Getting Help

There are times when every student needs help from other people. The good student is self-reliant, but in order to plan his program and to know what to study and what is expected of him, he needs help from other people. We’ll discuss the matter of getting help very briefly in this section.

OTHER STUDENTS:

1. Students help each other in a number of ways. You can pick up a good deal of information about particular courses from other students. Sometimes this information is valuable. You should take it, though, with a grain of salt. The judgement of students is not infallible, and things change from time to time. Be prepared to make your own assessment of a course and your own decisions about handling and work in it.

2. Students who are taking a course together should also occasionally compare notes. In this way you can exchange ideas on class notes and check with one another on important and difficult points.

3. Studying with other students for an examination can be valuable if done properly. Don’t rely on other students as your sole or principal preparation for examinations. A session with other students should serve only as a review and checkout for what you’ve already studied. Group studying does one important thing: it provides a good opportunity for oral recitation. This is the most valuable aspect of group studying. But, in addition, it allows you to correct one another, and it gives you a better prediction of what an examination will be like.

4. Groups should be run in an orderly fashion. When the group first meets, it ought to discuss its plan of action and set up an agenda much as any other conference would. Then you can take turns giving oral summaries of important points. Don’t get bogged down arguing about little points. And, above all, don’t take on faith what another student says about something. He can be wrong. Make a habit of checking anything new that you hear from another student.

5. If there is something in a course you don’t understand and you know another student who clearly understands the particular point, you can ask him to explain it to you.

INSTRUCTOR:

1. The most important thing about getting help from your instructor is not to ask her for help with anything you should have gotten yourself. If you’ve been cutting class or going to sleep, don’t ask her to tell you what you should have heard if you had been listening. This will leave an unfavorable impression with the instructor, and it is impolite and unfair. If you miss something, try to recoup your loss by asking your fellow students about what you have missed.
2. Avoid asking your instructor for unreasonable or special favors. Don’t, for example, ask to borrow her notes.

3. As examination time draws near, students ask all sorts of questions about what will be on the examination. It is more reasonable to ask specific questions about your responsibilities for an examination. You will surely want to know what kind of examination to expect; if the instructor doesn’t tell you, ask.

4. You ought to try to get help from your instructors immediately before or after the regularly scheduled class hours. Be brief and business like.

5. Don’t let this advice, however, discourage you from raising legitimate and interesting questions with your instructor. If there is an important point he hasn’t made clear or something you just don’t understand, don’t hesitate to ask him to straighten you out.

ADVISER:

1. In general, the adviser’s duty is to help the student with decisions about course programs and with any special academic problems that come up.

2. Do for yourself all that you can do. You must read your college catalogue to see what courses are offered. Consult schedules to see which courses conflict with each other and hence cannot fit into you schedule, and do the arithmetic involved in determining how many “credits” you should take or are planning to take in any particular term.

3. You should make out yourself the forms required for the adviser’s approval or action.

4. In general, go to your adviser only after you have thoroughly studied your own problems, learned all you can about them, and have specific questions well formulated.

5. An adviser’s job is to advise and not to make your decisions for you. He’ll give you information you can’t get yourself as well as opinions based on what he knows about courses and their value for your objectives. The choices to be made among electives and different arrangements of courses are up to you. You shouldn’t want to be told what to do, nor should you ask your adviser to decide matters of individual interest, taste, or preference.

6. Students often have personal problems that may, within reason, be taken to the adviser. If you are failing or doing poorly in any of your courses, if you have trouble studying or even if personal worries or difficulties seriously hamper your work, you should be able to present these problems to your adviser for some help and guidance. Don’t expect too much, though, or take too much of his time. If you state your problem clearly, he may be able to give you some helpful hints, but he can seldom solve your problem for you. That’s something only you can do.
WHEN YOU’RE IN TROUBLE

1. Try to diagnose the problem as early as possible. Don’t drift along hoping for the best any longer than it takes you to tell that something is wrong. Don’t wait for a failing mark on an hour exam to demonstrate what you had good reason to suspect before the exam. When you’ve a good idea you’re in trouble, try to do something about it.

2. To do anything, you’ll have to figure out, at least roughly, what the trouble really is. Are you unprepared for the course? Is there some one thing about the course that seems particularly wrong? Does its special vocabulary give you trouble? Do you have difficulty with calculations, problems, or laboratory work? Ask yourself questions like these to formulate as well as you can what may be wrong.

3. Decide whether you can do something to remedy your difficulties or whether you must consider dropping the course. At this point, your instructor may help you. If you go to him prepared to tell him what your particular problems are, he may be able to tell you the steps you should take to get straightened out. He may be able to spot something you’re doing consistently wrong. He may discover a weakness in your preparation and prescribe some reading or special exercises that will help you. On the other hand, he may find that you’ve simply gotten into a course that is too difficult for you—this can easily happen, for example, when students continue a foreign language they’ve previously had in high school—and suggest some other course that is better for a student with your background.

4. If you realize your trouble and seek help early enough in a course, you usually can work out some wise course of action. If you can improve, you can find out how. If you aren’t likely to, there is still time to drop the course and rearrange your program without undue hardship. It’s usually not a good idea, though, to drop a course impulsively and without seeking competent advice, especially if the course is one that is required or recommended for your field of study. For this reason, many colleges require the approval of both the instructor and faculty adviser to drop a course—not a matter of red tape but to encourage the student to seek their help in deciding whether it is a wise thing to do.

5. You don’t have to be in serious trouble or on the verge of dropping a course to seek some substantial help in it. Even good students find there are often some aspects of a course they have trouble handling. If they make a list of the things that bother them and then arrange with the instructor for a few minutes of his time, they often can run down the list and get a few pointers to straighten themselves out.

6. Suppose now that you get pretty well along in a course with an hour exam or two behind you and find that you are doing unsatisfactory work. Instead of quibbling about your grade and then putting aside the paper that received the grade, it’s time to find out specifically what’s wrong. If you can, you might go over your paper with another, better student to see
if you can learn anything that way. If you’re still not satisfied that you know where your shortcomings are, ask your instructor to go over it with you. If you are really interested in improving, instructors are almost always willing to take a little time to show you exactly what you did wrong and what you should have done to do it right.

7. Sometimes things get to such a point that you have little hope of pulling yourself out of a hole. You’ve done poor work all term and then, at the end, are still doing poorly. In this situation, it may be too late to learn something that will help you avoid similar difficulties in the future. Far too many students who have received a final grade in a course don’t bother to collect papers they could obtain from their instructor to see why they did badly. In many cases, they should ask to go over the paper with the instructor, not with any thought of getting their grade changed but with the idea of pinpointing their own weaknesses and mistakes.

8. Sometimes the trouble may lie not in mistakes or doing things that can be corrected but rather in something more deeply rooted. The student may be in personal difficulties with other people, worrying too much about nonacademic things, and generally not able to apply himself the way he knows he should. If that’s the trouble, it’s not one for the instructor to handle. Counseling Services is free and confidential.

9. We’ll mention finally the possibility of trouble arising because you’re a “round peg in a square hole.” You may be attempting to take a course of study in which you aren’t really interested. There may be another set of courses in which you will be more interested and more capable. You may, similarly, be shooting for a vocational objective for which you are not suited. As a consequence, you may be so poorly motivated that you simply can’t muster the effort to do the amount of work you know you should. This is a situation for professional help; seek out a psychologist, vocational counselor, or someone equipped to help you find the vocational objective and course of studies for which you are best suited.