

3 Skills You Need to be Successful in College

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The transition to a college or university is often one of the biggest adjustments in a student's life. The excitement of a new adventure, moving out of the family home and starting adult life, can often overshadow awareness of the academic rigor and responsibilities students are about to take on. Finding the balance of academic demands, making friends, campus involvement, work and other responsibilities can be quite challenging and requires a specific set of tools that many college students find they are lacking, as high school did not require such levels of self-management. Here are three skill sets students can develop to smooth their way.

1. **Metacognition** – Thinking about how you think and learn best
2. **Self-Management** - Managing time to sleep, wake up, go to class, study, work, have fun!
3. **Mindset** - Your belief in your ability to learn, grow and face challenges.

Skill #1. Metacognition Skills:

Often times students find the study strategies they used in high school are not getting the same results in college. They may become frustrated, begin to procrastinate, feel overwhelmed or may give up. The first key to turning that around is **Metacognition** – an academic word for reflecting on how you think and learn best, finding better study strategies and asking yourself questions throughout your studying process. When learning new content ask yourself “What do I already know about this topic?” Analyze and compare the new information to what you already know to spark understanding.

Thinking about thinking: Think about times you've had to learn something difficult and had success. How did you go about it? Did you just read about it? Or did you read about it, talk about it, watch a video, draw a diagram or chart? When we learn new information, it creates a very tenuous (unstable) pathway in the brain. We have to examine, compare, analyze, discuss, draw, interpret, make analogies and utilize a variety of other strategies to really form a permanent pathway in our brain that we can call upon during exams. Just reading the material and thinking you'll recall that information during test time will lead to disappointing results. (Unless you are blessed with a photographic memory.)

Many students have discovered understanding metacognition is transformational.

Here are some basic tips to help you develop basic Metacognitive Skills for success in college:

Review your course SYLLABUS regularly. The course syllabus is so much more than a document to look at once and shove in a folder. Treat the Syllabus as a living document.

- Print it out. Highlight test dates and long-term projects. Write notes in the margin.
- Refer to it weekly. Transfer assignments, test dates and projects to your calendar.
- Before you ask your professor questions about assignment instructions, due dates, test dates, etc. try to find the information on the syllabus.
- Professors spend HOURS creating their **SYLLABUS** to guide you through the course requirements - Use it to your advantage!

Read Before your classes - Professors expect you to have a basic understanding of the content and concepts BEFORE class so they can bring you to a higher level of understanding during class. If you haven't done the reading prior to class, note taking will be stressful and ineffective as you try to write everything the professor says. Make sure you know or understand the terms or acronyms. You need good notes to study from so here are some good metacognitive practices:

- **Read and watch videos and recorded lectures before class.**
- **Take notes while reading/watching lectures.** Pause to think about new words and concepts.
- **Paraphrase:** Read a few sentences then say it aloud in your own words. If you can paraphrase it you understand it. If you can't, go back. Read it again, look it up in the index in the back of the textbook or online to get more information. This only takes a minute and prevents you from letting your eyes continue while your brain is left behind.
- **Ask yourself questions:**
 - *What are the relationships between these two concepts?*
 - *What conclusions can I make?*
 - *How does this information relate to what we learned last week?*
 - *Does this information conflict or align with my prior understanding?*
 - *What is confusing about this topic?*
 - (brainstorm your own questions as they will differ based on the subject matter)
- **Use Graphic Organizers** – Just re-reading notes won't help you ace that test, and flash cards/memorization are a good, but basic method of study. Go deeper with:
 - **Concept Maps, Mind Maps, Diagraming, Charts, Graphs, Venn diagrams, Timelines.**

These visuals will help you to understand connections, details and recall the information during exams. Our Academic Coaches at the Center for Academic Achievement can provide examples and support in creating organizers to best suit your study needs. [Academic Success Program & Coaching \(fgcu.edu\)](http://fgcu.edu/academic-success-program-coaching)

- **Always Review Exams and Quizzes.** If you are not given your corrected test back, go to your **Professor's Office Hours.**
 - Ask professors to review your incorrect answers with you.
 - Ask questions.
 - Explain back what you understand.
 - Tell instructor where you got lost in the problem or explanation.
 - Take notes during this process. This crucial feedback will help you improve.
- **Test Yourself in a variety of ways**
 - Create tests and quizzes to take in the same amount of time you will be allowed in class.
 - Practice writing short response answers.
 - Practice drawing/labelling the diagrams or graphs you believe may be on the test - without using notes or book.

If you don't practice before the test, you'll be practicing ON the test!!

Dr. Sandra McGuire, Teach Students How to Learn

Skill #2. Self-Management is a crucial LIFE Skill

Self-Management Skills are composed of Self-Regulation, Self-Care and Executive Function Skills, and are often a challenge for first time college students because high school courses and schedules are set. Family members regulate other aspects of daily life by setting routines, helping students wake up, get to school and extra curriculars. Welcome to college! *Poof!* **You** are the adult now. No one is going to tell you to go to sleep or wake you up for class, make sure you eat, do your assignments, or limit your gaming and social media time. It's up to you to manage yourself.

1. Self-Regulation is the ability to examine and manage your energy states, emotions, thoughts and behaviors in an acceptable way, to produce positive outcomes for well-being, positive relationships, and learning. Self-regulation skills are key to helping you manage your behaviors and emotions effectively so you do not create obstacles to success through self-sabotage.

Self-Regulated Learning includes:

- **Organizing:** Collecting and organizing the information you need for the class; highlight the important points, draw pictures, maps, diagrams or webs to ensure a better understanding of the content.
- **Goal Setting and Planning:** Identifying personal and academic goals for each semester. Make an action plan to achieve the goals, break goals into smaller steps, work on goals every week, monitor your progress and celebrate your accomplishments! [Center for Academic Achievement \(fgcu.edu\)](http://fgcu.edu)
- **Tracking your assignments:** FGCU uses CANVAS for all class assignments. It is wise to use a planner, the free assignment tracker on Google Drive or create an excel document. Tracking assignments prevents missed deadlines and missed points.
- **Rehearsing and Memorizing concepts:** Master your course content using mnemonic devices, (acronyms, acrostics, analogies) Paraphrase and teach-back concepts; Test Yourself! Make up sample questions, quizzes and test, use imagery techniques or rehearse the content again and again in writing or by paraphrasing the concepts out loud.

2. Self-Care: You can regulate your behavior by being aware of your stress levels, how much sleep you are getting and how well you are eating. None of us are able to learn and perform well if we are tired, hungry, lonely or stressed out. Check in with yourself daily. **Ask yourself: Am I...**

- Sleeping 6-8 hours each night?
- Drinking enough water and eating a variety of foods, including protein? (fuel for your brain)
- Reducing stress through mindfulness, gratitude, exercise, yoga, meditation or contemplation?
- Showering, doing laundry, food shopping, etc.?
- Interacting with others, making friends, attending events, involved in student organizations?
- Leaning into the many campus resources that are here to support you?
 - CAA: Writing Lab, Coaching, Tutoring, Supplemental Instruction, & Accountability Partners
 - Advising, Career Services, Student Care Services
 - Counseling, Health Services, Adaptive Services, Prevention & Wellness

3. Executive Functioning is a set of life skills to help you manage time, prioritize and complete tasks, and are crucial to preventing feeling overwhelmed through:

- **Time Management:** Create a Time Management and study plan at the very beginning of each semester. *The CAA offers peer and professional coaching on time management.* You'll walk away with a personalized overview of your semester that includes how much to study, when you'll study and giving yourself rewards for studying four or more hours a day! [Academic Success Program & Coaching \(fgcu.edu\)](https://fgcu.edu/academic-success-program-coaching)
- **Space Management:** Determine where you can think and concentrate the best. Studying in your room can lead to a variety of distractions such as napping, snacking, video games, TV, social media, cleaning, doing laundry, hanging with roommates, etc. Many college students find it is best to study in the library or quiet corners of academic buildings. (One perk is you don't have to clean these spaces before you can study!)
- **Device Management: DND!!** Managing your phone and other devices is key to being able to focus and complete tasks. **It takes 20 minutes to get into the study "zone."** If you keep hearing notifications on your device and even just glance at them, you have to start that 20-minute cycle all over, giving you only 10-15 minutes of actual study time out of that hour. If you need music to study, choose music without lyrics. There are great instrumental study mixes on YouTube.

Memory Management: The ability to use and apply the information learned by using a variety of techniques such as:

- **Focus** your attention by eliminating distractions, setting timers to study uninterrupted and taking short breaks. The CAA recommends studying one hour, take a 15-minute break, study one hour.
- **Avoid Cramming.** Start studying 2 weeks before any test, review notes 10-15 minutes a day. Studying over time puts that information into your long-term memory preventing blanking out during tests. [Center for Academic Achievement \(fgcu.edu\)](https://fgcu.edu/center-for-academic-achievement) scroll down to Resources
- **Structure and organize** information in groups or clusters, make outlines of your reading and class notes. [Center for Academic Achievement \(fgcu.edu\)](https://fgcu.edu/center-for-academic-achievement) scroll down to Resources
- Use **Mnemonic Devices** that use positive imagery, humor, or relate to you specifically.
- **Visualize content** by creating concept maps, diagrams, charts, timelines and other graphic organizers.
- **Read aloud, Paraphrase, "Teach it back"** to a tutor, study buddy, pet or toy.
- **Go deeper.** Just studying from the study guide or PowerPoints will not be enough. Study as if you had to teach the concepts to your peers.
- **Make sure to utilize the Writing lab at the CAA for ANY writing for ANY class.**
- The Communications Lab (COMM LAB) can help you prepare for any presentations or speeches.

Mastering executive functioning skills lead to independence, adaptability and self-motivation. [The CAA coaches can provide information, strategies and support in all areas of executive functioning.](https://fgcu.edu/academic-success-program-coaching) Make an appointment early each semester to start strong: [Academic Success Program & Coaching \(fgcu.edu\)](https://fgcu.edu/academic-success-program-coaching)

SKILL #3. MINDSET

Think about how you respond when you make a mistake or fail at something. Does it feel catastrophic? Do you feel like a complete failure and just want to give up? Or do you think about what went wrong, try again or try a different way? Do you see it as a challenge you can work harder to overcome?

Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck developed the concepts of **Fixed and Growth Mindsets**. Dweck's research revealed students who have a **fixed mindset** believe their abilities are fixed traits and therefore can't be changed, and that talent and intelligence, not effort, lead to success. Dweck states these students are not as successful in college and life as other students. These limiting beliefs often hold students back because they lose motivation and feel working harder is useless. They may experience imposter syndrome or feel too overwhelmed to keep trying.

A **growth mindset** is the belief that a person's abilities and talents can be improved over time. Students with a "growth" mindset are more likely to continue working hard despite setbacks. These students understand that their talents and abilities can be developed through effort, good teaching and persistence. *"I can do anything I set my mind to."*

Ways to develop a growth Mindset:

Embrace your imperfection. No one is perfect, no one expects you to be perfect, especially not as you are transitioning to college or a new job or career. Mistakes will be made. Try to see mistakes as opportunities for personal growth.

- Failed a test? Meet with the instructor to review what you did wrong and use the feedback to practice better ways to study and take tests. ([Go to tutoring and SI at the CAA](#))
- Missed an assignment? Email the professor right away and see if you can make it up. Then go through your syllabus, calendar and assignment tracker to make sure they are all up to date so you don't miss any other assignments or deadlines.
- Procrastinating to start a writing assignment? ([Visit our Writing Lab!](#))
- Said something embarrassing? (Same... Every day.) Laugh and try better tomorrow.

Breathe deep and be brave. Trying new things, making new friends, or going to new places can make most of us nervous. If you see the experience as an adventure instead of a fear, you can accomplish most things. Our body registers excitement, anticipation and nervousness the same way. We have the same exact physiological response to each. Tell your brain you are anticipating or excited about what you have to do. Shift your thoughts. Trick your brain. Then just do it.

Your thoughts become actions. Your actions become habits.

Check in with your thoughts. Are they dark, negative, and sound a bit like Eeyore or Squidward? Try this: Use an imaginary windshield wiper to wipe them away. Then replace the negative thought with a more positive or constructive thought and repeat it. For example, take the thought:

"This is too hard, I'll never get this. I'm terrible at math!"

Wipe the thought away: ***"This is too hard, I'll never get this. I'm terrible at math!"***

Replace it with: *“This problem is hard. How can I start this? What do I already know? Do I need a formula to solve it? Where can I get support?”*

- *I can look in the book or at my notes.*
- *I can bring this problem to tutoring.*
- *I can ask my TA or Instructor to walk me through it.*
- *I can look it up online.* (Khan Academy Math is free and has college level math courses.)

Comparison is the thief of joy. Don’t seek the approval or opinion of others. Comparing yourself to others, focusing on what others think of you, or hiding failures, keep you from developing a growth mindset, and finding success. Keep your focus on your own growth and stop worrying. Chances are others are only focused on their own issues and didn’t notice yours.

LEAN IN. Be willing to lean in for the support services that are offered at the CAA and other departments at FGCU. You are paying for services when you pay your tuition.

Resources:

Dweck, Carol. “Mindset: The New Psychology of Success.” December 26, 2007

Dweck, Carol. 2014 “The power of believing that you can improve.” [Video] TED Conferences

McGuire, Dr. Sandra. “Teach Students How to Learn.” *Strategies You Can Incorporate into Any Course to Improve Student Metacognition, Study Skills, and Motivation* Oct 13, 2015

Remember the [Center for Academic Achievement](#) is here to support you while you navigate a new campus, the inner workings of higher education, self-management and course content. We offer [Academic Coaching](#), Writing support at our [Writing Lab](#), [Tutoring](#), [Supplemental Instruction](#), Accountability Partners, Study Spaces and Workshops. Come in to meet us for drop-ins or make an appointment. We can meet you in person or online. We are located in Library West 103, 201 & 202 to the right of Starbucks.



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