

STAYING ON TRACK AND MOTIVATED

Setting Priorities

Thinking about your goals gets you started, but it's also important to think about priorities. We often use the word "priorities" to refer to how important something is to us. We might think, *this* is a really important goal, and *that* is less important. Try this experiment: go back to the goals you wrote in the previous unit and see if you can rank each goal as a 1 (top priority), 2 (middle priority), or 3 (lowest priority).

It sounds easy, but do you actually feel comfortable doing that? Maybe you gave a priority 1 to passing your courses and a priority 3 to playing your guitar. So what does that mean—that you never play guitar again, or at least not while in college? Whenever you have an hour free between class and work, you have to study because that's the higher priority? What about all your other goals—do you have to ignore everything that's not a priority 1? And what happens when you have to choose among different goals that are both number 1 priorities?

In reality, priorities don't work quite that way. It doesn't make a lot of sense to try to rank goals as *always* more or less important. The question of priority is really a question of what is more important *at a specific time*. It is important to do well in your classes, but it's also important to have a social life and enjoy your time off from studying. You shouldn't have to choose between the two—except *at any given time*. Priorities always involve time: what is most important to do *right now*. As we'll see later, time management is mostly a way to juggle priorities so you can meet all your goals.

When you manage your time well, you don't have to ignore some goals completely in order to meet other goals. In other words, you don't have to give up your life when you register for college—but you may need to work on managing your life more effectively.

But time management works only when you're committed to your goals. Attitude and motivation are very important. If you haven't yet developed an attitude for success, all the time management skills in the world won't keep you focused and motivated to succeed.

An Attitude for Success

What's your attitude *right now*—what started running through your mind as you saw the “An Attitude for Success” heading? Were you groaning to yourself, thinking, “No, not the attitude thing again!” Or, at the other extreme, maybe you were thinking, “This is great! Now I'm about to learn everything I need to get through college without a problem!” Those are two attitude extremes, one negative and skeptical, the other positive and hopeful. Most students are somewhere in between—but *everyone* has an attitude of one sort or another.

Everything people do and how they do it starts with attitude. One student gets up with the alarm clock and cheerfully prepares for the day, planning to study for a couple hours between classes, go jogging later, and see a friend at dinner. Another student oversleeps after partying too late last night, decides to skip his first class, somehow gets through later classes fueled by fast food and energy drinks while dreading tomorrow's exam, and immediately accepts a friend's suggestion to go out tonight instead of studying. Both students could have identical situations, classes, finances, and academic preparation. There could be just one significant difference—but it's the one that matters.

Here are some characteristics associated with a positive attitude:

- Enthusiasm for and enjoyment of daily activities
- Acceptance of responsibility for one's actions and feeling good about success
- Generally upbeat mood and positive emotions, cheerfulness with others, and satisfaction with oneself
- Motivation to get the job done

- Flexibility to make changes when needed
- Ability to make productive, effective use of time

And here are some characteristics associated with a negative attitude:

- Frequent complaining
- Blaming others for anything that goes wrong
- Often experiencing negative emotions: anger, depression, resentment
- Lack of motivation for work or studies
- Hesitant to change or seek improvement
- Unproductive use of time, procrastination

We previously talked about goals, because people’s goals and priorities have a huge effect on their attitude. Someone who really wants to succeed in college is better motivated and can develop a more positive attitude to succeed. But what if you are committed to succeeding in college but still feel kind of doubtful or worried or even down on yourself—what can you do then? Can people really change their attitude? Aren’t people just “naturally” positive or negative or whatever?

While attitude is influenced by one’s personality, upbringing, and past experiences, there is no “attitude gene” that makes you one way or another. It’s not as simple as taking a pill, but attitude can be changed. If you’re committed to your goals, you can learn to adjust your attitude. The following are some things you can start doing.

Be More Upbeat with Yourself

We all have conversations with ourselves. I might do badly on a test, and I start thinking things like, “I’m just not smart enough” or “That teacher is so hard no one could pass that test.” The problem when we talk to ourselves this way is that we listen—and we start believing what we’re hearing. Think about what you’ve been saying to yourself since your first day in a college class. Have you been negative or making excuses, maybe

because you're afraid of not succeeding? You *are* smart enough or you wouldn't be here. Even if you did poorly on a test, you can turn that around into a more positive attitude by taking responsibility. "OK, I goofed off too much when I should have been studying. I learned my lesson—now it's time to buckle down and study for the next test. I'm going to ace this one!" Hear yourself saying that enough and guess what—you soon find out you *can* succeed even in your hardest classes.

Choose Whom You Spend Time With

We all know negative and positive people. Sometimes it's fun to hang out with someone with a negative attitude, especially if their sarcasm is funny. And if we've just failed a test, we might enjoy being with someone else who also blames the instructor or "the system" for whatever goes wrong. As they say, misery loves company. But often being with negative people is one of the surest ways to stay negative yourself. You not only hear your own self-talk making excuses and blaming others and putting yourself down, but you hear other people saying it, too. After a while you're convinced it's true. You've developed a negative attitude that sets you up for failure.

Being in a college setting offers a great opportunity to make new friends. Friendships and other social relationships are important to all humans—and maybe to college students most of all, because of the stresses of college and the changes you're likely experiencing. Try to choose friends with a positive attitude. It's simply more fun to be with people who are upbeat and enjoying life, people whom you respect—and who, like you, are committed to their studies and are motivated. A positive attitude can really be contagious.

Overcome Resistance to Change

While it's true that most people are more comfortable when their situation is not always changing, many kinds of change are good and should be welcomed. College is a big change from high school or working. Accepting that reality helps you be more positive

about the differences. Sure, you have to study more, and the classes are harder. You may be working more and have less time for your personal life. But dwelling on those differences only reinforces a negative attitude. Look instead at the positive changes: the exciting and interesting people you might be meeting, the education you're getting that will lead to a bright future, and the mental challenges and stimulation you're feeling every day.

The first step may be simply to see yourself succeeding in your new life. Visualize yourself as a student taking control, enjoying classes, studying effectively, getting good grades. This college success course will help you do that in many ways. It all begins with the right attitude.

Overcome Fears

One of the most common fears of college students is a fear of failure—of not being able to make the grade. We all know that life is not all roses and that we're not going to succeed at everything we try. Everyone experiences some sort of failure at some time—and everyone has fears. The question is what you do about it.

Again, think about your goals. You are enrolled in college for good reasons. If you still have any fear of failure, turn it around and use it in a positive way. If you're afraid you may not do well on an upcoming exam, don't mope around—sit down and schedule times to start studying well ahead of time. It's mostly a matter of attitude adjustment.

Stay Focused and Motivated

Okay, you've got a positive attitude. But you've got a lot of reading for classes to do tonight, a test tomorrow, and a paper due the next day. Maybe you're a little bored with one of your reading assignments. Maybe you'd rather play a computer game. Uh oh—now what? Attitude can change at almost any moment. One minute you're

enthusiastically starting a class project, and then maybe a friend drops by and suddenly all you want to do is close the books and relax a while, hang out with friends.

One of the characteristics of successful people is accepting that life is full of interruptions and change—and planning for it. Staying focused does not mean you become a boring person who does nothing but go to class and study all the time. You just need to make a plan.

Planning ahead is the single best way to stay focused and motivated to reach your goals. Don't wait until the night before an exam. If you know you have a major exam in five days, start by reviewing the material and deciding how many hours of study you need. Then schedule those hours spread out over the next few days—at times when you are most alert and least likely to be distracted. Allow time for other activities, too, to reward yourself for successful studying. Then when the exam comes, you're relaxed, you know the material, you're in a good mood and confident, and you do well.

Planning is mostly a matter of managing your time well, as we'll see later. Here are some other tips for staying focused and motivated:

- If you're not feeling motivated, think about the results of your goals, not just the goals themselves. If just thinking about finishing college doesn't sound all that exciting, then think instead about the great, high-paying career that comes afterward and the things you can do with that income.
- Say it aloud—to yourself or a friend with a positive attitude: “I'm going to study now for another hour before I take a break—and I'm getting an A on that test tomorrow!” It's amazing how saying something aloud puts commitment in it and affirms that it can be true.
- Remember your successes, even small successes. As you begin a project or approach studying for a test, think about your past success on a different project or test. Remember how good it feels to succeed. Know you can succeed again.

- Focus on the here and now. For some people, looking ahead to goals, or to anything else, may lead to daydreaming that keeps them from focusing on what they need to do right now. Don't worry about what you're doing tomorrow or next week or month. If your mind keeps drifting off, however, you may need to reward or even trick yourself to focus on the here and now. For example, if you can't stop thinking about the snack you're going to have when you finish studying in a couple hours, change the plan. Tell yourself you'll take a break in twenty minutes if you really need it—but only if you really work well first.
- If you just can't focus in on what you should be doing because the task seems too big and daunting, break the task into smaller, manageable pieces. Don't start out thinking, "I need to study the next four hours," but think, "I'll spend the next thirty minutes going through my class notes from the last three weeks and figure out what topics I need to spend more time on." It's a lot easier to stay focused when you're sitting down for thirty minutes at a time.
- Never, ever multitask while studying! You may think that you can monitor e-mail and send text messages while studying, but in reality, these other activities lower the quality of your studying.
- Imitate successful people. Does a friend always seem better able to stick with studying or work until they get it done? What are they doing that you're not? We all learn from observing others, and we can speed up that process by deliberately using the same strategies we see working with others. *Visualize yourself* studying in the same way and getting that same high grade on the test or paper.
- Separate yourself from unsuccessful people. This is the flip side of imitating successful people. If a roommate or a friend is always putting off things until the last minute or is distracted with other interests and activities, tell yourself how different you are. When you hear other students complaining about how hard a class is or bragging about not studying or attending class, visualize yourself as not being like them at all.

- Reward yourself when you complete a significant task—but only when you are done. Some people seem able to stay focused only when there’s a reward waiting.
- While some people work harder for the reward, others are motivated more by the price of failing. While some people are almost paralyzed by anxiety, others are moved by their fear to achieve their best.
- Get the important things done first. We’ll talk about managing your academic planner and to-do lists later, but for now, to stay focused and motivated, concentrate on the things that matter most. You’re about to sit down to read a chapter in a book you’re not much enjoying, and you suddenly notice some clothing piled up on a chair. “I really should clean up this place,” you think. “And I’d better get my laundry done before I run out of things to wear.” Don’t try to fool yourself into feeling you’re accomplishing something by doing laundry rather than studying. Stay focused!

Network for Success

Making friends with people with positive attitudes not only helps you maintain a positive attitude yourself, but it gets you started networking with other students in ways that will help you succeed.

Did you study alone or with friends in high school? Because college classes are typically much more challenging, many college students discover they do better, and find it much more enjoyable, if they study with other students taking same course. This might mean organizing a study group or just getting together with a friend to review material before a test. It’s good to start thinking right away about networking with other students in your classes.

If you consider yourself an independent person and prefer studying and doing projects on your own rather than with others, think for a minute about how most people function in their careers and professions, what the business world is like. Most work today is

done by teams or individuals working together in a collaborative way. Very few jobs involve a person always being and working alone. The more you learn to study and work with other students now, the more skills you are mastering for a successful career.

Studying with other students has immediate benefits. You can quiz each other to help ensure that everyone understands the course material; if you're not clear about something, someone else can help teach it to you. You can read and respond to each other's writing and other work. You can divide up the work in group projects. And through it all, you can often have more fun than if you were doing it on your own.

Studying together is also a great way to start networking with other students who are interested in similar fields of study and careers. Networking has many potential benefits for your future. Your relationship with a college peer today can lead to an important career connection tomorrow. College students who feel they are part of a network on campus are more motivated and more successful in college.

Tips for Success: Staying Motivated

- Keep your eye on your long-term goals while working toward immediate goals.
- Keep your priorities straight—but also save some time for fun.
- Work on keeping your attitude positive.
- Keep the company of positive people; imitate successful people.
- Don't let past habits drag you down.
- Plan ahead to avoid last-minute pressures.
- Focus on your successes.
- Break large projects down into smaller tasks or stages.
- Reward yourself for completing significant tasks.
- Avoid multitasking.
- Network with other students; form a study group.