

## **18 Thoughts on the Undergraduate Experience**

**By Michael Salmonowicz**

1. **If you don't feel comfortable with your current counselor or faculty advisor, switch to someone with whom you are more comfortable!** I had a great relationship with my advisor, and because she got to know me really well, she was able to help me make good decisions when I chose classes and tried to figure out what to do with my life.
2. **Don't feel pressured to figure out your major(s) right away!** Exploring and changing your mind is what being an undergrad is all about! That said, it is a good idea to declare your major(s) by the end of your sophomore year or the beginning of your junior year.
3. **Double major if possible**—it will make you twice as marketable and allow you to learn about two fields in depth (even if they are totally unrelated!). For example, I know people who double majored in economics & philosophy, film & psychology, and history & Spanish.
4. **In your first year or two, take a philosophy course and a psychology course**, no matter what you are thinking of majoring in. Philosophy will teach you how to think critically, while psychology will help you understand how you (and other people) think. Not taking classes in these areas early-on was the biggest mistake I made as an undergraduate.
5. **In your first year or two, take one history course per semester that deals with recent events.** Look for course titles such as: The 1960s; The Vietnam War; U.S. History from 1930 to the present; or 20th Century American History. No matter your major, it is important to understand the recent past so that you have some context for what is currently happening in the world with regard to the economy, politics, religion, war, etc.
6. **In your first year or two, take a course on world religions.** Understanding the history and major tenets of the world's major faiths is very important given our religiously pluralistic society.
7. **No matter what you decide to major in, take econ 101, econ 102, and accounting during your undergraduate years.** The recent economic downturn has made it evident that everyone should have at least a basic understanding of how the U.S. and global economies operate, and how businesses and banks account for their money. This may not seem like a necessity at age 20, but when you're 30 and trying to make a strategic career shift, or wondering where or how to invest your money, you'll be thankful you were so wise a decade earlier. I was not this wise; taking these classes has been on my "to do" list for years.
8. **Talk to your professors!** Introduce yourself on the first day. Sit near the front of the class. Participate in class if it is allowed. Go to office hours. If you don't have a relationship with a professor, it's your fault. You need to take the initiative. And trust me, it can help your grade if you are ever borderline in a course. I once got an A in a class where I had gotten an A- on both papers and a B+ on the midterm. My class participation and relationship with the professor gave me a boost.

9. **Find your school's free tutoring resources and use them from day one.** Most schools have peer tutoring centers, where you can make an appointment with an upperclassman or graduate student and get help with your writing assignments. Most students struggle with their writing when they first get to college, so it's a good idea to use a peer tutor as much as possible your first semester. Don't wait until you get a bad grade on a paper to take advantage of this terrific resource!
10. **Study abroad!** As we move deeper into the 21st century, it will become even more common for people to travel and work in countries outside their own. Taking part in a study abroad program will give you a taste of this. You will learn about a different culture, eat different food, and possibly speak another language. You also will make friends with people your age from other countries and learn about their perspectives on the world. I very much regret not studying abroad when I was an undergraduate.
11. **Find a way to balance your time between academics, extracurricular activities, friends, and (possibly) a part-time job.** For example, it's important to be involved (and eventually be a leader) in one or two student organizations, but you also have to keep your GPA at a high level. And though you may need to work part-time as a part of your financial aid package (or just to make a few dollars), you must make time for extracurriculars and friends. Time management is an important skill, and the faster you learn it the better.

One thing I found frustrating as an undergraduate was the reality that I couldn't always give my best effort to all my undertakings. There were many situations where I had to do a cost-benefit analysis to determine where my time and effort would go. For example, in an end-of-semester crunch you might decide to spend 80% of your time studying for one exam, and only 20% studying for another exam. The reason? One class you need for your major, while the other class is just an elective. Or, in December of your junior year you may slack off on your studying and put all your effort into a project for your student organization. The reason? Elections for next year's leadership positions are coming up in February, and you feel that doing a good job on this project will convince others in the organization to elect you president. College is all about deciding what your priorities are and making decisions accordingly.

12. On most any day of the week for the next four years, you will have the opportunity to attend concerts, plays, and sporting events, and to visit museums, art galleries, and cultural festivals. As a student, these things will cost little or no money, so **take advantage and try new things!** Attend a student-produced play, a women's field hockey game, or a swim meet, even if you don't know anyone who is performing. Meander through an art gallery, and enjoy the quiet atmosphere and the beauty of the paintings and sculptures. You can find a calendar of upcoming events in the student newspaper or on the Web.

13. Most students in the United States attend high schools that are, for the most part, racially homogenous, and college is the first time they will attend classes with or live among people who don't look like them. College is also the first time many students will meet someone their age from another country, or someone who practices a different religion. It can be tempting to hang out exclusively with people who look like you or come from the same background as you, but I encourage you to **broaden your social circle**. Becoming friends with people who are different than you erases stereotypes and is a great way to learn about other countries, other parts of the United States, and other ways of life.
14. **Keep your computer files organized and back them up regularly**. In today's world, it is important that you can access information quickly. The files and folders on your computer should be named so that you can find what you need without any difficulty. And make sure to back up your files at least once per month on a flash drive, external hard drive, or your university-provided virtual storage space.
15. **Frontload your effort**. The worst thing that you can do is get yourself into a hole academically. So from the very first day, give your maximum effort, do your best work, and do more than is necessary. Then, if you find you are successful, you might be able to back off a little bit. But if you start off by not working as hard as you can, you might spend the whole semester trying to recover. How can you frontload your effort? Take advantage of peer tutoring services, especially for writing. Visit your professor and/or TA during office hours to ask questions. Set up a study group with 3-4 other people in some (or all) of your classes. Never skip class. And do the reading! If you do all of this from day one, you will never have to worry about "catching up."
16. **Proofread your papers**. Don't rely on grammar check in Microsoft Word—it is virtually useless because it applies the same set of grammatical rules no matter what or how you are writing. Also, don't rely solely on spell check to catch your errors. For example, if you use "there" when you should have used "their," the computer won't realize you made a mistake. The best thing to do is finish your paper 24-48 hours before it is due. That way you can put it aside for a while, and when you come back to it with fresh eyes you'll find that your errors will jump out at you. Also, don't proofread the paper by reading it on your screen. Print it out and make corrections with a pen, just like you are a teacher grading a student's paper.
17. **Regardless of the situation, never ever ever cheat or plagiarize!** One of my English professors used to tell us, "If it's 2 a.m. and you are so desperate that you are thinking about plagiarizing, call me." The worst possible thing you can do as a college student is to cheat on a test or assignment, or plagiarize when writing a paper. One grade in one class is not worth getting kicked out of school. Don't do it, no matter what!

18. Your undergraduate years are a great time to have fun and experience new things. Just make sure you **keep in mind the possible consequences of your actions**. Here are a few things to keep in mind:

- Sex
  - if you're having sex, the guy should always use a condom
  - you can get STDs—including HIV—from oral sex
  - the “pullout method” is not a reliable form of contraception
- Drinking
  - never let anyone get you a drink at a party (even if it's not alcohol); get your own
  - every year, at least a handful of students around the country die on their 21st birthdays because of excessive drinking
  - never drink so much that you are not in control of your words and actions
- Smoking/Drugs
  - if you don't start, you'll never have to worry about quitting