



It's Freshman Year: Am I the Only One Who...? Things Freshmen Imagine No One Else Is Thinking and Feeling (But Many Students Are!)

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Privately, 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 some role in which they can feel confident and proud. But publicly, few freshmen acknowledge the complex reality of their experience. In talking with others, they emphasize the positive and downplay the uncomfortable, presenting “a face for the public.” That is of course entirely understandable. But the unfortunate result is that many are left feeling that they are only one who experiences a good deal of discomfort, distress, and doubt.

Whenever you enter into 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. To be living in “a company town” – where you work, love, and play within the same village, so to speak – can intensify those comparisons. That's especially true when you are living away from all of the contexts in which you have felt known and supported over the years. The experiences that follow seem particularly salient for freshmen, although of course they can also arise at other times in college:

1. “It's strange not being around anyone who knows me well. I am afraid I'm never going to make real friends here.” You're coming from a context where many of your friends are likely people you've known for a long time. You might have had both peers and grown-ups from home who knew you so well – knew your nature, your interests, your sense of humor, your strengths and vulnerabilities, your preferences and pet peeves. It can be hard to relax and be yourself when you feel as if you are in some sense “always on,” constantly trying to make some sort of impression.

Things to consider trying: Let those first few days and weeks be what they are – that inevitable mix of excitement, awakening, anxiety, and awkwardness. As a Harvard colleague once said to a group of students who seemed to assume that feeling awkward was to be avoided at all costs, “It's got to be okay to feel awkward.” 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 yourself 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 so many people's compelling stories and personalities.

In your effort to let others know who you are and to learn 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 into Boston to 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 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. You can't always tell from the get-go who is going to become a dear friend. Sometimes the people who end up becoming our best friends are people we weren't particularly close to early on. The opposite can also be true: someone with whom we clicked on Day One 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 the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, or just hanging out in the dorm. Even if others seem to be forming closed friendship groups, try to resist the pressure to create such exclusivity.

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

Things to consider trying: Don’t assume that certainty is better. 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. Shop at least one or two classes each term that are out of your usual zone of interest and comfort, again, just to open yourself to possibilities. Ask the grown-ups (professors, teaching fellows, deans, proctors, resident tutors) how they came to be studying what they study and doing what they’re currently doing. In hearing about others’ journeys, you might be surprised to discover how much serendipity there is along their paths and how much some people diverge from where they thought they were headed.

Resist the temptation to compare your degree of preparation with that of another student. Whatever your background, you can only start from where you are. While there might be a few concentrations that depend upon a fair amount of pre-college study and experience (e.g., it could be difficult – although not impossible – to concentrate in math if you do not arrive with a solid foundation of high school math), most concentrations are accessible to most students. And even in the case of math, a student without a strong foundation could still take math courses and might in fact want to develop math skills in the service of his or her 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 fellow’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 simply ask that person how he or she became interested in his or her area of study. Hearing about others’ intellectual and creative journeys can help you find your way on yours.

3. “It seems that nearly everyone here but me has done something extraordinary. They say Harvard 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 Harvard 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. To put many such people in one college ups the ante, and it is natural to be left wondering if you are out of your league.

Things to consider trying: Remember that Harvard didn’t have to admit you. Harvard had options. There were plenty of other students the Admissions Committee could have chosen for your spot. Know that the admissions officers bring a good measure of experience and wisdom to the table. So assume that there was something in your application that appealed to some admissions officer and left the Admissions Committee confident 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, believe it or not, there are places in life worth being other than the tippy top.)

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 trying: 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 such 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.

But do not abandon yourself. 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. (The Rooming Resources section of the Freshman Dean’s Office website (fdo.harvard.edu) has some helpful pointers.) 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 proctor, an academic counselor at the Bureau of Study Counsel, or a clinician/counselor at the Counseling and Mental Health Services to consider how to approach a conversation with your roommates or to arrange for a meeting with your roommates in the presence of someone (e.g., your proctor or a Bureau academic counselor) who can help to facilitate the group conversation.

Consider having a rooming group meeting at the start of the year to establish fundamental agreements around such basics as noise levels, level of clutter, timing of everyone’s showers, whether/for how long guests can stay overnight; whether/how to share food and drink and shampoo and clothes; and who gets a single room and for how long. (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 resident dean 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 routes, routines, smells, and sounds. 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 Harvard 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. Our whole being – brain and body – registers 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 it.

Things to consider trying: We grieve because we have loved, or at least attached. Let yourself miss what you miss. Trust that as you develop new relationships here – including relationships to people, places, routes, routines, smells, and sounds – you will begin to get attached to those as well. But 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. Many students are at some point surprised during their time at Harvard to hear themselves referring to Harvard 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 even if it does, it won’t happen overnight. And in any event, don’t try to force any particular relationship. Allow a process to unfold.

6. **“I have serious doubts about whether I can manage all of the work. The reading alone is going to 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 trying: There are many resources available to help students with their studies: The Bureau of Study Counsel offers individual academic counseling, peer tutoring, workshops and discussion groups, self-help

materials online and in the Cranium Corner of the Bureau's waiting room, and the Harvard Course in Reading and Study Strategies. You can also consult with the course instructor and teaching fellows, the Writing Center, your proctor, your dean, your peer advising fellow, and your fellow students.

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 academic equivalent of looking down at your hiking boots as you trudge to the summit) that you don't enjoy the process at all. 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 Harvard 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 Cambridge and Boston 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 labs and extracurriculars ever have any downtime in which they aren't doing anything overtly productive.

Things to consider trying: 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. Resist the temptation to think you should "be like everyone else" and the temptation to assume you "are not like anyone else." 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 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 need not always be entirely discrete. 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 Harvard, 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 full and real and complex experience of Harvard.

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." Harvard is a very diverse community. Students come from all over the United States and from all over the world; from different cultural, religious, class, and socioeconomic backgrounds; with different ethnic and racial heritage; with differing sexual orientations; with various political views; with various disabilities and abilities. 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 trying: 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; 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.

Bureau of Study Counsel academic counselors are available to consult with you about any of these topics or other things that might be on your mind. Call 617-495-2581 or stop by at 5 Linden Street to find a time to meet with someone.

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