

How to Help College and Grad Students Stay on Top of their Game

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DO YOU HAVE A DAUGHTER OR SON who is away at college or graduate school?

Do you feel powerless to help them with organizational strategies because they may be reluctant to accept your advice? If they were receiving supports in high school, they should not be going it alone in college. There are many ways to receive support.



Office of disabilities

If a student has an ADHD or other diagnosis, the first step should be to register with the office of disabilities (the exact name of this office varies by school) to find out which accommodations and services they are eligible for. In college, the teachers will not learn about the diagnosis, only the accommodations. Some accommodations that could be game changers are note takers, a distraction-reduced room to take tests, permission to record lectures, and extra time to complete homework. In addition, some colleges offer mentoring or tutoring through their office of disabilities. Many colleges offer free peer tutoring to all students.

Extra support

Some college students work privately with a virtual life or academic coach and/or tutors to stay on track academically. Students may also find study buddies or get informal help from friends.

Teachers

Most instructors want their students to succeed and welcome inquiries, discussions, and meetings. They appreciate the extra effort made by their students to engage with them.

Parental help

It can be frustrating to be a parent. Some of our grown children are hesitant to receive our suggestions. If

you talk to your son or daughter and learn that they are struggling in one of the areas below, perhaps you can help them with just one suggestion, or by asking a leading question to help them come up with a potential solution.

- **Listen to them carefully.** Do they want advice, or do they just want to vent?
- **Validate** by paraphrasing what they said and empathizing with their hardships.
- **Make only one suggestion.** Then ask if they think that will be helpful.
- **Ask a leading question** that will encourage them to come up with a solution. For example, Student: "I can't seem to get started on this assignment, and it is due tomorrow." Parent: "That must be stressful. What is holding you up?" Student: "I don't understand exactly what we are supposed to do." Parent: "Who can you ask to clarify the assignment?"

Here are some talking points to insert into a conversation as needed.

Planning

Do they use a paper planner, Google calendar, or just keep everything in their head? Is their method working for them? If they struggle with planning, ask them how well they remember everything and whether it might be helpful to clear their brains by writing/typing things down.

Ask them which technique might work best in their daily life.

Time management

Do they set aside time slots to do particular assignments? Do they set aside the time of day that they are most alert and can concentrate best?

Reminders

Do they set alarms not only for waking up but for attending meetings or beginning assignments?

Medication

Are they taking medication regularly? If they are on ADHD meds, do they study while the medication is most effective?

Load of work

Does an assignment seem overwhelming? Perhaps they can try these tools:

- Break assignment down into chunks, and possibly do different chunks on different days.
- Incorporate five- to ten-minute breaks into study time.
- Study in a room without distractions.
- Set aside no more than two-hour blocks to work; more than that breeds procrastination and inefficiency.

Motivation

Are they finding it difficult to be motivated to do homework?

- Make up fun mnemonics, stories, or songs to help memorize material for exams.
- Work with a buddy. This can be in-person or on video chat.
- Have a “body double.” According to Patricia Quinn, MD, an ADHD specialist, “Many people with ADHD find it easier to stay focused on housework, homework, bill paying, and other tasks when someone else is

around to keep them company. The body double may just sit quietly.” The body double can even be on video chat.

- Reward yourself with something to look forward to after completing an assignment, an assignment chunk, or working for two hours.
- Sometimes, the most efficient work is not planned. According to graduate student Yael G, “When you have a burst of motivation, you need to go with the surge.”
- When you are having trouble getting started, begin with the easiest task or the one you are most motivated to do.
- If you know you work best on deadline, be sure to allow a generous amount of time to complete assignments the day they are due.

Confusion about an assignment

If they don’t understand what to do, do they get into the trap of not doing it?

Perhaps they can try these strategies:

- Set up a meeting with the professor to discuss and clarify the assignment.
- Exchange phone numbers with a classmate for each class so they have someone to ask about their understanding of the assignment.

- Allow extra time to complete the more confusing and complicated assignments.

As a parent, stay in touch with your college or graduate student and be alert for signs that they have trouble keeping up with their schoolwork. Avoid being overbearing, seeming overly concerned, or showing signs of your own stress. Stay relaxed and calm, listen, and keep the door open so they can come to you with any problems. **A**

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