

6

Tips for a Successful College Experience

Christa Sanders works as a member services representative for Escambia River Electric Cooperative while studying business at Pensacola State College.

Going to college marks a milestone in the life of a student, but the journey to college can be complex. To make the transition easier for prospective students, six current college students share their best advice on how to succeed at school.

1. Start preparing in high school



Keaton Brown

Getting good grades is important, but so is involvement in extracurricular activities.

Keaton Brown attended Northview High School and participated in everything he could: cross-country, school advisory council, Navy Junior Reserve Officers Training Corps, Math Club and Beta Club. Now at University of Florida, he says that involvement strengthened his college application.

“Students who stand out in the college application process are involved in high school,” says Keaton, a past Escambia River Electric Cooperative scholarship winner. “From charity work to sports to student elected offices—anything you do that shows you put in extra effort to do something for your school or to make a change in the community will help your application.”

Participation in clubs, sports and volunteer activities—such as his volunteering with the local fire department—is also a great way for a student to hone in on a possible career path and to develop leadership and communication skills.

“I participated in a lot of clubs and organizations in high school,” Keaton says. “If I was interested in something as a potential career, I’d find a club or team to see if I liked it.”

Keaton held many leadership roles in NJROTC, including color guard commander, administration officer, commanding officer and drill team commander. He also held leadership roles in other clubs.

He says being a part of the organizations and clubs at high school helped him develop leadership and public speaking skills. Keaton credits this experience with his success in the Youth Tour application process and his selection to represent the community in Tallahassee and Washington, D.C. He says being chosen for this program—or any other award or recognition—will benefit a student when it comes time to apply for college. ■

2. Invest in the college application process



Matthew Taylor

Scoring well on entrance exams, writing good essays and working toward good letters of recommendation are important ways to strengthen your college application.

When preparing for college, Matthew Taylor took many prep courses for the ACT and took the test many times to strengthen his overall score and become more comfortable with the test. The prep courses taught him test-taking strategies.

Matthew is a senior at University of West Florida and works in EREC’s engineering department. Working while attending college not only helps pay for his studies, but Matthew says it gives him hands-on experience in his field of study.

When applying to college, Matthew says a clearly thought-out essay is paramount. He believes the essay is almost as important as test scores. While scores from an entrance exam tell admissions about your test-taking abilities, the essay tells them about you as a person—your habits, strengths and weaknesses.

“A few tips that I can give are to rewrite your paper many times, to have someone proofread your paper and to get comfortable with your topic,” Matthew says. “Your comfort really comes out in the paper that you write.”

Recommendation letters are also a critical piece of the college application. Choose someone who knows you and who you are as an individual: a teacher, a boss or a coach. Matthew says you can never get too many recommendations. Be sure to give the reference plenty of notice before the letter is needed. ■

Anything that you do in school—whether it be charity work, sports or student government—boosts your chances of getting into your school of choice.

—Matthew Taylor, Escambia River Electric Cooperative employee and senior at University of West Florida



Libby Pugh, a student at University of South Florida majoring in biomedical science, was an EREC scholarship recipient. She wants to pursue a career in pharmacy.

3. Choose a college that's affordable

This may seem obvious, but with the accessibility of student loans, going to a more expensive school is a consideration for some students. Attending a small school—which can be less expensive—seeking out scholarships and living off campus are all ways to make a college education more affordable.

“I wanted to go into the ROTC program at Troy University to eventually become an officer in the Air Force, but I couldn’t afford the classes and mandatory on-campus housing for all freshmen,” says Christa Sanders.

She had a few small scholarships that would only cover a third of her first semester at Troy.

“At first, I did not want to go to Pensacola State College because my parents continuously recommended going here, and I hated the idea of staying local, living with my mom until I became financially stable, and eventually having a full-time job,” Christa says. “But after I made the decision to go to a small community college just to make my parents happy, I ended up making myself happy as well.”

She paid for her first and second semesters completely with scholarships—and being at a smaller school means she has closer contact with professors and classmates.

Christa ended up changing her major to business to fit her current job at Escambia River Electric Cooperative.

While attending Jay High School, Christa worked with her guidance counselor on scholarship and college applications. She recommends all students complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)—even those who do not think they will qualify because some scholarships require it to be on file.

Christa is living at home, which is about 35 miles from campus. Because room and board can be costly, living off campus—if allowed by the school—is a clever way to cut college costs. ■

4. Get involved on campus

For Northview High School graduate Libby Pugh, a balance between her studies and campus involvement at University of South Florida has led to a fulfilling college experience.

“There are several ways to get involved on campus, including clubs, campus ministries, sports teams and Greek organizations,” says Libby, a junior majoring in biomedical science. “Getting involved with the Baptist Collegiate Ministry at USF has allowed me to experience new things and meet new friends that will last a lifetime. It is an awesome experience to have people by my side in this season of my life that support me and are willing to help me grow to be a better version of myself.”

Libby says she arranges her schoolwork around events on campus she wants to attend.

“It is important to me to get my schoolwork done first and then reward myself with an event,” she notes. “In the first few weeks, I did not know anyone. Going to events and trying new things allowed me to meet new people. Getting myself involved has allowed me to experience college life at the highest level. It may seem intimidating to go to an event by yourself, but once you realize everyone around you is looking to meet new people also, it makes it a lot easier. It just takes a leap of faith.”

USF has a student involvement webpage that lists different events scheduled each week.

“Try to attend these types of events as much as possible,” Libby advises. “Another way to get involved is to go to different sporting events. If you love sports, football, hockey, baseball, basketball and so many others are always going on. As a college student, the atmosphere of sporting events is a great experience.

“The college experience is what you make it. Do not be afraid to get involved and meet new people.” ■

5. Make studying a priority

Jackson Flowers, who received an EREC scholarship in 2018 as a Jay High School graduate, says the college experience is unforgettable, with classes, sporting events and social gatherings offering excitement, lessons and relationships that will last forever. Amidst the fun, he says to keep your eye on the prize, and never lose focus on the main reason for attending college.

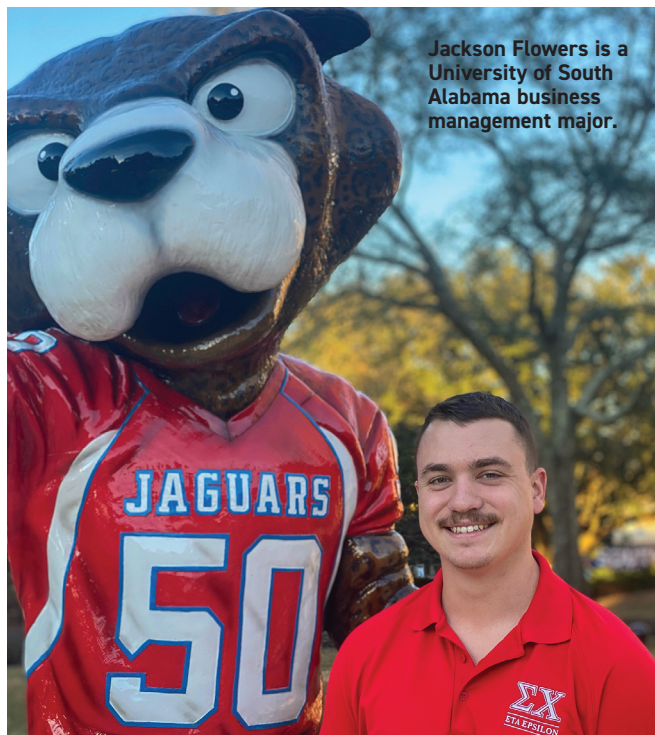
“There can be a lot of things going on on a weekly basis,” says Jackson, a University of South Alabama business management major. “All of this can be a distraction. You have to remember you are in school for one main reason: to get your degree.”

He admits that is not always easy.

“There will be times when you have to put other things off that may be more fun than studying, but it’s something you must do,” Jackson says. “The diploma is something you’ve worked all your life so far to achieve. Studying hard and putting the time in is the best way to get to the finish line.”

More is expected, with challenging coursework and students responsible for setting their priorities.

“It is on you to put your studies first,” Jackson says. “Once you can find the balance between your work and social life, your college experience as a whole will be much more fulfilling. But at the end of the day, you’re in school to get that degree. You cannot let that slip away. Your hard work will pay off in the end when you get to walk across the stage and hear your name called out.” ■



Jackson Flowers is a University of South Alabama business management major.

6. Allow yourself to grow

Do not put a timeline on how long someone is in college or how long it takes them to complete their degree. As much as it is about academics, college is also about growing and learning how successes and failures shape a person.

Delaney Reynolds is a 2019 EREC scholarship winner from Northview High School. She is in her final stretch as a senior at University of West Florida, working toward a bachelor’s degree in health sciences and administration. She has applied and expects to start on her master’s soon.

“If you are not sure about what field you want to enter or what career you may want, take advantage of your first two years of general education courses to take new classes, even if you’re not sure you would like them,” Delaney says. “This was actually one of the main ways I decided on a career path.”

“I always knew I wanted to do something in the health care field and loved my anatomy, physiology and biology courses. However, taking psychology and sociology courses while working on my associate of arts sparked my interest in my current education and career path.”

Delaney is pursuing a career in health care administration. She says she wants to use her experiences and education to make a difference in the lives of minorities and those living in underdeveloped communities, providing them access to fair and affordable health care. ■



Delaney Reynolds is studying health sciences and administration at University of West Florida.