

ARE YOU READY FOR UNIVERSITY?

From THE GLOBE AND MAIL October 2013

You've got the grades, you've got the tuition, you've got a dream university in mind. But it takes more than a letter of admission to successfully make the transition from high school to university. And let's face it, not everybody is ready to make the leap.

"The biggest difference is that learning is really your responsibility in university," says Kirsten Somers, co-ordinator of the first-year transition program at Dalhousie University in Halifax. "That's a huge culture shift from high school. The classes are bigger, there's less class time than you're used to and there's more independent work that needs to happen."

Lucy Fromowitz, assistant vice-president of student life for the University of Toronto, says many of the students who run into problems in first year have difficulty adapting to this new learning format. "The transition to a different learning style is a steep learning curve and one that's not often intuitive," she says. "Suddenly students are overwhelmed with an incredible amount of reading, they are having to listen to lectures and take notes and record the important information."

To thrive in a university environment, students need to be self-directed, Somers says, because they will no longer have teachers or parents to make sure they're getting the work done on time. Taking effective notes during lectures, keeping track of due dates and scheduling plenty of time for study outside of class (two to three hours of study time for every hour of class) are essential skills students will have to master.

Students who move away from home can also feel the pressure of financial difficulties, says Aneesa Shariff, staff psychologist and assessment co-ordinator for the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. They may be taking on part-time jobs, paying for tuition themselves, and struggling with budgeting for the first time in their lives. "Then there's the general self-management skills like waking up for class, making sure they are handling groceries and cooking and cleaning and other things that need to be taken care of."

As well, emotional challenges can come into play if students have moved far away from home and are feeling the pangs of homesickness, Shariff says.

"It's often difficult to maintain the same level of contact with your existing support system, your family and friends, and it's important to do that, but it's also important to build new connections, and some people navigate that more easily than others," she says.

The key is being open to new people and new experiences, says Fromowitz in Toronto, and a willingness to get involved beyond academics. "Our most successful students are

not the ones studying 24/7; they are the ones who are getting engaged with the university community.”

Find a club you’re interested in and get involved quickly, Somers says. Whether you’re living on or off campus, attend orientation week – it can be a great time to make connections.

“Try to find ‘your people’ on campus,” Somers says. “It could be the librarian or someone from the writing centre, your residence assistant, your TA [teaching assistant] or your professor – someone who is connected on campus so that if you don’t know something or you need help, there’s someone you can go to.”