

# ACADEMIC SUCCESS

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*Most of the information in this handout comes from materials created by other international student offices. We are grateful for being allowed to adapt their materials.*

# 1—KEYS TO SUCCESS

The American academic system differs from all others in the world. To succeed in it, you will need to learn how it is organized and how it works. You will need to learn, as the Americans say, “how to play the game.” Listed below are some suggestions that you should keep in mind as you begin your studies. You will learn more of the informal rules for academic success as you undertake courses and have the opportunity to talk with experienced students in your field of study. The more you discuss topics such as these with experienced students, the sooner you will be able to develop a helpful understanding of the way in which your academic department functions.

## **Measuring Success**

In the American educational system, success is measured by a student’s grades. The grade-point average (GPA) is determined by the grades of all their classes not just those within his or her major. At the beginning of each course, students will receive a syllabus which explains the class expectations and how grades will be determined. Each professor has a different mix of assignments and tests to evaluate their students’ understanding of the material covered. Therefore, maintaining a good GPA requires consistent, disciplined studying for all assignments, examinations, and courses.

<http://www.du.edu/registrar/academicpolicies/GPA.html>

## **Evaluate Your Expectations**

Keep in mind that a period of adjustment to a new educational system may be necessary before you will be able to perform to the best of your ability. Often, international students earn lower grades during their first quarter of study than they are expecting. However, as you become accustomed to the system and to learning and writing in English, your grades will improve.

## **Select Your Courses Wisely**

Especially during your first quarter, do not take more courses than necessary. Make sure you have a combination of more demanding and less demanding courses, rather than only “difficult” ones that require unusually heavy amounts of work. When arranging your course schedule, consult not only your academic advisor, but also experienced students who are familiar with available courses and teachers. You may be tempted to take more courses than necessary in order to try to earn your degree faster. The usual result of taking too many courses is discouragement and poor academic performance.

## **Work Hard from the Beginning**

It is not possible in the American system of higher education to wait until the latter part of the quarter to begin studying. If you do not begin studying on the first day of classes, you are likely to get behind and to experience academic difficulty.

## **Know How to Study**

The study habits that were appropriate for the educational system in your country may not be appropriate here. You may have to learn to approach your studies in a different way while you are studying at a U.S. institution. See [Study Skills](#).

## **Talk With Your Teachers**

Teachers here expect students to ask questions in class or immediately following class. They expect students to see them in their offices when the students are having problems in class. If you are not doing well in a class and you do not see the teacher to discuss the situation, the teacher is likely to assume that you are not really interested in his or her class. In other words, most teachers will have a negative or at best indifferent evaluation of a student who never raises questions or challenges in the class, or who does not visit the teacher outside of the class to discuss any academic difficulties he or she is experiencing.

## **Ask Questions**

Any time you feel unsure of what is expected of you in a class, or of some aspect of the material being presented, ask the teacher and some of your fellow students about it. If you do not ask, it will be assumed that you understand everything or that you are not interested.

## **Understand the Assumptions behind the Educational System**

From your past experience in other educational systems, you have developed certain assumptions about the nature and purposes of education, and about the way your field of interest should be studied. For example, you may have been taught that it is important to be able to memorize large quantities of information that are

provided by professors, authors, or other experts. Here, by contrast, you may find that being able to memorize material is less important than being able to synthesize (that is, bring together and mix in a new way) material from many sources, developing your own ideas and viewpoints. U.S. faculty members tend to agree that learning how to approach studies independently and to develop one's own approaches and ideas is the most difficult task facing new international students, especially at the graduate level.

It is important for you to realize that differences of this kind exist between the U.S. and other education systems, and that you will have to adjust your thinking if you are going to succeed academically. Whether or not you personally accept the values of the education system here, you will have to act in accordance with them while you are here in order to succeed in your program.

## 2—UNDERSTANDING THE ACADEMIC SYSTEM

### **Goals of the Academic System**

#### ***Broad Education***

The American academic system, as a whole, is intended to provide a broad education for as many people as possible. There is no screening examination, which directs a student, at an early age, into an academic or non-academic area. A high proportion of the population completes secondary school, which is not as challenging as it is in countries where access to education is more limited. A significant proportion of the population attempts some kind of post-secondary education and post-secondary study, and the undergraduate level is again not as challenging as it is in some other systems. You may be disconcerted to find that Americans who have completed many years of formal education do not seem as well educated as people at home who have had a comparable amount of education.

#### ***Specialization***

The American educational system also produces specialists, people who have studied a limited range of topics in depth. Specialization comes later in the U.S. system than it does in most other systems. It is not until the third (“junior”) year of undergraduate work that students concentrate on their “major” field. There is further specialization in graduate work, especially as students undertake research for a thesis or dissertation.

#### ***Evaluation***

It is considered important here to evaluate the work that students do in each class. Therefore, there is a “grading system,” which is used to rank and compare students' academic work. A student's grades receive considerable attention in competition for scholarships and fellowships, for admission to universities and graduate schools, and for jobs.

### **Organization of the Academic System**

#### ***The Quarter and Semester Systems***

The academic year at the University of Denver is generally composed of three quarters of approximately 10 weeks in length, plus a summer quarter. The Law School, however, follows the semester calendar and is composed of two semesters of approximately 17 weeks in length, plus a summer semester.

#### ***Credits***

The quantity of academic work a student does at the University is measured in “credits.” The number of credits a course is worth usually depends on the number of hours per week that it meets. A “three-credit course,” for example, will meet three hours weekly for one quarter. It might meet for three fifty-minute sessions, as undergraduate classes normally do, or for one three-hour session, a fairly common pattern in graduate classes. At the end of the term, the student who has achieved a passing grade in the course has earned three credits. A student must earn a specified number of credits in order to graduate.

#### ***The Grading System***

The quality of a student's academic work is measured by means of “grades.” There are four “passing” grades for undergraduates, A, B, C, and D. There is one “failing” grade, F. At the graduate level, many programs have more specific grading guidelines, including some that only consider A or B as passing grades. A student's grade-point average (or GPA) is calculated by dividing the number of credits earned into the number of grade points earned. The “cumulative GPA” is the

GPA a student has earned for all studies undertaken. For more details, please refer to the Registrar's website at <http://www.du.edu/registrar/records/gradesystems.html>.

### ***Dropping/Adding Classes***

Students who find that they are in too many classes or that one or more of their classes are exceedingly difficult can “drop” those classes, and perhaps add others to replace them, if they act before the “add-drop deadlines” that are published on the Registrar's website: [Important Dates](#). International students need to remember that U.S. immigration regulations require them to be registered “full-time,” which means being registered for at least 12 credit hours as an undergraduate or 8 as a graduate student. If you believe that you may need to drop below full time, talk with an International Student Advisor first in order to determine your options and possible issues with your immigration status.

Students should see an academic advisor in the [Office of Academic Advising](#) or their graduate advisor if they wish to drop or add a course after the published deadlines.

### ***Withdrawal***

International students intending to withdraw from all classes must receive prior approval from the International Student and Scholar Services. An undergraduate student intending to withdraw from the University must first go to the Office of Academic Advising, Driscoll Center South, Suite 30, right below the bookstore. Official withdrawal requires approval from the Office of Academic Advising, the International Student and Scholar Office, Penrose Library, the Bursar's Office and the Registration Office. Clearance from the Office of Housing and Residential Education is required if living on campus. More information and a checklist can be found at: [http://www.du.edu/registrar/regbill/withdrawal\\_official.html](http://www.du.edu/registrar/regbill/withdrawal_official.html)

### ***Academic Probation***

If an undergraduate student achieves a grade point average below 2.0, he/she will no longer be considered in good academic standing with the University and is notified at the end of each term by mail. A student on probation may continue enrollment only under certain conditions set by the University and the appropriate academic unit. Suspension from the University will jeopardize your immigration status. Please consult with an International Student Advisor in International Student and Scholar Services if you believe that you may be suspended.

### ***Graduation Requirements***

Graduation requirements specify the number of credits you must earn, the minimum GPA you must achieve, and the distribution of credits you must have from among different departments or fields of study. In addition, it is necessary to apply for graduation when you near the time that you will be completing your graduation requirements. Since graduation requirements vary among different departments at the University, you should consult your departmental office or your academic advisor.

## **Methods of the Academic System**

### ***Lectures***

The most common method of instruction here is the classroom lecture. The lectures are supplemented by classroom discussion (especially when classes are small), by “discussion sections” (especially in large, undergraduate classes where graduate teaching assistants aid the professor who presents lectures), by reading assignments in textbooks or library books, and perhaps by periodic written assignments.

It is important for the student to contribute to the discussion in the classroom. In some societies, it is “disrespectful” for students to question or challenge the teacher. In this country, by contrast, questioning or challenging the teacher is viewed as a healthy sign of interest, attention, and independent thinking. In many classes, your grade will be partially determined by your contribution to class discussion. If you sit in “respectful” silence, it is likely to be assumed that you are not interested in what is being said in the class, or that you do not understand it.

When classes are too large to permit questions and discussion, or if for some other reason you do not have the opportunity to raise questions in class, you can visit privately with teachers during their office hours or make an appointment to see them. Teachers usually announce their office hours at the first meeting of the class. In the case of large, undergraduate classes, there are usually graduate teaching assistants (TAs) who are available to answer questions.

### ***Seminars***

The seminar is a small class, typical at the graduate level. It is likely to be devoted entirely to discussion. Students are often required to prepare presentations for the seminar, based on their independent reading or research.

### ***Laboratories***

Many courses require work in a laboratory, where the theory learned in a classroom is applied to practical problems.

### ***Term Papers***

In many courses, you will be required to write a “term paper” (often called simply a “paper”). A term paper is based on study or research that you have done in the library or laboratory. Your teacher will usually assign a term paper in the early part of the course. You are expected to work on it throughout the quarter, and submit it near the end. The grade you receive on the term paper may constitute a significant portion of your grade for the course. It is wise to complete term papers in advance of their due date so there is time to ask another person to review your paper and suggest revisions.

Both in preparing term papers and in doing assignments for your classes, you are likely to use the library more than you have in the past. American university libraries tend to be larger than university libraries elsewhere, and students use them regularly. It is essential to learn how to use the library. Each library on the campus has trained employees who are happy to answer your questions about the library’s organization, the location of specific materials, bibliographies, and so on. Please do not be embarrassed to ask for the help of the library staff. For more information on the library, go to: <http://library.du.edu>.

The [Writing Center](#) is a great resource to use at any point in the writing process especially if you are feeling stuck. They offer free [writing consultations](#) to allow you to meet one-on-one with their staff.

The [Research Center](#) can be a great asset when writing a paper. They are able to help you find relevant books and articles for your topic or to help you create a bibliography of your sources.

Penrose Library also has an online [research guide](#) for international students on their website.

### ***Examinations***

You will have many examinations. Nearly every class has a “final examination” at the end of the term. Most have a “mid-term examination” near the middle of the term. There may be additional “tests” or “quizzes” given with greater frequency, perhaps even weekly. All these tests are designed to assure that students are doing the work that is assigned to them, and to measure how much they are learning.

You should not look at other students’ papers during an examination. To “cheat” on an examination by getting answers from other students or from unauthorized materials used while taking the test can result in a “zero” grade for the examination, an “F” grade in the course, and/or disciplinary action (See the section on [Academic Dishonesty](#)).

## **3—STUDY SKILLS**

Remember that the U.S. educational system rewards students who can study a large amount of material concerning a broad range of subjects, who can synthesize material from many sources, and who can take examinations effectively. These activities require skills that can be learned. Some of these skills are mentioned and briefly discussed here.

### **Organizing Your Time**

You will have a large amount of work to do and a limited amount of time in which to do it. In this situation, you need to use your time effectively. A good way to do that is to make yourself a weekly study schedule. Allot specified periods of time each day for studying. A good general guideline is: Undergraduates can assume they will need to spend at least two hours studying for each one hour they spend in class; graduate students can assume at least three hours and perhaps more. Look at the course outlines (or “syllabuses”) you get at the opening of the term and notice how much you will need to read and how many things you will have to write for each class during the term. Fill in your study schedule accordingly. Then follow the study schedule. If it appears later that your schedule is out of balance, with too much time devoted to some courses and not enough to others, modify your schedule and adhere to the new one.

### Reading Effectively

When you see the length of the reading lists your instructors give you, you will realize that it is not possible to memorize all of your reading materials for the term, or even to study them in reasonable depth. That is not what you are expected to do. Instead, you are expected to familiarize yourself with the main points from each reading and often be able to relate what one writer has said to what another writer has said. To draw the main points from a large number of readings, here are some things you can do:

**Skim:** “Skimming” means looking over a reading quickly, paying attention to the table of contents (if it is an entire book), the titles of the chapters, the headings of the various sections of the chapter, the “topic sentences” that begin most paragraphs, and the summary paragraphs or sections.

**Read:** Go over the material again, this time more carefully, looking for the main points, the conclusions, and the contentions. Write notes about the main points, following the outline of the reading itself.

**Questions:** Rather than passively accepting what the writer has written, ask yourself questions about it. “Why is the writer saying this?” “What is the evidence for that?” “Does that agree with what this same writer said earlier, or with what another writer on the same subject said?”

**Review:** Skim it again. Look at your notes again. Try to retain in your mind the main points of the readings.

### Retaining as Much as Possible from Classes

Since attendance at and participation in classes is such an important part of the academic system here, it is prudent to try to gain as much from your classes as you can. Here are some suggestions that will help you:

**Read in advance:** If you have reading assignments that relate to a lecture you will hear in a class, do the reading before the class, so you will understand the lecture better. From the reading you may come up with questions to ask in class.

**Take notes:** Write down the main points that the lecturer makes. Many lecturers will use phrases that will help you identify the points they think are important and that you should therefore note. Examples of such phrases are, “There are three major reasons for this...” and “The main thing to keep in mind about this is....”

**Review:** After the class; go over your notes. Fill in things you left out. Mark things you still have questions about. Before class, spend ten to fifteen minutes reviewing your notes from the previous class. This helps you retain information and makes last-minute studying less necessary.

## 4—ACADEMIC DISHONESTY

### What Is Considered “Cheating”?

In general, students in the U.S. academic system are expected to do their own academic work without getting excessive assistance from other people. This does not mean that you cannot ask other students to help with class work. It is permissible and sometimes even advisable to seek help in understanding what is happening in a class and what a specific assignment is about. It is not considered proper, though, to have someone else do an assignment for you, or to plagiarize, to copy answers or information from a publication in a way that makes it appear that the answers are ones you devised and composed yourself. That would be considered cheating. Here are some other things that are considered cheating:

- Copying other students’ assignments
- Copying other students’ answers to examination questions
- Taking notes or books to an examination and secretly referring to them for assistance in answering examination questions
- Copying from a book, the internet, or other publication without acknowledging that the words used are someone else’s (plagiarism)

### Possible Consequences of Cheating

Some students cheat and are not punished for it, either because the cheating is not detected or because the faculty member in whose class the cheating takes place prefers not to take any action against the student who has cheated. In most cases,

though, cheating is detected and has negative consequences, sometime very serious consequences, for the student. These consequences might be:

- a failing grade for the assignment or examination on which the cheating took place;
- a failing grade for the course in which the cheating occurred;
- expulsion from the course;
- expulsion from the University.

<http://www.du.edu/studentlife/studentconduct/>

## APPENDIX 1—ACADEMIC TERMS

Ace:	To earn a grade of “A” on an assignment or examination. “I aced my test.”
Academic advisor:	A faculty or staff member appointed to assist a student in the planning of his/her academic career.
Add a course:	To enroll in a course you were not previously enrolled in after your initial registration.
Assignment:	Out-of-class work required by a professor.
Blue books:	A small booklet of paper with a blue cover usually used for essay-type examinations. Can be purchased in DU Bookstore.
Carrel:	A small desk in the library reserved by individuals doing research.
Comps:	Short for “comprehensive examination,” which is often required to successfully complete an academic program at the graduate level.
Cram:	Frantic effort to learn neglected lessons before a test. “I crammed all night for the exam”.
Cum:	(pronounced “kyum”) refers to a person’s cumulative grade point average.
Cut class:	To deliberately be absent from a class.
Dissertation:	A scholarly independent research study required to obtain a Doctoral degree.
Drop a course:	To withdraw from a course within the add/drop period.
Drop and Add:	That period during the first week of the quarter during which you may change your program of studies by “dropping” and “adding courses.” Also refers to the procedure by which this is done.
Finals:	Last exams of a quarter.
Flunk:	To fail to achieve a passing grade.
Fraternity:	A social organization of men, sometimes living in a large house, with specific rules, regulations and objectives. Some fraternities are purely social, others are professional organizations or academic honorary organizations.
Freshman:	A student in his/her first year of study at a university.
“Grad”:	Graduate student. A student who has earned a bachelor’s degree and is working toward a higher degree.
Greek:	Member of a fraternity or a sorority.
Honor System:	The practice of relying on students not to cheat in any academic matter.
Incomplete:	A temporary mark given to a student who is doing passing work but who cannot complete all the requirements for a course during the term. The student must have a valid reason and must complete the course within a period of time acceptable to the instructor.
Junior:	A student in his/her third year of study at a university.
Major:	A student’s primary field of study.
Matriculate:	To be formally enrolled in the university.
Minor:	A student’s secondary field of study.
Mid-terms:	Test in the middle of a term.
Paper:	Writing assignment that is often required in coursework to analyze, critique, and/or summarize research on a particular topic.
Pass:	To successfully complete a course or examination.
Quarter:	One academic term for most courses at DU, which is one-fourth of the year.
Quiz:	A short test, sometimes given without warning.
Reading list:	A list of books and articles prepared by each professor for his specific course. The list should distinguish between required texts and suggested reading.
Registrar:	The custodian of a student’s official academic information, such as courses taken and grades received.
Semester:	One academic term for courses at DU’s Sturm College of Law, which is half of the academic year.
Senior:	A student in his/her fourth year of study at a university.
Skim:	To quickly read something to get a general idea of its contents.
Skipped, skip out:	To fail to attend a class, meeting, etc.
Sophomore:	A student in his/her second year of study at the university.
Sorority:	Comparable to fraternity, except that it is for females instead of males.
Syllabus:	A document designed to give the students an adequate introduction and outline of the particular course. It often includes assignment dates and class expectations.
T.A.:	Teaching assistant.
Thesis:	A scholarly research paper required to obtain a master’s degree or to graduate with honors.
Transcript:	Official record of past grades and courses taken by a student; available at the Registrar’s office.
“Undergrad”:	Undergraduate student. A student who is pursuing a bachelor’s degree.
Withdraw:	To voluntarily resign from the university or from some particular course. A “W” appears on the student’s transcripts.