

Advice for the First Generation Members of the Class of 2019

At the end of their first years at Harvard, we asked the First Generation mentees of the classes of 2016, 2017, and 2018 what advice they'd give this year's incoming First Generation students. Here's what they had to say!

Academic Life

The transition was academically difficult for me due to the large difference in academic level of the high school I come from and Harvard. I struggled for the first few months to learn what I supposedly should have learned in high school while simultaneously keeping up with new material.

Think about preparing for courses beforehand. In the beginning, it was a real struggle transitioning academically as I felt behind and lost. I also wasn't doing as well as I was used to and felt my hard work was not translating into high scores. I think looking at the course catalog more beforehand and preparing for classes over the summer would have benefited me a lot. For instance, looking through the CS50 material over the summer would most likely have made my life easier when taking the course.

If you are placed into a certain level of math, or life sciences course, I urge you to take one lower level; it will relieve your academic load during the semester, and even when you think you can handle it at the beginning, it turns out way difficult at the end. Besides, it won't harm you taking LPSA over LS1a or Math Ma instead of Math 1a; moreover, you will be truly rewarded in your grades, emotional state, and physical health.

Be confident in your abilities, there's a reason you got in. You'll enjoy yourself and meet wonderful people, just make sure to keep studies at the front of your mind.

As for academics, you need to create your own pace and truly understand how you learn and study best. Yes, there will be people who seem to have everything in their lives figured out but that doesn't mean that they do. Focus on you. There are so many wonderful resources and activities that you should take advantage of that can make you get up to pace. Lastly, do not be afraid to ask for help because even the brightest and most emotionally stable students need to recognize when they are struggling and how they can solve that.

I realize that entering university, let alone Harvard College, can in itself be a very daunting task. I had a very tough time during my first semester, adjusting to the rigors of academics here; however, the friends I made and the support systems here were very helpful throughout that process. I was always reluctant and hesitant to approach resources like my proctors, peer-advising fellows, the bureau of study counsel, my academic adviser and the other support groups on campus, but when I finally did I was surprised at how effective and helpful they were. All my pressures, stresses, and worries were minimized by reaching out, and therefore, I cannot emphasize enough that you ask for help when or if you ever need it!

Take advantage of and seek advisors, proctors, and other mentors.

Plan ahead for events, tests, assignments, projects, exams, races, etc. You should plan out your courses, especially if you have ever even considered being a pre-med student. Contrary to what most people say, planning out courses in the freshman year is extremely important, since many foundational courses you take in your first year will be used as pre-requisites to high-level classes in many concentrations in the life sciences, engineering, etc.

Take the classes that you truly enjoy. Don't feel the need to follow the crowd by taking the most popular classes. Use the Q guide and make the most of shopping period, because when you know that you really enjoy your classes you'll thank yourself later.

Take a freshman seminar. Just do it. Be open-minded in your class selection, and take the advice of upperclassmen. They know what classes are awesome, like SLS 20.

I felt under-prepared and overwhelmed. I made a lot of mistakes, like academically overloading myself without knowing the real reality of college classes. My grades were very bad. What would have made it easier for me are honest advice in choosing classes and knowing the real reality of the academic work load. I was not informed, and thought college was going to be like high school, except a little bit harder. I also didn't know I can drop, change grading status, or withdraw mid semester. There was a dark period in the fall semester when I was so overwhelmed and depressed that I just gave up, which exacerbated my slip in grades. I did not find a community of support or sought out help because, again, I was uninformed about those things. In summary, as a first generation, I did not understand the intricacies of college and how to navigate an institution like Harvard successfully. I prioritized the wrong things. For example, I was more concerned about getting a job and working to make money initially. I misunderstood a lot of things, and I was pretty much alone throughout the entire process. I did not start seeking out help until this semester. For me, as a first gen, seeking out help was very unfamiliar because it was the tendency to be independent, be responsible for myself, and the internal drive that helped me to break out and attend college. Also, first gens are often also economically disadvantaged, and it's very hard dealing with the things freshmen face at Harvard on top of financial worries.

Social Life

If college is hard for the average Harvard student, then it is super hard for firstgen students. Know that you are going to face emotional turbulences. Not everything is as beautiful as it seems. But please, reach out from the beginning of the year!! I cannot stress how much I would have liked that someone had told me to go to HUHS before it was too late!! Do not ever stop being in touch with your parents. Although one may think 'I have grown up, I make my own decisions,' well, that is partly true, but parent's voice is always a refresh to our hearts, and to know that they are still there for us when we need them, comforts us in an imaginable way (I say this because many of my classmates did not even talk to their parents, or very rarely did they call them.)

To come into Harvard with the knowledge that many freshman here have connections to others and they will like to stick with these people, at least at first, because they are "familiar."

The social transition was harder [than the academic] because it was difficult to make friends. I think this was due to my quiet personality, so I'm not sure what could have made it easier.

When I came here, I thought that most of the students would be very exclusive and difficult to talk to, but it was the exact opposite. The density of genuine, driven, and sincere people at Harvard is incredibly high. I know this because whenever I have felt overwhelmed, I have been helped and supported by them. But that doesn't even begin to explain how much of a wonderful and exceptional time you can have here. You should take things very slow. There is no need to rush and try and do everything, because Harvard isn't going to go anywhere. You have four years to meet new people, accumulate knowledge, develop skills, and do great things.

You can't simply imitate the practices and behaviors of peers--not to say that they aren't worthy. Many students will have already learned what you haven't. So, when it comes to socializing do what pleases you.

Meet everyone in your entryway, and hang out with your roommates. Your bond with them could very well last throughout your college years. Sit down with random people at Annenberg, introduce yourself and say hi! You'll meet the wide diversity and incredible talent of the freshman class, and feel inferior. But you shouldn't! Everyone at Harvard is here for a reason, and academics are only one facet of what makes you, well, you. And it's up to you to explore and find and define what makes up the rest.

Make many friends, especially at the beginning of each semester when there is not a lot of academic pressure. Be the first one to introduce yourself to others, and keep an open mind.

Meet a lot of people. Perhaps the best part of Harvard are its people. Talk to as many people as you can and take advantage of the fact that this community is so diverse. You'll meet new friends from every corner of the globe, which is probably the most exciting aspect of your college experience.

Don't be afraid to embrace your culture. While we all like to believe racial stereotypes and other forms of prejudice are completely eliminated, unfortunately they continue to persist at a subconscious level. There are multiple amazing cultural groups on campus filled with students who come from a similar background as you and it is important to embrace them because not only will you find some of your closest friends there, but you will have a piece of home with you at all times.

Your first year in college will be tough, both academically and socially. A little more so in one area depending on the type of person that you are. Despite this, though, your freshman year will undoubtedly be one of the best experiences you have had to date. The sheer number of influential and outstanding students that you will meet will blow you away. The best part about this, though, is that you will be going to school with these individuals for four years, giving you ample time to connect with them on a personal level conducive of the scholarly environment that makes

Harvard so vibrant and enlightening. I do exhort you to get out of your comfort zone and make a conscious effort to acquaint yourself with not only the students of your class, but the faculty as well. It will be these interactions that will not only make your freshman year most memorable, but definitely assuage the struggles that come with adjusting to life away from home.

Be open to everything! There are myriads of opportunities everywhere and tons of amazing people in your class. Try something you normally wouldn't and meet as many people as you can!

It takes time to make true friends here, and making really close friends has to be a natural process.

The social transition was a bit of a struggle. I felt that I didn't have much in common with everyone because I'm first generation and low income. But eventually, I found a group where I fit in.

Be observant of your surroundings, don't make bad financial decisions, it's okay to not be able to participate in every outing even if your friends can, be proud of your background, don't feel pressured to get into social clubs.

Extracurricular Life

Take advantage of as many opportunities as possible. Harvard provides a ton of free things and learning opportunities that will not be offered after graduation.

My advice would be to explore the different extracurriculars and activities as much as possible during the first two semesters. The temptation to want to do everything is certainly there, but it is literally impossible to participate in everything that catches your interest. That is why I would say that finding your true passions early on is the best route to take so that you know exactly what, and how many, extracurriculars you will be doing in the coming years. Extracurriculars in college are not like in high school, where you can do everything in an effort to beef up your resume; they are more like in real life: you do them because you like to, not because you need to.

Get off campus. Harvard has one of the best college campuses in the world, but that doesn't mean there isn't more to see. Boston is such a unique and fun city that's only about 10 minutes away via the T. Get out, wander around, and I guarantee you'll find a new place that you'll love, whether it's a restaurant, park, museum, etc.

Try everything and anything that interests you, and give each one a solid try; but if it's not what you're truly passionate about, consider eliminating things to make room for new and exciting things!

I highly suggest that you only do something that you are doing for your sake and something that you are enjoying. It is very easy to get caught up in participating in organizations and professional groups that look like the right thing to do, but if you aren't enjoying yourself then it might begin to drag you down.

Don't be afraid to quit activities. You will learn more about yourself and your interests throughout college.

The most important thing for a first year at Harvard, is to know his/herself. There are so many opportunities here and it can get confusing if you don't really know what you want, to make good of them you need to know your own personal goals, aspirations and limits.

Find a balance between studies and extracurriculars. Get involved and try something new. Don't be afraid to challenge yourself. And above all, have fun!

You should play an active role on campus by joining clubs, meeting with your professors and teaching fellows, attending college events, and spending time with friends. The Harvard experience is about more than just learning in the lecture and section setting; it is about using the available resources to make a difference and discover things you hadn't previously known or considered. It is important that you don't get intimidated or discouraged by the impressiveness of your peers-- everyone on campus is remarkable and you can learn a lot from one another if you so choose.

General Advice

You're not alone. There are other first generation students on campus and you should feel free to reach out to them and other support services on campus. Don't be ashamed to ask for help. There is support for you with any problems you are having, so don't be afraid to ask for help.

Make use of all your advisors/PAF/mentors. Get as many different perspectives as you can. Only then can you even start to formulate your own path.

Become close with your mentor; mentors are an added source of support outside the Harvard community and are valuable. Make more of an effort to keep in contact with your person.

Connect with other first gen students and don't be afraid to be open about your first gen status.

I feel like a lot of the adjustment can only happen through experience, so I would just reassure them that with enough time, they will feel comfortable in navigating Harvard.

You have to realize that you're not the only one who has the feelings of anxiety, inadequacy, fear, whatever, that you're feeling. One you realize that you're more like everyone else than you think, you'll be better off.

It was the hardest time of my life. College seemed to be hard, especially Harvard, but I never thought it would be hard for every cell of my body. I missed my life before Harvard, where everything was easy and I had true friends. Freshmen can be very mean. Some of them believe they are gods, just because they got into Harvard. Others keep being the same immature little kids from elementary school who think competition, rushing over others, and personal pride are more

important than other people's feelings. I felt I did not belong to this environment. Nonetheless, there is a group of humble people, with true feelings, who care about each other, and express their friendship caring about the details, the little things one remembers in times of trouble. I missed home, but my host family provided a warm environment in which I felt comfortable. I especially missed my family during "parent's weekend" because they could never afford a flight ticket. Emotionally, I went through an earthquake. I did not know what I liked anymore; I did not believe the same things I did just before coming to college; I was in a mental chaos. Fortunately, HUHS Mental Health was an incredible support. It would have been easier to me had I been told that most firstgen students face this problematic due to our background, because I would have taken this as something that 'had' to happen and I would have reached for help way before final exams began.

Don't worry too much about your identity - you'll be able to find it soon.

My new philosophy and advice to new students is this: "Everyone is exceptional in their own way. Remember that." There are so many amazing people here that not comparing oneself with others would have definitely lightened my burdens.

Try to keep in touch with your mentor as much as possible. My mentor is extremely helpful. He helped me emotionally after I told him what happened the fall semester [when my grades were very bad] and helped me to recover from it. The thing is that I did not start to be honest with him and admit that I was not okay until second semester. It was hard to admit that I was not okay because before Harvard, I was okay doing things alone and making decisions by myself. Asking for advice and admitting my vulnerabilities were some of the transitions I had to make.

Don't be afraid to reach out to other people. It will make your experience at Harvard a lot more fun and easy. The support network is there if you need it. Things will be hard for you in ways many others won't understand. But reach out to the support network and you will find the help to get you through it.

Come with a smile and trust that you will receive necessary information in time — if somebody else knows more than you, that's fine, in fact, it can be valuable. Never hesitate to ask!