

What to Expect as You Go to College

-Abdullah Derosier

Coming to college at Florida State University was an adventure. I fought my way through what I saw as traps in order to get here. With only one bag in hand, I didn't know what to expect when my sister dropped me off in front of my residence hall. Leaving high school, I was never the type of person that asked for help. My family taught me to deal with problems on my own and reinforced the notion "we are all capable of figuring anything out on our own if we look hard enough." I was a student who didn't let anyone know my situation in high school. I was homeless. I was used to just getting by under everyone's radar. The only problem with that way of operating is that a university is actually meant to help you grow as a person. Going to college is an opportunity to be the best version of yourself, and that can't be done all by yourself.

Coming to college was a hard transition. However, in my past three years as a college student, I have come to learn a few things I wish someone would have taught me when I started. I am sure my college experience would have been entirely different if I knew then what I know now. So, I hope that the lessons I learned can be helpful to a student who experienced homelessness like I did.

Ask for Help

As I stated before, I was raised to do things on my own. That way of working was fine until I was overwhelmed during my sophomore year. I was very involved on campus. I was a student-athlete and had multiple jobs. Oh...and there was also school. I was going insane with the amount of stress I put on myself. That stress and pressure to please everyone made me shift my focus from my classes. I placed other priorities ahead of my own need to be a student. Eventually, I dug myself into a pit and didn't know how to get out. When I eventually failed a class, I stayed in my room for an entire week. I finally mustered up the courage to ask for help. Embarrassed of my failure, I almost gave up until I spoke with staff who truly had my best interest at heart. They let me know that they understood my struggle, but were here to help me find my way. You have to speak to someone if things get tough. Whether it is the Dean of Students, counselors, advisors, or professors, there are people at the college who will be there for you and help you through anything you're going through. Being able to talk to someone about your struggles goes a long way to help you succeed in college.

Get Out of Your Comfort Zone

When I got to college, I was connected to a program that helped me transition from high school to college. The staff helped me to see ways to be involved on campus, and encouraged me to branch outside of my comfort zone. And, although I was intimidated initially, I made my way to professors' office hours. What I realized is they actually were there to help.

Beyond academics, college is a chance to experience so much more than what you knew growing up. College is about finding out what you do and don't like, and is a great time to try new things. When I started college, I would not believe anyone if they told me I would learn salsa dancing or join a step team. Knowing my dancing skills, I would have laughed at anyone that even suggested the notion. Now, I'm looking at joining a campus dance team! By taking a chance at something you do not normally do, you gain such an opportunity to enhance your college experience.

Since being in college, I've expanded my worldview. I've taken advantage of so many opportunities that I never thought were possible. I've had an internship almost 1,000 miles away. I've even had the opportunity to travel all across the nation with different organizations. Being someone who didn't have much money and was homeless, I never thought these opportunities were possible. However, you cannot let money (or the lack of it) prevent you from tapping into the chance to experience something you always wanted to experience. Many times, there are ways to finance activities in college. The first step, though, is being willing to take advantage of the opportunity! Don't let money be a barrier to having a full college experience.

First Impressions Matter

You have seven seconds to make a great first impression. First impressions are important in establishing a connection or professional relationship with anyone. This is something that you may not think has a lot of value. But, it can cause someone to remember you years later based on one thing you said, how you approached them, or how a strong handshake can make a difference. One of the most important things I learned when I got to college was how to create an elevator speech. If given 30 seconds to make an impression with someone, you learn how to introduce yourself, present your interests, and see how you relate. I learned the value in being able to express myself in such a quick manner as it's helped me find internships and jobs, and has helped me make connections with my professors, other students, and campus professionals.

"No" is an Important Word to Learn

I did not come to college with much money. However, once my financial aid refund hit my account, I had hundreds of dollars at my disposal. Of course, one of the first impulses when you have a little extra money is to help family back home. What I learned is that you can't send everything you have back home. Now that you are in college, you have to realize that you are truly an adult. That means you have to consider your own bills, cooking for yourself, healthcare, and so many other responsibilities that you may not have been used to when you were in high school. Budgeting is important if you are going to survive the entire semester. You have to take care of yourself first before you try to help others. Although it may seem selfish, the truth is that this is necessary to make it through each semester. You can still help. But, you have to make sure you cover your necessities first. I recommend you pay all of your bills at the beginning of the semester, if you have the ability to do so. Then, as you budget your money, consider what you are able to do without putting yourself in a bad spot. It's okay to help out family and friends every once in a while. Just make sure it's not a habit that they become dependent on you. Set limits to how often and how much.

I know I have aspirations to make enough money for my parents to retire and not have to work another day in their lives. But I can't do that until **AFTER** I'm done with college. You must get through college in order to truly help those you wish to help now.

Time Management is Important

One of my biggest changes in moving from high school to college was understanding the idea of time. In high school, you are forced to the schedule set by the school. In college, however, you set your own schedule for almost everything. Classes, studying, organizations, free time, and so much more can take so much of your time. There are so many potential distractions that you can forget why you are here!

Learn how to dedicate your time to what you care about, and what adds to you. Remember, the most precious thing in your life is your time. Once you give it away, you cannot get it back.

Don't Let Failure Go to Your Heart

In high school, I didn't really have to worry about getting good grades. I was used to doing homework at the last minute (and even right before class). I didn't really focus on studying. Tests were not a problem for me either. But, then I got to college! The shift from high school to college taught me the value of hard work. Where I was used to just knowing the material in high school, as a college student, I had to work to learn the material. It wasn't that I couldn't comprehend the work. I had to learn a new way to study. There were times I studied only to be knocked down when I received my test grade. Although I let my confidence take a hit initially, I learned that it wasn't **ME** that was the issue. I just had to learn this is the process of college. Once you learn what works for you as a college student, you'll see that it gets easier. Yes, you will still have some late nights studying and writing papers. And, it may initially seem very hard. But, remember, in the words of motivational speaker Eric Thomas, "If something was easy, everyone would do it."

Take Time to Yourself

College is an environment where lots of people are always around. Taking time to yourself is critical. It allows you to reflect on who you are and are becoming, focus on your goals and passions, and remember your purpose for being here. With so much going on, so many things to do, you have the possibility to be overwhelmed. Think of yourself as a sponge. You can take in only so much before you become saturated. You have to find time to squeeze your sponge.

It's important to recharge your batteries every now and then. Go to the gym. Take a day trip. Go for a walk. Go to a play, concert, or sports game. You'd be surprised how much there is to do on a college campus that is free! These help you to recharge, and they prevent you from burning out. And, if you have those moments of feeling like you aren't living up to the expectations of your family or yourself, this is valuable time for you to refocus. Take time to reflect on how far you've come and on your journey to this point. It's vital in maintaining the drive to push forward towards your degree.

Use Your Story as Your Strength

I mentioned that I kept my business to myself. No one needed to know that I was homeless. A lot of times, it can be embarrassing because people may look at you like something's wrong. What I've learned in college is to embrace what I learned from my experiences. Being homeless taught me strength and resilience. I don't let small things necessarily get to me. Instead, I realize that I've been through much more. That gives me perspective and the opportunity to push through. Look at how far you've come. You've dealt with situations that could have stopped you, or made you quit. But, you have push through and made it to this point in your life. Keep tapping into that strength that got you to college. It will help you reach your goal of earning that degree!

Coming to college was not what I had expected when I started. It has built me up and tore me down more times than I can remember. But, during the process, being here has helped me grow into who I am today. I am a better man now than the first day I stepped foot on campus. I have made lasting

friendships and have gained personal and professional connections I would never have imagined when I started. I have grown tremendously, and have matured in such a way that I am mentally and intellectually stronger. With all that I've been through before coming to college, and through all of my experiences since being here at FSU, I know that when I graduate and leave campus, I will be ready for whatever the world has to offer.

Abdullah Derosier is a senior at Florida State University majoring in Social Science. He is an active member of multiple campus organizations, including being one of FSU's Unconquered Scholars, a program designed to support students who were previously classified as homeless, foster care, relative care, or wards of the state.