

How Do College Freshmen View the Academic Differences Between High School and College?

Drew Appleby, Ph.D.
Director of Undergraduate Studies in Psychology
Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis

Rationale for this Report

I have been using a three-part strategy to help my students survive their freshman year in college for over a third of a century. The *first* stage in this strategy is to bring their attention to the ways in which their college classes and professors are going to be different from their high school classes and teachers. For example, the work in college is harder, there is more of it, it must be completed in shorter period of time, and most of it must be done outside of the school environment. The *second* stage is to help them identify and value the knowledge, skills, and attitudes (KSAs) they will need to adapt to their new academic environment. For example, they must have knowledge of the resources their college provides (e.g., the library, the writing center, and academic advising), the skills their classes will require (e.g., the ability to follow instructions, critical thinking, and time management), and the attitudes they must exhibit to be academically successful (e.g., the willingness to take responsibility for their own learning and to assume an active—rather than a passive—attitude toward their education). The *third* stage is to engage them in assignments and activities designed to develop or strengthen these KSAs.

I have identified these academic differences and the KSAs needed to adjust to them by combining the wisdom of experts in the field of the first year experience with the experiences I have had with the thousands of freshmen I have taught during my 33-year career as a college professor. My strategy has been reasonably successful, but it suffers from a reliance on the faulty assumption that younger people (i.e., college freshmen) will eagerly attend to, value, believe, and act upon the advice given to them by older people (i.e., college faculty). I am sure my students perceive me as a friendly, well-meaning person who sincerely desires to help them, but as I have aged, my ability to act as a credible source of advice for college freshmen has diminished. This paper represents an attempt to create a source of advice for college freshman that comes from a far more credible source than a person who is three times as old as they are. The source of this advice is students who, only one short year ago, were freshmen too.

My method to create this advice was simple. During the fifth week of the fall semester of 2004, I asked the 24 students enrolled in my freshman thematic learning community to tell me the differences they had experienced between (a) their high school classes and their college classes and (b) their high school teachers and their college professors. I then content analyzed their responses into categories that reflected basic differences between their academic experiences in high school and college. The remainder of this paper presents a summary of the differences in these two crucial aspects of the academic environment (i.e., classes and teachers) supported by the actual “voices” of my students. The paper ends with a paragraph of advice that can be drawn from this summary. This is basically the same advice I have been sharing with my freshman for the past 33 years. It is my fondest desire that the freshmen I teach during my next 33 years will be more receptive to this advice because they believe it comes from a more credible source.

Perceived Differences Between High School Classes and College Classes

My students identified several differences between high school classes and college classes, most of which dealt with the work assigned in classes. Students said that both the amount and difficulty of the work they are required to do in college classes had increased significantly from high school. One said, “You have to read everything in college, whereas in high school you barely had to read anything at all.” A second noted, “High school classes were really easy to pass, but college classes take a lot of work for you to succeed.” A third said, “College classes are really hard and much more in-depth compared to high school classes.” Time was also a factor mentioned by many students, both in terms of the amount of time it takes to complete assignments and the speed with which material must be learned. One student said, “We just don’t have as much time to do assignments as we did in high school because a lot more material is covered in a shorter amount of time.” A second stated, “Even though you may not be in class as long as in high school, the amount of time you have to put in to complete the assigned work is doubled, even tripled.” Another aspect of the differences between the work done in high school and college is where the work is done. One student provided insight into this difference by saying, “In high school, you learn the material in class. In college, most learning takes place outside the classroom.”

The most commonly cited difference between how learning takes place in high school and college was that more responsibility is placed on students to learn on their own in college. This difference was clearly communicated by one student who said, “You did not have to do reading assignments in high school because your teacher taught you everything you had to know for tests. In college, if you do not do your homework, you have no crutch to lean on. You are on your own in college classes.” Another supported this opinion succinctly by saying, “In college, you need to learn how to learn on your own.”

A final difference that a few students noted between high school and college classes was classroom atmosphere. The following two quotations make it clear that high school students should expect a difference in the way their classes will be run in college. “College

classes are more laid back, longer, and don't have as many rules." "The biggest difference is that they don't make you stand if you're late, there are no assigned seats, and you don't need passes to leave." (Please note that these comments refer to rules for classroom behaviors, not academic rules such as deadlines for papers and tests, which tend to be more strict in college as we will learn later.)

Perceived Differences Between High School Teachers and College Professors

My students also identified several differences between high school teachers and college professors, the most important of which centered on the fact that college professors expect their students to be more responsible partners in the teaching-learning process. Several students' responses focused on the syllabus that college professors use to communicate the structure, procedures, and requirements of their classes to students. One student commented about this by saying, "High school teachers tell students what's due the next day, whereas college professors expect students to read for themselves what's due in the syllabus." This idea was reinforced by another student who said, "College teachers don't tell you what you're supposed to do. They just expect you to do it. High school teachers tell you about five times what you are supposed to do." The following poignant comment from another student communicates the feeling of frustration and helplessness that can be experienced by a freshman who has not yet fully adapted to this greater level of responsibility. "College teachers expect their students to read the syllabus and the classroom is set up to where it is sink or swim. Do the work or fail. High school teachers reminded us about the deadlines for our projects everyday and tried to help us if we were struggling."

A second aspect of increased student responsibility for learning in college emerged in comments about the difference between what is taught by high school teachers and college professors. One student explained this difference by saying, "High school teachers teach you what's in your textbooks. College teachers expect you to actually read your textbooks." A second student highlighted this from a more personal perspective with the following comment. "High school teachers assist you more. They kind of hold your hand through things." A third student's comment summarized the concept of increased student responsibility quite succinctly by saying, "College knowledge is self-taught." A final comment lends a cultural perspective to the different atmosphere of academic responsibility in high school and college and the differential way this responsibility is valued by students. "In high school, you were a dork if you got good grades and cared about what was going on in your classes. In college, you're a dork if you don't."

Another responsibility-related difference that students reported between high school teachers and college professors was adherence to rules. One student noted that, "College teachers expect much more from you. There are no late assignments or make-up tests. They do not hold your hand anymore." The following comment helped to explain the potentially negative results of this difference for college students who are accustomed to their old high school ways. "The biggest difference between the two was that in high school, I could usually get an assignment done whenever I could and there wouldn't be much of a consequence if it was late."

A final difference that my students perceived between high school teachers and college professors dealt with student-teacher relationships. One student said, "College professors aren't as personable as high school teachers. I could stop into my high school teachers' offices and sit there for 30 minutes to just hang out." A second student commented that, "College teachers don't try to get to know you as well as high school teachers did."

Advice That Can Help High School Students Become Aware of the Differences Between High School and College and Successfully Adapt to These Differences

The advice in the following paragraph should help incoming college students who would like to know how their academic experience in college will differ from high school. If they take this advice seriously and use it to modify their academic behaviors and attitudes, it can prevent them from blundering into their freshman year in college and expecting it to be their 13th grade in high school.

Before you begin your freshman year in college, prepare yourself to be challenged by harder work, more work, and work that must be completed in a shorter period of time. You should begin to change your educational work ethic because you will be doing most of your work outside of the classroom, and you will be expected to learn the majority of your assigned material on your own, rather than relying on your teachers to teach it to you. You should also begin preparing yourself to learn in a less-structured classroom atmosphere in which your teachers will no longer remind you about what you are supposed to do, will hold you responsible for completing your assignments in the correct and timely manner described in the course syllabus they give you on the first day of class, and will be less likely to bend the rules or allow you to earn extra credit if your work is late or if you perform poorly. You may also discover that college professors are less available than high school teachers and that some prefer to maintain a somewhat more formal relationship with their students than high school teachers. Time management is a tremendous problem for many freshmen. For most high school students—especially bright ones—the educational day ends when the school day ends because they have been able to learn all they need to know while they were in school. Learning does not end when the class day ends in college. In fact, learning often begins when classes end because so much learning takes place outside the classroom. This abrupt change of events is particularly difficult for students who are accustomed to going to high school for 7 hours and then having the remaining 17 hours of the day to eat, sleep, relax, shop, play video games, watch television, listen to music, and hang out with friends. One of the purposes of higher education is to prepare you to become a person who is capable of mastering large amounts of difficult material in a short period of time and performing this work in a responsible and independent manner without having to be reminded to do it. In other words, one of the objectives of a college education is to transform adolescents into adults. The following comment from A. J. Thut, a current IUPUI freshman, puts this objective into sharp perspective. "It's time for me to step out of the purgatory between my teenage years and adulthood and to take some responsibility for my life."

Raw Data

IUPUI Freshman Perceptions of the Academic Differences Between High School and College

(Data gathered from Drew Appleby's 2004 Thematic Learning Community)

- A. What are the differences between high school classes and college classes?
1. There is more work to do in college classes.
 - a. You have to read everything in college, whereas in high school you barely had to read anything at all.
 - b. Even though you may not be in class as long as in high school, the amount of time you have to put in to complete the work is doubled, even tripled.
 - c. The biggest difference I have discovered is the larger amount of homework. I have been forced to become very good with time management in order to complete my assignments.
 - d. The biggest difference between college and high school classes is that the amount of effort and study time on the student's part increases greatly in college.
 2. The work in college classes is more difficult.
 - a. High school classes were really easy to pass, but college classes take a lot of work for you to succeed.
 - b. In college your grades are based on tests, not homework. Most classes don't give out a lot of points for homework. Homework was a big thing in high school and counted for a lot of points.
 - c. College classes are really hard and much more in-depth compared to high school classes.
 3. Most work for college classes takes place outside the classroom.
 - a. In high school, you learn the material in class. In college, most learning takes place outside the classroom.
 - b. There is a lot more work in college, and much more of it is outside of class.
 4. There is less time to complete the work in college.
 - a. We just don't have as much time to do assignments as we did in high school because a lot more material is covered in a shorter amount of time.
 - b. Even though you have more free time, it's tougher. You may have five assignments due at the same time. In high school, each class gave you assignments on different days.
 - c. There is more homework with less time to do it than high school classes
 - d. College classes are more fast-paced with much less "busy work."
 5. More responsibility is placed on students to learn on their own in college.
 - a. High school teachers taught you everything you had to know for a test. For college classes, you have to learn more on your own.
 - b. You did not have to do reading assignments in high school because your teacher taught you everything you had to know for tests. In college, if you do not do your homework, you have no crutch to lean on. You are on your own in college classes.
 - c. There is more independent learning in college. College learning is "do it yourself."
 - d. You must pay more attention in college because you need to pick up all the information. In high school you can get by with little information.
 - e. High school classes were easy because our teachers gave us the assignment and all the information we needed. In college, we have to look for ourselves in the syllabus so we know what to do.
 - f. In college you need to learn on you own.
 6. The atmosphere is different in college classes.
 - a. College classes are more laid back, longer, and don't have as many rules.
 - b. The biggest difference is that they don't make you stand if you're late, there are no assigned seats, and you don't need passes to leave.
- B. What are the differences between high school teachers and college professors?
1. College teachers give their students a syllabus that describes the assignments for the whole semester and they expect you to read it so you know what is going on in their classes without having to remind you.
 - a. High school teachers tell students what's due the next day; college professors expect student read for themselves what's due in the syllabus.
 - b. In high school, you were a dork if you got good grades and cared about what was going on in your classes. In college, you're a dork if you don't.
 - c. The difference between college professors and high school teachers is the way they teach. In high school, teachers gave us their assignments instead of having us look them up in a syllabus.

- d. High school teachers told us our assignments; college professors tell us to look at the syllabus.
 - e. The biggest difference is having a syllabus you are supposed to read instead of having your teacher tell you what your homework assignment is everyday.
 - f. College teachers don't tell you what you're supposed to do. They just expect you to do it. High school teachers tell you about five times what you are supposed to do.
 - g. College teachers expect their students to read the syllabus and the classroom is set up to where it is sink or swim. Do the work or fail. High school teachers reminded us about the deadlines are for our projects everyday and tried to help us if we were struggling.
2. College teachers expect you to learn on your own.
 - a. In high school, teachers taught us the material in class instead of us teaching ourselves.
 - b. High school teachers teach you what's in your textbooks. College teachers expect you to actually read your textbooks.
 - c. High school teachers teach students the information in their textbooks. College professors teach students how to learn on their own.
 - d. College professors do not cover the material in class that you read at home.
 - e. The biggest difference between professors and high school teachers is that you learn it by yourself in college.
 - f. College teachers don't teach as much as high school teachers.
 - g. High school teachers assist you more. They kind of hold your hand through things.
 - h. The biggest difference between high school teachers and college professors is their method of "teaching." College knowledge is self-taught.
 - i. High school teachers go over all the material. College teachers expect you to do it on your own.
 3. College teachers are more strict about deadlines.
 - a. College teachers are strict about when tests, papers, and homework assignments are due. High school teachers were more lax.
 - b. College teachers expect much more from you. There are no late assignments or make-up tests. They do not hold your hand anymore
 - c. The biggest difference between the two was that in high school, I could usually get an assignment done whenever I could and there wouldn't be much of a consequence if it was late.
 4. College teachers are less personable.
 - a. College professors aren't as personable as high school teachers. I could stop into my high school teachers' offices and sit there for 30 minutes to just hang out.
 - b. College teachers don't try to get to know you as well as high school teachers did.
-

Reference for this paper:

Appleby, D. C. (2005, March). *How do college freshmen view the academic differences between high school and college?*
Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Midwest Institute for Students and Teachers of Psychology, Glen Ellyn, IL.