“Am I the Only One Who...?"

Claire P. Shindler and Sheila M. Reindl

Things that Many Freshmen, Sophomores, Juniors, and Seniors Imagine No One Else is Thinking or Feeling

IN THE COLLEGE YEARS
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IN THE COLLEGE YEARS

IN THE COLLEGE YEARS is a collection of essays, teaching materials, and other publications from the Bureau of Study Counsel at Harvard University. The collection adopts its name from the classic study, *Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years* (Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1968) by William G. Perry, Jr., the founding director of the Bureau.
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This booklet is based on a series of handouts developed for Harvard students by the Bureau of Study Counsel, Harvard University.
INTRODUCTION

Each year of college presents students with unprecedented opportunities as well as unprecedented challenges. Many a student at one time or another during the college years assumes that he or she is the only one who is struggling while others are making extraordinary use of every opportunity and taking the challenges of college in stride. Privately, many students wonder why things are so unduly daunting and difficult for them and why they don’t seem to be as happy or well-adjusted as everyone else. They ask themselves what’s wrong with them. Publicly, few students acknowledge or share the complex reality of their college experience. In talking with others, they emphasize the positive, presenting “a face for the public.”

While trying to put one’s best foot (and face) forward is of course entirely understandable, when everyone does the same, the result is that students can be left feeling quite alone in their private discomfort, distress, or doubt. They struggle or worry on their own, without realizing that in fact they are in very good company and that their experiences – normal and natural reactions to the challenges of college life – are shared by many other students.

This booklet is an effort to articulate some common, salient experiences in each of the freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior years (although it’s worth noting that many of these experiences can arise at any time in college). The booklet includes suggestions of things students can consider trying to help them cope and thrive. While many of the suggestions are specific and practical, others begin with words like “remember…” and “consider…” and “acknowledge…. “ Suggestions like these recognize the value and power of students’ own inner resources and sense-making, which have served them well in the past and can serve them well through new challenges now.

Our hope is that this booklet will help students recognize that they are not alone and help them to seek out (and to also offer one another) company and support as they navigate the challenges of college life.
While the experiences described here might be considered normal and natural and common to many students, they can still be challenging for any one student. The support of peers, faculty, deans, counselors, and others, as well as a student’s own self-understanding and self-compassion, can make all the difference in any particular student’s experience.
In the College Years

Shindler, C. P. and Reindl, S. M.  Am I the Only One Who...?

Freshman Year

It’s freshman year...a new start, with exciting new possibilities, and so much to learn!

At the same time, many freshmen struggle to fit in, to make friends, to understand the academic expectations at work in college, to do well in their courses, to find some niche in which they feel known and valued, and to experience some role in which they can feel confident and proud. Having just entered a new community, it’s natural to compare yourself with others and to have concerns about how you will fit in and how you will reckon with new challenges and new experiences. This is especially true when you are living away from all of the contexts in which you have felt known and supported over the years.

1. “It’s strange not being around anyone who knows me well. I am afraid I’m never going to make real friends here.”

Many students come to college from a home context in which they have been known well or for a long time. You might have had both peers and grown-ups in your life who know your nature, your interests, your sense of humor, your strengths and vulnerabilities, your preferences and pet peeves. When you arrive in a new place where you are not known, you can start to feel as if you are in some sense “always on,” constantly trying to make some sort of impression, and it can be hard to just relax and be yourself.

Things to consider...

Let those first few days and weeks be what they are – that inevitable mix of excitement, awakening, anxiety, and awkwardness. Let yourself get to know people over time, and let yourself be known over time. As a starting point, remember who you are. Take some time to contemplate what engages your curiosity and interest, what brings you comfort and joy, what enlivens you, what is most deeply meaningful to you. You might even write a list of such things – not to define your-
self for all time but to give yourself some reference point in the event that you find yourself feeling overwhelmed or diminished or lost in the face of so many other people’s compelling stories and personalities.

In your efforts to let others know who you are and to discover who they are, you might say to a roommate or friend, “I like being up early. I’m trying to find other early birds to join me for a run and breakfast. Know anyone who might be up for that?” Or, “I keep wanting to go and check out _____. Would you be interested?” Or, “I’m curious about your interest in astronomy. I know next to nothing about that. How did you get into that?”

Accept that as you enter a new community and meet new people, you can’t know immediately who will become a close and enduring friend. It typically takes time – and sheer shared experience with someone – to cultivate a friendship of depth and durability. Sometimes the people who end up becoming our best friends are people we were not particularly close to early on. The opposite can also be true: someone with whom we initially clicked might turn out not to be someone with whom we go the distance in friendship. Let yourself spend time with people in various contexts – talking over dinner, going for a run, going out for coffee or ice cream, meeting up in the library to study, climbing the rock wall, getting involved in an extracurricular activity, attending a religious service or a student group associated with a spiritual tradition or practice, heading off to a museum, or just hanging out in the dorm. Even if others seem to be forming closed friendship groups, try to resist the pressure to become too exclusive too soon, and stay open to new possibilities.

2. “Everyone seems to be so certain of what they want to do in college and with their lives. I’ve met some students who are taking higher-level courses in everything. It makes me wonder if I’m already behind.”

Some people arrive at college with a clear path in mind. But many people are quite unsure of what they want to do. Even those who seem set on a path might end up diverging from what once
seemed a certain destination. And some of those who remain set on their path later look back and wish they had entertained more possibilities.

Students arrive at college with very different degrees of preparation based in part upon their secondary school background, in part upon formal and informal enrichment experiences, and in part upon how much they have already devoted to a specialized or focused area of interest. It can be hard to feel like a rank beginner at college after you have felt like an advanced student in high school.

Things to consider...

Don’t assume that certainty is better than uncertainty or doubt. Your job is not to be like someone else but to discover what engages you; uncertainty and doubt might be part of that process of discovery and discernment. If you are uncertain of what you like to do and what you want to learn, let yourself explore. Look in the course catalog under departments about which you know nothing or next to nothing just to open your mind to new possibilities. Investigate a few classes that are out of your usual zone of interest and comfort, again, just to open yourself to possibilities.

Ask a number of people who seem to be accomplished and happy in their work (professors, teaching assistants, deans, advanced students, etc.) how they came to be studying what they are studying or doing what they are now doing. You can simply ask that person how he or she became interested in his or her area of study. In hearing about others’ journeys, you might be surprised to discover how much serendipity there was along their paths and how far some people have diverged from where they originally thought they were headed. Hearing about others’ intellectual and creative journeys can help you find your way on yours.

Whatever your background, you can only start from where you are. While there might be a few majors that depend upon a fair amount of pre-college study and experience – e.g., it would be difficult to major in math if you do not arrive with a solid foundation of high school math – most majors are accessible to most students. And even in the case of math, a student without a strong foundation can still take
math courses to explore that interest or to develop math skills in the service of his or her primary field of study.

If you are taking a course in which much is new to you, let yourself enjoy your “beginner’s mind” – that capacity to encounter something with a fresh perspective and open, receptive mind. If you have a question that the course has sparked for you, ask it. If you don’t get to ask it in class, go to your professor’s or teaching assistant’s office hours, introduce yourself, and ask it there. But you needn’t have a brilliant question or great point to serve as a ticket to your meeting with an instructor. You can bring whatever question you have or simply your interest in hearing about the professor’s intellectual journey and academic work.

3. “It seems that nearly everyone here but me has done something extraordinary. They say the college has never made an admissions mistake, but there’s a first time for everything. Really, I think I am the admissions mistake.”

No doubt about it, some of the students admitted to college have done truly extraordinary things. There are students who have gotten extraordinary grades or test scores; who have performed extraordinarily well in athletics, music, drama, or other arts; or who have already made some extraordinary public service contribution. It is natural to be left wondering if you are out of your league.

Things to consider...

Remember that the college didn’t have to admit you. The Admissions Committee had options. There were other students the college could have chosen for your spot. And remember that the people on the Admissions Committee bring a good measure of experience and wisdom to the table. So assume that there was something in your application that appealed to the members of the Admissions Committee and gave them confidence that you would contribute something valuable to the college and that the college would offer something of value to you. They might have been struck by how much you did with the limited resources you had. Or you might have struck them as “Best All-
Around” or as someone living a life with a sense of balance among the different things that matter to you even if you are not the most outstanding achiever in any one category. Or it might be that there was something in your sensibilities and vision for your life that moved them. Or perhaps they saw some scholarly or artistic or leadership potential that they wanted to give you a chance to develop. Let yourself trust that someone saw good reason to admit you to this place; let yourself make of this opportunity what you will.

Remember that you are most likely to hear about and remember people’s most outstanding accomplishments, not their more ordinary or typical ones, so your sample of what you are hearing and remembering is inevitably biased toward the outstanding. Resist as best you can the temptation to compare yourself with others. There will always be someone better than you at something and someone worse than you at something. Focus on developing your own capacity and potential, and defining your own measuring scale as to what it means to succeed.

4. “I am going to hate living in a dorm – much less sharing a room.”

You might be right. Especially if you had your own room back at home, and if you are someone who treasures your private space, you might find sharing a room and living with other people to be quite demanding and exhausting.

Things to consider...

It’s natural to assume that you must become friends with your roommates, but try to enter into the rooming relationship without particular expectations. It might be that you and your roommates will remain “just roommates.” Even if living with others is not your preference – and even if it will never become your preference, especially if it means living in close quarters – let the anthropologist in you be a participant-observer who is curious to learn what it is like to live the dailyness of life in close proximity with others. Start by trying to observe and describe the experience without judging it one way or another.
Notice how your roommates’ assumptions, habits, and routines differ from yours, and try to understand why this might be. This sort of observation will inform your sense of empathy and understanding and help you in your efforts to work out a good roommate relationship.

In addition to understanding others, it is important to be able to speak up for what is essential to you and negotiate for your preferences. These kinds of conversations can be challenging, but they are part of our learning how to get along with others. Learning how to negotiate – how to clarify and articulate what matters most to you, express your experience effectively to others, listen to and appreciate others’ perspectives, identify and honor your non-negotiables, and work toward a resolution that everyone can get behind – these are important skills to develop. You can talk with your adviser or a counselor to consider how to approach a conversation with your roommates or to arrange for a meeting with your roommates in the presence of someone who can help to facilitate the group conversation.

Consider having a rooming group meeting (preferably at the start of the year, although it can be any time) to establish fundamental agreements around such basics as noise levels, level of clutter, timing of everyone’s showers, whether/how long guests can stay overnight; whether/how to share food and drink and shampoo and clothes. Some colleges require that all incoming freshmen rooming groups have such a meeting with their resident staff person and that they sign an agreement they themselves create together.

If your difficulties with your roommate(s) persist despite your best efforts to talk things out, consult with your residence staff or advisers about best next steps.

5. “I’m homesick.”

It’s of course natural to miss familiar people and places. We might also miss familiar foods as well as familiar smells and sounds, routes and routines. Many freshmen are surprised to discover how much they miss their cat or dog or other pet. People might tell you – and you might tell yourself – that you’ll get over it, that college will soon start to feel like home, or that you’ll be home soon enough for a long
weekend or a vacation. But in the meantime, you miss what you miss.

Moving – even moving to college – involves loss. And our whole brain and body register that loss. We can feel as if we’ve been ripped away from our moorings, even if we chose the move, even if we looked forward to it.

*Things to consider...*

We grieve because we have loved, been loved by, felt connected to, or even just gotten used to someone or something. Let yourself miss what you miss. Resist the temptation to have particular expectations of what new relationships will be like or who they will be with or how quickly they will develop. Trust that as you develop new relationships at college – including relationships to people, places, routes, routines, smells, and sounds – you will begin to get attached to those as well.

Many students are surprised at some point during their time at college to hear themselves referring to college as “home.” They find that without quite even realizing when it happened, they have somehow made a new – or at least another – home for themselves. This might well happen for you, too. But it won’t happen overnight. And in any event, it takes time for a new sense of comfort and connection to unfold.

6. “I have serious doubts about whether I can manage all the work. The reading alone will overwhelm me.”

College-level work is different from the work most students did in high school. Most students find that there is not only more work but that they are asked to think in more complex ways (e.g., tackle more complex problems; analyze, formulate, and develop more complex arguments). They also find that they are asked to structure their academic and personal lives to a much greater extent than they did when their parents, teachers, and coaches were there to help shape the structure of their days and weeks. Given all of these changes, students are called upon to change their approach to their learning and studying and to reconsider the ways in which they direct their time and attention more generally.
Things to consider...

Most campuses have resources available to help students with their studies – a learning center, peer tutoring program, or mentoring program. There are people in your college community who are devoted to helping students, including course instructors, residence staff, deans, counselors, peer advisers, and your fellow students. Give them a call, send them an email, make an appointment to see them, and visit their office hours.

That old adage that you can climb a mountain only one step at a time is a useful one here. When you look too far ahead, you can get so daunted that it can be hard to begin or hard to believe you can complete the climb. Or you can get so focused on just getting things done (the climbing equivalent of looking down at your hiking boots as you trudge to the summit) that you don’t enjoy the experience or the view. While it’s helpful to keep your ultimate hopes and intentions in mind, try also to be present for the moments of the journey. When you sit down to study, pause to ask yourself what it is that interests you, what it is you actually want to learn or understand in this moment.

7. “Everyone else seems to be so social. Am I going to be the only nerd who actually wants to study?” and/or “Everyone else seems to be so intense. Am I going to be the only one who wants to kick back and relax?”

The college social scene can be a challenging one. You might wonder whether drinking parties are the only means by which people come together on the weekends. If you want to go to a new movie or watch old movies or get tickets to a sporting event or just wander around campus or town exploring, will you be able to find someone to join you? You might wonder if people who “party hardy” also buckle down to study. Or you might wonder whether the students who seem to be forever busy with intense studying and extracurriculars ever have any downtime in which they aren’t doing something overtly productive.
Things to consider...

It takes time to find your way. Let yourself spend time with various people in various ways so that you can have a range of social experiences. There is a lot of middle ground between socializing at the expense of your studies and studying at the expense of your relationships and social exploration. Most students try to find some unique, ever-shifting, imperfect balance among their studies, social life, extracurricular involvements, and downtime/time for one's self. And many students find that the balance they strike at one moment in time is not the balance that feels right for all time.

You might also find that the academic, extracurricular, and social realms are not always entirely separate. Sometimes an academic or extracurricular activity that involves us in projects with other people can feel socially nourishing and vitalizing. And sometimes it is through our friendships and other social connections that we come up with some academic or extracurricular project that is exciting and meaningful to us.

If you feel disappointed in the social scene, remind yourself that disappointment is a sign of your yearning or desire: consciously or unconsciously, you had had your heart set on something else. When we enter into a new situation, we cannot entirely keep ourselves from having expectations of what our experience will be like. Recognize your expectations as just that – particular hopes or assumptions or preferences or fears – not as the reality of what will actually transpire or as some ideal that ought to happen. Accept that disappointment is part of most relationships – whether with another person, with the college, with yourself. It's okay to feel disappointed. Try to keep an open mind and to be receptive to the full mix of disappointments and satisfactions you encounter in your real and complex experience of college.
8. “I feel that my background is so different from other people’s backgrounds. I wish I could find someone to whom I could relate.”

Most colleges are diverse communities. Students, faculty, and staff come from all over the United States and from all over the world. You might also encounter diversity in terms of language, sexual orientation, gender identity, race, socio-economic status, religion, and a very wide range of abilities and interests. This diversity can be both exciting and challenging as you aim to get to know people whose experience is so different from yours and, at the same time, to find some sense of belonging for yourself.

Things to consider...

As trite as it sounds, let yourself have different experiences. Although you might feel an instant sense of connection with someone who shares some common element of your background, be aware that when we presume sameness, we sometimes stop being curious to really know someone as an individual. Conversely, if we can be curious and open to getting to know people whose backgrounds are quite different from ours, we might be surprised to discover that we share some sensibility or pleasure or commitment that transcends our differences.

Keep an open mind; resist the temptations to think you should “be like everyone else” or to assume you “are not like anyone else.” Everyone is going to have a different story, and someone else’s story might move or inform or inspire you (and vice versa). Many students find that their extracurricular involvements offer a context in which they can get to know people they might otherwise not have sought out. In coming together around a shared enterprise, they discover and create connections through shared experience in the here and now.
SOPHOMORE YEAR

It’s sophomore year...college isn’t quite so new and daunting, and you can focus on launching onto your academic and career path.

At the same time, the “sophomore slump” has become a reality rather than a cliché. The college years are filled with new developments and shifts, and the challenges of the second year include feeling more distant from what you used to call “home,” feeling that the freshness of freshman year has faded, and feeling a sense of fatigue or malaise overcome your sense of direction and motivation.

1. “Everything isn’t new any more.”

“Sophomore slump” often refers to the feeling of loss one experiences after the newness – the excitement – of being at college has worn off. Though sophomore year brings the advantage of familiarity – you know your way around campus, you know the meaning of most of the school acronyms, you know what to expect – that increased familiarity and loss of newness can also be a letdown. You might miss the thrill of starting so many new things.

Things to consider...

Recognize that with just about any significant new experience, one's excitement eventually diminishes over time. While it’s understandable to feel a bit let down by this, remember that there are a wealth of advantages and opportunities that accompany experience and familiarity. Think about all you learned last year and how that knowledge has laid a foundation for the coming year. Now look ahead toward the things you’re anticipating this year. Make a list of the familiar things that you hope to continue to have in your life, as well as goals for what you want to accomplish as a sophomore. Such goals might include meeting new people, finding out about some field or topic that you didn’t know about last year, getting involved in some activity on campus, exploring the sights on or near the campus, etc.
2. “Where are all my friends?”

When sophomore year begins, your friends from last year might reside in more distant dorms or even off campus. Therefore, as a sophomore, it might take more effort to continue to see your friends because you can no longer rely upon those casual encounters that occurred more frequently during your first year on campus.

Things to consider...

Make plans with friends for lunch and dinner. Find a time to meet for coffee or to study with one of your friends in the library. Meet new people in your new residence by sitting with someone new at dinner, by inviting someone on your hallway to watch a movie with you, or by participating in a dorm activity.

3. “I thought that my roommates were just right last year (or that my roommates would be perfect this year), but it’s not working out so well right now.”

In the transition from freshman year to sophomore year, you and/or your friends might change in ways that make it surprisingly difficult to maintain good relationships. Or, in living together day by day, you might discover annoying aspects of one another that had previously not been so apparent.

Things to consider...

As uncomfortable as it might be, try talking with your roommates directly. Sometimes airing everyone’s concerns can help shift the tone in the room. Consider enlisting assistance for this conversation: Residence hall staff can be very helpful, and counselors from the counseling center also frequently facilitate roommate conversations. Having a neutral party facilitate the dialogue can be quite helpful in creating a safe and productive climate in which to address your differences. Also consider expanding your network of friends so you don’t have to rely primarily on your roommates.
4. “I’m anxious about the possibility of joining a social club/organization (e.g., sorority, fraternity).”

Freshman spring and sophomore fall are common times for students to solicit and receive offers to join social clubs. For some students, this can be a very stressful experience, and it can feel difficult or awkward to discuss. In addition to being time-consuming, the process might involve engaging in behaviors and forming relationships that are way outside your comfort zone. It is also quite common for students to feel rejected or ashamed in a deeply personal way as part of this process.

Things to consider...

Remind yourself that students lead perfectly satisfying, emotionally secure lives without ever joining a social club. Recognize that your true friends will continue to associate with you regardless of whether you are in a social club. Know that many students who are in social clubs are ambivalent about their experiences and participation.

5. “I have no idea what to choose for a major!!”

Last year you might have thought you were positive that a particular major was the perfect fit for you, but now you’re not so sure. Or, maybe no single major ever felt quite right. Regardless of how you arrived in this place, choosing your major can be challenging and fraught with anxiety. You’re likely to be weighing factors such as what you like the most, what comes naturally to you, what might position you best for your post-graduation career or graduate school, etc.

Things to consider...

Make good use of your academic advisers, and attend the events and office hours that are provided by the school. Reach out to a favorite teacher, adviser, or counselor and ask for a conversation to reflect on your options. Meet with department-specific advisers or administrators. Speak with juniors or seniors in particular majors. Also, try to trust yourself and your choices. Give yourself the chance just to notice your ambivalence and all the complicated reasons for potentially
choosing one major over another. Is it due to external expectations? Fear of making the “wrong” choice? Not being sure what you might be good at? The more you understand about your own misgivings and wishes, the easier it will be to make a decision. And remember, for most students, no one "perfect" major exists to suit all of their needs.

6. “Last year, I loved most of my classes. But now, I don’t feel very engaged in them” and/or “Last year, my classes didn’t seem hard, and I had good grades. But now, I’m working even harder, and my grades aren’t as good. What’s happening???”

This is a moment to be curious about what has created the change in your relationship with your studies. Sophomore year is a time when many students realize the full impact of what it means to make choices and take full responsibility for one’s choices. The realization that our decisions, actions, and commitments shape our lives and our very selves can be daunting. The effort to sense what you care about, how you best learn, and what you trust to in making choices can be challenging.

In addition, some sophomore-level courses really are more difficult and require more effort. But it’s important to consider that your courses this year might require a different kind of effort than last year’s courses required. You might not necessarily just need to spend more time studying. Rather, you might need to be more strategic about your studying.

Things to consider...

Take advantage of this time in your life to wonder, think, reflect, talk, chat, read, explore, etc., in ways that help you understand yourself better – your interests, identity, values, cultural heritage, spiritual beliefs, motivations, and sense of meaning.

Sometimes a personal connection with teachers can make a big difference in one’s engagement in the classroom. If you’re finding your academic life a little dull, consider meeting with one of your teachers to try to get more excited by the course material. You don’t need a
specific academic question to see a professor or teaching assistant. One way of starting a conversation can be to ask about the person’s own interest in the topic.

Sophomore year is also an excellent time to evaluate your study skills. Many students come to college without ever needing to think about their study habits and skills. That’s because for high school work, and sometimes even for first-year work at college, one’s tried-and-true study habits remain effective. But your second year at college might bring with it your first encounter with the limitations of those previous ways of working. Those tried-and-true study habits and skills might no longer suffice. Make good use of resources on campus and online that can help you hone your study skills – workshops on time management, books on college skills, etc.

7. “I used to love my extracurriculars, but this year the same ones aren’t quite as fun.”

While you might feel that your extracurriculars are no longer as enjoyable or meaningful as they once were, you might also be thinking, “I didn’t get involved in enough activities last year. Is it too late to get involved now?” or “I felt overcommitted last year because I was involved in too many things.”

Things to consider...

Keep an open mind. It’s always good to evaluate the use of your time and to focus on the activities that matter most to you. Try prioritizing all your interests and activities to see whether a few of them stand out as particularly compelling. Remind yourself that it is never too late to explore or cultivate a new interest. An integral part of student life throughout college is finding the activities that are most interesting and meaningful to you. You might discover potential new interests by joining a friend in one of his or her activities and keeping an open mind when perusing your activity/extracurricular options. Another part of the process is to pay attention to your own experience. For instance, notice when you’re feeling particularly engaged and enlivened by your endeavor or experience versus when you’re
feeling disconnected, bored, or unmotivated. These observations provide clues about patterns and themes across your preferences. And always remember that you don’t have to do everything. Learning to say “no” is a crucial part of leading a balanced, satisfying life.
JUNIOR YEAR

It’s junior year...you are over the half-way hump, and well into your major.

At the same time, this halfway mark provides a good vantage point to look forward and backward. From this vantage point, students might find themselves experiencing a combination of regret, fear, excitement, anticipation, and confusion. It’s a great time to think about one’s goals, aspirations, and ways to make the most of the remaining time at college.

1. “I’m halfway through college, and I don’t feel as if I’ve accomplished much.”

You might feel that you haven’t yet explored your academic discipline deeply enough, created the social life you expected, gotten as involved as you had hoped in an extracurricular activity, or figured out your post-college plan. You’re thinking to yourself, “By now, I should have ____.” or “These were supposed to be the best years of my life, but they don’t feel like it.”

Things to consider...

Recognize that feelings of regret are common when reaching the midpoint of any experience. Knowing that these feelings are shared with others can ease the anxiety that there’s something wrong with your perspective.

Take note of all you have accomplished in your time at college so you don’t lose sight of your achievements, your learning, and your personal development. Take time to ask yourself what you would still like to learn and experience in college. Make a list of what comes to mind. Make another list of possible first steps you could take to investigate those possibilities. Make time for a conversation with someone about those possibilities and about what occurs to you as you consider exploring them. Recognize that you do still have time left in college. Half-way done means you still have half left.

Keep in mind that time and experience do not necessarily have a linear relationship. That is, it’s not a given that you will have half of
your richest college experiences during your first two years and half during your last two years. During your time so far, you might have laid a foundation for richness that will deepen dramatically at some point in time. Be kind to yourself about paths not taken. Tough choices are always a part of our life experience. We can not commit deeply to all things. When we say “Yes” to something, we say “No” (or “Later” or “Only on limited terms”) to much more.

2. “I’m not sure I’m in the right major.”

Juniors have been known to start their fall courses wondering if they chose the right major. You might feel it’s too late to make a change or feel doomed to be uninspired for the next two years of course work.

Things to consider...

Don’t assume you can’t make a change. Collect information to help you make an informed decision. Talk with your dean, counselor, or other academic advisers.

Make a list of what you like and dislike about your current major to help you clarify what’s behind your uncertainty. Compile a list of the courses you would look forward to taking in your current major and ones you’d look forward to taking in a potentially new concentration. Notice what strikes you. You might find a way to take courses for your current major that would rekindle your interest, or you might clarify that the new major is more appealing.

Resist feeling that you messed up your whole academic life. Acknowledge all you’ve learned in your courses already and all you’ll be learning in future courses, no matter the major you’ve chosen.

3. “I’m tired of my usual routine.”

After two years of courses, the same extracurricular activities, the same group of friends, you might feel tired of it all or feel like you need some kind of change. Change might not come easily. If you are considering ending your involvement with an activity or team, you
might be concerned about being seen as a quitter or being disloyal. The loss of that activity might also mean losing a long-standing part of your identity and a core social context. But change can also generate new energy and interest.

**Things to consider...**

Spend time sorting out which parts of your life are a source of discontent. You might be dissatisfied with one or several. Gaining insight into the nature of your feelings will help guide you.

Dream up a list of changes you wish you could make. Identify within that list some small changes. Or play with the possibility of a big change.

If you’re concerned about the impact of your choices on others (e.g., your teammates or roommates), consider talking with ones you trust to sound them out. More often than not, fellow students are supportive of other students’ needs and choices; this can relieve your anxious feelings.

Confront the fear of change. Often we’re more willing to deal with our present situation than with the uncertainty of the unknown. Recognizing that you’re afraid might help prevent staying with the status quo only out of fear. It’s also quite possible that after a period of consideration, you’ll discover that things are actually mostly going okay. You might identify just a couple of small adjustments that will be sufficient to make you feel happier.

Making conscious choices can be very empowering, even if the conscious choice is that everything is okay as is!

4. “I’m worried that I’m not yet sure what comes after college for me.”

During junior year, “after college” begins to feel more tangible. With this reality approaching, students might feel uncertain, sad, confused, scared, or excited. Many juniors are watching their senior friends go through recruiting, job searches, and applying for graduate school, law school, medical school, fellowships, etc. Just watching them can be anxiety-provoking for the bystanders.
Things to consider...

Remind yourself that you do still have time left at college. You are not yet a senior! Try to reassure yourself that you’ll figure things out.

Find others to talk with – advisers, counselors, residence staff, friends, family.

Dream about your future and contemplate the possibilities, while noting the natural feelings of trepidation and excitement that come with the unknown.

5. “Do I really want to write a senior thesis/capstone project?”

Some students decide during their junior year whether or not they are going to complete a senior thesis or capstone project. This decision can give rise to a number of feelings and concerns. For example, you might experience the weight of your own or others’ expectations that you’ll have an over-the-top brilliant idea. You might fear that, without pursuing a thesis, you will diminish your future academic or career prospects. You might worry that you’ll have regrets (whatever your decision). And you might wonder how you’ll make it all happen – find a topic, get an adviser, pull together the funding, muster the stamina, have the creativity. Some of these concerns might continue into senior year and be intrinsic to working on a major project.

Things to consider...

Try consulting current seniors to find out about their experiences and the way they approached these questions.

Try to anticipate whether you’d feel engaged and interested in working on a single project for many months. To do so, generate potential ideas, try some exploratory research, and then examine your reactions. Are you feeling excited and intrigued? Fearful? Bored?

Think about the kind of senior year you hope to have and whether the thesis will help or hinder that experience. Of all the things you want to accomplish/enjoy/experience in your last year of college, where does the thesis fit in? Remember, there is no such thing as a perfect decision, just a well-considered one.
SENIOR YEAR

It’s senior year...your degree is within reach. Soon you will be graduating, celebrating your accomplishments, and entering into a new season of life-after-college.

At the same time, senior year has a bittersweet quality that naturally comes with the prospect of approaching an end to one stage of life and anticipating the beginning a new one. Seniors can find themselves feeling anxious about the past, the future, and the present as they reflect on their time at college and plan for the next stage of their life while still striving to get the most from their final year in college.

1. “Everyone seems to know what they’re doing next year. I’m still not sure, and I’m worried.”

As friends finalize their post-college plans, if you’re still exploring what you want to do, you might feel concerned that you haven’t figured it all out. You might even feel pressure to make a decision just so you’ll get it over with.

Things to consider...

Acknowledge that it is difficult and uncomfortable to face uncertainty. But know that feeling unsure, unsettled, and even utterly lost are natural, expected experiences when one is facing a transition. Regard your anxiety as a sign of your caring.

Remind yourself that you are engaged in an important stage of discovery and that discovering your next steps might take more time than you anticipate. Remind yourself that everyone is on their own path, including you. Though your friends might have settled their plans for next year, you’ll find your own way in your own time.

Continue to explore your options through writing down choices, talking with people such as a career counselor, a friend, or an adviser/mentor.

Shindler, C. P. and Reindl, S. M.  *Am I the Only One Who...?*
2. “Compared to my friends, I don’t feel like I’ve accomplished a lot.”

Looking around, it’s easy to fall into comparing yourself with others. Since college students typically have a few résumé-worthy achievements, these comparisons might sometimes leave you with a feeling that you’re deficient and might lead you to minimize your own accomplishments.

Things to consider...

Remind yourself of your own accomplishments, in their own right: “My friends have done ____; yet I’ve done _____. That meant a lot to me and is something of which I’m proud and which will benefit me in securing a position for next year.”

Give yourself due credit for intangible achievements. Résumé items are easy to list and somehow feel more real. It can be harder to recognize and credit yourself for other achievements related to your personal development such as learning how to live a balanced life, taking care of yourself physically and emotionally, being good at connecting with others, dreaming big dreams. Allow that indeed these are achievements and that they will enrich your life in immeasurable ways as well as provide you with the strength of character to pursue your ambitions.

Consult with a career counselor about your résumé to make sure that you’ve highlighted all of your experiences.

3. “I regret…."

Approaching the end of a stage in our lives often produces regrets. Regrets, by definition, leave a feeling that we should have done something a different way. You might have regrets about paths not taken, time you feel you should have spent differently, opportunities you didn’t pursue.

Things to consider...

Assure yourself that it’s natural to have regrets. At the same time, rather than dwelling on the regrets, you might use them as learning
experiences. Try to put your regrets in context. Remind yourself that, in hindsight, it’s easy to judge your decisions. Instead, try to put yourself back in the time when you were in the midst of making a choice; try to remember what you knew and didn’t know then.

Be kind to your past self, who probably did the best he/she could at the time. Appreciate your present self for whatever you have learned from your past self.

Remember that it’s impossible to follow every opportunity in life. In reflecting on your decisions, see which opportunities you still wish you could pursue. Though you might not have a chance to explore a particular path during your time at college, note for yourself what it is that feels compelling about it and keep it in mind for a future endeavor.

4. “I’m feeling overwhelmed by job-hunting!”

The process of job-hunting, letter-writing, application-tracking, traveling, and interviewing can be intense and overwhelming. Often students undertake this significant workload while at the same time fully participating in academic and extracurricular senior year responsibilities. And dealing with rejection – a common job-hunting experience – is never easy. Many students say they feel challenged to maintain their equilibrium and focus during this process.

Things to consider...

When things feel stressful or confusing, sometimes it’s helpful to talk things through with a neutral listener. So take advantage of the college resources available to you to consult about your experiences, including the career office, counseling center, and advising staff. Keep your job-searching materials well-organized so that you can track deadlines, communications, and materials for multiple applications. And take care of yourself during this stressful period through sleeping, eating well, exercising, and other activities that relax and energize you.

It is natural to feel anxious at job interviews, especially if you feel under pressure to secure a job as soon as possible. One way to calm your interview anxiety is to think about the interviews as a way for
you to interview the interviewer to find out more about whether the organization is a good fit for you. Radical as this suggestion might be, try to have fun during the interviews. If you’re relaxed and enjoying yourself, you’ll be more yourself and you’ll interview more effectively.

5. “I’m not interested in the typical paths (investment banking, consulting, medicine, law, Teach for America). I also want to find something that really matters to me. How do I even find out about other paths and how do I feel good about it when I compare myself to others here?”

Worrying about looking for a job, graduate program, internship, or other post-college endeavor is certainly stressful. It’s especially difficult to launch into this endeavor if you are not quite sure what you want to do.

Things to consider...

Rather than focusing on finding what is ultimately right for you, focus on taking the first next step. As a starting point, listen to yourself. Ask yourself what leaves you feeling enlivened, what leaves you with a deep and resonant sense of “Yes.” What is an unbidden caring or interest of yours that seems to insist on finding expression in your life? (This caring or interest might have been evident in some form since you were very young; it might keep declaring itself in one form and another.) What are you consistently drawn toward? Pay attention even to seemingly small, everyday instances in which you experience a sense of feeling alive or a sense that you are doing exactly what you want to be doing in that moment. Keep a list of possible jobs that might involve just these activities; make a list of what comes to mind as ways to complete the sentence stem “I wish I could get a paid internship/apprenticeship/job in which I could . . . .”

One way to help define your interests is to talk with people who are doing work they love. Ask family members, deans, faculty, and others who seem to you to be doing what they enjoy how they came to be doing that. This is worthwhile whether in informational inter-
views or in informal conversation. Listen not only to the “what” but the “how,” including how they approached their journey of finding a path that spoke to them in some core way. You might meet a few people who had a strong sense of a calling or a clear path while they were in college or even before. But they will be the exceptions. Most people who find a path they love recount stories with uncertainty, false starts, changes of plan, meandering twists and turns, and serendipity. It is in part through sheer exposure to and experience of various activities and contexts that we encounter moments in ourselves a source of our own enlivenment, caring, and meaning.

Listen to or read commencement speeches in which speakers recount their own path. (These might be available right on your college website.) Take advantage of your college alumni network as well as standard job searches. Ask people who know you best what they secretly or not-so-secretly think could be a possible path for you. Regard whatever they say not as defining paths but as data and possibilities.

While it’s hard in a college environment to resist the temptation to compare yourself with others, remember that, as they say in some twelve-step groups, we need to beware of comparing our insides with other people’s outsides. When we compare our internal clutter with others’ apparent clarity, our deep self-doubt with others’ apparent surface certainty, we are setting ourselves up to feel bad. As corny as it sounds, remember that your job in this life is to be you, not someone else. Don’t abandon yourself by trying to be someone else.

6. “It’s going to be so hard not to see my friends all the time. I know we’ll stay in touch, but I’m sad that things will change.”

Saying farewell to friends is indeed one of the hardest parts of graduating. In this global era, after graduation, people scatter to all parts of the world.

Things to consider...

During college, people have a unique chance to spend a lot of time living with a community of friends. Simply acknowledging the
sadness is a way to honor the closeness you’ve all had and to respect the difficulty of the impending separation. While accepting and noting the sadness, try to resist having the anticipation of the farewells overtake the last months you’ll all have together.

Though the distance presents challenges for maintaining closeness, it also presents opportunities for visiting far-flung friends in interesting places. As best you can, make some future plans with friends for in-person encounters in the following year so that you’ll look forward to those moments.

7. “College was supposed to be the best time in my life. I was supposed to make lifelong friends or find my life partner. Things haven’t worked out that way.”

The storylines of finding lifelong friends and a life partner in college are certainly appealing. But they are not the only storylines out there. Many people with good friendships and deep and abiding partnerships have other storylines. Many of us make some of our best friends and find our true love after college.

Things to consider...

As you move through life, where appropriate, ask people you know how they met. It’s helpful to collect an assortment of real-world love stories and accounts of friendships.

Acknowledge that while we have influence over what happens to us, we don’t have ultimate control, especially in the realm of relationships where other people’s lives and desires and experiences are involved. When we go through life with a strong sense of how life ought to go or of the milestones we ought to achieve and what timetable we ought to achieve them on, we set ourselves up for disappointment.

Remind yourself that you don’t know what the future holds. Just as finding a calling or a right path in life involves some measure of serendipity, so does finding a true friend or a life partner. Learn to acknowledge your preference for what you wish would happen while also accepting what actually unfolds. Sometimes the universe surprises
us; we discover wonderful people and experiences that we couldn’t have come upon by our design and force of will.

Remember that even if you are leaving college without a best friend or a solid group of friends, you can claim what you have learned about who you are as a friend and what you value in friendship. While it might be challenging after college to meet the sheer number of people your own age whom you could meet in a residential college setting, your self-knowledge about who you are and what matters to you in relationships can leave you less interested in quantity of connection because you are more discerning about what you are seeking in relationships.

Some people whose college experiences haven’t been what they hoped nevertheless find that they feel good about what they learned from the experience. They say to themselves something like, “When I think about who I was when I first came to college and who I’ve become, it’s pretty amazing! I’m grateful for these four years and how I’ve grown into who I am. I am less concerned about whether I feel I have all the answers – instead I feel proud that I was able to weather adversities, make it through, and now I’m heading into a new phase of my life.” This approach allows you to acknowledge the ways you’ve grown and changed while being open to what the future might hold for you. Celebrate your personal and intellectual achievements and development!
At every stage in their undergraduate careers students are liable to confront personal challenges, to experience moments of self-doubt, and to wonder “am I the only one?” This thoughtful guide offers practical advice on how to work through such challenges. Taken together, the lessons it imparts form a kind of student’s roadmap to a balanced life.

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