

SURVIVAL KIT FOR FIRST YEAR STUDENTS

(Particularly in the Sciences)

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A. SO YOU MADE IT TO UNIVERSITY

Congratulations! You were the cream of your high school's graduating class and you can be justifiably proud.

YOU ARE NOW MIXED IN WITH THE CREAM FROM OTHER HIGH SCHOOLS and the level of the game has changed dramatically:

- You are no more special than the next student beside you.
- You are now competing at a higher level. The "average" against which you were judged in high school has just rose several notches.
- Just because you attained "A" grades in subjects in high school does not guarantee you will do so in university. In fact, for most of you, your grades in university will be lower than what you have been used to in high school.
- So you want to enter Medical School. Well so do 20% of first year students that did well in the Sciences in high school. You will discover in your first year whether you have what it takes, intellectually and psychologically, to be a doctor. Arrogance is definitely not a prerequisite for Medical School.

B. HOW CAN YOU ENSURE YOU CAN SURVIVE FIRST YEAR AT UNIVERSITY

You need to dramatically change your work and study habits.

Many of you breezed through high school, even got bored by being unchallenged. Your workload in high school was light compared to what you will experience at university. Besides, there was always some higher authority making sure you went to school, paid attention in class and did your work in high school.

WELCOME TO INDEPENDENCE!

At university, nobody is looking over your shoulders to ensure you do the work. Sure, there may be instructors or Teaching Assistants supervising your Science labs but they are there to ensure the safety of students and to give assistance to students who want to learn. Most lectures and labs do not take attendance - in fact, most courses do not care

whether you show up as long as you can pass the exams and complete the assignments on which the course grades are based.

You are an adult and responsible for your own destiny.

Therefore,

- **attend lectures.** The material is nearly always examinable and being able to get the lecture notes before or after the lecture is no substitute for actually being there. Lecture notes are synopses of what was communicated, but how the material was communicated can make a difference to your understanding. Besides, information peripheral to the lecture topic (e.g. exam tips, sources of additional references, etc) can be important for exam purposes but may not be incorporated into lecture notes available to students.
- **go to tutorials prepared to actively contribute to discussions.** SFU's strength over other universities is its tutorial system. It allows students to discuss course material in smaller groups with a moderator (TA) and it can help you better understand information with which students have difficulties. You will get as much from a tutorial as you are prepared to put into it. Do not go to tutorials expecting to have your questions answered without first attempting to answer them yourself. Your attitude towards tutorials should be one of symbiosis and not one of parasitism.
- **be prepared to ask questions of your instructors.** You are here to learn and they are here to teach. Your interactions will be fruitful if these roles are recognized by both parties. No question is stupid! Only a poor instructor will tell you so.
- **attend labs faithfully and conduct them carefully.** The biggest mistake that students make in first year is to skip labs. Some first year labs (e.g. in Biology) are "open labs". This means "come when you can" and not "come if you want". The latter attitude accounts for high failure rates in lab exams.
- **know what you are doing in labs.** Knowing why you do something is nearly as important as getting the results.
- **know the answers to all questions asked in the lab.** They are the bases for lab exam questions.
- **conduct labs in the logical sequence laid out in the lab handout.** Not doing so will circumvent the process of cumulative learning. You will miss the point of the exercises.
- **remember that missed labs are not recoverable.** Frequently, prepared materials are available only for that particular week or that particular lab.
- **read the required textbook for the course.** If the textbook is required, there is a good chance that designated readings will be examinable. Even if they are not, the textbook may present a different approach to the subject, which you may find easier to understand. Modern textbooks also have excellent illustrations to help your understanding. It does not hurt to read around the examinable topics - this is part of the natural process of learning. Don't let your reading be totally

examination driven. You are at university to learn, not just to learn to pass exams. USE THE LIBRARY! BROADEN YOUR MIND.

C. OTHER SURVIVAL STRATEGIES THAT WORK

- **Form study groups in courses.** Students can benefit tremendously by feeding off each other's strengths and helping each other's weaknesses. The best way to discover whether you know the material is to try teaching it to someone else. The best way to obtain a solution to a course problem is to discuss it with someone who possesses the solution. This is a mutualistic relationship.
- **School does not end when you leave campus.** The semester system is intense because all your courses have midterms and finals at around the same time. The work you don't keep up with today will be the work you need to recover during the pre-exam period. Stress can build up to unhealthy levels during those periods.

Therefore,

- keep up with your homework and readings on a daily, or at least a weekly, basis. Keep good notes.
 - even if there is no designated "homework" for a course it does not mean there is no work which can be done to prepare you for impending exams.
 - designate a regular time on a daily or weekly basis for catch-up work.
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- **You are not alone.** The university has a network of support organizations to help you cope with your adjustment to university life (see Health and Counseling Services). Although you may feel you have lost your high school circle of friends and confidants, there are many persons on campus with whom you can talk, including your instructors. Many students feel isolated in this vast student population. There is no need to feel this way because help is easily accessible.
 - **Develop a new circle of friends.** Your years at SFU may be the best years of your life (you won't realize this until you graduate into the workforce). The friendships you make in university will last a lifetime. They will help you through the ups and downs of university life. Most of all, they will teach you that your problems are not unique and definitely not insurmountable.
 - **Learn to relax.** Sure an "A" will look good on your transcript but most students who graduate from SFU do not score as many "A's" as they would like or think they deserve. The job market out there is full of employees with "C" averages who still make valuable contributions to society. A transcript full of "A's" is only important if you need to apply for a postgraduate scholarship or a professional school. In the end, the employer is more interested in your university training and your performance at an interview. Work hard if you must but also play hard. **STAY HEALTHY!**
 - **Get to know your instructors.** They are human. Believe that most of them are not here to make your life difficult. By getting to know them you will understand

their teaching philosophies and methods of delivery. In your time as a student at SFU you will encounter some outstanding teachers as well as some poor ones. The former will enrich your academic experience. The latter will teach you self-reliance and how not to teach if you are ever in such a position.

D. GET RID OF BAD ATTITUDES

Sure you have paid your fees and feel you should demand your just pound of flesh BUT realize that the universe does not revolve around you.

Don't

- make the lives of your fellow students' more difficult by selfish attitudes. This includes removing without permission or depriving your fellow students of equal access to shared course materials. Remember that they also have paid fees.
- demand more marks after an exam has been graded unless an error in addition has been made or part of an answer has been missed by the marker. In the end, the small number of additional marks you may obtain may not make any significant difference to your total course grade. If you need to approach a marker for additional marks, request a review of your answer rather than demand more marks. *It is not in your best interest to alienate your marker/instructor.* Instructors remember outstanding students, very poor students and annoying students for very different reasons.
- expect special arrangements to be made for you which would inconvenience the course schedule. Many instructors are willing to be flexible if they feel the situation warrants the flexibility. Examples are medical conditions causing a student to miss an exam, members of athletic teams needing to be away for competitions, and deaths in families. Be prepared to back up your excuse with documentation.
- carry on a conversation during lectures. There is nothing more annoying than trying to listen to a lecture with people around you carrying on an unrelated conversation. If you don't want to listen to a lecture, don't come. Remember you are not being forced to attend lectures against your will.
- expect your instructors to drop everything to cater to your interests. Instructors have other duties in the department and university besides your course. Instructors may set office hours or individual appointment times for students. Use these times if you need to consult with your instructors. Also do not expect your instructors to respond to your emails on weekends or holidays. They are not being paid to do so at these times.

ENJOY YOUR TIME AT SFU. WORK HARD, PLAY HARD AND STAY HEALTHY.

I WISH YOU EVERY SUCCESS.