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Ditch Your Laptop, Dump Your Boyfriend

By TIM NOVIKOFF, WILLIE X. LIN, AMAN SINGH GILL, CHRISTINE SMALLWOOD, EVAN LALONDE and REBECCA ELLIOTT

Advice for freshmen from the people who actually grade their papers and lead their class discussions.

College is your chance to see what you've been missing, both in the outside world and within yourself. Use this time to explore as much as you can.

Take classes in many different subjects before picking your major. Try lots of different clubs and activities. Make friends with people who grew up much poorer than you, and others much richer. Date someone of a different race or religion. (And no, hooking up at a party doesn't count.) Spend a semester abroad or save up and go backpacking in Europe or Asia.

Somewhere in your childhood is a gaping hole. Fill this hole. Don't know what classical music is all about? That's bad. Don't know who Lady Gaga is? That's worse. If you were raised in a protected cocoon, this is the time to experience the world beyond.

College is also a chance to learn new things about yourself. Never been much of a leader? Try forming a club or a band.

The best things I did in college all involved explorations like this. I was originally a theater major but by branching out and taking a math class I discovered I actually liked math, and I enjoyed hanging out with technical people.

By dabbling in leadership — I ran the math club and directed a musical — I learned how to formulate a vision and persuade people to join me in bringing it to life. Now I'm planning to become an entrepreneur after graduate school. It may seem crazy, but it was running a dinky club that set me on the path to seeing myself as someone who could run a business.

Try lots of things in college. You never know what's going to stick.

— TIM NOVIKOFF, Ph.D. student in applied mathematics at Cornell

Chances are, if you are taking the time to read this advice, you already have the quality necessary to undertake the intellectual challenges of a college education — a seriousness of purpose. What I want to speak to is much more mundane, but it will make your transition into college easier: amid the thrill and vertigo of change, be kind to and patient with yourself.

Remember to take some time away from campus — from the demands of schoolwork and the trappings of the college social life. Explore the town you're living in. Meet people who are not professors or fellow students. If you spend all of your time on school grounds, then it becomes too easy for the criticism from an occasional unkind professor or the conflict with a roommate to take on a monstrous scale. And to let that happen is to suffer from a mistake of emphasis; college should be a part of, but not the entire scope of, your existence for the next few years.

In Virginia Woolf's novel "Mrs. Dalloway," characters are troubled and traumatized by their inability to maintain a proper "sense of proportion"; ordinary tasks — life itself, for one of the characters — become outsized and unmanageable.

I mention this not because I think your situation will be so dire if you don't heed my advice, but mostly because "Mrs. Dalloway" is a great read, and I highly recommend it.

— *WILLIE X. LIN, student in the M.F.A. program in creative writing at Washington University in St. Louis*

Universities are places where facts are made. Research is a collaborative process, so scientists need lab assistants, humanities researchers need library aides and graduate students need all the help they can get. A curious, competent undergraduate can always find work assisting a researcher.

Regardless of the field and the specific project, helping them helps you. The obvious benefits are new skills and invaluable experience. But there is also something powerful in seeing how the right experimental or analytical approach can sort through a mess of observations and opinion to identify real associations between phenomena, like a gene variant and a disease, or a financial tool and the availability of credit. With a window into the world of research, you will find yourself thinking more critically, accepting fewer assertions at face value and perhaps developing an emboldened sense of what you can accomplish.

Most important: research experience shows you how knowledge is produced. There are worse ways to prepare for life in an information age.

— *AMAN SINGH GILL, Ph.D. student in the ecology and evolution department at Stony Brook University*

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Devices have become security blankets. Take the time to wean yourself.

Start by scheduling a few Internet-free hours each day, with your phone turned off. It's the only way you'll be able to read anything seriously, whether it's Plato or Derrida on Plato. (And remember, you'll get more out of reading Derrida on Plato if you read Plato first.) This will also have the benefit of making you harder to reach, and thus more mysterious and fascinating to new friends and acquaintances.

When you leave your room for class, leave the laptop behind. In a lecture, you'll only waste your time and your parents' money, disrespect your professor and annoy whomever is trying to pay attention around you by spending the whole hour on Facebook.

You don't need a computer to take notes — good note-taking is not transcribing. All that clack, clack, clacking ... you're a student, not a court reporter. And in seminar or discussion sections, get used to being around a table with a dozen other humans, a few books and your ideas. After all, you have the rest of your life to hide behind a screen during meetings.

— *CHRISTINE SMALLWOOD, Ph.D. student in English and American literature at Columbia*

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First-years are under an unbelievable pressure not only to succeed, but to *excel* in college. They walk into a university already feeling guilty that they don't know what they want to major in, or what their career path is going to be. But be comfortable with the fact that you don't know anything. Nobody does.

During my first week in art school, I sat in a dark lecture hall as a professor asked questions I couldn't answer and showed slides I couldn't identify. I felt as if I was the only one in the room who didn't have a clue. So, when my drawing teacher invited several of us students to a potluck dinner at her house, I was still worried that I was out of my league. But in this casual setting, everyone opened up, and I was able to talk about art in the most relaxed and personal way.

As we returned to the dorms in the back of our now-favorite professor's pickup truck, I remember looking up at the night sky and the trees whizzing by and thinking, "This is what college is supposed to feel like!" Relax and enjoy the ride.

— *EVAN LaLONDE, student in the M.F.A. program in contemporary art practice at Portland*

State University

During the first few months of college, everyone wants to make friends. But no one knows how to do it, so everyone is really friendly all the time. You are likely to find yourself feigning interest in and enthusiasm for a lot of things to ingratiate yourself with your peers. “You’re a semiprofessional mime? So cool. Where are you going out tonight?”

Eventually, mercifully, it all shakes out. Parties, activities, dorms and classes help you find people you actually like to talk to. That is, unless you’re in your room every night, on the phone with your high school sweetheart, who’s back home or at another school. Or worse, you’re leaving school every other weekend to visit your significant other. Break up.

You should break up soon because you are likely to break up over Thanksgiving, anyway. You’ll give it an earnest try, but you’ll start to resent each other for forming new attachments, for not really “getting” what it’s like at your respective schools, for being the reason you’re both missing out on important experiences, like the hectic social sorting that’s happening right now. Worse, other people will punish you for missing out: “Oh, yeah, the joke is kind of hard to explain. See, it started that weekend you were out of town.”

Going to the same college as your significant high school other will not necessarily solve the problem. This is what happened to me. My boyfriend didn’t like my new “scene”; I panicked because I felt that we were spending too much time — then too little time — together. We limped through the first two months of the first semester before we called it quits.

The college year went by, bringing a lot of new people and priorities into our separate lives. The following fall, we realized that all our growing pains had not diminished what was a very precious connection. We ended up getting back together and staying together through the rest of college. But we had to break up first.

— *REBECCA ELLIOTT, Ph.D. student in the sociology department at the University of California, Berkeley*