

An open letter to all incoming college freshmen.

Many students have chosen NCCC for their freshman year of college (excellent choice, by the way!). Others may be off to one of the other fine institutions of higher learning in Kansas or beyond. As your resident expert in Higher Education in this service area, please indulge me to pass on to new freshmen and families some advice as you head out next month to begin your college career.

This letter contains how to be successful and graduate from college and give yourself the best chance possible. But before I begin the “how to succeed at college by trying really, really hard” lecture, first a word of warning. The new national college graduation data is out and it is not pretty.

Of all those who enter college with the intent to get any level of degree or certificate only 49.4% have achieved that goal even after six years of trying. (US Department of Education and the National Center for Educational Statistics tracked degree seeking students enrolled in 2003. In 2009, less than half of that group had graduated with any credential.) If this statistic remains true in the future, less than half of those who are right now filling out college forms, packing, and buying items to decorate their residence hall rooms, will come home with a degree by 2017. That is a staggering number. And what is most alarming about this statistic, is that it is NOT alarming. The rate has been fairly consistent for decades.

Think about it Mom and Dad. State university estimates are around \$20,000-\$35,000 a year for cost of attendance (private colleges A LOT more), so you are looking at an investment that tops well over \$100,000 for 4-6 years---and no degree to show for it HALF of the time. Good news, if there is any here, is many students drop out after their freshman year so the bleeding stops at \$30,000 or so, but not always.

So the big question is, “why?” Why do some students succeed and others fail? As an industry, higher education in America is very concerned about this success rate. We have done many, many studies about why some students graduate and others don’t. There are many factors that contribute to success such as high school preparation, economic level of the family, race, whether the parents completed a degree, IQ of the student, rural vs. urban, etc.

But the truth is, you, personally, can’t do anything about many of those factors as you enter college. You are who you are. You have a certain IQ, your family makes so much money, mom and dad may or may not have gotten a degree, and so on. Some people have more to overcome than others to achieve the same credential. Yup – that’s life. It isn’t always fair.

However, there is one thing that most of the research has shown, and what I have personally witnessed during my 19 years as a professional in higher education, which can overcome these factors. It’s the one thing that can put someone into the half that earns a degree vs. the half that does not.

Desire.

It is one factor that is found to have the strongest correlation to success at college. The student must have a clear educational goal and really want that goal. So it comes down to a simple question I ask new

students – “Why are you here?” If they have a strong answer like “because I’m going to be a (fill in career here),” then we are on track. They could even answer “I’m not sure what major, but I know I will be a college graduate” then we are ok too. But if they answer, “I’m not sure” or “to play a sport” or “my friends are going” or “because that is what was expected of me,” then we are not off to a good start to get that degree.

A clear educational goal. It must be there. Without that desire for the degree, without really wanting what college provides, then there is no motivation to put up with classes, papers, tests, lab assignments, projects and all of the other things required. College is awash in distractions. There are co-eds, guys, parties, activities, etc. There will be many seemingly rewarding reasons for a student not to go to class, or to study, or to do the assignments, but only one to get to work – desire for what is earned at the end.

So here is Dr. Inbody’s short list of how to survive college.

1. Have a clear educational goal. Why are you going to college? Figure that out as soon as you can. Your college counseling/advising office can help if you are unclear. By the way, it is ok for you to change majors once you get here. Your educational goal can evolve as you learn more about a career. Mom and Dad, don’t panic when they want to change majors, especially early on in the college career. They have found a new desire that is stronger than the old one. If you try to keep them in the old major, they’ll lose desire and quit.
2. Take at least one class in your major the first semester. Parents always say “get your basics out of the way first.” In my long experience, this is wrong. Sorry Mom and Dad. Students need to connect with that desire from the beginning. If students take nothing but general education courses they will lose focus on the educational goal. Plus, if they take one major course they will get to try out that major sooner, so if they hate it they can change and not waist additional time, energy, and money. Take at least one class toward that specific career every semester that you can.
3. Get involved and meet people. Join a student club or organization, make friends and get involved. The students who sit in their rooms playing XBOX by themselves, I lose them fairly quickly.
4. Go to class –EVERY TIME. If you are not motivated enough to drag yourself out of bed to go to class, how in the world are you going to be motived enough to write a paper or study for a test? One study said that if a student misses six or more classes in their first semester chances are they will not get a degree. Graduates went to class. Always.
5. Join a study group – Research has shown that students that studied together for classes did much better than students who went it alone. Reserve a room in the library and post a comment on the class forum that you are studying for the test at that time. It’s also a great way to meet people.
6. Get a tutor and see your instructor – Every college has a tutoring service, most like NCCC’s are free of charge. Get a tutor at the first sign of trouble in a class, not when it is too late. Also, see your instructors in their offices. College instructors and professors must keep office hours where they sit and wait to help you. Take advantage of that. So many students struggle then

flunk a class. They never got a tutor or saw their instructor outside of class. Help is there if you ask for it.

7. Take care of yourself – Studies show that college freshmen gain weight (the dreaded “Freshmen 15”), do not get enough sleep, and often fail to exercise. Eating right, sleeping enough, and getting some exercise lowers stress levels and aids concentration. One of the biggest health issues that end college careers for both men and women is pregnancy. Research has now found what causes pregnancy and there are things you can do, and perhaps more importantly not do, to avoid this issue and the awesome responsibility that follows. Seriously, pregnancy often trumps desire to get a degree. Be responsible and make good choices there.
8. Adapt – Things are different now, especially for those moving away to a residence hall. College classes are very different from high school classes in many ways. Life in a residence hall is not like life at home. We ask for a lot of adaptation from 18 year old college students. Change the way you learn, change the way you live, do your own laundry, feed yourself, motivate yourself to get up and go to class, study, etc. It is a huge change, soon to be followed by another huge change if you are successful - graduation and the working world. The skill of adaptation is an important skill to learn. Some struggle with this mightily. Use the counseling office, your resident assistant, your advisor and, most importantly, your family to help you make this change. We are all here to help.

They say the first step in solving a problem is recognizing that it is there. If you take nothing else away from this article, please at least understand that graduating from college is hard but you can make it if you know why you are there. Many fail on the way to completion their first time. To overcome this – you must have the desire for what college provides.

The average age of an NCCC student is 26. We have many students who have come back later in life to try again – this time they are focused like a laser on that educational goal and never look back. I wrote this in hopes that you are successful the first time, but if you are not, there are second chances.

I wish you success in your new college career. Remember, NCCC is here to help, even if you didn't choose us. Often university students take our online classes while they are enrolled elsewhere or take summer or interterm classes when they come back home to the service area. Good luck and GO TO CLASS.