

The dropout dilemma: One in four college freshmen drop out. What is going on here? What does it take to stay in? - Special Report

Jonathan Whitbourne

Michael VanAdams was a model student in high school--president of his senior class, captain of the varsity tennis team, and a straight-A student. So when he received an academic scholarship to the University of Maine in Orono, nobody was surprised--especially not VanAdams. Having excelled both academically and socially at his small high school in rural New Hampshire, VanAdams expected more of the same in college. He was wrong.

VanAdams did poorly on his first couple of exams and even received a failing grade on his first term paper. Instead of asking his professors or classmates for help, VanAdams began to isolate himself, spending hours alone in his dorm room where he would play video games or send e-mails to friends back home. To make matters worse, he became homesick during his first weeks of college, longing for his high school friends and sweetheart, who was attending a community college in New Hampshire.

"I did all the wrong things," says VanAdams. "Instead of seeing my first couple of failures as wake-up calls, I became depressed and immediately started passing the blame onto others. I told my parents that the professors were awful and didn't like me; I told my girlfriend that the kids who went there were snobs and no fun at all. Basically, I blamed everyone but myself."

VanAdams also told himself that the University of Maine wasn't for him. He dropped out a couple of weeks before completing his first semester. "Frankly, I wasn't properly prepared for college," he says. "I didn't go into my freshman year with the right attitude. At age 18, I thought I had the world figured out; I thought I could ace my college classes like in high school. I couldn't have been more off. I was failing three classes, and I didn't see the point of sticking around."

GIVING UP AFTER JUST GETTING STARTED

VANADAMS'S STORY is hardly unique. According to American College Testing (ACT), one in every four students leaves college before completing sophomore year. What's more, nearly half of all freshmen will either drop out before getting their degree or complete their college education elsewhere.

It's strange when you think about it. High school students spend so much time stressing over getting into college--studying countless hours for standardized tests, traveling to visit campuses, laboring over every word in their admission essay. So why is it that when many finally get in, they don't want to be there?

"A large number of students are ill-equipped for the challenges of college," says Vincent Tinto, chair of the Higher Education Program at Syracuse University in New York, and author of *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition* (University of Chicago Press). Tinto says students devote so much time to the admissions process, they forget to focus on what lies ahead: challenging academics, living away from home, maintaining their finances, learning time management skills, and taking responsibility for their own lives.

SURVIVAL COURSES

TO SLOW THE FRESHMAN exodus, colleges have been studying why freshmen become disenchanting and are creating

programs that prepare students for what lies ahead. Dubbed by many colleges as "freshman survival courses," these programs train newcomers in time management, study techniques, and even how to meet and make new friends.

"Basically we're teaching students how to learn at the collegiate level and how to enjoy their new environment," says Raymond A. Brown, dean of admission at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth.

One of the most successful (and oldest) of these programs is "University 101," which has been taught at the University of South Carolina in Columbia since 1972. Through this three-credit course, students master how to write a term paper, take effective notes, and manage both time and finances. "We're teaching them life skills, building a solid foundation that will, hopefully, help them throughout life," says Dan Berman, director of University 101. Thanks to this course, South Carolina has a high retention rate--less than 13 percent of its first-year students did not return last year.

6 REASONS FOR LEAVING

BEFORE DIVING INTO COLLEGE, review these six common reasons why freshmen leave, suggests Tinto. And for each scenario, check out the survival strategy that may help you from becoming a dropout statistic.

1. TOO MUCH FUN

LET'S FACE IT: Many college freshmen are away from home for the first time--and not everyone is homesick. "I remember going to parties every night for the first couple of weeks," recalls Sara Stanton of her early days at Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire. "There aren't any major exams or papers for the first couple of weeks, so you're almost lulled into a false sense of security. But you snap out of it pretty quick. I remember feeling like the grasshopper that played all summer; now it was my turn to pay.

And pay she did. Stanton spent several all-nighters frantically trying to catch up on the schoolwork that she'd neglected for so many weeks. Fortunately, she caught up and learned a valuable lesson. "Some of my friends weren't so lucky," she says. "My dorm had a lot more room come the end of the semester."

SURVIVAL STRATEGY: BALANCE SOCIALIZING AND STUDYING. If you're a social butterfly, don't feel as if you need to clip your wings. Allow your outgoing personality to work for you. For instance, put together a study group with a couple of compatible peers in your class. "Studies have shown that students learn best in a group setting, so take the initiative and form a study group," says Tinto. "It's a fun and productive way to meet people and keep up with your work." Also, if your group meets on a set day at a set time, you'll be less likely to neglect your studies because you won't want to let your group down.

2. NOT JOINING IN

NOT EVERYONE IS a social butterfly. Instead of walking up to new classmates and introducing themselves, some students choose to retreat back to their room or go to the library alone. And while this may work for some kids, others often become overwhelmed by feelings of isolation and loneliness. They may even daydream about going home where a familiar routine and, perhaps more important, good friends are waiting for them.

"I was never totally able to let go of my high school life," says VanAdams. "I constantly compared the people I met in college to friends I knew back home. I just didn't give my new surroundings a fair shake--and I still regret that to this day."

You don't have to strive to be the most popular person on campus, but a few personal connections can help you feel more at home.

SURVIVAL STRATEGY: JOIN IN CAMPUS ACTIVITIES. College is the ideal time to try new things and diversify your interests. Write for the school newspaper, become active in student government, form a club, join a sports team, or get a part-time job at the library. "Understand that extracurricular activities are just as important as your studies when shaping a well-rounded college experience," says Robert Feldman, director of under-graduate studies in the department of psychology at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. "Get involved. Your college experience is what you make of it." Just be careful not to spread yourself too thin. After all, it's hard to focus on schoolwork--or any activity, for that matter--if you have too many things going at once.

3. ACADEMICALLY UNPREPARED

ALTHOUGH YOU MAY have gotten great grades in high school, college can be much more demanding. Plan on studying longer hours and spending more time reading books and researching term papers. You have to hone effective time management skills and, most important, become self-reliant.

This means identifying your Achilles' heal (term-paper writing, perhaps), seeking out ways to strengthen this weakness (paying frequent visits to the campus writing center), and setting and hitting deadlines (giving your term paper to a professor a week in advance so she can offer helpful ideas that you can incorporate before the paper is due). And don't let one low grade send you into a downward spiral of self-doubt. Remember: You're in college to build new knowledge, not rehash what you already know.

For some, though, this readjustment period is rather tough. "I was the salutatorian of my high school, so I wasn't used to getting anything less than an 'A,'" says Stanton. "When I got a 'C' on my first chemistry test, I was, like, 'Whoa, what's this? This must be some kind of a mistake.'" But it wasn't, and Stanton quickly learned that college academics were a completely different ballgame--and you had to play by different rules.

For one thing, the 30 minutes she would study for exams in high school just didn't cut it in college. Secondly, the notes she took in class, she quickly learned, were disorganized and incomplete. Fortunately, Stanton recognized these shortcomings and sought help--a decision that, she says, "saved my life...and grades!"

SURVIVAL STRATEGY: ASK FOR HELP. Professors, for the most part, are friendly folks who are more than willing to help a student in need. They can offer helpful insights and point you to outside resources that may be of further assistance, such as the university's guidance office, writing center, or a tutoring program. Also, by establishing a friendship with a professor, you'll see her as less of an obstacle and more as a mentor. "The best thing I did my freshman year was introduce myself to all of my professors, no matter how well or poorly I was doing in their class," says Stanton. "I formed many friendships with professors; in fact, one helped me get an internship." For more academic advice, see page 32.

4. LOW ON FUNDS

FOR MANY, THE FINANCIAL burdens of college are too overwhelming, and many dropouts cite a lack of money as the No. 1 reason why they left school, according to ACT. Often students will plan the finances for only the first year or the first semester, but they will not look ahead to how they're paying for the rest. To make ends meet, some students work a part-time job. But this can lead to problems as work can cut into study time and send grades plummeting.

SURVIVAL STRATEGY: LOOK BEYOND THE MONEY ISSUE. "Oftentimes, money is masking another problem," says Tinto. "I speak to several kids every year who claim to be leaving school because they can't afford it. But in truth they're having difficulties adjusting either socially or academically -- sometimes both--to college life."

However, if money matters remain the primary reason why you want to leave college, remember this: College graduates, on

average, earn nearly twice as much per year as those with just a high school diploma, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Also, by staying in school, you build contacts with friends and professors that could lead to lucrative summer internships and potential post-graduate job opportunities.

If you need money for school immediately, research possible scholarships, grants, and financial aid packages. There are several excellent resources on the Web that can point you in the right direction. As for working a part-time job, try to find one on campus that won't take away from your studies, like a position at the library or dining hall.

5. CHOSE THE WRONG MAJOR

WHILE IT'S DIFFICULT to choose your life direction at age 17 or 18, some students feel pressured into picking a major when applying to college. "I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life, I just knew I wanted out of Connecticut," says Jesse Barber, who enrolled at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. "I decided to major in sports communication. To be honest, I wasn't even sure what that meant--but I liked sports so how hard could it be?" Unfortunately for Barber, sports communication turned out to be a bad decision, and he transferred to another school after his freshman year because he simply had no interest in what he was studying. "It wasn't a good fit, and my grades indicated that."

Like Barber, many students think it's essential to choose a major when applying to college. And also like Barber, a fair share of these students quickly learn they made the wrong choice.

"It took me a couple of years--and colleges--to find the right major," says Barber, who chose a computer science major. "I'm glad I left my options open, though, because I found something that I truly liked and excelled in."

SURVIVAL STRATEGY: ENTER COLLEGE AS AN "UNDECIDED" MAJOR

"There's nothing wrong with checking the 'undecided box' when applying to college," says Malerie Simon, a guidance counselor at John Jay High School in Cross River, New York, where nearly 90 percent of graduating seniors go on to college.

Most four-year colleges and universities don't require students to declare a major until the middle of their sophomore year or beginning of their junior year, points out Mark Cannon, deputy executive director for the National Association for College Admission Counseling.

Cannon encourages first-year students to explore all of their options by taking a range of courses, from economics to English to physics. "Don't panic if you can't decide on a major immediately," he advises. "Dabble in a variety of subjects, see which ones pique your interest. And while you're narrowing your search, be proactive and interview faculty members and upperclassmen. When the time comes to decide on a major, you'll feel more confident that you've found a good fit."

6. FIRST-GENERATION STUDENT

STUDIES SHOW THAT if you're the first in your family to go to college, you're more at risk to drop out before the completion of your education. Basically, it's hard to know what to expect from college when you don't have a parent or sibling to show you the ropes. Often, first-generation students are minorities, which can be even more daunting when attending a predominantly white campus.

At the University of Nebraska, in Lincoln, more than 85 percent of the student body is white. To make the transition easier for minority students, many of whom are first-generation students, the school invites minority students to campus for six weeks during the summer. During this time, these students take between six and eight credit hours, work on campus, live in the same

dorm, and build relationships with their professors and each other. "Many of the students who attend it go on to be excellent students and leaders," says James Griesen, vice chancellor for student affairs at Nebraska.

SURVIVAL STRATEGY: BEFORE APPLYING TO SCHOOLS, FIND OUT WHICH ONES HAVE PROGRAMS FOR FIRST-GENERATION AND/OR MINORITY STUDENTS.

'Ask not what you can do for your school, but what your school can do for you," says Tinto. Remember: You (or your parents) are paying for your education, so don't be afraid to interview several schools and be frank in your discussions. Questions such as "What does your school offer minority students that 'School X' doesn't" and "What programs do you have for students struggling to adapt to college life" are perfectly legitimate.

HAPPY ENDINGS

NOT ALL COLLEGE dropouts are permanent dropouts. In fact, a good number of them actually transfer to other schools or take some time off before returning to college. Such is the case with VanAdams, the well-rounded high school student who never quite found his footing at the University of Maine. After that dismal experience, VanAdams took a year off to find himself.

"I just drove across the country and saw as much as I could," he says. "That was a wonderful time. But it also opened my eyes; as soon as I pulled into my parents' driveway, I knew I wanted to give college another shot."

Older and wiser, VanAdams spent the summer researching schools and chose to apply to Ithaca College, in New York. He got in. Four years later, after switching majors three times, he graduated with a degree in medical records. And now, working as a medical records clerk for a top hospital in San Diego, he has advice for those entering college: "Understand that there are several paths you can take during your college career. What works for some, may not work for you. It's amazing how much you grow during your college years if you remain open to new ideas and experiences."

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1. BAKER UNIVERSITY, BALDWIN CITY, KS (www.bakeru.edu) Offers the "Ibn-Roads Pre-Collegiate Experience," a non-credit program for incoming students that addresses living in the dormitory, communication skills, and introductory mathematics and business classes.
2. TEXAS CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY FORT WORTH (www.tcu.edu) Gives incoming freshmen the option to join "Frog Camps" off-campus summer retreats after the school's quirky mascot that allow students chance to bond with their classmates and community before classes begin. Some of the FrogCamps even emulate the "Habitat for Humanity" project, where teams of students work together to build homes for the less fortunate in Fort Worth.
3. OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY COLUMBUS (www.osu.edu) Has "foundations" courses for first-year students who wish to hone their study skills, learn to take effective notes (especially when part of a large freshman lecture that may contain 300-plus students), and discover the wealth of student resource centers available on campus.
4. UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS, AMHERST (www.umass.edu) Offers a one-credit freshman survival course that

contains no more than 20 students per section and focuses on practical lessons, such as how to study for exams, research term papers, and engage yourself in campus affairs and activities.

5. UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA LOS ANGELES (www.ucla.edu) Has several summer courses for motivated high-school students looking to gain insight into the rigors of college while taking a variety of challenging classes in several subjects. Students live on campus during the summer and gain an appreciation for dorm life by meeting kids from across the country and globe.

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