



How do college freshmen view the academic differences between high school and college?

Insights for your college-bound students.

By [Drew C. Appleby, PhD](#)

Psychology teachers can serve an important role as mentors to their students in ways that can help students make a successful transition to college. By sharing information about the differences between the high school and college experiences, teachers can help students understand they will be adjusting to many changes, particularly in terms of expectations.

Fostering students' adaptation to college

To help my students adapt to their freshman year in college, I have used a three-stage strategy.

1. The first stage is to bring students' attention to the ways in which their college classes and professors are going to be different from their high school classes and teachers. For example, the work in college is harder, there is more of it, it must be completed in a shorter period of time and most of it must be done outside the school environment.
2. The second stage is to help them identify and value the knowledge, skills and attitudes (KSAs) they will need to adapt to their new academic environment. For example, they must have knowledge of the resources their college provides (e.g., the library, the writing center and academic advising), the skills their classes will require (e.g., the ability to follow instructions, think critically and manage time) and the attitudes required to be academically successful (e.g., the willingness to take responsibility for their own learning and to assume an active — rather than a passive — attitude toward their education).
3. The third stage is to engage them in assignments and activities designed to develop or strengthen these KSAs.

I identified these academic differences and the KSAs needed to adjust to them by combining the wisdom of experts in the field of the first-year experience with the experiences I have had with the thousands of freshmen I have taught during my 40-year career as a college professor. My strategy was reasonably successful, but it suffered from a reliance on the faulty assumption that younger people (i.e., college freshmen) would eagerly attend to, value, believe and act upon advice given to them by older people (i.e., college faculty). I am sure my students perceived me as a friendly, well-meaning person who sincerely desired to help them, but as I aged, my ability to act as a credible source of advice for college freshmen diminished. This article represents an honest attempt to create a source of advice for college freshmen that comes from a far more credible source than a person who is three times as old as they are. The source of this advice is students who, only one short year earlier, were freshmen too.

My method to create this advice was simple. I asked the 24 students enrolled in my freshman learning community to tell me the differences they had experienced between (a) their high school classes and their college classes and (b) their high school teachers

and their college professors. I then content-analyzed their responses and put the responses into categories that reflected basic differences between their academic experiences in high school and college. The remainder of this paper presents a summary of the differences in these two crucial aspects of the academic environment (i.e., classes and teachers) supported by the actual voices of my students.

Perceived differences between high school classes and college classes

My students identified several differences between high school classes and college classes, most of which dealt with the work assigned in classes. Students said that both the amount and difficulty of the work they were required to do in college classes had increased significantly from high school.

- “You have to read everything in college, whereas in high school you barely had to read anything at all.”
- “High school classes were really easy to pass, but college classes take a lot of work for you to succeed.”
- “College classes are really hard and much more in depth compared to high school classes.”

Time was also a factor mentioned by many students, both in terms of the amount of time it took to complete assignments and the speed with which material must be learned.

- “We just don’t have as much time to do assignments as we did in high school because a lot more material is covered in a much shorter amount of time.”
- “Even though you may not be in class as long as in high school, the amount of time you have to put in to complete the assigned work is doubled, even tripled.”

Another aspect of the differences between the work done in high school versus college is where the work is done.

- “In high school, you learn the material in class. In college, most learning takes place outside the classroom.”

The most commonly cited difference between how learning takes place in high school versus college was that more responsibility is placed on students to learn on their own in college.

- “You did not have to do reading assignments in high school because your teacher taught you everything that was in your textbook that you had to know for tests. In college, if you do not do your homework, you have no crutch to lean on. You are much more on your own in college classes.”
- “In college, you need to learn how to learn on your own.”

A final difference a few students noted between high school and college classes was classroom atmosphere. The following two quotations make it clear high school students should expect a difference in the way their classes will be run in college. (Please note these comments refer to rules for classroom behaviors, not academic rules such as deadlines for papers and tests, which tend to be stricter in college as we will learn later.)

- “College classes are more laid back, longer and don’t have as many rules.”
- “The biggest difference is that they don’t make you stand if you’re late, there are no assigned seats and you don’t need passes to leave.”

Perceived differences between high school teachers and college professors

My students also identified several differences between high school teachers and college professors, the most important of which centered on the fact that college professors expect their students to be more responsible partners in the teaching-learning process. Several students' responses focused on the syllabus college professors use to communicate the structure, procedures and requirements of their classes to students.

- "High school teachers tell students what's due the next day, whereas college professors expect students to read for themselves in the syllabus what's due."
- "College teachers don't tell you what you're supposed to do. They just expect you to do it. High school teachers tell you about five times what you are supposed to do."

The following poignant comment from another student communicates the feeling of frustration and helplessness a freshman who has not yet fully adapted to this greater level of responsibility can experience.

- "College teachers expect their students to read the syllabus, and the classroom is set up to where it is sink or swim. Do the work or fail. High school teachers reminded us about the deadlines for our projects every day and tried to help us if we were struggling. It's really cool that college teachers treat us like adults, but the down side of this is that we have to act like adults too!"

A second aspect of increased student responsibility for learning in college emerged in comments about the difference between what is taught by high school teachers versus college professors.

- "High school teachers teach you what's in your textbooks. College teachers expect you to actually read your textbooks."
- "High school teachers assist you more. They kind of hold your hand through things."
- "College knowledge is self-taught."

A final comment lends a cultural perspective to the different atmosphere of academic responsibility in high school versus college and the differential way students value this responsibility.

- "In high school, you were a dork if you got good grades and cared about what was going on in your classes. In college, you're a dork if you don't."

Another responsibility-related difference students reported between high school teachers and college professors was adherence to rules.

- "College teachers expect much more from you. There are no late assignments or make-up tests. They do not hold your hand anymore."

The following comment helped explain the potentially negative results of this difference for college students who are accustomed to their old high school ways.

- "The biggest difference between the two was that in high school, I could usually get an assignment done whenever I could, and there wouldn't be much of a consequence if it was late."

A final difference my students perceived between high school teachers and college professors dealt with student-teacher relationships.

- “College professors aren’t as available as high school teachers. I could drop into my high school teachers’ offices anytime and just hang out. College professors have office hours we have to use if we want to discuss things with them.”
- “In high school, teachers were supposed to learn our names and get to know us. In college, I have learned it is my responsibility to help my teachers to get to know me.”

Advice that can help high school students become aware of the differences between high school and college and successfully adapt to these differences

The advice in the following paragraphs should help incoming college students who would like to know how their academic experience in college will differ from that in high school. Taking this advice seriously and using it to modify their academic behaviors and attitudes can prevent students from blundering into their freshman year in college and expecting it to be their 13th grade in high school. I truly believe the transition from high school to college can be as serious as the culture shock experienced by travelers who are not properly instructed about the customs of the countries they visit. Imagine arriving in England and renting a car if no one had told you that the English drive on the left side of the road. You might survive your first encounter with an English driver but, then again, you might not.

Before you begin your freshman year in college, prepare yourself to be challenged by harder work, more work, and work that must be completed in a shorter period of time. You should begin to change your educational work ethic because you will be doing most of your work outside of the classroom, and you will be expected to learn the majority of your assigned material on your own, rather than relying on your teachers to teach it to you. You should also begin preparing yourself to learn in a less-structured classroom atmosphere in which your teachers will no longer remind you about what you are supposed to do, will hold you responsible for completing your assignments in the correct and timely manner described in the course syllabus they give you on the first day of class, and will be less likely to bend the rules or allow you to earn extra credit if your work is late or if you perform poorly. You may also discover that college professors are less available than high school teachers and that some prefer to maintain a somewhat more formal relationship with their students than high school teachers.

Time management is a tremendous problem for many freshmen. For most high school students — especially bright ones — the educational day ends when the school day ends because they were able to learn all they need to know while they were in school. Learning does not end when the class day ends in college. In fact, learning often begins when classes end because so much learning takes place outside the classroom. This abrupt change of events is particularly difficult for students who are accustomed to going to high school for seven hours and then having the remaining 17 hours of the day to eat, sleep, relax, shop, play video games, watch television, listen to music and hang out with friends. One of the purposes of higher education is to prepare you to become a person who is capable of mastering large amounts of difficult material in a short period of time and performing this work in a responsible and independent manner without having to be reminded to do it. In other words, one of the objectives of a college education is to transform adolescents into adults. The following comment from one of my former learning community students puts this objective into sharp perspective. “It’s time for me to step out of the purgatory between my teenage years and adulthood and take some responsibility for my life.”

Reference

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Author's note

If you would like to receive a PowerPoint Presentation created from this article that can be presented to college freshmen or high school seniors, please contact me via [email](#).

About the author



Drew C. Appleby, PhD, received his BA from Simpson College in 1969 and his PhD from Iowa State University in 1972. During his 40-year career, he served as the chair of the Marian University psychology department, the director of undergraduate studies in the Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) psychology department, and the associate dean of the IUPUI Honors College. He was honored for his outstanding contributions to the science and profession of psychology by being named as a fellow of APA's [Div. 1 \(Society for General Psychology\)](#) and [Div. 2 \(Society for the Teaching of Psychology\)](#), the Midwestern Psychological Association, and as the 30th distinguished member of Psi Chi. He has been recognized for his outstanding contributions to teaching, advising, mentoring and service.

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