

Guide to the Culture of College Academics

***E**ntering the culture of college academics is like entering a new and unfamiliar land, with its own beliefs and customs, its own values and unspoken assumptions. A new student joining the college classroom for the first time needs to learn as quickly as possible: What do people here believe in? What motivates them? What do they expect from me? How do I behave in acceptable ways? How do I communicate?*

Figuring out college academic culture, and adapting to it, can be challenging, in part because no one ever really explains it; students are just expected to absorb it as they go. Until now.

Here are eight ideas that can help high schoolers make sense of the culture of college academics before they get there.

 **KEY
CONCEPTS**



Education is more than career training.

Your idea of education and your college's idea of education may be very different.

It's tempting to believe that the purpose of college is simply to get training for the work you want to do when you get out. But while career preparation is certainly an important part of getting a college degree, the institution itself believes there is much more to education than that.

In the culture of college academics, education is understood as important for creating a society that is not only wealthy, but also democratic and just. It's also essential for developing individuals into people who are not only economically productive, but also decent and responsible and well-informed.

That's why a liberal course of study designed to broaden students' view of the world serves as the foundation of a college education. You should understand why your college or university requires you to take "general education" courses — introductions to anthropology, composition, biology and so forth — even if you really just want to work as an artist, or engineer, or accountant. It's because your college has a broad, ambitious vision of education's purpose.

Entering students need to understand how academic culture thinks about its mission, so that they can align their own goals and expectations with those of their school, and even embrace its vision of education for themselves.

#2

College is organized around *academic disciplines.*

In high school, you take classes in “subjects,” such as English, Social Studies, Science, and Math. The goal is to acquire a foundation of basic knowledge and skills. In college, “subjects” are replaced by “academic disciplines,” and with that switch comes a change in the relationship between you and your course content, and between you and your teachers.

An academic discipline is a field of study, such as Physics or Sociology or American Literature. Practically any course you take in college falls into an academic discipline. University professors and instructors specialize in these fields. Teaching may be an important part of their jobs, but they also conduct research, write articles and books, participate in professional conferences, and otherwise devote themselves to advancing knowledge within their academic discipline.

Why should any of that matter to you?
Because what your professors and

instructors reward in students is evidence that you are learning to think and communicate like them, that is, like people who are academically trained: formulating knowledgeable questions, thinking critically about ideas and evidence, trying out the specialized language of a discipline. Moreover, the history of their discipline, and the knowledge it contributes to the world — the key figures, the landmark research, the breakthrough theories, the major debates — are important to the people teaching you. They want you to see why you should care about their discipline as well.

An academic discipline is not a fixed bundle of knowledge, like a high school subject. It’s a living, breathing, changing complex of people and publications, methods and theories, information and institutions. When students can see how their courses fit within academic disciplines, then they begin to understand what they’re studying in the way that the culture itself understands it.

Through all your years of grade school, middle school, and high school, you don't have much choice — either in attending, or in selecting what you learn and do. The system of primary and secondary schooling can create the feeling in students that education is mostly about showing up and sitting still, as though you were an empty vessel gradually filled with whatever knowledge and skills your school pours into you.

The decision to attend college, however, signals a change in the relationship between you and your own education. It means that you, for the first time, have consciously elected to pursue education for yourself, and to take your studies in the direction that you want them to go.

Even after making this choice, however, many students have to *unlearn* the habit of seeing themselves as passive recipients of information and instruction. Instead, they

must turn themselves into active learners, who take responsibility for their own interest, motivation and growth. This is what

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the culture of college academics expects of students. It rewards people who cultivate within themselves curiosity about a wide variety of topics, and who can find something of value for themselves in every course they take.

But beyond a basic level of genuine effort and curiosity, students are expected to find

paths of intellectual pursuit that call out to them personally. Not all work in college is pleasurable, of course, but everyone has an opportunity, even a duty, to find the academic work that speaks to them.

It can be a revelation for students to discover that anything and everything is fair game for examination in academics. Anything that interests you or carries weight in your life — relationships, music, food, styles, sports, identities, city life, home life, rural life, social movements, fandom, technologies, health, family, business, gaming, media, the past, the future, every animal, vegetable, and mineral — anything

at all can be rendered an academically worthwhile topic. In the culture of college academics, intellectual engagement is the means by which students discover where their interests and talents lie; it's necessary for delivering their best work.

Every student has the opportunity to discover and pursue something they care about in their academic studies. In fact, there are few things that the culture of college academics values more than students' intellectual engagement. But the culture places responsibility on you for finding that engagement within yourself and getting passionate about your own education.

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It's true that getting a college education means learning how to think, behave, and communicate in ways that are accepted within the culture of college academics. But too many students believe that this requires suppressing who they are and conforming, in outward ways at least, to some nebulously defined mainstream college-student ideal.

What you'll actually find in college is that your background, your identity, and your individual perspective are valued by your school. Far from desiring to hammer you into a mainstream mold, college academic culture wants you to share the knowledge you bring with you from your own background and experience, and to fortify it with academic knowledge and habits of intellectual rigor.

Higher education considers it an important part of its mission to help you acquire agency — the ability to speak, write, and

act in ways that can make a difference in the world. The culture of college academics wants you to effectively represent and advance your interests and concerns, your purposes and perspectives — not just in school, but in society and in the world.

It strives to accomplish this goal by doing two things: 1) validating you as a member of the academic community; and 2) helping you to learn how to think and communicate in ways that have power and impact.

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Validating you as a member of the academic community means sending the clear message that you have a right to be there, earning your education, and that you have equal standing along with everyone else — no matter your income, background, native culture, or physical attributes. People may be excluded from the academic community on the basis of their merit, but not on the basis of their identity. That's the ideal, anyway.

As a validated member of the academic community, you have a right to speak. But in order to be heard, you need the ability to reason and communicate in ways that are valued and persuasive to people in academic culture. That means thinking

logically, reasoning carefully, reading perceptively, knowing what you're talking about, writing clearly — in short, it means acquiring and exercising the fundamental skills of an educated person.

When students understand going in that the project of higher education is to equip them with agency, it gives greater purpose to their efforts. They understand that education can reach beyond a narrow course of career training, toward developing them more fully as people, and empowering them as members of a democratic society. Students who understand this can better align their own conception of why they're pursuing an education with the institution's notion of why they *should* pursue an education.

By the time you get to high school you pretty much understand what is expected of you in order to succeed. This understanding has come about gradually, as you've advanced from grade to grade. But college can be a jarringly unfamiliar environment, and most students are only partially prepared for what they encounter. New students can become frustrated or intimidated because they recognize a gap between the academic work they feel prepared to do, and the work that is now expected of them in the college classroom.

The good news is that the culture of college academics recognizes this situation. You are not expected to perform at an expert level right from the start. Built into the culture is the understanding that learning to think and communicate like a college-educated person takes time — and that the farther away your

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native culture is from college culture, the greater the challenge you face. It's understood that you are in college to get *socialized* into the ways of academia, and that it doesn't happen overnight.

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and the place where you get to practice these skills yourself. *Practice* is a key idea here. Through participation in classroom discussions, working collaboratively in groups, engaging with instructors, reviewing and commenting on the work of your peers, producing work and responding to the feedback you receive from others, you gradually acquire for yourself the language skills and habits of

You learn and practice academic skills *in concert with other students* — and you learn from one another's successes and failures. Thus, in the culture of college academics, learning is understood as a thoroughly social endeavor.

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mind that are promoted and rewarded in the culture of college academics. Acquiring and practicing academic skills necessarily takes place in the presence of others, not in isolation.

College-level thinking and communication skills come through practice, and practice happens in the social environment of the classroom.

#6

Argumentation is the key mode of communication.

Forming and expressing an opinion is an important part of schoolwork prior to entering college. Students learn how to weigh in with their opinion on topics during classroom discussions, in assigned essays, and elsewhere. In the process, they learn to respect the opinions of others.

But students entering college need to understand that there is an important difference between an opinion and an argument — because opinions don't carry much weight in college academic culture, whereas strong, well-reasoned, well-supported arguments are its lifeblood. If you are going to succeed at academic work, and make good on the agency an education promises you, then you must learn how to recognize, evaluate, and construct arguments.

No doubt you've heard that "everyone is entitled to their own opinion." However

true it might be in other contexts, that notion is of limited value in academic work. The idea that all statements about the world are just opinions, and that all opinions are equivalent, stops many students from thinking critically about the things they read and hear. Opinions don't necessarily need to be supported, but persuasive arguments by definition back up their claims with data, observations, logic, experience, examples, illustrations, and so forth. Unless a statement about the world is backed up by evidence or reason, it's not persuasive in academic culture, and will not have much impact.

By understanding arguments, you'll be able to evaluate the claims about the world made by others, asking, "Are they credible and persuasive? Why or why not?" And you'll be able to express and support your own perspectives in ways that have power and impact.

Primary and secondary schooling is good at providing a foundation of basic academic skills and knowledge. Generally, in high school and before, students demonstrate that they're learning the basics by accurately repeating back information (historical facts, for instance) or correctly performing procedures (such as finding the slope of a line).

In college, the process continues: you absorb more information and learn more procedures. But there are additional

expectations as well, something more that you need to do with the information and procedures you learn. You need to analyze and think critically and solve problems. You need to be able not just to repeat knowledge but to transform it by teasing out new insights, bringing ideas or information together in new ways, refining a point, adding a perspective that can change the way people think about a topic, identifying flaws in an argument, or helping others appreciate a truth that wasn't apparent before. The list is infinite.

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We can call this ability *creative intelligence* -- *creative* because you are generating something new, a critique, an insight, a solution; *intelligence* because it is the product of your cognitive skills and knowledge, the product, that is, of your educated brain.

When you do college-level academic work, you're entering into a conversation with the writers and scholars you read, with your fellow students, with your instructors; in a fundamental way, you're entering into conversation with all of the people who have thought about the given topic, read about it, talked about it, written about it, worked with it. And as with any conversation, participation isn't about simply repeating back what someone else has already said. It's about responding, building upon, asking critical questions, fine-tuning points, proposing solutions — in short,

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contributing something of value that extends and enriches the conversation.

Regardless of your field of study, creative intelligence is the quality academic culture most wants to cultivate in you — because this is a quality that leads to success in academics, in work, in society, and in life.



By the time they get to high school, most students have a solid idea of what academic honesty means. They know that it's wrong to represent the work of others as their own, for example, or to seek some advantage for themselves by cheating on a test or in a competition.

Academic honesty takes on even greater importance in college. If you plagiarize the work of others or cheat on an exam, your grades suffer, your status as a student is imperiled, and your reputation is permanently tainted. The reason academic honesty matters so much in college — in addition to the basic issues of personal character and fairness to others — is that it is essential to intellectual integrity, and intellectual integrity is a core value in the culture of college academics.

Intellectual integrity is the quality within academics that assures that the work that gets done there is credible. People,

companies, governments, society itself rely on the credibility of the intellectual work produced by colleges and universities. Scientific studies, published analyses, public policy proposals, creative work — the value of all of it depends upon the integrity of the people and processes responsible for producing it. Without intellectual integrity, the work of colleges and universities can't be trusted and is of no value to anyone.

Students should understand that the integrity of their own intellectual work is wrapped up in the integrity of the whole

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enterprise of higher education. Students' intellectual integrity extends beyond refraining from cheating and plagiarizing. In the culture of college academics, students are also expected to represent the statements and positions of others fairly and accurately, for example. To support your own position, you can't mischaracterize the results of someone else's study, or distort the argument of someone else's essay, or falsify the results of your own research.

Further, it's essential that students learn to quote and cite other sources honestly and accurately. Academic work is always responding to and building upon the work of others. Citations establish your credibility with your audience and give

credit to others where it is due. Academic work depends for its credibility on making absolutely clear which ideas and language are your own, and which come from someone else. If the lines get blurred, the credibility of your work is undermined.

Your professors and instructors are keenly attuned to matters of intellectual integrity, since their own work, and their confidence in the institution of higher education itself, depend on it. Teaching this value to their students is one of their highest responsibilities. As an entering student, you should recognize that intellectual integrity is a deeply held cultural value that you will need to understand, embrace, and reflect in your own work.



***T**he eight points in this guide should help you prepare for and adjust to the culture of college academics. Let us know what you think of them. It is not a comprehensive list by any means. We hope to add to it, revise it, and otherwise improve it as we go along. Your ideas and suggestions are an important part of that project. We'd love to learn from your experience.*

Please share with us any comments and suggestions. Write us at hello@better-rhetor.com.

This guide was written by William Bryant, PhD. For a research-based discussion of the concepts in this guide see our white paper [here](#).