

Seven Crucial Differences Between High School and College

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1) Academic expectations are much higher.

- In high school, academic expectations are not always high, and good grades can often be obtained with minimum effort. This is especially true for bright students who discover they don't have to do much more than attend classes and remember what their teacher say to earn high grades. This situation is made even worse by the fact that being perceived as popular in high school often requires the ability to project the appearance of not working hard.
- In college, academic expectations are much higher, and minimum effort usually produces poor grades.
- *"In high school, I was one of the 'smart' people who never had to read the material before class, study for a final, or write a paper well in advance. Here, I have to spend every free minute preparing the homework assigned for that day. If I don't, I will fall behind, and if I fall behind now, there is no catching up."*
- *"Even if I didn't pass the tests in high school, I could still pass the class as long as I did my homework."*

2) Student-teacher contact is less frequent and more formal.

- In high school, teacher-student contact is close and frequent in classes that meet 5 days a week. Teachers are very accessible.
- In college, classes meet less often—sometimes only once a week and sometimes never if they are online—and faculty are usually available only during their office hours or by appointment.
- *"College professors aren't as personable as high school teachers. I could stop into my high school teachers' offices and sit there for 30 minutes to just hang out."*
- *"High school teachers assist you more. They kind of hold your hand through things."*

3) The syllabus replaces teachers' daily reminders.

- In high school, the teacher prepares a lesson plan and uses it to tell students how to prepare for the next class period (e.g., "Be sure to read Chapter 3 in your textbook." or "Don't forget to study for tomorrow's test.")
- In college, the instructor distributes and discusses the syllabus during the first class and expects students to read and follow the syllabus without having to be reminded about what will be done or what assignment is due during the next class period.
- *"High school teachers tell students what's due the next day, whereas college professors expect students to read for themselves what's due in the syllabus."*
- *"College teachers don't tell you what you're supposed to do. They give you a syllabus and expect you to follow what it says. High school teachers tell you about five times what you're supposed to do."*

4) Homework is done after, not during school.

- In high school, students are assigned daily homework, which teachers collect and check to insure that assigned work is being done. For example, a term paper can require many intermediate steps before the final paper is submitted.
- In college, instructors assume students have learned how to "keep up" with their assignments in high school and can be trusted to do course work without being constantly reminded or assigned "busy work" homework.
- *"In high school, you learn the material in class. In college, most learning takes place outside the classroom."*
- *"In high school, things were over at 4:00 p.m. In college, things like studying are just starting by that time."*

5) Students must be more independent and responsible.

- In high school, parents, teachers, and counselors support, give advice to, and often make decisions for students. Students rely on their parents to meet their basic needs and must abide by their parents' boundaries and restrictions.
- In college, students must learn to rely on themselves and begin to experience the results of their own good and bad decisions. It is their responsibility to seek advice when they need it and to set their own restrictions.
- *"High school teachers teach you what's in your textbooks. College teachers expect you to actually read your textbooks."*
- *"College teachers expect 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 projects every day and tried to help us if we were struggling."*

6) Students are treated more like adults than children.

- In high school, teachers often contact parents if problems occur. Parents are expected to help students in times of crisis.
- In college, students have much more freedom, and must take responsibility for their own actions. Parents may not be aware that a crisis has occurred because the Federal Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) protects their children's privacy.
- *"College teachers expect more from you. There are no late assignments or make-up tests. They do not hold your hand anymore."*
- *"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."*

7) **Students must learn to prioritize their activities and manage their own time.**

- In high school, there are distractions from school work, but these are at least partially controlled by rules at school and home (e.g., curfews, dress codes, and enforced study hours).
- In college, many distractions exist, but students are not protected from them by parental or school rules. Time management and the ability to prioritize become absolutely essential survival skills for college students.
- *“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.”*

Advice for College-Bound High School Students Based on these Perceived Differences

The advice in the following paragraph should help incoming college students who would like to know how their academic experience in college will differ from high school. If they take this advice seriously and use it to modify their academic behaviors and attitudes, it can prevent them from blundering into their freshman year in college and expecting it to be an extension (i.e., 13th grade) of high school.

Before you begin your freshman year in college, prepare yourself to be challenged by a higher volume of work, work that is more challenging, 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 may 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 have been 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 7 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 people to master large amounts of difficult material in a short period of time and to perform this work in a responsible, independent, and competent manner without having to be helped or reminded to do it. In other words, one of the objectives of a college education is to transform responsibility-challenged adolescents into responsible adults. The following comment from one of my freshmen puts this objective into sharp perspective. “It’s time for me to step out of the purgatory between my teenage years and adulthood and to take some responsibility for my life.”