



FAST FACTS for Freshmen

5 Getting Help If You Need It

“It’s very intimidating when you are 18 and are sitting in a class and the most accomplished professor in the world is teaching you. You feel like you can’t go to them and ask stupid questions. But with professors, the dean—no matter how high up—I have never had somebody not make time for me and be very genuine about it.”
—Theodora, History

“You need to talk to professors if you don’t understand something. Instead, I would feel guilty, like I hadn’t studied enough. I’d tell myself that I’d go see him after I understood the material and got caught up in the readings. But it just got worse.”
—Rob, Architecture

TALKING TO A COUNSELOR
Sometimes a problem you are experiencing can seem overwhelming, and often a little outside perspective and non-judgmental advice can put you back on the right track. If you feel that you need someone to provide that kind of help, you should contact Counseling and Psychological Services at x8-2922. They offer confidential services free of charge.

First-year students soon discover that full support of their intellectual exploration is an integral part of the Carnegie Mellon culture. Professors, TAs, advisors, associate deans, peer tutors, RAs—all of these members of the campus community are excellent sources of information, and all are there to help.

A culture of support.

Chances are, you were a very successful high school student. Perhaps you even had an easy time of the school work without much exertion. If so, you may find that the rigorous and demanding coursework at Carnegie Mellon presents a much greater challenge. You may not have had to seek academic help before, but you may find it useful to take advantage of some of the many resources that Carnegie Mellon provides for its undergraduates, especially first-year students. From asking your professor a question in class, to going to office hours, to joining a study group, to going to special review sessions—there are literally hundreds of people who are ready and willing to give you a hand if you need it.

Just ask!

With all of the resources available around campus, there’s no reason not to get some help when you need it. Professors and TAs hold regular office hours; librarians can be consulted in person or via e-mail;

cluster administrators are easy to find; and even fellow students are a good source of information and feedback. No one is going to doubt your intelligence if you have to ask for clarification or a nudge in the right direction. In fact, it would be dumb to waste your time always trying to figure everything out for yourself.

And the same goes for when you’re in class. If you’re not following the instructor’s meaning, you would help yourself (and very likely several of your fellow students) by asking for further explanation or reiteration. Or, if you feel embarrassed or want more personalized attention, you can catch the professor before or after class. Remember: You’re here to learn, and asking questions and getting answers is a major part of the college experience.

Get advice from your advisor.

Though this may seem obvious, your academic advisor is the perfect person to talk to if you’re having academic problems. From having questions about if your chosen major is a good career choice to whether to drop a course, make an appointment for a chat with your advisor. That’s what they’re there for.

The Academic Development Office

Having to work harder than you’re used to—and even struggling in some areas—does not mean that you don’t belong here. It’s just an

GETTING HELP IF YOU NEED IT

“I had a horrific time trying to figure out a computer programming assignment one lovely Sunday afternoon. After spending hours on the problem (and wasting the entire afternoon) I went to the computer clusters for help. My problem was solved in 15 minutes. Moral of the story: do not hesitate to ask the teacher or cluster assistants for help.”

—Caroline, Computer Science

“I found the SI [supplemental instruction] sessions in all of my courses to be so helpful. They were usually led by some of the best students on campus who actually took that course and aced it. Often there were handouts that helped to ask me the questions about the material that I wouldn’t think of when studying alone.”

—Ari, Chemistry

“Don’t be afraid to ask for help in courses you are having trouble in. Go see your TAs, ask professors, go to all lectures, recitations and go to peer tutoring to get your questions answered. Also, study in groups. You can learn more than you realize from your peers.”

—Jake, Civil and Environmental Engineering

FACULTY FEEDBACK

“My job is to teach students the material—and challenging them is part of that process. I expect them to sometimes have to ask for my help. That’s why I hold office hours—and I’m always there.”

—Professor, Architecture

indication that you need to adjust to meet this new challenge.

A wonderful resource that hundreds of students use each semester is the Academic Development Office. Academic Development provides services to students who are having academic difficulties or to those who simply want to improve their academic skills. All services are free of charge and include both group and individual instruction.

Following are the services that Academic Development offers:

Peer tutoring. Peer tutoring is geared primarily, but not exclusively, toward large introductory courses. It is available from 8:30 to 11 p.m. Sunday-Thursday in various residence halls and on selected weekday afternoons in Cyert B5. This is a walk-in service, and no appointment is necessary. Standing tutoring appointments are also available upon request.

Group and individual study skills instruction. Group workshops are held several times each semester, covering topics such as time management, how to prepare for exams, stress management and procrastination. Register for workshops or make individual appointments by contacting Academic Development.

Supplemental instruction (SI). SI is an academic enrichment program that is offered in traditionally difficult courses. SI discussion and review sessions are facilitated by trained student SI leaders who have already completed the course and received an A in it.

Designed to supplement—not replace—class lectures and recitations, SI sessions are interactive and collaborative.

Students who attend sessions learn to integrate how to learn with what to learn.

SI sessions are usually held twice weekly for one hour; additional sessions are held prior to exams. Attendance at sessions is voluntary.

Study groups. Organized study groups are available in selected courses each term. The study groups are limited to six students and are facilitated by a student leader. Come in to the Academic Development office in Cyert Hall, Suite B5 and fill out a request form to join a study group.

Fast Facts. These pamphlets, which offer tips on a variety of academic success issues, can be picked up from the Academic Development office or can be viewed on their website under Publications:

- Combating Procrastination
- Fighting Test Anxiety
- How to Succeed in Organic Chemistry
- How to Successfully Manage CS Programming
- Plagiarism
- Preparing for Exams
- Preparing Your Study Space
- Setting and Reaching Academic Goals
- Stress
- Successful Exam Strategies
- If You Suspect You Have a Learning Disability
- Taking Lecture Notes
- Textbook Reading Strategies
- Thinking About Transferring?
- Time Management
- Your Role as a Partner in Learning

Fast Facts for Freshmen

- 1: A Strong Start
- 2: A Lot to Do
- 3: Absorbing It All
- 4: More to Consider
- 5: Getting Help If You Need It

If you have missed many classes because of illness or personal crisis, in addition to contacting your academic advisor, there is a staff of advisors in Student Affairs. The Student Affairs advisors will be able to assist you in evaluating your situation from the basics of contacting your instructors to knowing university policies on dropping courses or taking a leave of absence.

Studies have shown that students who need help and ask for it improve their grades, while those who do not seek assistance feel helpless, isolated and unhappy.

“For Freshmen Only” workshops are held each September. Check the Academic Development website or ask you RA for more information.

If you have taken advantage of various resources to improve your academic performance, but none have worked, you may find that a learning disability is at the root of your difficulties. Learning disabilities are often referred to as “hidden” handicaps because they aren’t always obvious and can be difficult to diagnose. If you find that you are having trouble listening, reading, writing, spelling or solving problems, you may want to be tested for a learning disability. For more information, refer to Academic Development’s Fast Fact on “Suspecting a Learning Disability” (on their website) or contact Equal Opportunity Services at x8-2013.

Drop by the Academic Development office (Cyert Hall, Suite B5), visit their website (www.cmu.edu/academic-development) or call x8-6878 for more information and schedules.

Other useful resources

Bboards and websites. Many large courses have bboards or websites where syllabi, homework solutions and other information is posted.

Librarians. Tried and true, librarians are invaluable sources of information. They can help you find materials that you need for a paper or teach you some good research tips.

Some questions for self-reflection.

Sometimes it can be helpful to step back and get a little perspective in order to assess how things are going. Following are some questions you can ask yourself to see if you are satisfied with how you’re handling college academics, or if perhaps there’s something you could be doing differently.

- *Have you been going to class and keeping up with your homework and readings?*
- *How many times have you talked to your professors or TAs this semester?*
- *Which of your courses are you doing best in? Why?*
- *In which course or courses are you not doing so well in? Why? What have you done to improve? What do you think you could do?*

Setting goals.

One of the best ways to become and stay motivated is to set learning goals. Successful students have found that goals should be centered on learning, rather than grades. Achievable goals are:

- *Realistic and challenging.* Is it doable?
- *Believable.* Do you feel that you can achieve your goal?

- *Measurable.* How will you know whether or when you’ve met your goal? It must have a clear start and finish time or date.

List three short-term and three long-term goals for the semester. Are these achievable? How will you know when you’ve achieved them?

Don’t forget to reward yourself for meeting your goals. After completing a calculus homework set, go for a swim. After finishing a big project, go out with a friend to dinner and a movie. Or just kick back and enjoy how great it feels when you’ve done a good job.

Work hard, but take some time for yourself. *And have a terrific first year!*

