

What I Learned from My First Year of College: A Student's Perspective on the Critical Skills Needed for College Success

Transitioning from high school to college can be an exciting time in a student's life. Unfortunately, it can also be a challenging time. Around 40% of college students drop out, and a majority leave during their first year of college (Hanson, 2021). The experiences students gain during their middle and high school years help set them up for college success. This is especially true for students with intellectual disability preparing to enter inclusive postsecondary education (IPSE) programs. The term "inclusive" means that students take part in all aspects of college life. ACE-IT in College at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) is an IPSE program.

IPSE Programs: ACE-IT in College

IPSE programs are college programs for students with intellectual and developmental disability (IDD). These programs allow students who do not meet the traditional college entrance criteria to take part in college. Students attending IPSE programs typically earn a certificate since they are not seeking degrees. The goal of IPSE programs is to prepare students for competitive, integrated employment.

Established in 2011, ACE-IT in College serves students with IDD on the VCU campus. ACE-IT in College provides individualized support and services to help students take part in academic, employment, and campus engagement activities.

The following case study highlights Anasia's perspectives and experiences during her first year with ACE-IT. She shares what she learned, what helped her the most, and what she wishes she knew before she started.

Student Profile: Anasia

At age 18, Anasia entered VCU's ACE-IT in College. She graduated with an Applied Studies Diploma from a local high school. Anasia had a variety of interests. But, she had not narrowed down a specific career goal upon entering college. Anasia decided to attend college to work towards her future, complete more school, and make friends.

Anasia's First Year Experience

Students in ACE-IT in College select their classes from the courses offered by the university. Each semester, with guidance from advisors, students select their courses based on their career goals. Anasia took five classes during her first year. The classes spanned different subjects and included Introduction to the University and Effective Speech. Her favorite class was Introduction to the Fashion Industry. Each class helped Anasia learn how to be a college student and to develop skills for her future career.

Anasia also held two paid campus jobs during her first year. The first semester, she worked at the VCU Capital Assets & Real Estate office. Here, she assisted students with COVID-19 testing by managing the office administration tasks. At this job, Anasia developed important workplace readiness skills such as customer service. During the second semester, Anasia worked in VCU's Health Promotion & Wellbeing Center as a Program Support Specialist. In this position, Anasia used her organizational skills at the front desk. She also used her creative skills to help design signs to post on campus.

ACE-IT students can access all clubs and campus amenities. Anasia spent her free time on campus at the library, student commons, and gym. You could often find her meeting up with a peer mentor. ACE-IT peer mentors are other VCU students who support ACE-IT students in campus engagement activities. From courses and paid campus employment to getting involved on campus, Anasia had a full schedule her first year.

First-Year Strengths

Anasia loves being social. One of her favorite things about being a college student has been spending time on campus. Engaging with peer mentors has been a positive experience for Anasia. Peer mentors have helped Anasia feel comfortable learning the social norms of college. Anasia is a hard-working student. She loves doing homework and working on her semester projects on her own or with support. Anasia thrives when she is busy with a full and stable schedule. She enjoyed her campus jobs, especially getting paid and working extra shifts.

First-Year Challenges

The college schedule and expectations are very different from those of high school. For example, transportation to and from campus has required a lot of planning. Transportation arrangements had to be adjusted as Anasia's schedule changed. Also, staying focused in long college classes has sometimes been difficult for Anasia. While Anasia enjoys being social, making friends and initiating conversations has been challenging as well.

First-Year Support

ACE-IT in College advisors provide career development, class selection, and campus engagement. Anasia's advisor helped her to make informed career decisions and work towards her goals. They also explored work preferences and values. This process helped Anasia identify jobs that provided the best opportunities for growth.

Anasia also received a lot of support from her coaches both at work and in her classes. At work, Anasia's job coaches helped her to learn assigned tasks and manage her time. They also worked on strengthening social skills and developing independence. Anasia learned to use alarms, checklists, social stories, and to break large tasks down into small steps. These strategies helped Anasia stay engaged. She met her responsibilities as a college student and student worker during her first year.

High School Experiences that Aided First-Year Success

Anasia's high school experience helped prepare her for college in a lot of ways. For example, in high school, Anasia discovered she doesn't like science. This knowledge informed her career goals and college course selection. Anasia took a Career and Technical Education (CTE) course in cosmetology during high school. This CTE course gave her the opportunity to practice skills she would use in college. She learned to navigate a new campus, to try new things, and meet new people. She also developed perseverance when things got hard. Throughout high school, Anasia learned to ask for help, lean on trusted adults, and handle her frustrations. Anasia worked a paid job during high school. This experience helped her as she started her on-campus jobs.

What Anasia Wished She Learned Before Transitioning into College

Anasia's high school experience provided her with opportunities and skills that helped her during her first year. Even so, there were critical areas that weren't addressed before transitioning into college. Anasia has had a difficult time identifying her career goal and what she wants out of a future career. She wished that she had done more career exploration and planning in her high school years. College takes self-determination and independence. Anasia lacked opportunities to practice these skills in various areas of her life. This made completing coursework and job tasks difficult at times.

VCU is located in an urban area. Anasia wanted to live on or near campus. Unfortunately, Anasia had not learned safety and navigation skills to use public transportation. Exploring independent living skills like transportation in high school would have been beneficial. Anasia also wished she had more instruction and practice in using her social skills during her CTE and general education courses.

Anasia's first year of college has been fun, challenging, and full of opportunities. She has gained many new skills and a lot of independence, but still has more goals for next year! Educators, students, families, and others can learn from Anasia's first-year experience to prepare for the transition to college.

Key High School Experiences Leading to College Success

As IPSE programs grow, it is important to prepare students with IDD for the transition into postsecondary education early. Through learning about ACE-IT students' experiences, we recommend that secondary school students prepare for college by participating in the following activities.

Engage in self and career exploration activities

Students need to learn the variety of postsecondary options and pathways that are available to them. They should also explore how those opportunities fit their strengths, interests, preferences, and needs.

Have a paid job

Research shows that students who work during high school are more likely to have paid jobs after graduation. For students entering college, having a job builds workplace readiness skills and helps to form career goals.

Practice independence and problem-solving

In college, students must manage their schedules, navigate campus independently, and solve issues. To prepare for college, secondary students need opportunities to problem solve and practice independence.

Take part in general education and CTE courses

Research shows that these courses help prepare students for inclusive and challenging academic settings.

Practice asking for help and self-advocacy

In college, it is up to the student to seek out help when needed. Provide a variety of opportunities to practice these skills in a supportive environment.

Learn to manage frustrations and do difficult things

Meeting the demands of college and adulthood can be stressful. Practicing skills in self-regulation, frustration management, and perseverance will help students in the college setting.

Conclusion

College can provide the opportunity to develop the knowledge, skills, and experiences needed to get interest-driven careers. Transitioning into the first year of college can bring a lot of exciting opportunities as well as challenging times. To decrease the impact of those challenging times, students should begin building skills and experiences early in middle and high school.

References

Hanson, M. (2021). *College dropout rate*. Education Data Initiative. Retrieved May 12, 2022, from <https://educationdata.org/college-dropout-rates>