

Making the Academic Transition from High School to Northwestern

It's easy to feel like a fish out of water as you move from high school into Northwestern, with so much new and different in the environment. In terms of academic work, you may hit a point (as most Northwestern undergrads do) where you feel shakier than you ever did in high school. This makes sense, because the pace is faster, the classes are typically more rigorous, your time is much less structured, and you're surrounded by people who achieve at high levels — which can leave you feeling a little less academically confident than you did in high school.

This uncertainty can be uncomfortable — but it can also be a springboard to learning. To develop as a person, we *need* to feel off balance sometimes. That off-kilter feeling can prompt us to notice new features of the world around us — and eventually to deepen and enrich our understanding of that world and how we interact with it.

You'll need to make some academic adjustments during your first couple of quarters at Northwestern, and that takes time. But there are some fairly simple things you can do to help move that adjustment period forward and to stay grounded as you're finding your way:

1. **Take charge of your schedule.** In high school, your time was probably far more structured than it is now, and most likely there were people around you (parents, counselors, teachers, etc.) who helped you stay on track toward your academic goals. Here at Northwestern, by contrast, your schedule is your own, your time is much more free-form, and nobody is closely tracking your activity. So it's up to you. Start with some proven techniques:
 - a. **Figure out how you are using your time, and how you'd like to be using your time.** You need to allow for time for class, studying, sleeping, eating, socializing, and other important activities. And there are only so many hours in a day. A [time-tracking sheet](#) can help here.
 - b. **Read your syllabi and plan accordingly.** The course syllabus provides an outline of what you need to do when, so it is invaluable in planning your time. Note due dates, and work backwards to allow for enough prep time. Enter all of this into your planner (see next item).
 - c. **Use a planner** — it can be an old-school calendar, an app, or whatever works for you. Don't try to rely on memory — even if that approach worked in high school, it is not going to be effective here.
 - d. **Keep up with the material.** The quarter system runs at a fast pace, so falling behind can easily snowball into an enormous barrier to success. Stay on top of your assignments, and go to class. If you do start to slip behind, make catching up a priority, and ask for support from friends, classmates, and/or your instructor.
2. **Empower yourself to get the help you need.** It's unlikely that anybody will proactively approach you to offer help — which might have been the case in high school — so you need to reach out and ensure that you get support when you need it. Some guidelines:
 - a. **Recognize when you need help.** It can be hard to know at what point you should reach out for help. Too early, and you don't give yourself a chance to grapple with the material. Too late, and you may be so far off the path that it will be hard to steer back. A good rule of thumb is that if you have spent more time than you usually do on a task and are still confused, it's time to seek help.

- b. **Know that help is here for you.** Asking for academic help is an expected and ordinary part of the college experience. Professors hold office hours for just this reason: office hours are meant to be a time dedicated to helping students who have questions. If you can't make the office-hours times, it's fine to ask the professor if you can set up a separate time to meet (see the [Emailing a Professor](#) handout). Many other resources are available; see (d) below.
 - c. **Pinpoint what you need help with.** Sometimes you might just feel confused or lost in a course, making it hard to communicate to a professor or TA how they can help you. In this case, take time to think about where you are getting stuck. Is it a particular concept(s) that are causing trouble? A particular type of problem or assignment? A reading that you are having difficulty making sense of because of the writing style or specialized vocabulary? When you ask for help, share this with the help-giver, and let that person know what you have attempted so far, to help them more easily tailor their support to your needs.
 - d. **Find the right resources for you.** Northwestern offers an array of academic-support services, in addition to faculty office hours. Many departments offer TA tutoring, and [Academic Support & Learning Advancement \(ASLA\)](#) offers peer tutoring, study groups, and coaching. For help with writing assignments, check out the [Writing Place](#). The [Academic Resource Portal](#) is a good place to find resources. [Counseling and Psychological Services \(CAPS\)](#) and [AccessibleNU](#) can help with mental health concerns or course accommodations you may need. All of these services are free for Northwestern undergraduates.
3. **Connect with others.** Connecting with classmates will help you gain perspective on the material and check your understanding. Connecting also simply helps you feel more connected, and less alone in your course experience. Find a study partner, join a study group, or just have a brief conversation with a classmate about a homework assignment. Even if you feel that you've got the coursework down, hearing other people's approaches to the material can help you make even more out of the course experience. Connecting with others who share your social identity or life experience is also important, especially if you don't see those identities widely represented around you. Check out resources like [Multicultural Student Affairs](#), [Student Enrichment Services](#), and [Religious & Spiritual Life](#).
4. **Know that you don't need to figure it all out now.** You may feel overwhelmed in your first quarters by all of the decisions you think you're supposed to make: classes, activities, student organizations, future major, possible internships... it's too much to tackle all at once. Allow yourself time to experiment and reflect, and remember that you do not need to do it all. Let your values and interests drive your priorities, and focus on a few at a time.
5. **Push out of your comfort zone.** Navigating the new academic terrain requires you to take some uncomfortable steps: Emailing a professor, showing up at office hours, or walking into a tutoring room can be intimidating. Even creating and adhering to a schedule can feel unnatural if that's something you've not done before. But the potential reward is that you gain clarity on course material, feel more confident talking with professors, have a better grasp on your stronger and weaker points in a course, and have met new people and maybe even helped them, too.

Would you like to talk with somebody about academic challenges you are facing? [Make an appointment with](#) an ASLA staff member. Your academic advisor and faculty members are also great resources.

More information at northwestern.edu/asla. Questions? asla@northwestern.edu

See [accompanying video](#).