

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.

