FAST FACTS

Combating Procrastination

You have an exam next Thursday and you want to do well. You're a little behind in your reading, but all you have to do is set aside about two hours a day to study, take notes and then review. You'll start today—right now, in fact.

Well, maybe not this very **instant.** *You have plenty of time to catch up. You can afford to take a break for an hour or so before you actually sit down to study. Besides, you've been meaning to alphabetize your CD collection for a long time now, and that's something that really needs to be done. You'll hit the books right after that.*

Then Wednesday evening arrives and with a sinking feeling you realize that you really aren't prepared for this exam. Somehow you just never seemed to get around to motivating yourself to study. Forget the "A" you dreamed about—the only chance now for passing the exam is to pull an all-nighter. Again.

Does this scene described at left sound familiar? If so, it might comfort you to know that you're not alone. It's natural for everyone to procrastinate to some degree. We all avoid tasks that we find tedious, overwhelming, irrelevant or boring. Procrastination becomes a major problem, however, when it becomes frequent and habitual, and when it begins to interfere with your ability to make your way through school.

Like most bad habits we acquire, the tendency to procrastinate develops slowly over a long period of time, with roots stemming from behavior we learned early in our lives. Psychologists and time management experts believe that each person has his or her own individual patterns of procrastination. These different patterns arise for different reasons. One person may learn to procrastinate through fear of failure, while another procrastinates for fear of success.

As a Carnegie Mellon student, you probably find yourself with too much to do and too little time to do it in. You may feel overextended and overwhelmed. Being unable to prioritize your tasks, lacking the knowledge about how to go about accomplishing them, simply feeling burnt-out—these all contribute to the tendency to procrastinate. Thankfully, it's a well-recognized problem that can be successfully combated with a variety of effective, proven techniques.

How to fight procrastination
Set realistic goals
It's difficult to motivate yourself to work when you really don't have a good idea of what you're ultimately trying to accomplish. When approaching a task, think carefully about your short- and long-term goals. What actions are necessary for you to achieve these goals? Which tasks must be finished at once and which can wait for a better time? Recognize that a long-term goal is often reached through the successful attainment of many composite short-term goals. Make sure your goals are realistic and achievable, and don't hesitate to rethink and redefine your goals as your situation demands.

Not all jobs need to be done perfectly. Sometimes it's smarter simply to get the job over and done with and then move on to other chores. If it's important that the job be done with quality and precision, certainly give it the attention it requires, but recognize that not every job needs to be done so well. It's hard to motivate yourself when every little task seems to require a superhuman effort.

Divide and conquer

A task will often seem overwhelming because it demands a great commitment of time and energy. In such a case, dividing the task into smaller parts may help. The task of writing a research paper, for example, is actually composed of several smaller tasks: going to the library to research information, photocopying articles, writing the first draft, revising and so forth. If you face a large task that seems impossible to attack, divide it up into its smaller parts and tackle each as a separate job. You can calculate how much total time will be needed for the entire task by estimating the time needed for each part. Finding time to work on these subtasks will be easier as well, since you can fit small chunks of time into your schedule more readily than larger ones. With each smaller task you complete, accentuate the positive by congratulating yourself on a job well done.

Use the five-minute plan

If you are having a difficult time motivating yourself to begin a task, give this strategy a try: figure out how much of the job you can accomplish in five minutes' worth of work, then complete that amount of work *and that work only.* If you are writing a research paper, for example, five minutes may give you only enough time to collect your notes and perhaps sketch a brief outline. After the time is up, take a short break in which you do something entirely different, then plan what you will accomplish in your next five-minute session. The key is to force yourself to stop after five minutes; if you do not, the next time you try this technique you'll know subconsciously that you intend to work longer and

the job will seem no less daunting. Work only for five minutes, but make those five minutes count.

If this strategy works for you, after a while you may want to lengthen your work session to ten or fifteen minutes at a time. Always keep it short enough so that the task before you doesn't seem overwhelming. Keep the intervals between work sessions reasonably brief as well. It does you no good to work for five minutes at a time—no matter how effectively—if you only work once or twice a day.

Reward yourself

Make a contract with yourself. In exchange for services rendered (completing all or part of your work), reward yourself by giving yourself something you want—a pizza, relaxation time, whatever. Instead of choosing to attend a movie while homework remains outstanding, for example, finish your work first and then reward yourself with the movie afterward.

Visualize success

One good way to overcome the anxiety and guilt that accompany procrastination is to simply imagine the task finished and the job well done. Picture to yourself all the intermediate steps you took to finish the job. Think how good you'll feel with all the work completed. Plan how you'll then reward yourself. The key to effective visualization is *detail:* be specific in imagining the good things the future holds after your work is behind you.

Know yourself

We all have certain chores that we don't like to do, and we each have our individual ways of avoiding them. Study your individual avoidance

patterns and learn how best to surmount them. The more you know about your procrastination—what cues it, and when—the better you can combat it. Recognize when you are rationalizing reasons to avoid work you don't want to do. If your schoolwork takes priority, for example, don't fool yourself into believing that it's okay to do your laundry instead of going to the library to study.

Be realistic. If you are an evening person, don't tell yourself that you'll be able to awaken at 6:00 a.m. to study for your physics exam, especially if you are rationalizing a reason to go to a late-night party tonight. Likewise, if you are a morning person, don't put off doing difficult homework until your favorite evening TV shows are over; you'll be too tired to work well then.

Guidelines for success

Experiment. Try different strategies at different times. Some may work and some may not. Try to find out which works best for you. Experiment with only one strategy at a time. If you try too many new strategies simultaneously, they might not work. Even if they do, you won't be able to tell which ones worked and which did not.

Go slowly. Your procrastination habits were a long time in the making. Don't expect them to change overnight. Commitment and perseverance are what counts. Shoot for slow but certain improvement. Don't fool yourself into thinking that you can instantly eradicate procrastination.

Expect setbacks. You will always experience setbacks whenever you try to break a bad habit. Don't let

them get the best of you. If you have a bad day, your efforts haven't all been in vain. Simply start the next day with a firm resolution to do better.