
The Changing College Student

Why First-Year Students Today Are Different

The first chapter explains why and how social science can help students navigate college. The introductory chapter begins with student case studies and then describes how a number of social changes over the last several decades resulted in the relatively new life stage called “emerging adulthood.” Emerging adults today are different from the entering college students of the past, which means that the parents and grandparents of young students may have had different experiences in college than most young people do today. This chapter explains these differences across generations of entering college students, as well as the implications of these changes for understanding entering college students today. This introductory chapter also introduces and summarizes the content of the other book chapters.

This book aids entering college students—and the people who support college students—in navigating college successfully. In an environment of information overload, where bad advice abounds, this book offers practical tips and guidance. Unlike some of the more widely available advice that is based on outdated, misinformed, or uninformed ideas about what college students need to know, the advice in this book is based upon real students and sound social science research. The wide range of college pathways available to students presents challenges for understanding what information is applicable to their individual path. What students and their parents and mentors need is a book that provides clear guidance on how to navigate different pathways with their own preferences in mind. This guide provides tips that assist readers along well-traveled (and less traveled) pathways through and out of college.

The central thesis of the book is that the transition to adulthood is a complex process, and college is pivotal to this experience. This book seeks to help young people navigate that process. For many, college represents the culmination of ambition, independence, and individualism, and each of these themes is represented in this book, especially through the student stories. Challenges vary depending on a student's demographics and social background. Getting invested in the community is critical to college success, no matter what the point of entry. Universities have many resources, but students have to realize when they need them and figure out how to connect with them. There is no single template for student success, whether considering how to navigate through college or how to find gainful employment afterward. Each student needs to balance their evolving life in their own way. Nevertheless, this book highlights some common issues that many college students face and provides science-based advice for how to navigate college.

Every chapter of this book begins with stories from real college students and then summarizes research that is relevant to their stories. The third section of each chapter turns insights from both sources of information into advice for students. The author team of faculty, instructors, advisors, and other campus support staff provide students with tips on how to understand their circumstances, process various situations, and find their

way around academic and social life on campus. The final chapters of the book offer interactions among student stories and tips to give students an overall sense of how to forge their own path through college.

With each chapter we paint an increasingly complex picture of the challenges and opportunities college students encounter. One way of characterizing this progression is that this chapter focuses on individuals in a developmental stage during which self-focus is normal. Chapter 2 contextualizes the changing life course within larger economic, social, and cultural trends, and discusses the role of contemporary higher education in understanding those changes. Social class, economic resources, and how family backgrounds condition students' college experiences are addressed in chapter 3. Chapter 4 integrates these topics by advising students to consider the ways that they exercise personal agency in making key decisions during college, while warning students to appreciate the difficulty of these choices and pay attention to the realities of the options they have available to them. Resiliency, or how students can bounce back from personal and structural challenges to build a successful college career, is the focus of chapter 5. Chapter 6 addresses race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, and other aspects of diversity that shape individual students' expectations and experiences of college life. Chapter 7 examines how learning from personal experiences and structural challenges can put students on a path to leadership. The final chapter attends to the exploration of college life, and how switching and recalibrating allows students to realize their professional and career identities and goals.

THIS BOOK'S GOALS

Our goal in writing this book is to convey the contemporary experiences for emerging adult college students in a meaningful way. We identify a number of social issues; describe how these present challenges to students; place students' personal experiences within a broader social context; and offer research-based tips for young people—and the people who support them—in navigating college. Our objectives are as follows:

- Respond to the changing needs of incoming college students;
- Synthesize social science research into practical tools;
- Challenge preconceived and outmoded understandings of career pursuits;
- Discuss socioeconomic status, race, gender, and other identities in college experiences;
- Identify multiple segments of students, and describe both the differences and the commonalities in their needs;
- Develop useful skills for navigating college;
- Empower students to access campus resources and discern which individuals on campus can assist them in specific situations;
- Reveal the unwritten rules of college;
- Build competencies that transfer to careers and life after college.

In sum, our goal is to empathize with the often-challenging experiences of emerging adults as they explore individual and social identities, encounter rifts in their sense of self or conflict between their various social roles, and then work to achieve balance. We view students to be in the midst of an exciting and demanding life stage that requires they take increasing ownership of who they are and what they want to do, and we want to help them acquire the skills they need to set out on their own particular pathway.

WHY THIS BOOK IS NEEDED

The typical first-year student entering college today differs from the average first-year student of just a few decades ago. To meet the changing needs of incoming students, many universities now have first-year seminar courses. These courses often draw upon texts that were not designed for first-year seminars, and which may give practical tips that are not based on scientific evidence or may summarize academic research while failing to provide useful advice. This book combines the strengths of these

approaches by offering science-based advice to students on how to navigate college. This book engages the real issues that entering college students face, contextualizes individual experiences of these issues, and offers advice. While (often misguided) advice abounds in the broader public, the advice of this book targets specific kinds of student situations drawn from the lives of real students.

This book sees students as situated within the changes of recent decades, which explains why parents and other well-meaning adults in students' lives may not know about the contemporary college experience, as it could be quite different from their own. For example, many technological and social media changes have occurred since late 2006 and early 2007, which may seem like ages ago to many of our student readers but seems recent to many of their professors. These changes include the invention of the iPhone, with more processing power RAM and gigabits of flash memory than had ever been held in a palm-size device up until that moment. Additionally, Facebook was released to the general public, formerly being confined only to college users; Twitter launched on its own platform and went global; Google bought YouTube and launched Android; Amazon launched Kindle; Airbnb was conceived; and Change.org became an important social mobilization website.¹ To understand this broader social context of today's college students, it is important to summarize several changes surrounding higher education.

These include economic, technological, social, cultural, familial, generational, and educational changes. For example, today's entering college students are accepting and supportive of monumental changes in gender norms, such as expecting women to be regularly engaged in long-term labor and thus also establishing meaningful careers during college, as well as accepting and participating in same-sex relationships at a greater rate than previous generations, which means that same-sex partnerships are equally included within an understanding of how romantic partnerships affect college and career pursuits.² All of these changes, and more, have shaped the experiences of American young people, or "emerging adults," as scholars of life course development call them. First, we will explain what emerging adulthood is.

Becoming an Adult Takes Longer. Emerging adulthood is an exploratory age during which young people make decisions that have long-lasting effects on their life chances.³ Major social and economic restructuring over the last several decades⁴ contributes to the precariousness of long-term employment,⁵ a collective sense of insecurity in social positions,⁶ and greater economic churning (or turnover) in adult transitions.⁷ To put those trends in more concrete terms: First, prior generations were able to earn more money at earlier ages, relative to inflated costs. Second, those generations were better able to keep the same job and work their way up within a company. Now young people change jobs more frequently. Third, only a small minority of emerging adults view their current job as a viable, long-term career—meaning it takes longer now to secure positions that reliably pay the rent or a mortgage.⁸ Fourth, the skills required for top positions in an increasingly technological society require greater levels of cognitive capacities, which have continually increased the demands for higher education. College degrees, and often advanced degrees, are required more often for entry-level positions now than for previous generations.⁹

College Has Unequal Risks and Rewards. While enrollment in higher education institutions is increasing, the return on a bachelor's degree is declining. This means that going to college is becoming more of a requirement to get a desired position, but the additional income people are likely to earn with that degree (relatively speaking) is smaller now than it was for previous generations, especially for particular student subgroups.¹⁰ At the same time, the intersection of parental income level with race and ethnicity has never mattered more. For example, research finds that students from poor families are less likely to go to college at all, and especially unlikely to be able to attend Ivy League schools, just as black and Latino students are less likely than white students to attend Ivy League schools. Yet students who are both poor and black or Latino are especially less likely to attend those schools than are wealthier white students.¹¹ All of which is why public universities are key to expanding equal opportunities. Parental income level affects the financial burden of college too. Research finds that students from the highest *and lowest* income levels are the least likely to acquire student loan debt—the former because they have less need for

loans and the latter because they have less chance of enrolling—while students from middle-income families are the most likely to risk high student loan debt without gaining the same returns as more advantaged peers.^{12,13} Beyond the debt incurred, parental income can also impact the earnings of their children, meaning the impact of student debt can be experienced in different ways depending on one's family background.

Within College Inequalities. Partially due to rising participation in college, “within-college differences,” or differences between groups of students who are attending the same college, are increasingly important in predicting life outcomes.¹⁴ This finding contradicts the popular perception that people can choose any which way they want to navigate college. The impression of young people that “anything goes” in becoming an adult may partly be due to the attention that scholars of emerging adulthood devote to individual experiences, such as describing young adults as “self-focused.” This focus, while helpful, can hide some of the broader social patterns from view. In actuality, the ways that young people take on adult roles can lead to better or worse social and economic outcomes.¹⁵

In addition, emerging adults rely on different kinds of “cultural capital” as they go through college.¹⁶ Cultural capital refers to the stock of knowledge that people have about how to fit in across different kinds of social contexts. For example, what it takes to fit in with a group of engineering students is different from what it takes to fit in among art majors. While it is not always obvious, college is a new cultural context and has different norms for fitting in and succeeding than high school. Some entering college students have been more exposed to college norms than others because of their family members' college experiences or the kinds of class norms their high school had. Different cultural resources offer various pros and cons in distinct contexts, but the point is that getting used to college takes more adjustment for some students than for others. Taken together, these trends indicate the need for emerging adults to have “extra-familial support” (caring adults beyond parents and extended family members) in navigating college. Because this book addresses these issues, all incoming college students (and their more advanced peers) can benefit from reading

it, and many universities creating first-seminar courses will find this book is helpful as assigned reading.

College Success. To help all students succeed in college, this book makes visible some facts about college that can be hidden in plain sight. For example, researchers find that prior aptitude does not adequately predict the skills necessary to succeed in college.¹⁷ This means that doing well in high school does not guarantee success in college, a counterintuitive idea that many formerly high-achieving students experience as a shock when they earn their first C in college. Similarly, recent research has expanded the notion of college readiness to include “extra-cognitive” factors, such as *ownership of learning* (understanding that ultimately one is responsible for whether and what one learns in college), *perseverance* (sticking it out even when it is rough or boring), and *self-efficacy* (believing that one can learn what is needed to succeed in different college situations).¹⁸ In short, students can learn skills and capacities that drive their success during college. When we examine what separates students who do well in college from students who struggle or drop out, these factors turn out to be important. Applying social cognitive theories on college readiness and perseverance,¹⁹ we focus in this book on the role of college social self-efficacy in academic success.²⁰ This is because prior studies indicate that this is a central factor in college success. It helps to clarify why students who leave college explain their periods of “stopping out” of college by citing experiences that students who remain in college also experience, but while staying enrolled.²¹

Overcoming Obstacles. Relatedly, one of the central goals of this book is to help students build perseverance and learn how to overcome obstacles that they may experience in college. Indeed, scholars find that emerging adulthood is a key life-course development stage during which the brain matures in important ways, allowing young people to engage in more concerted regulation of themselves and their actions than was present at earlier life stages.²² Notably, we approach this subject in a unique manner because many of us authors are sociologists. This means that, counter to the individual focus of popular American culture, we emphasize the social

aspects of college. For example, we understand the ability to overcome college hurdles not as an individual quality alone, but as a trait resulting from interwoven social and personal processes over time.²³ In short, students' belief that they can succeed in college may reflect how much their prior experiences have prepared them for it. Social experiences take place within more or less advantaged contexts,²⁴ and feeling that one has control over one's life is a combination of belief and social experiences.²⁵ In essence, people who have greater control over their life circumstances wind up feeling more in control of their life. This is what sociologists refer to as "invisible identities": the way that people make decisions is patterned by what feels comfortable based on the ways their identities have been shaped in relation to their social contexts.²⁶ With this in mind, we think the key to helping students succeed in college is in teaching them how to "weather the storm" by addressing obstacles with the support of campus resources.

THE BOOK'S AUDIENCE

This book is primarily intended for undergraduate students, especially incoming first-year students. A secondary audience includes parents, academics, and other higher education professionals. Our goals for each group are as follows.

Students: We aim for this book to aid incoming and current students in finding a viable path through the many facets of college life, both academic and social, and later in transitioning into adult roles. Our goal is to make the hidden rules of college visible to all, and thus to level the playing field for all students, regardless of background and exposure to formal and academic settings. To ensure the book reflects the experiences of contemporary college students, we begin every chapter with stories from real students and refer back to these as we provide advice. Appendix A also offers students a variety of activities that can be completed alone or in groups to engage the concepts in this book through reflective and engaging exercises.

Parents: Secondly, we intend for this book to equip parents to support their children during the college years and acknowledge the valuable resource that parents can be for college campuses. While the main text is written for students, parents can learn a great deal about their emerging adult college students from this book. In addition, we include advice specifically for parents of emerging adult college students in appendix B. This advice ties the student stories, relevant science, and advice into practical tips for supporting college students.

Academics and Professionals: We aim for this book to also help academics and professionals (including faculty, instructors, administrators, advisors, and staff) in understanding the social scientific research relevant to emerging adulthood, higher education, and the transition into college. This book could serve as the primary text for first-year experience courses, and we have included ideas for classroom activities within the academic appendix that correspond to each chapter. Appendix C, our academic appendix, also provides further details on the methods employed and offers implications of the summarized research and case studies for faculty, instructors, administrators, advisors, and other staff who work with college students. Additionally, we provide an online supplement for instructors with classroom activities.

CHAPTER SECTIONS

Each chapter has the following three sections: (1) student stories; (2) scientific research summaries; (3) advice on accessing campus resources to gain support from advisors, faculty, and other mentors on campus. The final chapters of the book have two additional sections: (a) social interactions among students; and (b) overarching tips for navigating college to launch successful and satisfying careers. The scientific research summaries were primarily written by the first three authors of this book, all of whom are faculty members, specifically associate professors with primary disciplinary training in sociology, along with psychology, social work, and criminology. The advice sections were primarily written by the remainder

of the authorship team, who are student development and student support practitioners, mostly staff and also an instructor.

It is worth noting that the tone varies across these sections in ways that reflect the diversity of approaches that college students encounter on campuses. For example, the tone of the student stories and togetherness sections best reflect the voices of students who are conversing with each other. The scientific research summaries best reflect discussions with faculty whose scholarship aligns with college and emerging adult related topics; these are the voices that students are most likely to hear when seeking assistance from professors in office hours. In yet another set of voices, the advice sections best represent those of student support and development practitioners. These are the kind of responses that students are most likely to hear during new student orientations, academic advisor meetings, and in other staff office discussions. Rather than reconcile this rich diversity into a single author voice, this book provides readers with the wide variety of approaches and tones that students actually experience on the college campus. From informal talk among friends to formal interaction with professors, college provides experiences with multiple, even conflicting, voices.

Stories: What We Experience

Each chapter begins with multiple stories that illustrate different types of college students. The majority of these are direct quotes from students who wrote *autoethnographies*, a form of qualitative research which involves self-reflection and an interpretation of one's personal biography within the broader social, cultural, and political context (Ellis, Adams, & Bocher 2011; see appendix C, note 1). Supplementing these, we also include scenarios that combine aspects of the many students whom we have taught or assisted. All student names are changed to protect confidentiality.

These stories help to show what it is like for students to find their way through college. On the one hand, these stories underline that there is no one-size-fits-all approach, as there are many distinct kinds of students and

backgrounds that affect how college feels, especially during the first year. On the other hand, few student experiences are entirely unique. Every student reading this book is likely to identify with at least one of these stories.

Many first-year seminar books and courses seem to assume all college students are essentially the same, but we form every chapter around the diverse perspectives that real college students bring to campus. We also tailor our interpretations and advice toward scenarios like the ones these students confronted, which should teach students what they could do if they find themselves in a similar situation.

Through the narratives, we describe the complex issues that many students face during college. Scholars call this time in life “demographically dense,” because it involves so many major life changes and fluctuations: young people are establishing career choices, often forming longer-term romantic partnerships, gaining career experiences, accruing (or not) financial credit, and sometimes breaking up, temporarily dropping out, or moving back home. It is no wonder that many students feel lost at some point. In the course of tackling these issues, we address how race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, and other background characteristics condition college experiences, basing our analyses not on stereotypes but on lived realities. Drawing from the experiences of our students, including many navigating their first year, we tell the stories of college students who we think will resonate with our readers.

Science: What We Know

Building on these stories, the second section of each chapter summarizes scientific research. We describe our approach as “the science of college,” because we are drawing on social science theories and data to provide interpretations, advice, and tips. Social sciences engage similar tools to those used in the natural sciences: in both sets of disciplines, researchers often form a hypothesis based on a theory and then test the theory with data, as well as collecting data to detect patterns and develop theories.

Additionally, social scientific knowledge is also advanced as a collective enterprise that is based heavily on peer-review processes to accumulate more valid and careful information over time. This peer-review process is crucial for distinguishing legitimate forms of knowledge from common sense and culturally biased notions about how the (social) world works. Yet as an art, the social sciences also involve imagining reality, accepting the unknown, theorizing based on logical reasoning, and relying on a collective imagination. In this way, the social sciences can serve as a bridge between the natural sciences (such as biology and chemistry), on the one hand, and the arts and humanities (such as philosophy and history), on the other. Examples of social science disciplines include sociology, psychology, social psychology, communications, political science, and economics.

Perhaps more importantly, at least for entering college students, social science can help young people make sense of their experiences in college. To succeed in college, it helps to understand the context of higher education and changes in the economy and career availability. There can be something empowering about viewing personal experiences within life course development, and in students gaining perspective on how they are not alone in encountering some issues and confusions in college. Seeing broader social patterns is a key insight of sociology, and this aspect of the book helps to set it apart from many self-help books that tend to highlight the individual uniqueness of a person and their personal ability to create any change desired. Yet, thinking about people as embedded within larger social contexts can perhaps feel alienating, or in some ways de-emphasizing of the personal experiences that can feel so intense and powerful at the individual level. Beyond naming the challenges that social and cultural inequalities present to students (which, unfortunately, is often where introductory textbooks on these topics end), we connect these findings to research on identity formation, career development, social self-efficacy, and ownership of learning. Armed with this knowledge, students can better manage the choices they make during college to smooth their path into successful adult roles later in life. Relying on a research-informed perspective for guidance rather than outdated, confusing messages is like

having a GPS with turn-by-turn options instead of ambiguous “word of mouth” directions.

In providing advice for students, we merge three broad perspectives:

- a. A sociological framework, illustrating how some students encounter more or less hardship than their average classmates;
- b. A psychological and counseling framework, empathizing with the existential crisis and tasks confronting young people during their college experiences;
- c. A higher educational framework, underlining the need for diversified social supports within university ecosystems.

See appendix C for more information on this social science approach. More broadly, most of navigating college in the way we advise students to do is about learning to employ research-based thinking to solve, or at least respond to, real-world issues. The book also provides examples of making science-informed decisions, beginning first with college.

Advice: What We Provide

The third section of each chapter offers responses and support from campus resources. There are literally hundreds (on smaller campuses) or thousands (on larger campuses) of people whose full-time job is to assist students at a given college. Some of these people are faculty and instructors, whose classroom instruction provides a knowledge resource and whose one-on-one time in office hours provides a mentoring resource. Other resources come in the form of professional staff and administrators. Many staff members serve students in various advising roles, depending on the programs that employ them.

One aspect of the college campus that is “hidden in plain view” is that students can turn to any number of people for help on a daily basis. Many students form lasting relationships with faculty and staff during their time in college, which serves both their short-term needs and provides

long-term support via recommendation letters and career networking. Thus, one of our goals in this section of each chapter is to spread the word about the tremendous amount of support students have available and make them more comfortable accessing these resources for a wide array of needs.

We do not provide a list of the offices on college campuses that can be resources to students. Based on conversations with our students, we think the obstacle is not that students do not know of their existence, but rather that they do not view these resources as necessary or useful to *them*, in particular. Thus, our case studies illustrate how these offices can tailor the kind of support they provide to fit the needs of individual students.

Together: What We Share

In the later chapters, we describe social interactions among students and in groups. Because we view students not merely as individuals but also as friends, peers, classmates, roommates, and participants in other groups, we recognize them as a primary campus resource for one another. Many books on higher education pay considerable attention to official campus resources. Conversely, many sociological, anthropological, and ethnographic investigations into college campuses indicate the importance of peer-to-peer networks and friendships as a primary mechanism through which college “works.”²⁷ However, these approaches are rarely combined.

We offer a text that covers both formal and informal college processes, allowing students and their social supports to understand the breadth of people and relationships available to them on campus. This bolsters college students’ understanding of who to turn to for what form of assistance, and of the tradeoffs between available resources. It also provides students and their supports the opportunity to learn from the social interactions that some students have with each other, and—in the process—acquire tips for how friends, roommates, and student organization peers can help one another navigate college successfully, and enjoyably!

Tips: What We Can Do

The final chapters of the book also bring together the insights laid out in each chapter in the form of specific tips for each of our audiences. These takeaways aid young people in making informed decisions during college that set them up for successful life outcomes, while also providing them with practice in consuming research-based information to guide life decisions now and in the future. In addition, we teach the adults who support young people in transitioning to adulthood—faculty, instructors, staff, administrators, scholars, parents, practitioners, and other interested readers—how to respond to the personal troubles encountered by college students, in ways that both value the intensity of their individual experiences and normalize their experiences within their broader social context.

ADDITIONAL UNIQUE FEATURES

Two other unique features of this book are (1) voices drawn from a representative university context, and (2) hyperlinked keywords that are denoted as hashtags.

Representative University Context

We draw upon a representative university context: public universities that are research-intensive, which have large student populations with a high degree of socioeconomic diversity (ranging from low to high income), and that enroll many students who are the first in their family to attend college. Many of the books available on higher education and emerging adults draw on small, private, liberal arts universities, often in the Ivy League. Yet navigating those contexts is quite different from navigating the universities that most average American young people attend. Recognizing that students in the latter setting also need resources, we focus here on large,

public universities, summarize research findings, and offer responses that are reasonable for faculty, instructors, staff, and administrators, given the opportunities and constraints of their institutions.

Hyperlinked Keywords as Hashtags

Another unique contribution that our text offers is a hyperlinked keyword system. We think it is important that a book of this kind be written in the “native language” of young readers. Thus, we borrow inspiration from the popularity of hashtags—as used on Twitter and Instagram—to convey meaningful information concisely over social media. By providing this text in electronic format, we are able to hyperlink student stories throughout the book, allowing readers the opportunity to read the book in order, or alternatively to click hyperlinks to read all the content on one student story within each of its different chapters. In other words, the book can be read sequentially, as a traditional text, or it can be read nonsequentially, in a way that is more akin to browsing social media.

STUDENT STORIES: WHAT WE EXPERIENCE

To introduce the rest of the book, we present the first three student stories and our analysis in the same structure that later chapters follow. In the stories, the gray highlighted text should be read as a tweet or status update from these students sharing a bit of their story on social media. Some of these stories were written by real students who took one of our sociology classes and completed an autoethnography, in which cases their quoted text is a portion of what they wrote about themselves. In other cases, we drafted stories that combine elements from several of the students we have met over the years. The hashtags that begin the student status updates can be read as keywords for the tweet and for their fuller story that follows, and they can be clicked on to bring up all the sections in the book that are part of the same story.

#adulthood #20something: I just bought all my own books and school supplies, and paid all my own bills. Now I'm broke and eating cereal for dinner, probably will show up to class tomorrow in my pajamas.

Devon had this to say in writing an autoethnography about the transition to college:

Even with all the preparation in high school, I was overwhelmed with the things that college life brought me. As my parents hugged me goodbye and left me in my tiny shoe box, I realized that not only was I alone, I was about to begin the true journey into adulthood . . . I had to learn how to take care of myself, without the help of my parents, including doing my own laundry and dishes, and getting my own food. My mind was no longer focused on just being successful in school. Now I had to do that and figure out everyday living. Along with new studies, I had to start thinking about my future after college. My dad continued to pressure me about preparing for the real world, even though I had just started classes. He stressed to me the importance of appearance and preparation for the future workforce.

#onmyown: I just realized that I do not have any soap, and I will have to go to the grocery store for the first time without my parents to buy my own soap.

Like Devon, **Brittany** found that starting college entailed many changes:

Before I came to college I had my values and the way I did things, but that changed dramatically when I came to school last year. I have always been responsible, but in the past I was under my parents' roof and had to do whatever they told me to do. I could not do whatever I wanted or go wherever I wanted without having their permission. But when I got to college I was now on my own, in charge of myself but able to do whatever I wanted. I had to change how I lived completely since I was on my own time and

literally everything was up to me, and I did not need parental approval for anything.

#wherestheparty #yolo: I'm flunking bio! Every time I talk with my professors, they give me advice on classes, and I just keep thinking, "does my breath smell like alcohol?"

Charlie has always been a social butterfly. High school was pretty stress-free, allowing her to do her fair share of partying while still making good enough grades to go to college. Things are different now. In college, there's a party every night, but there's also a huge amount of schoolwork. Everything seems to be snowballing out of her control. Maintaining her new friendships is very important to her, but she tends to overdo it when they go out. Then she feels sluggish the next day, skips class, and gets a late start on studying. Today she had a paper due and three tests to take, but after finishing the paper last night, she chose to go out and celebrate before studying for her tests. Deep down she knows that it was the stress of being so unprepared for an exam that caused her to go out. She wonders how worried she should be about this. Her friends party just as much. She wonders, "Are they stressed like me? What's more important: studying or taking advantage of the college experience? Should I ask my friends?"

SCIENCE: WHAT WE KNOW

According to Jeffrey Arnett in *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens Through the Twenties*,²⁸ the life stage that most college students are in is called "emerging adulthood." Emerging adulthood describes the experience of having one foot in adulthood and the other in adolescence, in limbo between the younger years under the protection and social control of parents and the completed launch into adulthood.

Popularly some aspects of this are known as “adulting.” The life stage of emerging adulthood is characterized by being self-focused, exploring self-identity, experiencing instability, and feeling in-between. It is the age of possibilities. This is a new stage in life course development that resulted from several converging trends: people are devoting more years to college and pursuing advanced degrees; they are getting married and becoming parents at older ages; and they are switching jobs more frequently than their predecessors did at their age. While most emerging adults feel like their life is disjointed, since they do not know what will come next, it is also a tremendously exciting period—partly because of that uncertainty, and because emerging adults have not had to pay the price for their choices.

Although emerging adults (and their parents) have a wide variety of opinions on what it takes to be considered an adult, there are three criteria that are regularly identified. The first is accepting responsibility for yourself. The second is making independent decisions, perhaps with the input of family and friends, but still making final calls for yourself. The third is becoming financially independent. This last milestone is perhaps the hardest to achieve and is the aspect of transitioning into adulthood that emerging adults have the least control over. Accomplishing these aspects of adulthood is typically a gradual, incremental process. Many young people in the United States spend a decade or more in limbo, feeling ambiguous about whether or not they are adults.

For many emerging adults, college is a period of “resocialization,” when they unlearn some of their prior ways of being and doing and acquire new norms regarding how to act and what to value. In the student stories, **Devon** and **Brittany** referenced something they read on this subject in their sociology class.²⁹ The excerpt, by Gwynne Dyer, is from a chapter called “Anybody’s Son Will Do,” which appeared in his book *War: Past, Present, and Future*. In this book, Dyer describes the resocialization process of military training, and how young men and women in the military eventually acquire the norm of killing during combat and accept this as part of their everyday business. Interestingly, these students (along with several other students who appear in later chapters, such as **Gabby** in chapter 3, **Kyndal** of chapter 4, and **Marco** of chapter 6) compare

the process that Dyer describes to their experience of entering college. For example, **Marco** says, “Socialization is the lifelong process through which an individual is incorporated into a social group by learning that group’s norms, social roles, and values (Kane 2013; see chapter 5, note 7). Resocialization, by contrast, is the sacrifice of the set of values acquired through socialization for the adoption of another set (Dyer 2013).” Likewise, **Kyndal** says, “As I look at the ‘culture’ of college, it is clear that it is an entirely new atmosphere and basically makes you forget everything you had ever known as ‘normal’ and makes a complete 180 shift; college resocialized me. Resocialization occurs when an old identity is taken away and adaptation to a new identity happens (Dyer 2013: 158).”

Similarly, **Devon** described this experience of resocialization in college by saying, “I had to undergo a process of resocialization, completely changing my values and ideals to fit my current situation (Dyer 2013).” **Brittany** mentioned “how I experienced resocialization when coming to college.” She explained, “This is when you learn new norms and values when joining a new group or when your life circumstances change dramatically, like going to college (Dyer 2013: 158).” Brittany continued with the following:

Some of the new norms and values I learned were things like going out and drinking every weekend is the cool thing to do, or if you did not find a person of the opposite sex to go home with after a party you are considered lame. These have really clashed with the values and norms my parents taught me growing up because they never allowed me to drink and they definitely were not supporting random hook-ups like everyone does here. This has really helped me grow as an individual and given me insight on what the rest of my life will entail [being in situations where my values clash with group values].

Two students we will introduce in a later chapter, **Abby** of chapter 4 and **Desiree** of chapter 7, liken their sororities to the “total institution” of the military and relay, affectionately, how well their sororities absorbed members into a community. New members proudly adorn themselves in Greek

letters and feel an instant bond with people wearing those same letters. Abby said, “A total institution is a setting where a group of people is isolated from the rest of society and made to act a certain manner (Dyer 2013). My sorority became a total institution [to me] . . . Similar to how proud a marine is to be a marine after boot camp, I am proud to be a member of my sorority.” While students find their social groups in different places on campus, college itself can serve as a total institution. Many students come to associate the school mascot with their identity and feel an instant bond with people anywhere in the world wearing their university’s clothing.

Devon also references a reading by Robert Granfield on socialization, one entitled “Making It by Faking It: Working-Class Students in an Elite Academic Environment”:

As a young adult, I took golf lessons. My dad believed the benefits of knowing things like how to play golf could help me better associate myself with future employers. Learning sports such as golf are a form of cultural capital, which are social assets of a person that promote one’s cultural competence, and thus social standing in society (Granfield 2013).³⁰ Being able to golf with a future employer, as well as dressing appropriately and having the ‘look’ of a successful young adult, are things that I keep in the back of my mind as I navigate college.

Drawing on the theories of Erving Goffman,³¹ Granfield describes how students undergo a process of socialization during college that not only teaches them the norms and expectations of their future profession, but that also teaches them new ways of being and interacting with others while in college. Granfield applies Goffman’s idea of stigma management to the law school scene, explaining that while American culture generally promotes individual uniqueness, people do not want to have “undesirable differentness.” That is, few people want to stick out in noticeably negative ways. **Austin**, a student we introduce in chapter 4, describes this by saying, “Social stigmas can limit the opportunities and level of success of

an individual (Granfield 2013: 150). To compensate, people use stigma management to conceal their financial status to increase the opportunities afforded to them (Granfield 2013: 150).” Another student, **Aaron** of chapter 5, explained how he used stigma management himself: “Although I was a capable student, I lacked ‘manners of speech, attire, values and experiences’ that my other classmates had already acquired (Granfield 2013) . . . As the years of high school went on, I began to identify more with the upper-class than the lower class, especially as I hid the fact that my family was middle-class,* just as the students in Granfield’s study did (2013). I began to wear as much designer clothes as my parents could afford because it was a part of the upper-class ‘dress-code’ (Granfield 2013).”

Part of what college is about, then, is learning the rules of the game, how to fit into a new social scene, acquiring “cultural competence.” The college socialization process is even more intense for students who grew up with very different sets of norms than the middle-class college scene. Granfield describes students from working-class backgrounds attempting to avoid class stigma, struggling to show they belong rather than risk being marginal: “While most students experience some degree of uncertainty and competency crisis during their first year, working-class students face the additional pressure of being cultural outsiders (Granfield 2013: 149).” **Alexa**, a student introduced in chapter 5, recalls, “This was another part of socialization in my life, when I had to learn how to fit into the social norms and behaviors of my surrounding community so [that] I would not look like an outsider. Many people in these social class type of situations, use a sort of stigma management to ensure that even though they are of a lower class, they are going to mask this fact and try to transform so that people think they are part of the upper class (Granfield 2013: 145).” We

* “Middle-class” here is Aaron’s description; we are directly quoting from his autoethnography. Based on Aaron’s description of his living conditions and his parents’ educational background, we would characterize him as a member of the working class (a lower socioeconomic status than middle class). To the extent that he is “middle class,” he is on the margins of this status.

will return to Granfield's ideas again in chapter 3, as they clearly resonate with many contemporary college students.

ADVICE: WHAT WE (CAN) PROVIDE

Based on research on emerging adults, we would offer the following advice to Devon, Brittany, Charlie, and students with similar stories.

#adulting #20something #onmyown In many ways, **Devon** and **Brittany** are typical emerging adults. Being self-focused during emerging adulthood is normal and part of learning to stand on one's own feet. Knowing this information, emerging adults can explain to professors, parents, and other supportive adults that they are not "off track" but going through a common experience for young people in the United States.

#adulting #20something Though Devon is not struggling with a particular issue, it would still be helpful for him to talk to an advisor to gain some general advice about college. Though many students are focused on studies when they begin college, they soon realize that studies are only one part of the equation; they must also get used to dealing with laundry, food, and such matters. Then they feel pressure (from parents or others) to further expand their focus and think about long-term career stuff. That is a common college transition.

Even though Devon is doing well in general, he should be careful not to put too much emphasis on mastering the social norms he mentions (for example, learning golfing to enhance his long-term career goals). At least as important as learning social norms during college is working on forming an authentic self, connecting with people in a genuine way, not merely as a means to an end (such as getting a job later). Students need to truly experience college, and learn from the new people and situations they encounter.

Students who relate to Devon need to focus on the big picture. Form a steady plan. It is important to have a life plan in college, especially during the first year. This includes something as small as doing laundry all the way up through making time for quality studying. The plan will help

ensure that it is all integrated. The second piece of advice is to learn from Devon's story that it is important to form authentic connections with people. Meeting people strategically for job opportunities is fine, but it is important first to connect genuinely with people who are similar and different, and to allow oneself to be changed in positive ways by these interactions.

#onmyown Students that resonate with **Brittany** should remember that it is common to arrive in college and be surprised by all the out-of-classroom adjustments that have to be made. College is different than past experiences, and this is good. It can cause some stress, however, because students are trying to decide where they fit in. When encountering new values and norms, many wonder whether to reject what they once took for granted, and to question which of the norms from childhood still matter. But students need to embrace this process by remembering who they are at root. Our advice for students like Brittany is to embrace that they are in control of what changes they will make. We advise students to question their assumptions about campus life. It may seem that everyone is drinking and hooking up, but that actually happens less than students think. Although one group of students does that, another group is completely different, and there are at least ten different groups of students in between those opposite ends of the spectrum. We thus advise students to be careful not to overgeneralize. The other point is to form personal values by being focused on the broader picture of where individual decisions are leading, and in what direction a student is heading.

Changing as an individual is an important part of emerging adulthood and college life. Amid these changes, however, people are not abandoning their true selves. People do not simply become somebody completely different, or wind up as someone that they do not want to be, especially if they reflect on what they value and who they want to become. We advise students to remember that there are people on campus that can help in their journey, such as advisors and professors, when they are outside the classroom. Professors or advisors can be a bridge of sorts between what life was like growing up and what it is like now. They can stand between

those two cultural scenes and assist students in navigating new terrain. A key piece of advice: do not be afraid to ask for help.

#wherestheparty #yolo In **Charlie's** story it is clear how different daily life can be in college. Students can do what they want—when they want. It truly is a great time in life, but it comes with a lot of new decisions. Many students plunge in head first, and some crash hard. That is especially common when people have in mind the “movie version” of college, envisioning that it is all about having fun. It is easy to get caught up in that. Most college students struggle at first with their newfound freedom. It may take a while to decide how much time in the day should be devoted to academics, how much should go to extracurricular activities, and how much should go to “fun.” All three of these are important! However students choose to spend leisure time, they can benefit from meeting new people, trying new things, and discussing ideas learned in class with friends.

One of our biggest pieces of advice for students is to reflect on what they truly want out of college. During college, students are discovering who they are, where they are going, and, most importantly, what they want out of college. Everybody approaches college in their own way, but there are also some shared experiences. It comes down to finding balance. College is different than high school, not just in the classroom but in campus life as well. Explore a variety of activities, both social and academic. Decide what is right, and then spend time accordingly. Everyone else is exploring their goals, desires, and even their party habits too. Do not be afraid when it gets difficult to juggle all these new choices, and do not worry about setbacks. Choose activities that are meaningful and that help to explore what college life has to offer. It is all fine!

That said, it is also normal to get stressed during college, and colleges have counseling centers where students can get support when feeling anxious. Just talking through the stress with a counselor can help. As intimidating as it may be to sit down with professors and advisors, it is also important that students talk to people on campus and contextualize their advice by role.

Another piece of advice that we have for students like Charlie is to reflect on their assumptions. Charlie mentions seeing students that are

partying just as much as she is and still making good grades. That could be the case, but maybe they are doing some things that Charlie is not. She could connect with those people outside of parties and see if she can study with them, or at least ask them how it is going, how they do it. A lot of times, a situation like Charlie's is based on assumptions that are false. Maybe her peers are studying way more than she realizes, or maybe they are partying less than she thinks. The people she sees at a party may have been there only twenty minutes while she was there for three hours. We have to question our assumptions and connect with the people who seem to have it all together, to see if that's true.

A further tip to consider: step outside the situation and talk to someone. Start with an advisor, a faculty mentor, a peer mentor, or the counseling center. A trip to a health clinic or counseling center doesn't require a life-threatening situation. There are always multiple people that can be approached. Start by talking about studying. Then casually mention not having enough time for studying, and then mention social life, without having to be specific. There are many ways to handle that. Just talking out the issue with someone not in the situation helps.

Our final piece of advice to students like Charlie is to embrace the change while remembering who they are, how they grew up, and what they liked about themselves going into college. Connect on campus with what you like, and seek challenges to grow in positive ways. Be okay with change, with evolving and learning and a whole new way of doing things. Also students need to know that they are in charge of that process. When it seems like things are spinning out of control, talk to people, remember to be intentional, and reflect on what you want out of college. Connect with people; seek advice; and then make decisions.

We also offer a few general pieces of advice. Our author team consists of faculty, instructors, advisors, and higher education staff. Each voice represents the kinds of responses that students can receive from people in different roles across campus. Most students are at least mildly confused by whom to go to for what, and we often experience (and have committed ourselves!) blunders in approaching people in certain roles with questions that are better suited for other roles. Students would benefit from knowing

that, for example, faculty office hours are helpful for certain kinds of support, while meeting with advisors is helpful for others.

Gaining clarity on who can provide what kinds of support not only reduces the chances of awkward blunders in going to the wrong person, it also ensures that students gain the best social resources when expending their time and avoid frustration (or even apathy) in taking ownership of their own learning. Most people choose to work on college campuses because they truly enjoy supporting young people, but many are also incredibly busy and can sometimes seem off-putting to students who approach them with questions that are mismatched to their roles. For example, it is unlikely a faculty member will know how many more credits are needed to complete a dual degree across colleges, and they could seem bothered by the question. That question would be better suited for an advisor who serves students across campus. Likewise, it is not terribly helpful to ask during an advising appointment designed to select courses for the coming semester how best to find an internship within a particular field that could lead to a paid position. This is better-suited for a faculty member, who has a deeper knowledge of and connection to that field.

Nobody expects incoming college students to have all this figured out. But some students do know more about this than others, and they can “hit the ground running” by engaging with the appropriate campus resources. This cuts down on the amount of time spent running around, feeling like each person recommends asking someone else. This is why seven different authors, from the perspective of four different campus roles, can provide valuable direction. It is also worth saying that we do not assume that disconnect between campus resources and students is only a student issue. Parents can play a role in helping advise their children, and academics and professionals can do a better job communicating this. And through our diverse author team, we provide academic and professional readers with a model for how to build a more cohesive, relevant, and tailored set of responses to students’ issues.

The Chapters Ahead

The second chapter explains further how the life stage of emerging adulthood, and the changes that created it, help to make sense of modern college students. Students will learn how experiences with moving, changing identities, romantic partnering, and breakups all fit within the life stage tasks of establishing identity while forming intimate romantic relationships and friendships. Achieving a better grasp of how transitioning into adulthood looks for young people today makes it easier for students to explain themselves to others.

Chapter 3 covers the value of college: why it is important to earn a degree for specific skills (or “human capital”) and credentials, and how doing well in college is largely about acquiring “cultural capital,” aka learning the rules of the game. This third chapter also addresses how students’ social class backgrounds affect how easy, hard, or different college can be.

The fourth chapter explains how exploring and forming a personal and social identity is key to learning to navigate college well. In chapter 4, students will learn that one key to college success is taking ownership of learning and exposing themselves to a variety of classes and majors in order to decide what is the best fit for them.

Chapter 5 teaches students about the importance of having resiliency amid challenging experiences during college. College also presents the opportunity to reflect on childhood experiences in families, cultures, groups, and within organizations. For students, reflecting on how their backgrounds affect current choices is crucial for shaping a personal and professional story that can guide choices in college, frame personal statements, and point toward potential career paths after college.

The sixth chapter introduces several students who are struggling with identity as they navigate diversity at a large public university. Some find the university to have a greater degree of diversity than their smaller hometowns, while others came from urban settings more diverse than their campus. Many of the students share stories of struggling to understand how they fit in, as

well as how to make sense of others' attitudes about diversity in terms of race and ethnicity, biculturalism, and immigration, along with gender, sexuality, and religion. In chapter 6, students reflect on experiences with inclusion and exclusion during college, and many come to understand these experiences as part of larger social structures. Students will also learn how to harness their identities as a personal strength, while also finding others who are similar enough to understand and support their perspective, values, or interests.

Chapter 7 shows students that another important aspect of college is figuring out how to become a leader. Being a leader requires recognizing one's personal strengths and learning how to engage those strengths on campus, which builds skills and experiences for later civic engagement. The goal in this chapter is to enable students to use college in a way that helps them find their way through future life changes and carve their own paths in future endeavors. Moreover, this seventh chapter presents several student stories that suggest the wide array of options for finding a niche group or activity on campus, which makes students feel integrated on campus and gives them valuable leadership skills.

The eighth chapter, which concludes the book, describes why college provides a safe place to explore different career options. In chapter 8, students will learn how switching majors, interning, working as a research assistant, and talking with professors are all excellent ways to test out their major, to see whether a career in that field is a good fit. This chapter addresses tips for major changes, talking with parents about desired careers, finding a vocation or career path, and shaping professional identity. The book culminates with a section about how to navigate college, and life generally, with research-based decisions.

FURTHER READING ONLINE

- Here is a post about what “adulting” means: Steinmetz, Katy, June 8, 2016, “This Is What ‘Adulting’ Means,” *Time*, retrieved from <http://time.com/4361866/adulting-definition-meaning/>.

- Our favorite GIF of adulting depicts a man tumbling backward on an escalator while the escalator keeps carrying him up, posted here: <http://www.psherzog.org/single-post/2017/06/09/The-Perfect-GIF-of-Adulting>.
- As described in the blog, this GIF implies that growing up can be hard: Kelner, Simon, September 3, 2015, “For the Twenty-Somethings of Today, Growing Up Is Hard to Do,” *Independent*, retrieved from <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/for-the-twenty-somethings-of-today-growing-up-is-hard-to-do-10485276.html>.
- This TED Talk covers what people think they need to be happy and successful, as compared to what research shows is needed to experience feelings of success and happiness: Waldinger, Robert, November 2015, “What Makes a Good Life? Lessons from the Longest Study on Happiness,” TedTalk, retrieved from https://www.ted.com/talks/robert_waldinger_what_makes_a_good_life_lessons_from_the_longest_study_on_happiness?language=en.
- Finally, it is important to know that parts of college, and of growing up generally, can be tough: Grossman, Nick, December 10, 2014, “Everyone Is Broken and Life Is Hard” [Blog post], retrieved from <http://www.nickgrossman.is/2014/everyone-is-broken-and-life-is-hard/>.
- It is important for students to give themselves, and each other, a break. There is a great deal happening in the midst of the fun time that college can be, and students need to rest too. These years in college are important, and life-shaping, but they are not the end of the story. Do not be like Bryan Adams, saying that these years were the best of his life (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9f06QZCVUHg>). Instead, build a life that keeps getting better, and see college as a key that will open doors that you want to walk through.

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