet perhaps your college experience has still been tough. Growth yields growing pains which are...*painful*!

Our brains can be described as having two systems. System 1 is fast, automatic, and intuitive. This is the system that drove you to work instead of school when you were on autopilot. It's effective at making quick decisions but is prone to mistakes. System 2 is slow, deliberate, and systematic. This is the system that noticed you forgot to carry the 1 on your pre-calc exam.

Our brains have evolved to conserve energy. System 1 encourages us to be lazy and accept the first answer that comes to mind. Sometimes it's right, sometimes it's wrong. College courses require you to engage in system 2 thinking, which hurts! Thinking is uncomfortable. It takes effort to check your answers, solve problems from another point of view, and reflect on your learning behaviors.

Fortunately, there are steps you can take to better engage your system 2 processing. These include taking breaks, practicing good sleep hygiene, eating nutrient-dense foods, exercising, meditating, and strengthening your social relationships. When you practice self-care, your mind is clearer<sup>9</sup>—you can better navigate when it's appropriate to make quick and automatic judgments, and when a more thoughtful approach is necessary.

### **Conclusion**

There are resources here at Snow College that are here for you. Psychologist Adam Grant said<sup>10</sup>, "Seeking advice doesn't reveal incompetence. It reflects respect for another person's insight. Requesting feedback doesn't signal insecurity. It demonstrates that you

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<sup>8</sup> <https://us.macmillan.com/books/9780374533557/thinkingfastandslow>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6180557/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://twitter.com/adammgrant/status/1450475032312963075>

care more about your learning than your ego. Asking for help doesn't display weakness. It builds strength." Navigating college life isn't easy. Ask for help when you need to.

Above all, show yourself some compassion. You deserve it.