

The Ten Commandments for College Success and Happiness



1 Believe in Your (Jewish) Self

As a Jew, you are a member of the “People of the Book.” Your parents and grandparents hold high expectations for you in college and in life. Your synagogue or temple has honored you and put you on a pedestal for your high school accomplishments. Your peers are bright, have high aspirations for college, and all seem to have done well throughout their schooling. Your siblings have been very successful at college. It’s all great, right?

But talk about pressure!! OK, take a deep breath and relax. Everything is going to work out just fine.

I can’t overstate the importance of maintaining your self-confidence at college. You are a bright, capable person, and if you have good study habits and the desire to succeed, you will do just that at each and every college that offered you admission. Know that this is true, remind yourself daily, and never question your intellectual abilities.

There is a mind game that gets played out at every college regardless of its guidebook ranking. Very simply, students worry that they’re not up to the college’s or their family’s standard. Unfortunately, colleges

do very little to allay such fears. First-year students look at their peers in the residence hall cafeteria, at the college convocation, or at the first lecture or seminar and worry that they're just not as smart as the other students.

Many students, when they are speaking openly to me, wonder aloud whether the college admissions office made a mistake in admitting them. Deep down in a vulnerable place inside them, they imagine that if the college admissions office had truly read their applications carefully, they would not have been deserving of admission. After all, with so many other smart students in their school and now sitting with them in college, how could they have been fully competitive and worthy of admission?

I experienced this same fear when I attended college many years ago. Sure, I was a good student in high school, but I worried that I would be found out once I got to college. Maybe the admissions office accidentally put my application in the wrong pile and sent me the wrong letter. I wondered whether colleges ever send out "so sorry" letters retracting admissions to students like me.

Of course this is all silliness. And if such a notion should ever come over you, just let go of it immediately. College admissions offices know what they're doing. The truth is that colleges receive applications from so many outstanding students that they must reject hundreds, even thousands, of qualified students. So, clearly, everyone who is admitted is fully capable of doing outstanding work. The key is discovering what your interests are, finding your own identity, meeting good students and faculty, and developing good study skills.

When you hear others talk about all the smart kids at college, know that they're talking about you. SAT/ACT scores? Once you're in college, no one cares about those exams and what your score was. Your high school GPA? Forget it. After the first few weeks of college, high school will seem like years in the past. No one is interested. What faculty members and the other students will be interested in is you—in

your ideas, your interests, what you care about, what classes you are taking, papers you are writing, books you are reading, and what you hope to accomplish in your life.

When I first entered high school in ninth grade with a class of 1,500 other students, our principal gave a welcoming speech to us in our huge high school auditorium. He told us to look at the student sitting next to us on our right and then to turn and look at the student sitting next to us on our left. Then he told us that in four years, at the end of twelfth grade, one of the three of us would not be there for graduation. I remember that sorry speech and its negative message all too well.

But unlike my high school principal's advice, you should approach your college education with full confidence that you will graduate in four years. And your expectation should be not just that you will graduate, but that you will excel. In college you will begin the path of realizing your academic, professional, and personal dreams.

Right now, take out a piece of paper and write "I know I am smart. I know I can do well in college. I believe in myself and in my academic abilities. I will achieve to the top of my ability. I will accomplish great things." Put this paper in a secret place. Read it to yourself as often as you need. Self-confidence is your first insurance policy for success in college.

2 Learn to Be a College Student: You're Not in High School Anymore

College is an entirely different universe than high school, and your job is to explore that new universe as you move on to the rest of your life. College is not just different; it is a far richer, more substantive, and deeper learning environment than high school. It's important to come to college personally and mentally prepared and with the right expectations for your college experience and growth as a young

adult. Get ready to immerse yourself in an entirely different type and quality of learning.

The worst mistake you can make is to imagine that college is like high school. That's a nightmarish vision. Think about it. Only if you had failed twelfth grade would you still be in high school. Fortunately, you were a very successful high school student, and your reward and opportunity is to go on to the great educational adventure that is college. Don't waste the next four years of your life repeating your high school experience.

At the end of four years of high school, you, along with the other best-educated students in the country, typically know five areas of intellectual thought, including math, science, English, U.S. history, and a second language. To be certain, these are important fields. But a world of ideas awaits you when you enter college.

Most colleges, in their effort to help guide you in the process of broadening your intellectual horizons, require you to take a series of required courses in various disciplinary areas. Unfortunately, too many students embrace these requirements in the old high school mold. They organize their course selection for their first year of college in a manner that will help them "get the requirements out of the way." Please don't approach your first year of college as yet another year of ugly requirements, forcing you to delay for yet another year the excitement of learning that awaits you.

What steps can you take in your first year to embrace the best that college has to offer? First, take at least one first-year seminar. In a first-year seminar, you will sit in a class of between twelve and twenty students with a faculty member who loves to teach undergraduates, exploring with other bright students a field in which you all have an interest. Most important, you will build a small community of interested learners, students, and faculty, meeting a few times each week to question, challenge, analyze, and think about ideas that are important to you and the world around you. The small seminar setting is the

epitome of the college experience with active and engaged learners in a scholarly community of faculty and students.

Second, take courses with good teachers. Regardless of how interested you are in any given course content or course description, you are better off following good teachers. With good teachers you will be inspired, you will be engaged, you will build a relationship, and you will want to do good work and to learn beyond the limits of the course syllabus.

Third, try out a new idea. It is the very essence of college. College is a place filled with people who think about ideas. This is a chance you must not miss out on, a chance to give voice to all your ideas—the wondrous ones, the ones that will some day save lives, the inventive ones, and also those that are half-baked, barely formed, and that on face value seem almost ridiculous. Trying out an idea is so exciting in college because there is a community of faculty and friends who will take you seriously and listen and respond to you.

Fourth, try out a new field of study that you've never considered before. Take a course in some field in which you know very little or even nothing. Yes, there's some risk here. You might find out you're not particularly interested in this field. But if you consider how many years you've been studying the same old topic over and over again without any choice, as if there were only a handful of topics in the world to study, this is a pretty small risk. And the benefits could be enormous. Take some intellectual risks, please!

Fifth, try out your Jewish identity as an independent young adult. Explore what being Jewish means to you, unencumbered by parental or communal obligations to practice and believe in one or another particular way. Examine the many different Jewish approaches to prayer, faith, holiness, personal behavior, social justice, God, values, relationships, and Israel. Choose for yourself what this identity means for you and how, or in some cases even whether, you want to embrace and embody it.

Sixth, try out a new career. No, most of you don't have to start looking for full-time work just yet. But imagine what life will be like for you if you choose to be an artist, a teacher, a CEO, a writer, a scientist, an engineer, a doctor, a survey researcher, an interpreter, a community organizer, or a forest ranger. Many students come to college thinking that their career choices are limited to medicine, law, engineering, and business. Don't think in that limiting way; your career choices are wide open.

Seventh, try out a new friend. High school friendships can be comforting and supportive as you enter an entirely new environment, but if you want to move on with your life and meet the world, then college is precisely the time to assert yourself, make new friends, and pursue your own identity. Students in your college will come from a variety of racial, ethnic, class, religious, sexual orientation, geographic, and national backgrounds, and you should meet these people.

Eighth, try out a new perspective. You might change your perspective or reaffirm your current viewpoint, but in doing so you will most definitely begin to take responsibility for thinking critically and holding your own views. And, hopefully, you'll begin to see the world beyond factoids and sound bites and understand the complexities of issues. See the world from a point of view of someone who has different interests, comes from a different part of the country or world, or is of a different gender or religion.

3 Get to Know Faculty

Getting to know faculty at your college must be one of your top priorities. It will make your college experience.

Don't consider yourself an A student if you don't know at least one professor well enough to ask a question, ask for advice, discuss some academic topic, and request a letter of recommendation. You haven't

completed your college education yet. And if you know one or more faculty well and you're not an A or B student, you have greatly increased the chances that you will walk at graduation in four years alongside your peers. It is well known that students who succeed in college have good relationships with one or more faculty members.

One way to think about faculty is that they are brilliant scholars, cutting-edge researchers, inspiring teachers, first-rate authors, and consultants to leaders in every imaginable field around the globe. For most first-year students, that's a surefire intimidating mind-set that will permanently keep you 50 yards away from the nearest faculty member in sight.

I suggest you step back from that approach for a moment. Try imagining your professor or instructor as a parent, a child, or a sibling. A professor or instructor is someone who likes to spend much of his or her day reading, creating, thinking, discovering, experimenting, writing, and engaging in interesting discussions with smart people just like you.

Faculty are regular people, just like you. Faculty have their good points and their flaws. They have their likes and dislikes. They worry about money, health, and taxes; watch sports; take an interest in politics; have close friends; and sometimes are in good, friendly moods but on other days are the opposite. What distinguishes faculty from others, however, is their interest in ideas as a lifelong pursuit.

This characteristic of faculty makes getting to know them such a special and unique opportunity. You get to spend four years in their environment—in their classes, their labs, their offices, their lecture halls, their campus hangouts—during which time your primary purpose is to pursue ideas and the intellectual life. It's in this sense that college is so different from high school. These faculty people don't just come to work to teach you. They live and breathe their intellectual work 24 hours a day, and they're delighted to have you join them in their journey during your short stay in their environment. Don't miss out!

So how do you meet a faculty member? The best approach is to meet them in the classroom by taking a small enough class or seminar that personal relationships naturally develop. You see your instructors a few times a week in class, they debate ideas with you, and they read your papers and write back to you with insightful comments. You'll likely feel comfortable meeting with them after class or during office hours.

But because many of your classes won't be small seminars, it's important to take advantage of other approaches to meet faculty. Go up to the faculty member after class and follow up on a question or idea that was raised in class. Do the same during office hours. Check to see if there are any opportunities to be a research assistant for a faculty member. Some colleges have mentor programs to provide structure for meeting faculty. Invite an instructor to eat lunch with you in your residence hall, at a student union cafeteria, or at a local sandwich shop. Ask a professor if he or she would be willing to speak at a meeting of some organization you're a part of. Join a college committee that includes students as another way to meet and talk with faculty.

And if you are fortunate enough to have a professor or instructor who invites your class over to his or her house for dinner, by all means, GO! No excuses are acceptable. Don't assume you will have this opportunity again in college. As one very bright student told me recently, if your faculty member invites you to *anything*, GO!

What should you say to your professors when you do decide you're ready to talk with them? Ask them about themselves, about what they do, and about how they got interested in their field. Ask them what they're working on now and whether it is a new research project, a journal article, a book, a community project, or a conference presentation. Tell them about a book you're reading or something you've been wondering about related to your class. Feel free to talk about any topic related directly or indirectly to the class. Tell them about your own intellectual and social interests and about your professional goals. All

of these questions and topics will lead to enriching conversations and friendships that you will maintain throughout college and, in many cases, well beyond.

Finally, you will want to know a professor or instructor well enough that you can ask that person for a recommendation letter. In most cases, you will be rewarded with such kind words in the letter that you'll find yourself thrilled at how proud the academic world is of your intellectual pursuits and accomplishments.



DANIEL WISEMAN—*“Tutoring Is for A Students.”*

Daniel Wiseman is taking the pre-business curricular track. He has always known that he would be good in business, and his parents have always encouraged and assumed that this would be his career. In high school his dad set up summer internships for him in business, and Daniel has loved following the stock market in the daily newspaper.

Daniel started off his first semester with a course load that included calculus and economics. The first few weeks of math class were mostly review from high school, and Daniel felt very confident about his academic preparation and performance. He needed only to study a couple nights a week to stay on pace with the course.

All of a sudden, or so it seemed, the course picked up steam. The material the professor began to cover was all new to Daniel, and the problem sets were quite difficult. And there were so many of them! Daniel was used to just studying a few hours per week on each subject, and he didn't have the study habits in place to put in sufficient time to keep up. Within two weeks time with the new material, Daniel realized that he was falling way behind and his first major test was coming up the next week.

Daniel had always been an A student. He had never received lower than a B in high school. Yet, on his first test, Daniel got a C-, having missed all the questions testing the material he had not already learned in high school. Daniel was embarrassed to say anything to anyone about getting help because he never had to seek help in high school. In fact, he had been a math tutor in high school. Daniel began to worry that all his plans for a career in business were not going to be realized.

After the first test, Daniel couldn't help but observe that many other students were upset about their grades. Although people were grouching about the professor and how she should have explained the material better, a few students mentioned that they were going to participate in study groups. They invited Daniel to join them, and grudgingly he agreed.

When Daniel attended his first study group session, he recognized that there were all levels of students present. He didn't think some of the students were so smart, but he also knew that others were the absolute stars of the class and had received A grades on the exam. He was surprised to see such a mix of students. During the study session, a number of students spoke of meeting the professor during office hours to get help on certain questions. Others mentioned that they were also going to the math department's "math lab" for extra assistance.

All of this was entirely new to Daniel. Yes, he had read about the math lab in the course syllabus. And, yes, he knew his teacher consistently invited students to office hours. But Daniel had always thought that going for help was not for people like him. He decided to give it a try because he knew he had to do better on his exams.

Daniel started taking advantage of all of these resources—office hours, math lab, and the study group. It wasn't as bad as he thought, and no one stigmatized him for asking for help. In fact, he got lots of positive feedback from his friends and parents for his effort and

interest. He found that he was starting to pick up the new material and had a group of friends who shared his struggle. Daniel's confidence and determination got a big boost from all of this work, he began to put in many additional hours studying, and he again started to feel that he could achieve his goals. Next exam, Daniel got an A, and on his final he got an A-.



4 Get Involved and Be Engaged

It is highly important to your success in college that you feel attached to your college and are involved in campus life. Not only is it important for your mental and emotional well-being, but it is also a central ingredient for your academic success. Students who feel a connection to their college are much more likely to do well there, to go on to graduate, and to report having had positive college experiences.

It's probably easier at first glance to understand the importance of being involved if you are attending a large public university. At a large university, there may be 15,000, 20,000, 35,000, or even 40,000 or more students on campus. Coming from a high school and perhaps a neighborhood in which it seemed just about everyone knew, admired, and cared about you, you may naturally feel isolated and lonely. How will you ever stand out and be noticed as the unique and special individual that you are?

As a student who has purposely chosen a small liberal arts college, you may anticipate that you've already addressed this concern by your selection of a small college. But in a surprising way, choosing a smaller college can produce some feelings that are similar to those of your peers at larger universities. After all, if you find yourself feeling lonely and homesick at a small college, it's likely that you'll attribute these

feelings as being your own doing rather than the fault of the college's size or impersonal atmosphere. At your college, everyone appears to be nice and interested in each individual, and students know one another, yet you are feeling like you're an outsider, on the periphery.

What to do? The simple answer is to get involved. And by getting involved, you may want to attempt a variety of strategies, reaching beyond those that worked for you in high school. Especially if you are attending college with friends from high school, you should definitely explore—on your own—getting involved in campus activities, events, and organizations.

Most colleges have academic structures whose very purpose is to create smaller, more personal, learning environments. One popular structure is called “learning communities.” Typically, these programs have the best teachers in the university. They may be academic programs located in the residence hall where you live, or they may be organized as two or more courses together, not associated with any housing situation.

In addition, many colleges today have programs for undergraduates to participate in research with faculty. While this may sound intimidating to a new college student, it is, in fact, one of the best ways to get to know (and be known by) faculty and students on a personal basis.

Almost every college has a Hillel, Chabad House, or other Jewish organization to welcome you to school. There are Jewish student organizations with a focus on Jewish religious, cultural, and Israel-centered activities, and often a building or home that is a comfortable place to hang out. Try attending a Friday evening Shabbat dinner or the first Jewish student mass meeting, or try going to services for the High Holidays in the first weeks of college. Whether your Jewish identity is central or peripheral to you and whether you are religiously observant or not, you are likely to meet some other students and adult leaders who share similar interests with you and will be eager to get to know you and help you feel comfortable and connected at college.

Community service learning is another organized feature on most campuses, and a growing number of campuses are now offering course-based intergroup dialogues. These courses bring students together from two or more social identity groups to talk openly and frankly about difficult issues between groups.

Then there are the myriad campus organizations. Every college has student organizations to suit your interests in politics, sports, media, art, music and theater, writing, race and ethnicity, religion, and so on. Academic departments often have student clubs for those who want to pursue in more depth their interest in chemistry, genetics, creative writing, language, politics, or whatever.

In addition to the option of getting involved in an organization, opportunities exist every day on campus and off to attend lectures, concerts, or plays; to participate in intramural sports or pick-up games; and to do all kinds of other things. Read the student newspaper, check the postings on campus bulletin boards and telephone poles, visit the websites of campus organizations, and find an event to get you out of your room into the residence hall and out into the campus community.

Some students will want to do more than attend events or participate in organizations. There are numerous opportunities to become student leaders on campus in existing organizations or academic clubs, and students can even set up their own organizations. Workshops and retreats are offered to give students experience and skills in leadership, and there are all kinds of networks of student leaders.

These wonderful opportunities will allow you to feel connected intellectually and socially to college life. And be sure not to let yourself feel overwhelmed. Take things slowly, make your choices carefully, and manage your time well. You will have four—or more—years to try out these academic and social options, so don't rush to get all of this done in the first few weeks of college.