What I Learned as a First-Generation College Student

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I started learning and growing as a young adult way before I enrolled as an undergraduate at Vanderbilt University. Being the first person in my family to attend college, I didn't know what exactly to expect, but I was eager to embark on the journey. For as long as I can remember, I've always enjoyed reading and learning — fundamentally, it is what keeps me grounded to this day.

Interestingly enough, going into my freshman year, I was set on becoming a doctor. Luckily, the classes I took and the influential professors I met along the way helped me realize what my real passion in life is: entrepreneurship.

Great professors and teachers aside, the real heroes were my parents. I learned a great deal from them before I even earned my diploma — enabling me to experience four phenomenal years in Nashville. My parent's wisdom transcends the pages of a textbook, and it was that wisdom that allowed me to excel academically. In a way, because my parents didn't go to college, I was able carve my own path. They supported me of course, but I charted my own journey, void of excessive parental pressures and unrealistic expectations.

Below are four lessons I learned as a first-generation college student.

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1. You are your own biggest advocate

The ability to navigate through adversity, adapt to change and thrive is what sets apart top performers from the pack – in college and in life. Whether you're a legacy kid or a first-generation student, you'll learn quickly that you need to rely on yourself to succeed. While having a support system among faculty, friends and family is important, you must remain self-sufficient.

Not only do you need to rely on yourself to excel at your course work, but you also need to make healthy personal choices (diet, exercise, sleep, etc.). And although I couldn't ask my parents how they navigated the college experience specifically, they did show me how to remain adaptable and autonomous. My freshman year, I worked to cultivate a sense of calm, clarity and stability when faced with uncertain or stressful situations.

2. Nothing will outdo sweat

You may be familiar with the recently popularized phrase, "Work smart, not hard." While I can appreciate the sentiment, I want you to imagine the impact of working smart and hard. In my mind, it's simple: someone who trains, practices and relentlessly works towards achieving his or her goals will almost always outperform those who don't. Growing up, my father exemplified strong work ethic. He was constantly in motion. In fact, he still is to this day.

So, when I entered college, I made sure to follow my father's lead and remain busy. I was always taking action – whether I was on the soccer field competing or in the library studying, I too was constantly in motion. I've carried this inherent

sense of drive into my professional life as well. Being the first person in my family to attend college only fueled my fire further.

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3. Don’t ignore the soft skills

Emotional intelligence plays a huge role in succeeding in college and beyond. From an early age, my mom instilled the importance of humanness in me. Forgiveness, empathy and self-awareness were among the traits she taught me to hone and embrace. In academic and professional settings alike, these soft skills are imperative. Our ability to relate to one another, communicate and understand all perspectives is the cornerstone of critical thought and collaboration.

When you get to college, often times you’re introduced to individuals from near and far, and whether they are international students or locals, you need to be able to collaborate effectively with one another. This is where the soft skills come in – compassion, awareness and flexibility. Even today, as the CEO of 4,500 employees at Asset Living, people are my priority. That means my ability to understand and communicate with everyone determines our collective success.

4. Compete with yourself – not others

As humans, we naturally compare ourselves to those around us, particularly in new settings. College is no different; in fact, I think the younger we are, the more we tend to do this. As a first-generation college student, it’s easy to fall into this trap. Try to avoid it. Instead, track your current results against your past results.

You want to consistently improve. So, how do you measure that improvement? By evaluating your past self and identifying where you've grown and where the gaps lie. Self-growth is the ultimate goal, and the only way to achieve this is by logging your progress — not the progress of those around you. While you should have some awareness of your competition and surroundings, fixating on this will only distract you. Stay focused; stay driven.

Ultimately, the most important skill you can gain in college is simply the ability to learn. Learning to learn, I call it. It doesn't necessarily matter what your major is; rather, it is your capacity to quickly absorb new ideas, techniques and concepts that will help you excel.

In the end, the tendencies we develop as young people tend to crystallize as we get older. Therefore, forming positive habits early on helps greatly in succeeding as a college student, an employee and, eventually, an employer.

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