

WHAT IT IS

Going away to college requires students to “learn the ropes” when it comes to the expectations of their various instructors and teachers. It may come as a surprise from high school, where grading and behavioral expectations may have been more consistent among the teachers the students worked with. Depending on the college or university, the instructors will likely represent a wider range of expectations when it comes to attendance, participation, questions, late assignments, writing style, and how grades are calculated. A successful college career starts with assessing what each of your professors and instructors require of you to obtain a good grade in their class.

WHO TO USE IT WITH

Students who are new to the college or university experience and first-generation college students who don't have the same support or hear the same stories from their parents about their college experience. This approach is particularly useful for those who are open to adjusting how they approach their classes and those who might be experiencing some anxiety after receiving 4-5 different syllabi all in the first week of class.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

1. What do you think is required to get good grades in each of your classes? How are these thoughts supported by the course syllabus?
2. What questions should you ask your professor at the start of class that would help you be more successful?

TEACHING INSIGHTS

- Encourage students to not only read the syllabus for each course but to do so in a critical manner, helping them determine where they need to invest their time. Remind them to pay special attention to how the grades are weighted when it comes to the various assignments. For example, there may be weekly homework or discussion board posts that are worth 10% of the overall course grade, while the midterm and the final are both worth 30% each. Doing well on the assignments is important, but 60% of the course grade is calculated by the midterm and final.
- Students should introduce themselves to each of their professors by name. Something like, “Hi, my name is Brian, and I wanted to just say I'm excited about your class.” Advise them to continue using their name even after they think the professor knows it. Instructors who know a student's name are more likely to be flexible in assignments and more gracious in their grading of papers.
- Help your students identify any potential obstacles they see to succeeding in the class. This could mean how any major grade drop occurs (e.g., “students who miss more than the allotted two classes lose one letter grade for each additional class missed”) and how assignments are weighted (e.g., “the final is worth 80% of your overall grade”). Likewise, some instructors have specific expectations around how and when to ask questions and their own pet peeves (e.g., chewing gum, wearing a hat, or not raising your hand). Help them be “emotionally intelligent” when it comes to engaging in their classwork.
- Help your students “do their best work first.” Instructors and professors are human and, like all humans, have biases and expectations about their students. If they know a student's name and see quality work from the start of the semester, they will likely see the student as a “good one” who will continue to achieve in class.