

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	vii
1. The Big Picture: Every Culture Has Rules and Norms. Some Are Written, But Many Are Not	1
Setting Goals: It's Not the Plan, But the Planning	
2. Not Having a Career Plan on Day 1 Usually Is Better than Having One	11
3. Planning Your Schedule This Term, This Year, and Through Graduation	25
4. Planning Semester and Life Goals	41
5. Planning Daily and Weekly Goals	55
Achieving Goals: How to Interact Effectively and Get Stuff That You Need	
6. In Choosing Your Courses Seek Great Teachers	71
7. Office Hours: How to Get the Most from Your Instructors When You Control the Agenda	82
8. Classroom Behavior: How to Master Content and Make a Positive Impression on Your Instructor	94
9. Nurturing Your Relationships with Instructors: The Path to Recommendations, a Mentor, Jobs, and More	103

VI CONTENTS

The Nuts and Bolts of Learning and Performing

10. How to Study (The Lessons You Need but Never Got)	137
11. Exams: How to Perform When It Counts Most	157
12. Papers and Other Writing Assignments: Say It Better	170
13. How to Study a Language	183

Overcoming Barriers to Success

14. Resilience: Everyone Falls; Only Some Get Back Up	195
15. Exam Postmortem: How to Learn from the Experience	212

Career Planning

16. Getting into the Graduate School of Your Choice: The Process (and the Secret)	221
17. What Makes You an Appealing Job Candidate? It's Not What You Think	234

Conclusion

18. The Big Picture, Revisited: If You Remember Just One Lesson Five Years from Now, It's This . . .	247
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	253
<i>Appendix</i>	255
<i>Index</i>	269

THE BIG PICTURE

Every Culture Has Rules and Norms. Some Are Written, But Many Are Not

One fall day, some years ago, Terry was sitting in his office at Harvard University near the Charles River. Within one minute (literally), he received two nearly identical requests:

Dear Professor Burnham, I am applying to graduate school and I would appreciate if you would write a recommendation letter on my behalf. Sincerely, your former student.

To one of the students, Terry wrote, “Yes. It would be my pleasure to write a letter for you. Please come by my office sometime this week. We can discuss my letter and I’ll help you develop a strategy to get accepted.” To the other student he wrote, “I’m sorry. Unfortunately, I won’t be able to help you at this time.”

Both students had taken the same class with Terry. And the student who received the “Not at this time” response had even earned a higher grade than the student who received the “I will help you.”

What was going on? How is it possible that a student who performed less well can get valuable career assistance and a recommendation letter, while a better-performing student does not? This seeming paradox is resolved by understanding and following some unstated cultural norms regulating behavior in college.

2 CHAPTER 1

Grades are important, but they are not everything. Far from it, in fact. The best outcomes require artful navigation of the unique college culture. *The Secret Syllabus* is a guide to mastering these unstated cultural norms that lead to academic (and life) success. With it, you won't lose your way.

Together, we have taught more than 20,000 students at Harvard, UCLA, Pepperdine, the University of Michigan, Chapman University, and MIT. Almost every day, we encounter students who work harder and achieve less than they would if they knew and understood the material in *The Secret Syllabus*.

Additionally, during college, we—the authors, Jay Phelan and Terry Burnham—made some avoidable and spectacularly terrible choices. These blunders caused us to miss opportunities and to waste untold time—sometimes hours, sometimes months—in aimless and unproductive floundering. We needed this book!

Before laying out the book's structure, let's start with a bit of biography.

Jay grew up in California and attended UCLA. He then earned a master's degree at Yale, followed by his doctorate in biology at Harvard. Jay taught at Harvard and Pepperdine before returning to teach biology at UCLA and write biology textbooks.

Terry grew up near Detroit and attended the University of Michigan. He earned a master's degree at San Diego State University and a second master's at MIT, followed by his doctorate in business economics at Harvard. Terry was a professor at the Harvard Business School, the Harvard Kennedy School, and the University of Michigan, before moving to California to teach finance at Chapman University.

You can be forgiven for assuming that two Harvard PhDs must have skated through school and so cannot understand the issues of typical students. This could not be further from the truth. We have certainly had some great outcomes, but, for the most part, we have been depressingly average in the mistakes that we've made.

Let's start with Jay in his own words:

I was not a good student. Almost from the day I arrived at college (as a first-generation college student), things went poorly for me. My courses didn't speak to me. It felt as though my instructors weren't telling me anything about my life. My textbooks seemed out of touch with my own personal experiences in the world. And consequently, little of my course work felt relevant to me. I wanted to check out. Not surprisingly, my resulting "strategy" of poor attendance led to some very bad outcomes.

This wasn't simply a brief, difficult transition to college. I spent years stumbling into and out of "academic probation" and the more dire "subject to dismissal." I was an interdisciplinary disappointment and received the dreaded grade of F repeatedly.

I understand what it is like to sit in class and feel that all hope is lost. But I also have learned how to turn things around.

And from Terry:

I never saw a clear and obvious path when I set off for college. Initially, I was pre-med because my father wanted me to be a doctor. After getting accepted to medical school, however, I decided to instead try to find my own path.

I was a computer programmer, a tank driver in the U.S. Marine Corps Reserves, and worked on Wall Street for Goldman, Sachs &

4 CHAPTER 1

Co., before earning an MBA, a PhD, and then becoming a professor. My path was unnecessarily circuitous because of my lack of focus and guidance.

Uncertainty about my direction also led me to take time off from college. I lived in Salt Lake City, where I skied and worked at a variety of jobs, including as a busboy and a short-order cook. Only after taking a day labor job at a slaughterhouse and standing waist-deep among bloody carcasses did I have the epiphany that maybe college wasn't so bad.

We are not proud recounting our struggles and failures; for many years we were too embarrassed to even mention them to anyone. We only reveal them here in the hope that helping you avoid these blunders can be a silver lining.

Throughout this book, the advice and guidance we provide is not always available from your instructors. Your challenges may be motivation, time management, life pressures, study skills, mentor-seeking, finding a learning community, or something else.

You may feel like you don't know what you should be doing. Or you may know what you should be doing, but don't quite know how to do it effectively. These challenges can be exacerbated because, in many cases, your instructors have never faced similar issues.

For example, while more than a third of all college students have parents who do not have a bachelor's degree, only a tiny percentage of faculty members were first-generation students. It's hard to find your way, let alone thrive, when you're not quite sure that you belong and may lack a sufficiently knowledgeable support network.

The experiences of struggling, juggling, searching, and bouncing back from setbacks may be unfamiliar to many professors, but we know these issues intimately. We have wrestled with (and overcome) these challenges.

Advice Is Not Enough

Much of the advice that students receive about how to be more successful in college is not particularly useful:

“You should go to office hours.” *This is true, but it’s not very helpful. Because once you’re there, what should you do? Here’s a hint: asking your instructor to re-explain concepts from class is not among the most valuable reasons to go to office hours.*

“You should get some research experience.” “You should get some real-world experience, like an internship.” “You should get a faculty mentor.” “You should be more efficient when you study.” *Again, these are true. But they miss the mark. As is often the case, the more important guidance you need is about **how** you actually do those things. We will help you succeed with all of these.*

Our overriding goal in *The Secret Syllabus* is to highlight the ideas and practices that you are not likely to come up with on your own. We get particularly excited about counterintuitive solutions, those for which your instincts might lead you to do exactly the wrong thing, even after careful consideration.

“The sooner you have a major, the better a candidate you will be for jobs, for transfer to a better school, or for graduate schools.” *Not only is this advice not helpful, in a very large number of cases, it is completely wrong.*

6 CHAPTER 1

And still other advice—although undeniably reasonable—is just too obvious to be helpful. For example, here are some actual recommendations from other college guidebooks:

“Get to class early.”

“Be prepared. Read the assigned material.”

“Try not to cram for tests.”

“Avoid procrastination.”

Moreover, we will never suggest that doing well in college simply boils down to a set of tricks or “hacks.” Doing well in college, as in life, does involve learning some important tactics and skills (which we will cover). But reading or memorizing a bunch of unrelated bits of advice from a list of “tips” can take you only so far. Real success requires engagement with the substance and a foundation of deeper, guiding principles.

The Secret Syllabus

With *The Secret Syllabus* our goal is considerably more ambitious than the dispensing of advice. We want to serve as guides and, hopefully, mentors, as you become immersed in a new, complex culture. Across each of the eighteen chapters—think of them as “lectures”—our objective is to illuminate the fundamental foundational principles that will enable you to succeed, as you:

- craft your college experience;
- develop professional relationships;
- achieve academic excellence;
- increase your resiliency; and
- plan your postcollege career.

Throughout this book, we’ll illustrate both productive and counter-productive approaches, using true, real-life stories. And

we will summarize each lesson with “Take Home Messages,” distilling the ideas into clear, concise guides to action.

Our goal is to inspire you not just to get good grades, but also to learn and to grow, to recognize that you belong, and to find satisfaction and excitement in your role as a college student. Whether you are figuring out how to select a major or how to find an effective mentor, there won’t be “one size fits all” solutions.

There is some creativity—even artistry—required. Our approach is to help you develop consistently winning and effective behaviors. With this wisdom, you’ll be equipped to thrive in any situation.

Take Home Messages

1. In addition to the many explicit rules and requirements, college is governed by unwritten, and rarely stated, practices and cultural norms, which we reveal in this book. True and long-term success requires mastery of both types of material.
2. Almost every student arrives at college unprepared for the impending culture shock—including even those who are academically brilliant. Mastering *The Secret Syllabus* equips students for a rich college experience and a successful life.

Index

- Amazon, 64–65
American Dream, 15
arts, 35
Belleville, Bob, 238–39
Bernstein, Carl, 110
Bezos, Jeff, 65
Blake, William, 205
blocking, of study material, 150–51
Blunt, Emily, 71
the boss: attitudes of, toward employees, 247–48; employee characteristics desired by, 250–51; employees' relationship with, 234–37
brain: cognitive effort, 142–43; evolutionary behavior, 59–61; responses to changes in situations, 60–61, 199; structural changes caused by learning, 185
brainstorming, 174–75
Briggs, Katharine, 48
Broca's area, 185
Bush, Barbara, 34
business management. *See* the boss
career centers, 23–24, 49, 234
career paths: benefits of being undecided about, 16–22; changing, 16; circuitous, 3–4, 46–47, 51–53; exploring, 20–22, 41–42; feeling pressures about, 11–12, 15–17, 21; goals for, 43–44; job considerations, 234–44; networking and, 240–42; personality types and, 48–49; planning and pursuing, 11–16; regret over, 19; relationships with the boss, 234–37
career satisfaction, 20, 23, 239–40
Carter, Jimmy, 56
Chapman University, 29, 101, 104, 161
Church, George, 202–3
classroom behavior, 94–102
class size, 33
CNN Money, 20
cognitive effort, 142–43
Cohen, Arianne, 199
Coley, Ron, 201
college experience: best memories of, 34–35; employment during, 35; goals for, 6, 21, 43, 45; networking as aspect of, 243; pressures of, 196–98. *See also* planning a schedule; relationships with professors
Columbia University, 33
course selection, 72, 74
Covey, Steven, 80–81
cramming, 152–54
culture shock, vii, xii, 7
Curie, Marie, 204
decision-making, 18, 21, 28
dopamine, 198, 199
Duerson, Dave, 50
Einstein, Albert, 204
elaborative interrogation, 148
emotions, 59–61, 207
employers. *See* the boss
employment during college, 35
Erard, Michael, 184–85
evaluations. *See* student evaluations of teachers
evolutionary behavior, 59–61
exams, 157–69; grades, 137–39, 161–62; how to take, 158–60, 162–68; learning from past performances on, 212–18; presentation of answers in, 166–68; professors' learning from, 216; styles of writing, 214–15

270 INDEX

- failure: emotions associated with, 207; on exams and assignments, 137-39; finding success after, 3-4, 32, 195-96, 200-203, 221-22; lessons learned from, 204-9; making stories of, 207-8; misconceptions about, 51-53, 203
- Feldstein, Marty, 99
- Felt, Mark, 109-10, 114
- financial goals, 44
- first-generation students, x, xi, xii, 3, 4
- fitness goals, 44
- flash cards, 185-86, 188
- Forbes Magazine*, 20
- foreign languages. *See* language study
- four-year college plan, 27-36; nonacademic activities, 34-36; requirements and hard/easy classes, 33-34; summer plans, 31-33; value of planning ahead, 27-31
- free time, 36-37
- Freud, Sigmund, 47
- Full Metal Jacket* (film), 47
- Garagiola, Joe, 239
- Gilyard, Reggie, 104
- Ginsberg, Ruth Bader, 240
- goals: career progress, 43-44; college, 6, 21, 43, 45; daily and weekly, 55-66; examination of, 63; financial, 44; fitness, 44; identifying, categorizing, and prioritizing, 45-46, 56, 62-63; life, 42-43; personal, 44; tasks in relation to, 57-58
- Goldman, Sachs & Co., 3, 91, 101
- Goodall, Jane, 14
- graduate school application process, 221-33; cost of grad school, 223; identifying and communicating with desirable professors, 224-31; identifying desirable schools, 226-27; personal statements, 231-32; professional schools vs. graduate schools, 222-23; what schools look for, 223-24
- Haims, Julie, 207
- happiness: arts-related activities contributing to, 35; changes in situation as source of, 59-61, 199; myths about achieving, 15, 17. *See also* career satisfaction
- Harbaugh, John, 15, 17
- Harvard University, 1, 41-42, 105-6, 163, 198
- heritage learners, 189-90
- Honnold, Alex, 30-31
- interests. *See* self/personhood: interests and passions
- interleaving, of study material, 151-52
- Jerry Maguire* (film), 249
- Jobs, Steve, 12-13, 17, 236, 238-39
- jobs during college, 35
- job seeking, 234-44
- Jordan, Michael, 201-2
- Jung, Carl, 47-48
- Keitel, Harvey, 90
- Keynes, John Maynard, 18
- Koch, Jim, 62-63
- Konrad, Ulrich, 177
- lag time, 25-27
- language study, 183-92; heritage learners, 189-90; study tips, 185-86; in summer school, 33; use of class time, 187-89; using the language, 187-88; writing, 190-91
- leisure. *See* free time
- Lincoln, Abraham, 202
- Lombardi, Vince, 157
- majors, 5
- Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), 33
- mentorships, 103-4, 114-16. *See also* relationships with professors
- Mezzofanti, Giuseppe, 184-85
- Middlebury Language Schools, 33
- midlife crises, 19
- Mini-Markers personality test, 237
- Moliere, *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, 242

- motivation, 59–61
- Mozart, Wolfgang Amadeus, 176–77
- Myers, Isabel, 48
- Myers-Briggs personality test, 47–49
- networking, 240–42
- Nixon, Richard, 109–10
- nonacademic activities, 34–36
- notes and note-taking, 39, 141–47
- Oberg, Kalervo, vii, xii
- office hours, 82–93; professors' expectations for, 84; protocol for going during, 91–92; scheduling time for, 38; student attitudes toward, 85; student initiative in going to, 83; unhelpful advice concerning, 5, 82; what not to do when going to, 87–89; what to do when going to, 83–87, 89–92
- Ohio State University, 33
- omphaloskepsis, 41
- organization of class material and notes, 39
- outlines, 175–76
- Ovid, 62
- Page, Alan, 28–29
- papers. *See* writing
- parents, influence over career decisions, 17, 21–22
- Parker, Dorothy, 178
- passions. *See* self/personhood: interests and passions
- peers: advice on professor selection from, 75–76; evaluations of teachers by, 75–79; as study partners, 37
- personality types, 47–49, 237–38
- personhood. *See* self/personhood
- Phelps, Michael, 138
- Pinker, Steven, *The Sense of Style*, 178
- planning a schedule, 25–40; daily and weekly plans, 55–66; four-year plan, 27–36; lag time, 25–27; semester-by-semester plans, 36–40; value of planning ahead, 27–31
- Poitier, Sidney, 200
- Post-it notes, 205
- practice tests, 148–50
- priorities, 45–46, 56, 62–63
- productivity, 55–56, 61–65
- professional schools, 222
- professors: attitudes of, toward students, 1–2, 23, 94–95, 100–101, 248–49; effectiveness of, 72–74, 77; effect of, on students' lives, 71, 73; exam-writing styles of, 214–15; expectations concerning office hours, 84; in graduate school, 224–31; learning from students' exam performances, 216; making impressions on, 94–102, 248–49; perspectives on grades, 161–62, 172–73; recommendations from, 1, 25–26, 95–97, 101, 116–18, 132–33, 250–51; selection of, 73–76, 79–81; showing respect for, 97–99; student evaluations of, 75–79; students' attitudes toward, 247–48. *See also* relationships with professors
- progress, signs of, 61–62, 64
- Pulp Fiction* (film), 90
- Real Genius* (film), 145
- recommendation letters, 1, 25–26, 95–97, 101, 116–18, 132–33, 250–51
- relationships with professors, 103–33; benefits of, 106, 250–51; continuing contact in, 112–14; in graduate school, 224–31; importance of, 103–6; initial contacts in, 107–9; notes from students, 107, 109, 112–13, 115–17, 120–33; opportunities for deepening, 109–12; payoffs from, 114–18; phases of developing, 104–5; professors' valuing of, 104, 249; strategies for developing, 105–6; student attitudes as component of, 248–49
- required courses, 33–34

272 INDEX

- research opportunities: grad school selection and, 223, 225, 227-29; notes from students seeking, 108-9, 121-28; in summer, 31-32
- resilience, 195-211; brain chemistry behind, 199; building, 204-9; defined, 200; examples of, 195-96, 200-203; role of failure in, 202-6
- revisions, 176-79
- Rowling, J. K., 63
- Rush, 28
- schedules. *See* planning a schedule
- Schwarzenegger, Arnold, 144
- Seau, Junior, 50
- self/personhood: development of, 47-48; goals for, 44; interests and passions, 13-15, 20-21, 45; making changes in, 65-66; motivation of, 59-61; Present You and Future You, 27, 28, 65-66. *See also* happiness
- semester game plans, 36-40
- Silver, Spencer, 205
- Sinclair, Upton, *The Jungle*, 239
- sleep, 39-40
- Smith, Adam, 231
- soft contacts, 242
- Solis, Hilda, 200
- sports, 35
- Stewart, Martha, 199
- Strunk, William, and E. B. White, *The Elements of Style*, 178
- student evaluations of teachers, 75-79
- study abroad, 33
- studying, 137-56; lack of preparation for, 139; mistakes made in, 140; note-taking as part of, 141-47; with peers, 37, 38; practice tests as component of, 148-50; process for effective, 38, 140-54; questions as component of, 147-48; time allotted for, 38, 152-53
- summer plans, 31-33
- summer school, 32-33
- Swift, Taylor, 100
- Take Home Messages, 175-76
- Taoism, 50, 186
- Task Lists, 57-58, 61-65
- teachers. *See* professors
- time management, 37
- To-Do Lists. *See* Task Lists
- Tulane University, 32
- University of California, Berkeley, 33
- US News and World Report*, 20, 210, 227
- volunteering: career exploration, 36; research opportunities, 31-32, 36
- Wachtel, Howard, 75
- Washington Post* (newspaper), 110
- Wernicke's area, 185
- Wilder, Laura Ingalls, 51-53
- Woodward, Bob, 109-10, 114
- writing, 170-82; approaches to paper writing, 174-76; in a foreign language, 190-91; guidelines for, 181-82; making it interesting, 179-80, 182; personal statements, 118, 231-32; role of revisions in, 176-79