

Welcome to Psychology . . . Now Let's Get Stuff Done

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1.0 MEET KRIS



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CHAPTER OUTLINE

- 1.0 Meet Kris
- 1.1 The Good (and Bad) About the Psychology Major
- 1.2 Does a College Degree Guarantee Success?
- 1.3 Superstar Psychology Students
- 1.4 Motivation for College Success—What is Your “Why”?
- 1.5 Setting Goals and Creating Systems to Achieve Them
- 1.6 Overcoming Procrastination and Getting Stuff Done
- 1.7 Living the “Getting Stuff Done” (GSD) Lifestyle

Kris is a senior, about to graduate with a bachelor's degree in psychology. Throughout college he has been a pretty good student, earning mostly B's in his courses (with some A's and some C's). Recently, Kris met with a professor to see if she could provide some insight into what he could do after graduation. The professor asked him if he were considering graduate school or if he were going to start a career right away, but Kris said that he had not given it much thought until now; he said that he thought he would figure out the next step after graduation.

To get a better idea of how she could help, the professor asked Kris if he had worked as a research assistant. Kris said that he remembered one of his professors asking for volunteers, but he had not bothered to follow up on it. She asked if Kris had completed any internships; Kris shook his head no and said that he did not have time. The professor questioned whether Kris was involved with any student organizations like Psychology Club, and Kris told her that he thought those clubs were only for honors students with straight A's. She pressed on and asked if he had been to the career center on campus, but Kris responded with his own question: “There's a career center on our campus?”

At this point, the professor was still not ready to give up—she checked to see what skills Kris developed in college by asking him if he wrote any papers or did presentations in front of a class. Kris said that he purposely chose professors who had reputations for being “easy.” He found the ones who were known for using multiple-choice exams, letting students out of class early, and requiring little outside reading and who did not assign papers or projects.

Why Did We Tell You This Story?

Over the years, we have seen too many students like Kris who did not take advantage of their college experience and who did not take time to prepare for their future. Kris should have been (1) exploring possible career paths, (2) taking challenging courses that made him think, (3) developing skills for a professional career, (4) networking with peers in student organizations, (5) getting valuable experience by working on research or completing an internship, (6) taking advantage of free resources offered by his school, and (7) planning his next step well before finishing college. Although it is not too late for Kris to figure things out, he would have been much better off if he had known the keys to succeeding as a psychology student when he was first starting the major.

As professors, we want to see students like you succeed, so we wrote this book to open up the secrets to becoming a successful psychology major! If you take this book seriously, we will help you find possible career paths, determine whether graduate school is a good choice for you, and describe how you can have experiences throughout college that can help to get you there!

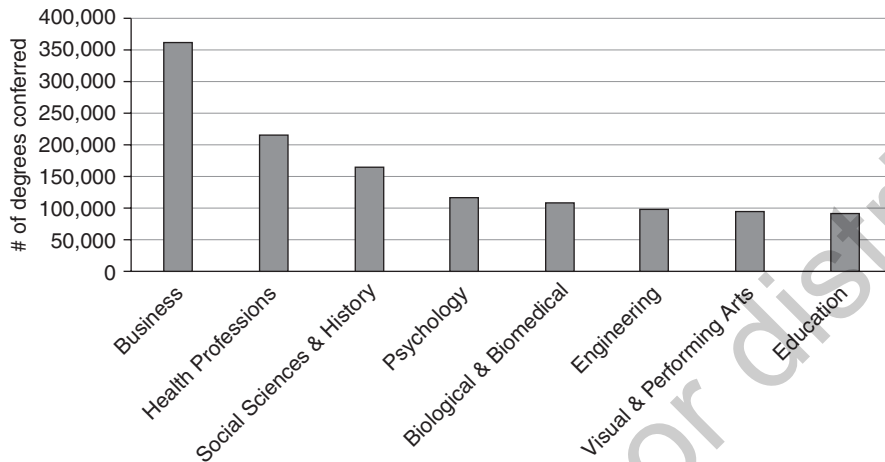
1.1 THE GOOD (AND BAD) ABOUT THE PSYCHOLOGY MAJOR

We would like to welcome you into a world that we both love—psychology! Psychology is one of the most popular majors in college today—according to the U.S. Department of Education (2018), it is the fourth most popular college major (see Figure 1.1). One reason is that students seem to be naturally curious about themselves and other people. Another reason is that psychology seems to funnel its way into almost every aspect of our lives (people are constantly perceiving, thinking, remembering, feeling emotions, and reacting to others). Some students choose psychology because they like the idea of helping people who have problems, whereas others may want to apply psychological knowledge to other fields. It’s also possible that you have your own reasons for exploring psychology.



FIGURE 1.1

Most Popular Areas of Concentration for Bachelor's Degrees Awarded in 2014-15



Note: Based on data from U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2018). *Digest of education statistics, 2016* (NCES 2017-094). Retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/fast-facts/display.asp?id=37>.

Regardless of which reason brought you here, you may not have a complete understanding of the pros and cons of psychology as a major. If you told a family member, friend, or academic advisor that you were considering psychology as a major, perhaps that person provided advice about what to expect. We hope that they made you feel excited about your choice of major, but it is also possible that you have heard cautionary tales that scared you. Our goal here is to provide you with a clear picture so that you can dive further into the psychology major as an informed student!

It is likely that there are kernels of truth in both optimistic and pessimistic accounts of psychology as a major. For every driven entrepreneur who attributes her success to what she learned in her psychology courses, there is also likely to be a disillusioned coffee shop barista who laments his experience. Be aware that compelling tales of success or failure tend to stand out in your mind more than the tales of people who simply apply themselves and do well in life. This is due to a cognitive phenomenon worth mentioning here—the availability heuristic (check out Tversky & Kahneman, 1973). Another related idea is the law of small numbers, which is when people mistakenly give more importance to a small number of occurrences that they hear about rather than what happens to most people (e.g., Tversky & Kahneman, 1971).

Our point here is that one person's story—as vivid and compelling as it may seem—should never be the end-all and be-all to your future. Do not stop seeking information once you have heard one story or even a handful of them. Stories can be effective in persuading people (see Green & Brock, 2000), and often they are more powerful than hearing about

statistical information (e.g., Betsch, Ulshofer, Renkewitz, & Betsch, 2011). By no means are we saying to discount the information that people share with you. Rather, we suggest you become a relentless and voracious seeker of information. Take in the good and the bad about YOUR major. We will help you get started by sharing some of the things we have seen and heard about psychology.

Negatives About the Psychology Major

There are a number of misconceptions about psychology and its majors (e.g., Brinthaup, Hurst, & Johnson, 2016)—we listed some of our favorites in Table 1.1. In addition to those, if you have been on the interwebs you may have seen dramatic headlines that disparage certain majors. We noticed a few that described psychology as a “bad major.” One described psychology as one of “the worst college majors” (Goudreau, 2012), another as one of “the most worthless college majors” (Trattner, 2018), and two Florida governors questioned the career prospects of psychology majors (Logue, 2016)—one even suggested that psychology students should expect to end up working at places such as Chick-fil-A (Jaschik, 2015).

What should you make of this negativity? Part of this dissatisfaction could stem from ignorance about the field and what the bachelor’s degree in psychology will allow you to do. Unlike degrees in applied fields like engineering or nursing that train students for a specific job, the psychology major focuses on teaching you how to think and create. Also, you may be disappointed to learn that an undergraduate bachelor’s degree in psychology (a BA or BS) will NOT certify you to start practicing as a counselor, psychotherapist, clinician, or professor—those jobs require additional graduate study (i.e., a master’s or doctorate degree).

So, is it time to consider a different major? Of course not—give us a chance to make a case in favor of psychology!

Positives About the Psychology Major

As a psychology major, your curriculum will likely start with an introductory psychology course and then progress to your senior year, when you take in-depth seminar courses and, hopefully, complete a capstone course or culminating project. In between, you will take a journey through Statistics, Research Methods, and a large number of elective courses (we will walk you through some of the many subfields of psychology in Chapter 4). You will gain scientific literacy, quantitative reasoning, and the ability to

TABLE 1.1

Our Favorite (False) Stereotypes and Misconceptions About Psychology
(Some Were Inspired by Brinthaup, Hurst, & Johnson, 2016)

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- Psychology majors are analyzing everyone that they meet.
 - Psychologists can read other people’s minds.
 - All psychology majors are trying to figure out their own problems or disorders.
 - Psychologists have secret labs where they administer electroshock treatments.
 - All psychology majors become therapists or “shrinks.”
 - Psychology is an easy major because it is based on common sense.
-

understand, evaluate, and develop empirical research in the social sciences. You will have opportunities to immerse yourself into research, you can dip your toes into the culture of professional conferences, and you will surely get your hands dirty administering studies and playing with data using the statistical software packages of our field (e.g., SPSS, SAS, R, and Excel).

A degree in psychology prepares you with skills that can be applied to a wide variety of careers. These competencies include thinking critically, writing and presenting for various audiences, conducting empirical research, and working with others. In the process, you will gain domain knowledge in statistics, mental disorders, how the mind works, and how people behave. It just so happens that the skills that we just described nicely correspond to a recent article that listed the top skills that employers desire in their new hires (Hart Research Associates, 2018)!

In addition to all of that, psychology can be a gateway to a wide variety of careers. Some are related to mental health or helping others. Psychology can help prepare you to pursue careers in areas such as counseling, therapy, social work, addictions, medicine, or clinical disorders—you may need additional graduate training, but your undergraduate psychology degree is a great start. We also want to emphasize that majoring in psychology does not limit you to those helping fields, as there are many other paths you can pursue, including career opportunities in business, nonprofit organizations, human services, and other areas! We cover this a lot more later in the book when we discuss careers.

Balancing the Good and Bad

As you can see, the positives about the psychology major can outweigh the negatives—it is a matter of informed perspective. Bachelor’s-level psychology graduates come away with a toolkit that includes basic scientific skills and, often, an understanding of the “behind the scenes” aspects of empirical research. Additionally, psychology majors glean familiarity, if not a deeper understanding, of subject matter that can be of great use to many industries and work settings.

We wrote this book to educate students like you about this reality. We understand that many students have no clue about what career they would like to pursue, but we want to get you to start thinking about possible careers as early as possible. Even if you have no idea right now, you can still work hard to develop the skills that will be applicable to a variety of careers. Throughout this book, we want to let you know of all of the resources that are available to you to help you be the best that you can be!

We want to end this module on one very important point. No matter what a college diploma can offer students, if you do not take advantage of the opportunities available to you, you may not develop the skills that we described. We expand on this point in much more detail in the next section by distinguishing between a college degree and a college education!



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Take-Home Message

As you read this book and as you progress in the years to come, we recommend that you devour all of the information you can about the psychology major, career opportunities, and graduate study. Do not be daunted by what may seem challenging or discouraging! We tell our students that it is always best to be an informed optimist rather than a naïve dreamer. Also, keep in mind that no one has ever learned by placing a book beneath their pillow and hoping to learn through diffusion or osmosis—learning takes effort. Take advantage of the opportunities in psychology to learn knowledge and develop your skills!

Action Steps

1. Use this module as an inspiration to connect with current and former psychology majors. Ask them about what they see as negatives and positives to our major. If you want, you can take a moment to fast-forward to the end of this book and check out the advice from people who graduated with degrees in psychology. Use this information to make an informed decision as to whether psychology is the right major for you. And, if you are on the fence and cannot decide if it is a fit or not, finish reading this book before making a decision, as we will provide more information than you could ever imagine about the psychology major.
2. Visit at least one of your professors during their scheduled office hours, or hang around to chat with them after class. In whatever situation works for you, find time to strike up conversations about what you are learning about YOUR major and what suggestions or advice they would give someone new to psychology. You should ask them what they recommend you to do to be successful in the major, how to be in the best position to take the next steps after graduation, and other questions you might have about the major and career opportunities.



If you dedicate some time to these actions, you will be well on your way to joining the ranks of the “savvy psych majors” who seek out information on their own. This is a tendency that will suit you well in the years to come. Also, you will hone your skills on how to engage in productive conversations with your peers and mentors. As you will read in the modules to come, you will be most successful if you connect with others in your classes and department.

1.2 DOES A COLLEGE DEGREE GUARANTEE SUCCESS?

It might be tempting to think that a college education is the same thing as a college degree, but the two are a little bit different. A college degree, in and of itself, is a piece of paper (or sheepskin for those of you attending fancy schools) that you can hang on the wall. You might say, “Well, they don’t just hand those out to anyone,” and that is true to some degree (pun intended), but there is a large amount of variability among those who receive diplomas at graduation. Some graduates have earned honors such as valedictorian or salutatorian because of their incredible grades. In contrast, there are also graduates who may have passed with the minimum grade point average (because they did not bother to read the assigned textbooks)—some of these students may have searched a website like RateMyProfessors.com to find the easiest instructors, particularly ones who did not require papers.

Even though these students may have had completely different experiences in college, all of them end up earning the same degree. The degree is worth the same when it is listed on a résumé or curriculum vitae (CV). So, if a particular job requires a college diploma, all of these individuals can apply (see Caplan, 2018, for a unique discussion on this topic).

A College Education

In contrast to the degree itself, a college education consists of the knowledge, skills, relationships, and the experiences you build along the way (e.g., Bruni, 2018). In psychology, you can read about fascinating (and sometimes controversial) research studies—you can also take part in class discussions about these issues. You can become a research assistant and contribute to scientific studies that might one day be taught in textbooks. You can join organizations and travel to psychology conferences that are nearby or far away. You can ask your instructors or the campus career office for assistance finding an internship that can help you gain work experience. You can develop writing skills that are applicable to a variety of careers. If you find instructors who challenge you, then you can also develop your ability to critically think (we guarantee that this is a skill that can help for the rest of your life).

As you can see, a college education can be very good or it could be just okay (or “meh”). Ultimately, the choice of what you want to get out of college is completely up to you, but you are probably not surprised to learn that we are big proponents of getting a good education. To help you out, we included some suggestions for psychology



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TABLE 1.2

An Example of a Good College Education in Psychology

1. Extensive knowledge about topics (e.g., in psychology)
 2. The use of classroom and study tips that lead to long-term knowledge and knowing how to continue learning throughout life
 3. The ability to write and communicate effectively
 4. Experience in research and/or an internship
 5. Relationships with professors, fellow students, and/or professionals in your preferred career area (i.e., networking)
 6. Knowledge and skills in other areas (e.g., a minor or second major)
 7. The ability to think critically about arguments and to make rational decisions
 8. Knowing how to find reliable information
 9. Learning from setbacks and failures rather than avoiding them or quitting at the first sign of trouble
 10. Enhancing your computer skills
 11. A clear and well-developed plan for achieving your career goals
 12. Awareness of how graduate school can benefit certain career paths (and, if you choose that route, knowledge of how to get into graduate school)
 13. Taking advantage of opportunities that come with your tuition (e.g., advising, career services, job fairs, guest speakers from other schools)
 14. A good monetary situation for yourself (e.g., scholarships that minimize or eliminate the need for loans)
 15. Unique experiences that you will remember your entire life (e.g., travel abroad, completing an honors thesis, attending a professional conference, building friendships, challenging yourself and succeeding)
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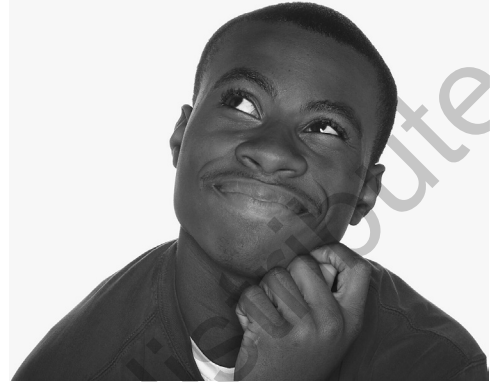
students in Table 1.2. We think that those of you who take our advice and use college as an opportunity to develop skills, gain long-term knowledge, and try new things will be at an advantage—and you will have those skills and experiences for the rest of your life.

Take-Home Message

As the saying goes, *C's might get degrees, but A's and B's succeed!* We want to expand this and say that average grades can get you the diploma, but skills and experiences can land you the job. So, do more than the minimum—work hard in the classroom and get involved in activities outside of class! Keep in mind that being serious about one's college education does not mean never having any fun. To the contrary, getting involved in your education can be invigorating! Taking part in psychological research can lead to new discoveries. Joining a club like Psi Chi gives you the chance to meet new people and socialize. Taking advantage of study abroad can open up a new way of life to you. In college, there are tons of opportunities that are available, so why not jump right in and reap the benefits? In this book, we make a lot of recommendations as to how you can get all of the advantages of being a psychology major!

Action Steps

1. Take a few minutes to think about whether you are in college for the degree, the education, or both (we recommend this last option!). Decide today whether you want the basic, no-frills, minimal-effort college degree or whether you want to participate in the add-ons that can come with it. The good news is that most of the add-ons do not cost money, just a little bit of your time and effort, but the payoff can be big in the long term!
2. Imagine yourself at graduation—visualize not only what you look like but also the knowledge, skills, and experiences that you have gained as a college student. Imagine yourself so that you are similar to the description in Table 1.1—do you like what you see? If so, then commit to taking action and making that goal your reality. Even if you have already started college on the wrong foot, there is still time to change—start today!



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1.3 SUPERSTAR PSYCHOLOGY STUDENTS

Now that you know the importance of a college education, we want to encourage you to aspire to become a superstar psychology student! That is, we want you to strive to get the most out of the psychology major and to be ready to transition to the work world or graduate school. We started with existing research on the topic (Bain, 2012; Martin, 2015; Newport, 2005) and then we also conducted informal interviews with colleagues about this topic. Putting that all together, we developed a list of 12 traits and accomplishments of superstar psychology students.¹ And, for those of you who are interested, there are also descriptions of superstar psychology graduate students, too (see Grover, Leftwich, Backhaus, Fairchild, & Weaver, 2006).

Start by reading through these descriptions. Then, answer the questions in the Self-Assessment to see where you are right now. Finally, use these items as you think about where you want to be in the future!



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¹We understand that the term “superstar psychology student” might sound a little corny, but we like it because it is memorable, it clearly conveys an image of achieving success, and others have already been using it (see Grover, Leftwich, Backhaus, Fairchild, & Weaver, 2006; Martin, 2015). Remember that *any of you* can reach this status if you follow the advice in this book!

Traits and Accomplishments of Superstar Psychology Students

1. Superstar students *actually* use effective study techniques.

They do not just claim to “know how to study”; they ACTUALLY use good study techniques. Effective study techniques lead to long-term knowledge and good grades.

2. Superstar students take the time to learn APA-style formatting (and word-processing software).

They pay attention to details in their work and proofread carefully. Everyone makes mistakes—however, those who look over their work so that they can fix mistakes tend to do better. Employers and graduate programs expect people to know how to use popular software like Word, so take the time in college to learn!

3. Superstar students get involved in research.

This is especially true for those who plan to enter doctoral graduate programs (many of those involve research), but it can also help those who are looking into jobs or master’s programs as well. Working on research can help you with data analysis, communication, and critical thinking skills. It can also be a way to earn a good letter of recommendation.

4. Superstar students find an internship to get relevant work experience (and connections).

Internships can help in a number of ways: they can (a) build your résumé, (b) help you to develop skills, (c) teach you about a career path, and (d) possibly get your foot in the door for a future job. Good Grades + Internship = Better Résumé.

5. Superstar students join a few college clubs and professional organizations.

The key is not to join every club or professional organization, but to selectively join ones that can help YOU. Clubs allow you to meet others who have similar goals, and they are an opportunity to build skills (and résumé lines) in leadership positions. Professional organizations can provide you with resources (e.g., books, scholarship and grant opportunities, tips on careers or graduate school, etc.).

6. Superstar students apply for scholarships, grants, and awards.

Scholarships, grants, and awards are easy ways to say the following to employers and graduate programs, “You should hire/admit me because this organization thought highly enough of me to give me money and/or recognition!” Plus, who does not want free money or a pat on the back?

7. Superstar students add a minor (or possibly a second major).

Having a minor (or second major) can be a nice complement to your psychology training. With the right planning (use campus advising for help!)

Self-Assessment



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The next step is for you to assess yourself on the qualities of a superstar psychology student. For each of the items below, answer “Yes” or “No” based on the current you:

1. Are you actively using effective study skills?
2. Do you know how to properly write in APA-style formatting?
3. Have you worked on research?
4. Have you gained work experience in an internship?
5. Do you have memberships in any professional or college organizations?
6. Have you earned any scholarships, research grants, or awards?
7. Do you have a minor or second major?
8. Do you have strong critical thinking skills related to data and statistics?
9. Do you have a plan for your career and the path to get there?
10. Do you have a clear idea of what specific degree(s) is/are needed for your career goals?
11. Do you know how to properly prepare for graduate school?
12. Do you know how to properly document your accomplishments on a CV and résumé?

this can be built into your course schedule. It can also help you stand out from all of the other college students who did not do it.

8. Superstar students focus on learning statistics and developing critical thinking skills.

Instead of succumbing to math anxiety, superstar psychology students realize that analytical thinking and the ability to work with data/numbers/statistics is an important skill in today’s world (think of all of the data that companies and governments gather—valued employees will be able to work with data).

9. Superstar students figure out what they want to do after college.

It is okay to not know what you want to do after college, but the sooner you can figure it out, the sooner you can have a concrete goal that you want to reach. Progress tends to happen faster when you have an end goal in mind.

10. Superstar students figure out what degree they need for their career goals.

Superstar students do not earn a degree and then ask, “Now what can I do with this degree?” Instead, they say “I want to do __, and it requires a __ degree”—then they go after the degree(s) that they need.

11. Superstar students learn how to prepare for graduate school.

Many psychology-related careers require some graduate training, and graduate school is much more competitive than college. So, if this is a possibility (or even a remote possibility), start preparing early.

12. Superstar students know how to document their accomplishments.

Most jobs require that you submit a résumé, and graduate school applications require you to submit a CV. So, learn how to build these and what accomplishments will make them impressive!

Take-Home Message

While we use the term “superstar psychology student” because it is catchy and we want you to dream big, we think that each and every one of you can reach superstar status. There is nothing magical to the steps that we described in this module—the key idea is that you have to take action in order to build up these accomplishments. Keep reading this book so that you can learn how to make these happen!

Action Steps

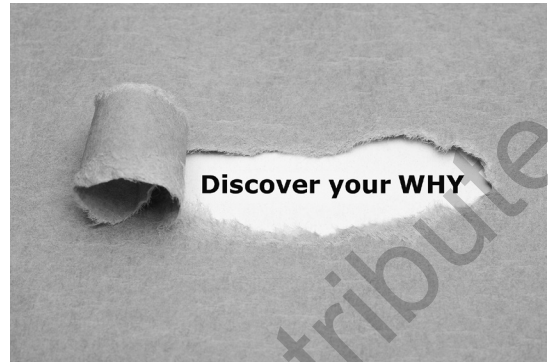
1. How many “Yes” answers (out of 12) do you have from the Self-Assessment? If you did not already do it, please go back and answer the superstar questions for yourself!
2. How many “Yes” answers do you want to have in a year or two? Which ones? How many do you want to have by graduation? Set these aside where you can find them later, and return to your answers here after you finish this chapter and learn more about setting goals. As a preview, we want you to make your goals very specific!

1.4 MOTIVATION FOR COLLEGE SUCCESS—WHAT IS YOUR “WHY”?

Imagine that we asked you to hop on a bicycle today and ride 100 miles without stopping. Some of you (who are cycling enthusiasts) might not mind, but most of you would probably find a way to politely decline that request. Now, instead of us making that request, imagine that a close loved one was 100 miles away, in serious trouble, and the only way for you to get there was by riding a bike—would you do it now? The difference between those two scenarios is that, in the latter scenario, you had a strong motivation (or “why”) to complete that daunting task. In the words of Nietzsche (1889), “He who has a *why* can bear almost any *how*.”

If you have just started college, then you can see a large number of courses and requirements ahead of you over the next few years. If you have been in college for a few years, then you know that college can be humbling at times. To help you get through this, we want to describe a technique described by Miller (2014). Take a moment and ask yourself, “What is your reason for being in college (and completing your degree)? In other words, why do you stay in college?”

The answer to this can differ among college students. For example, maybe you are a nontraditional student who needs college training to restart a brand-new career path. Perhaps you are a first-generation college student and your family has pushed you to go beyond their educational achievements. In a similar manner, maybe your parents and grandparents sacrificed a lot so that you could have this opportunity and you do not want to let them down. Or is it possible that you have a dream of becoming a neurosurgeon so that you can use your knowledge and skills to save and improve lives? Others might be completing college to set a good example for their kids. For some of you, the answer might be obvious; however, for others, you may have to think a little bit more. Keep in mind that the answer can be different for different people. Regardless of your reason, though, be specific about your motivation. Whatever your reason, write it down!



Take-Home Message

We put you through this exercise because college is a lengthy process that can wear you down at times. When you experience those moments—whether it is the miserable feeling of getting a D on a difficult exam, not seeing an end in sight, questioning your choice of major, or having difficulty finding time to get everything done—refer back to your reason for being in college and wanting to finish. Digging deep down to find that motivation can potentially mean the difference between sticking to it and giving up. We want you to succeed, so find that motivation and remind yourself why you are here!

Action Steps

1. Maybe your “why” is similar to one of the previous responses, but maybe it is different—regardless, we want you to think about and to search for your “why.” Make sure that it is personal and specific—try to avoid broad or generic ideas that have little to no impact on you.



2. Once you have it, write it down and put it where you will see it—use it to remind yourself why it is important for you to put in the effort to succeed!

1.5 SETTING GOALS AND CREATING SYSTEMS TO ACHIEVE THEM

Thus far, we have emphasized the importance of a college education, described the traits of superstar students, and asked you to identify your “why.” Although this is a great start, it is just step one. The next step for achieving more is to set goals for what you want to accomplish. Importantly for you, there is research that has demonstrated that setting the right kinds of goals can lead to improved academic performance in college over simply trying to do your best (e.g., Latham & Brown, 2006). However, it is important to keep in mind that goals are most helpful when they are used properly (e.g., Locke & Latham, 2006). In this module, our objective is to help you to understand how to best use goals toward success in college.

Start by Creating Large Goals—Dream Big!

A major purpose of using goals is to give yourself some direction. Without goals, you might drift aimlessly as you may not have anything specific that you are trying to accomplish. Let’s fix this by taking a moment and writing down five long-term goals that you would like to accomplish. This can relate to college or a future career or it can be one of the traits of superstar psychology students—these are good choices because goals that require effort lead to higher levels of satisfaction than easy ones (Locke & Latham, 2006).

Keep the Goals Positive!

The way that something is framed or presented can affect your decisions and performance (e.g., Kahneman, 2013). We recommend that you phrase your goal as a positive challenge rather than trying to avoid a negative consequence—the former tends to lead to higher achievement than the latter (e.g., Drach-Zahavy & Erez, 2002). For example, a goal to earn a grade point average of 3.5 or higher is better than a goal to avoid earning any C’s or D’s—in other words, aim to win instead of trying not to lose.

Break Goals Into Specific Subgoals (and Subgoals Into Even More Specific Daily Goals)

One thing that you will notice about most big goals (e.g., land an internship) is that they are not likely to be accomplished today. Unfortunately, because they seem far out into the future and in the land of “someday,” you may not feel very motivated to work toward them today. And, if



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FIGURE 1.2

Example of Breaking a Big Goal Down Into Subgoal and Daily Goals.

GOAL: Earn an A on the exam	
SUBGOAL 1: Study	SUBGOAL 2: Get help or clarification
DAILY GOAL 1a: Read Chapter 1	DAILY GOAL 2a: Ask questions in class
DAILY GOAL 1b: Summarize Chapter 1	DAILY GOAL 2b: Visit office hours
DAILY GOAL 1c: Read Chapter 2	
DAILY GOAL 1d: Summarize Chapter 2	
DAILY GOAL 1e: Review chapter summaries	
DAILY GOAL 1f: Create flashcards for key definitions	

you feel that way today, then you are also likely to feel that way tomorrow, next week, next month, next year, and, well, you get the idea.

One secret to avoiding this problem is to break vague and distant goals down into more detailed subgoals (Latham & Brown, 2006). Unfortunately, one mistake that we see students make is that their subgoals are not specific enough! If your goal is to graduate from college, a subgoal might be to complete your Statistics course; however, you might be weeks away from achieving this subgoal. Break this down even further until it is something you can accomplish today (call these daily goals). In this example (see Figure 1.2), your daily goal might be to read Chapter 5 in your Statistics textbook and to complete the assigned problems. The takeaway here is that you need to keep making goals more and more specific until it is something that you can realistically achieve today!

Create a Timeline

Besides specificity, another thing to consider is the timeframe of completing goals. In one regard, this involves setting some type of deadline. Consider these two goals: (a) “I am going to do an internship one day” vs. (b) “I am going to apply for an internship this week.” With the former, who knows when “one day” is going to occur? In contrast, the latter pushes you to take action because you have defined a timeframe for it. If possible, we recommend creating timelines by working backward from a deadline. If a class presentation is scheduled for 2 weeks from today, work back from that date to determine what your daily goals can be between now and then.

Build a System for Your Goals

When you have long-term or predictable goals, systems are helpful as a plan of attack for each day or week. Systems are a way to create a routine where you can chip away at a goal, making steady progress until you reach that goal. For example, simply saying “I want to study more” is probably not very effective—but planning that you are going to the library to study from 3:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. Sunday through Thursday is a system that is more likely to work. You may already be using systems but you just do not realize it.

If you have ever learned how to play a musical instrument or played a sport, then you probably used a system. In these scenarios, you likely practiced on a regular basis (and improved as a result). If systems can be successful for music or sports, why not try them with college? Set aside specific days and times throughout each week where you can work on courses, papers, or other accomplishments. This can be any time that works for you—right when you wake up, between two courses, or in the evening. Also, these sessions do not have to be very long—they could be as short as 10 minutes or as long as an hour or two—the key is to spread them out.

A final point that we want to make about systems is that you should design them so that you will stick with them—you do not want to set them up to fail. A common mistake that we see is that some people are overly ambitious—they might make plans to study 40 hours per week, but it is not realistic that they will stick with that schedule. So, try to be reasonable when building a system. Another thing to try is to apply the psychological construct of positive reinforcement (e.g., Skinner, 1948). That is, when you stick to your system, reward yourself! Using positive reinforcement will help you to continue following your system in the future.

Take-Home Message

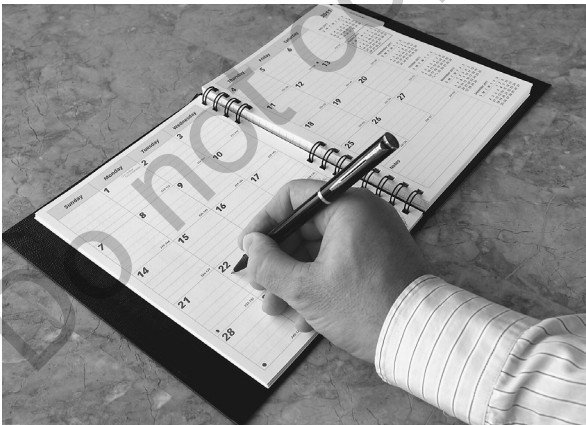
Rather than drifting through college hoping to “do your best,” set goals so that you know what you want to accomplish. Remember that most goals tend to be too large to accomplish in one day, so it is important to keep breaking them down into specific subgoals and even more specific daily goals that can be realistically accomplished. A final note about goals is that, if left alone, they are no better than wishes—we could wish for world peace, but that does not mean that it is going to happen. Goals and wishes do no good unless you act on them. So take the first step today!

Action Steps

1. Create a list of at least five long-term goals that you want to achieve (you can refer back to your superstar goals from an earlier module). Keep in mind that this list can be fluid—you can add to it or subtract from it in the future.

Once you have your list, break each goal down into more and more specific subgoals; keep going until you can create daily goals.

2. Take time to plan a daily/weekly system for when you can work on tasks that you want to accomplish for your courses. Create specific blocks of time that are dedicated to studying and preparing for a certain course. You can also set up certain blocks that are fluid and can be used for whatever course that week has any upcoming big activities such as an exam, paper, or presentation.



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3. Get into the habit of starting each day with a list of achievable daily goals and cross them off as you complete them. Some people prefer to write out a list at night (for the next day), and others prefer to create it in the morning—do whatever works best for you.

1.6 OVERCOMING PROCRASTINATION AND GETTING STUFF DONE

Raise your hand if you have ever set a goal but put it off until later because you did not feel like doing it? If it makes you feel better, we (and other professors) raised our hands, too (Ackerman & Gross, 2007). Although you may tell yourself, “I’ll feel like doing it tomorrow,” the problem is that, when tomorrow comes, you will likely say the exact same thing, putting it off yet another day (Pychyl, 2013). Some of you may even try to convince yourselves that procrastination is actually a productive strategy (“I work better under a lot of pressure!”); unfortunately, though, research suggests that this is not true for most people (Ferrari, 2001). In this module, we will first explore some reasons that we procrastinate. After that, we will provide a number of suggestions for how you can change your ways and procrastinate less.

What Happens When We Procrastinate (in a Fun Story)

According to Urban (2016), when we are not procrastinating, it is as if our mind is being directed by a *Rational Decision-Maker* who is the captain steering us into reasonable decisions. However, every once in a while, our Rational Decision-Maker receives a visit from the *Instant Gratification Monkey*.

The Instant Gratification Monkey wants to do anything that feels good in the moment—checking websites, downloading apps, eating food—basically anything that you can easily do right now that feels good. The Instant Gratification Monkey has no qualms with steering us off course, leading us to procrastinate.

Urban (2016) continues his tale by introducing one more character—the *Panic Monster!*



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The Panic Monster wakes up when a deadline gets close because it desperately wants to avoid the negative repercussions of inaction (e.g., a failing grade). As you may have noticed in your own life, the Panic Monster can scare away the Instant Gratification Monkey, which is good in that the task gets done; however, the Panic Monster can bring a lot of stress.

This example illustrates a lot of problems that come with procrastination (Tice & Baumeister, 1997). At first, procrastination may seem good as stress is low—but this is only true while you are putting the task off. When the deadline approaches (and the Panic Monster arrives), the stress ramps up! A side effect (possibly due to this stress) is that procrastinators tend to be sick more often than nonprocrastinators. Another major problem, particularly for students, is that procrastination leads to lower grades.

Why Do We Procrastinate?

One reason that we procrastinate is that we tend to value immediate rewards over future rewards. For example, a number of studies (e.g., Mischel, Shoda, & Rodriguez, 1989) showed that individuals had difficulty resisting an initial offer of a single piece of candy, even when they could wait and receive a larger reward after a delay. This relates to procrastination because, in the moment, you might prefer an activity that is fun right now (e.g., playing on your phone), even though you might earn a high grade later if you worked on that essay today.

We also tend to underestimate the length of tasks and then, because of that, overestimate our ability to get things done. Because of this, we are willing to put things off because we think that we will have plenty of time later. This is dangerous because a research study (Buehler, Griffin, & Ross, 1994) demonstrated that the actual time for students to complete an academic task was nearly twice as long as what those students predicted!

Finally, procrastination can serve as a protection for our self-esteem. If we delay a task and still do well, it is because of our “phenomenal talent and skills.” However, if we delay a task but do not end up doing well, we tell ourselves that the poor outcome was due to the time crunch. As you can see, we have a built-in excuse ready to use (Ferrari & Tice, 2000)!

Two Types of Procrastination

So far, we have been mainly focusing on one type of procrastination—this is when we procrastinate but we have the “safety net” of a deadline that can cause us to panic and get the task done. The second type is when we have life plans or bucket-list items that do not have deadlines (e.g., “I want to learn how to speak Italian and travel to Italy”). The problem here is that we can continually put things off with no penalties—this can potentially lead to a lot of regret later in life when we look back at what we did not accomplish.

Regardless of what type of procrastination you are dealing with, imagine how much more productive and successful you could be if you did not procrastinate as much. If you could avoid procrastinating, you could actually make significant progress with your goals!

TABLE 1.3**WHAT-WHEN-WHERE-HOW To-Do List Example**

WHAT?	Read Chapter 2 for Research Methods
WHEN?	2:00 to 3:00 p.m. on Monday this week—between my classes
WHERE?	Coffee shop across from campus
HOW?	Online textbook—there is free WiFi for my laptop. Bonus: caffeine will help keep me awake and focused!

TABLE 1.4**IF → THEN Examples**

IF I have a break between classes, THEN I will read a chapter for class.
IF I am reading for class, THEN my phone will be turned off and in my backpack.
IF my calendar shows an alert for an exam in 2 weeks, THEN I will create flashcards for studying.

Fortunately for you, a number of psychological researchers have studied procrastination and have come up with ways to reduce it (e.g., Ferrari, 2010; Pychyl, 2013).

One Strategy to Reduce Procrastination

The first strategy you can implement is to go beyond a standard to-do list; this is because a standard list only includes *what* needs to get accomplished (Pychyl, 2013). To go beyond the standard list, you want to add to the “what” by also describing the “when,” “where,” and “how” as well. For example, if you know that you have to write an essay for class (what), you should also specify that you are going to work on it tomorrow afternoon at 2:00 p.m. (when) in the library (where) by looking up articles in the library database and writing the essay on your laptop (how) (see Table 1.3).

Gollwitzer and Sheeran (2006) recommend that you use “if → then” rules to increase the odds that you start taking action (see Table 1.4). You can do this by setting up a trigger or cue that will signal that it is time to start working on that essay—for example, you could program a reminder on your phone calendar for 2:00 p.m. tomorrow. To put it in Gollwitzer and Sheeran’s terminology, *if* you see the calendar alert, *then* you write the essay. You can also set up cues to create a regular routine or habit. For example, we knew one student who implemented a study routine based on when his young child went to sleep. *If* his child went to bed, *then* he would read or study for an hour (this example is somewhat similar to one described by Pychyl, 2013). You can use anything as a cue, but make it clear!

Ideally, you should take this a step further and prepare for possible distractions (or Instant Gratification Monkeys). For example, you can probably anticipate some likely distractions (e.g., text messages from friends). Once you have identified those possible distractions, plan “if → then” rules for how you are going to deal with them. With the text message example, you can set up a rule that *if* you are working on a paper, *then* you will turn your phone completely off and stash it in your bag. Avoiding distractions and knowing what you will do can help tremendously!



A Second Strategy to Reduce Procrastination

The strategy here is easier said than done—if you catch yourself procrastinating, then push yourself to *just get started* (Pychyl, 2013). Sitting there and thinking about the task is probably not going to get you anywhere, so you might as well just get started. The act of getting started is helpful because you can develop momentum for working on the task and you can see that the task itself is not so bad.

In order to get started, you may have to focus on stripping away the emotions that surround a task (e.g., fear of failure, being in awe of the amount of work needed to be done)—these emotions can make the task seem more intimidating. Remember, you do not have to “feel like doing it” to get it done. Another helpful tip here is to think of “what” you have to do in a concrete manner instead of abstractly (e.g., McCrea, Liberman, Trope, & Sherman, 2008). So, instead of dreading that “lengthy paper,” think of it as more concrete steps—sitting down to brainstorm, selecting a topic, conducting a simple library search, summarizing articles, etc.

Some Additional Thoughts about Getting Stuff Done

In addition to the strategies we just described, there are a few more suggestions that people can try. First, remember that everyone procrastinates, so do not beat yourself up too much about it. Second, be sure that you value your future self as much as you value your current self—imagine where you want to be in the future (set goals!). If you truly value that future self, then you better start taking steps now to make that happen. You can also better connect to that future by thinking of time in smaller units—think about an upcoming deadline as 14 days instead of 2 weeks (Lewis & Oyserman, 2015). Finally, use a basic psychological principle from operant conditioning—set up plans to reward yourself for getting tasks done.

Take-Home Message

Procrastination is something that happens to everyone, but psychologists have an understanding of why we procrastinate and how we can reduce it. There are a number of strategies described here that you can try in your own life. However, suppose that you follow the steps described previously but after a while you are back to your old habits. What should you do—give up? Of course not! You may not want to repeat the exact same plan that did not work; instead, figure out how you can improve your plan, and then try again. And if that does not work? Reassess your plan again, make some changes, and then try again! But most importantly, try those strategies today (do not procrastinate)!

Action Steps

1. Start implementing these strategies in your daily life by picking some tasks where you are currently procrastinating. Start by creating an expanded to-do list and use cues to create “if → then” rules for triggering action (do not forget to account for possible distractions by creating “if → then” rules for those).
2. Pick another task where you are currently procrastinating and **JUST GET STARTED** on it right now. To help with this, (a) strip away any emotions (e.g., fear of failure, not feeling like doing it) and (b) think about the task in a very concrete manner (break the task down into smaller, concrete steps).



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1.7 LIVING THE “GETTING STUFF DONE” (GSD) LIFESTYLE

In the world of superheroes, a lucky few are either born with extraordinary powers (e.g., Wonder Woman) or suddenly gain new powers (e.g., Spider-Man); however, in real life, things are not that easy. Real-life musical talents like the Beatles and Beyoncé did not instantly go into the studio to create a masterpiece—they worked extremely hard over time to get to that point. Some of the best athletes might start with physical talent, but they become great by pushing themselves and chipping away at goals (e.g., Grover, 2014).

In college, you are not going to be bitten by a radioactive spider that will give you superstar abilities—you actually have to put in effort by reading books, paying attention in class, and writing papers. If you want to be productive, you have to put in some effort. Most people seem to go through their days on autopilot, wasting time and occasionally reacting to external pressures like deadlines. However, imagine how much you could get done if you adopted the GSD lifestyle!

Part of the GSD lifestyle is finding time for things that are a priority in life. Seeing that a college education can potentially affect your mental abilities and your future earning potential, we think that it should qualify as a priority. Because it is a priority, you need to find time to do it well. We recognize that you already have



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constraints on your time (e.g., family responsibilities, a job, etc.), but we bet that everyone can find pockets of time that you may not have noticed—use those moments to get stuff done. As we will explain, you do not have to find large pockets of time; small bits of effort can build up into large accomplishments!

Set Goals—How Many Superstar Psychology Student Accomplishments Do You Want to Achieve?

Instead of drifting through college, use this book to set goals of what you want to achieve. As we noted earlier, people accomplish more when they have a goal (e.g., Latham & Brown, 2006). We did some of the work for you by describing the accomplishments of superstar psychology students. Now you just have to decide which ones are important to you and to then break those down into specific goals so that you can keep making progress toward them. If possible, be very specific by breaking subgoals down so that it is something that you can achieve today. Remember, any step forward, no matter how small, is better than moving backward or standing still.

Plan for Activities to Take Longer Than You Expect

A simple fact of life is that activities take longer to complete than people expect—this is referred to as the planning fallacy (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). The funny thing about this is that people fall victim to this over and over and over. When we work with students who are writing a thesis (a long research paper), it is not uncommon for them to tell us that they will have it written in 2 months. However, nine out of 10 times, when those 2 months have passed, they only completed about half of the writing.²

Our point here is that you should always start early (if possible) so that you can give yourself more time to get things done. If you think you can write a good paper in a weekend, allocate a full week for it. If you think it will take 20 minutes to read a chapter, be realistic and give yourself an hour. When adopting the GSD lifestyle, beware of the planning fallacy!



Consistent Effort, Higher Grades, and More Accomplishments

Imagine a silly example where college students approached taking courses in a procrastination-like manner—you would put off taking courses for 3½ years and then, when the Panic Monster arrived (Urban, 2016), you would try to cram 100 credits worth of courses into a single semester! Instead, college students follow a more reasonable strategy of taking

² We humorously refer to this as the half-life rule—for big projects, when you reach the date you expected to be finished, you will only be halfway to your goal.

approximately three to five courses each semester, making consistent progress on the way to graduation.

Think about it, procrastinating in that college course example sounds ludicrous—so why do we do it with other tasks?

We recommend the approach of making consistent effort—study a little bit here and a little bit there; read a textbook chapter tonight, read another one tomorrow over lunch. Chip away at it! If you could find 1 hour each day to read, there would be no need to cram or panic the night before an exam (see Figure 1.3). If you want to have a lot of experiences in college, then spread them out. Try an internship one semester, work on a research team another semester. However, if you keep putting things off, eventually that exam will arrive or graduation day will be there—without consistent progress, you will not be ready. With the GSD lifestyle, you can choose to be productive now instead of waiting until “someday.”

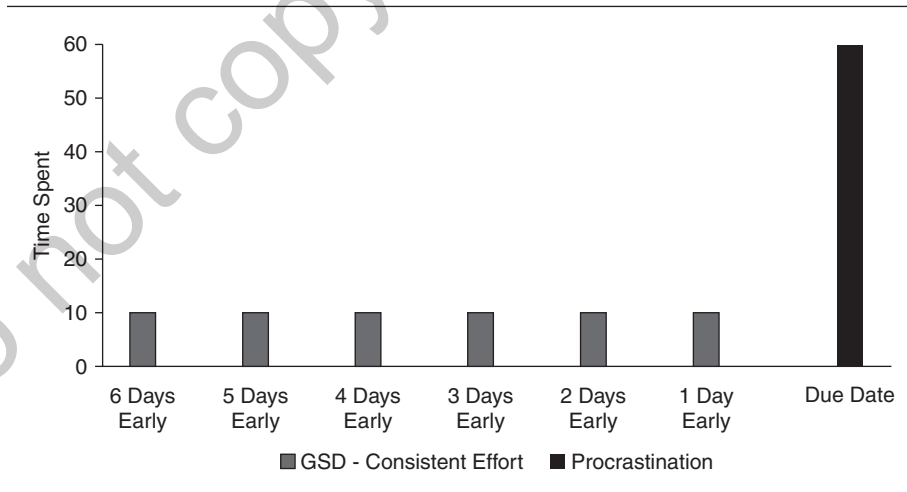
Eat the Frog First!

There is an old saying (sometimes attributed to Mark Twain) that states that, if you start your day by eating a live frog, then, no matter what else happens that day, you can have a sense of accomplishment because you already tackled a difficult task (Tracy, 2017). Now, we are not suggesting that you actually eat a live frog. Instead, this saying suggests that you should dive into your most important and difficult task first.

Suppose that you have two key activities that you want to get done that day—studying for an exam and catching up with friends on social media. “Eating the frog” means that you should study first, followed by catching up on social media. Let’s say that you opted to start with the fun activity (with the best of intentions to study later)—it is not difficult to

FIGURE 1.3

Comparison of Consistent Effort vs. Procrastination and Last-Minute Panic





imagine getting sucked into an internet rabbit hole where you start responding to friends and watching videos and then that leads to downloading and playing with some new apps. And, just like that, there is no time (or energy) left for studying. To avoid a situation like this, the GSD lifestyle dictates that you should eat the frog first!

Less Stress

As we discussed in an earlier module, procrastination is an invitation for the Panic Monster (Urban, 2016) to come and visit. In other words, why live your academic life so that it is more stressful than it needs to be? So, get that paper started, build a cushion when planning how long activities will take, read your textbook consistently, and log into your online course more than once a week! A major benefit to the GSD lifestyle is that you should start to feel more confident about your academic performance as you make more progress.

Still Time for Fun and Family

Although productivity may sound like a lot of work, one trick is that you can do it with minimal time and effort. You do not necessarily have to push yourself for hours each day—just be consistent with small amounts of progress. For example, imagine if your current routine consists of attending class, working at a job, spending time with friends or family, and no time spent reading your textbooks—if you increase your daily reading time from 0 minutes to 15 minutes, then your productivity should noticeably improve. In most cases, your friends and family will understand that you need some time to devote to your education, especially if they are supportive of you and your goal to earn a college degree!

Take-Home Message

So, how do you do this? Stop working on autopilot, following your old routine, and floating toward whatever seems easy. Instead, make a true determination to get things done. As we noted in other modules, one key is using a little bit of effort to **JUST GET STARTED** (Pychyl, 2013). Make the conscious choice to live the GSD lifestyle and then take action! If you ever stumble or lose your way, remind yourself “why” you are in college!

Action Steps

1. Make a promise to yourself right now that, as you move through this book, you will take action as you learn about what you can do to improve yourself (eat those frogs!). We cannot say it enough—take action, do not

procrastinate—reap the benefits of the GSD lifestyle!

2. Each and every one of you will run into problems at some point.

There will be a week where a job might demand more hours of your time, there might be nights when the siren call of Netflix or Hulu will be too much to resist—regardless of what happens, studying and schoolwork will likely be a casualty in those scenarios. When that happens, avoid the temptation to give up the entire plan completely. Instead, admit to yourself that you messed up, but then dive right back into the plan. If you have a bad day, a bad week, or even a bad semester, shrug it off and jump back into the GSD lifestyle!

