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YOUR GUIDE TO SUCCEED IN UNIVERSITY

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Your Guide to Succeed in University

Do you ever wonder why most alumni or adults say, “University was the best years of my life”? Regardless of what age you start university, when you finish, you should look back and share that similar feeling. University is about learning to explore, discovering who you are and who you want to be, and creating the foundation for a lifetime of successes. University is the place where I learnt to make the most of opportunities and became who I wanted to be. It made me aware that just attending university isn’t a silver bullet to success, not unless you take control. The university experience will provide endless possibilities and opportunities, but it’s up to you to take the first step. You will face a roller coaster of emotions. You’ll feel excited and scared, challenged and stimulated, but when all is said and done, YOU determine how you want to look back on this experience.

Starting university can be the most sensational experience of your life, but it can also be the most overwhelming. In fact, it can be downright scary if you do not equip yourself with a plan on how to navigate through university. That is why I wrote this guide. My goal is to not only share my experience and lessons learned, but, to channel this into a helpful guide that may help you adapt rapidly and efficiently navigate your university to ensure that you can make the most of the experience.

This guide will not define success for you. You define success and you can start by creating personal goals. Take some time and think about where you want to be in a couple of years, when you graduate, and 10 years from now. You could have educational goals, career goals, salary aspirations, a list of activities to learn, family and other types of goals. Try writing these goals down and revisit them every couple months to see how you’re doing. By taking the first step of writing them down, it shows that you are committed to making these goals a reality. This guide will discuss topics ranging from what you’ll experience in your first few weeks of university, to how to find a mentor, to networking and post-graduation. At the end, there is a summary of the
main takeaways and the top 10 themes. This guide will help you get through the tough times and excel in the good times of university to achieve your definition of success; it may even become your survival guide.


Think About How Far You’ve Come

Take a few minutes to think about how far you’ve come. You’ve made it through elementary school, clubs, teams, activities, high school, part-time jobs, etc. What you have achieved to date is absolutely amazing! Now, you’re in the process of getting a university degree. Only 6.7% of the global population have earned a college or university degree. That means that in a gathering of 1000 people, you’re going to be one of the 67 most educated people. University is a tremendous undertaking; you have embarked on the path to join the most educated, intelligent and elite people on the planet. YOU are the future. You could play a part in creating breakthroughs for global food shortages, global warming, aid for aging populations, and other social issues that our global community faces. You may not see it yet, but you could be a part of the future solution that will change society.

A Fresh Start

Regardless of your background or past achievements, university is a fresh start. Whether you were a weak or a strong student academically, that is all erased. You have the chance to prove yourself. If you were a strong student, keep that level of excellence while trying a new activity or signing up for new clubs. If you were a weaker student academically, you have a clean slate to set new goals for your academics and still try new activities.

For me, university was a clean slate. I wasn’t a strong student in high-school, but I didn’t let that limit my university experience. However, I had good grades in grade 12, and surely you do too if you’ve made it this far! You’re in a brand new environment; you have a chance to make new friends, explore new things, and redefine yourself.
First Few Weeks of University

The first few weeks of university includes many firsts. This can be your first university friends, first day at orientation, first university class, etc. Nonetheless, you should start off with orientation week (aka frosh week)! This is a great time to meet new people and get out of your comfort zone. It’s normal to be shy and uncertain of how to introduce yourself to new people; however, it’s important to realize that every other student is in the exact same position as you. This is your prime opportunity to walk up to other students and introduce yourself, find out where they are from and what they are studying. This can practically be done for the first couple months of school without anyone thinking twice about it being awkward or weird. This is the perfect time to make dozens of friends and all it takes is for you to introduce yourself!

After frosh week, things can be pretty overwhelming. You have to sort out any course problems you may have, buy your first set of textbooks, find class locations, etc. One of the best ways to get through this is by going with a friend who has a similar course timetable. If you don’t find a friend with similar courses during orientation just remember that everyone is really friendly and you can always ask for help to find what you need.

It’s important to be organized before the first class; make sure you read the syllabus a few times. It is quite difficult to understand the syllabus as a new student, but make sure that you have everything you need prior to the first lecture.

Get Organized & Strategize

Once you understand the syllabus, an important part of university is your strategy. You should strategize an approach to your classes. For example, plan out when you’re going to do your assignments. Sometimes, there are assignments that don’t relate to the midterm or final exam. You could do those assignments all in one weekend and have a more relaxed semester. Learn to organize your study schedule and when you will complete each assignment either on a calendar, agenda, or phone calendar. Take each of your syllabi and literally add each lab, assignment, test, project, task to your calendar from day 1. This is a great way to ensure that you don’t miss any of your assignments. You can also plan your schedule to ensure that you can have
certain ‘personal days’. These are days where you don’t need to study and you can have fun, go to a party, or just relax. University isn’t easy, but being balanced and organized will make everything significantly easier by saving you time and improving your grades.

Personally, I’m not an agenda type of person. I use a smartphone and have my calendars synced from my different email accounts to my phone. All calendar inputs sync through my phone and I can access it anywhere and anytime. This works for me rather than having a separate agenda, as I always have my phone. This is a great strategy for keeping yourself organized as your phone will remind you before appointments, classes, assignments, etc. For assignments, I always book in 2-3 timeslots in my calendar. 1 timeslot for the day it is due, a warning to complete it the day before it is due, and 1 on the weekend or a few days before it is due so that I can get it done. This helps me stay focused and I always know when to get my assignments done.

Strategies for your classes also include understanding and knowing your professor. This means knowing what types of testing methods (multiple choice, short answer, essay, etc.) they prefer. Also, do they repeat questions from year to year on exams? Is all tested material covered in the lectures? Is the material in the textbook? Is everything tested from the PowerPoint slides? Asking people who have already taken the class can help boost your mark by a few letter grades. Basically, doing some background research on your classes and professors will go a long way and it’s worth the time to find out.

The atmosphere in university is very different from high school. In high school the teachers personally guide and check up on you. I had trouble adapting in university because the emphasis is on self-study and the professors won’t check up on you. Your professors are still a helpful resource if you have any questions but the onus is on you.

Learn to Study

Try to learn how you best study early in your university career and it will play a crucial part in your academic success. How you studied in high school won’t necessarily be effective in achieving your targets in university. You need to come up with strategies that are effective and efficient for you. For example, some students:
a) Study alone at home or at the library

b) Need to study quietly with a couple friends

c) Need to actually learn with a group

On a per course basis, try to find out which method earns you the best results for the time invested.

*I’ve never been the type that can study at home or in residence. If I study on my own, I must be at a coffee shop or a library. Usually, I become unproductive when I’m trying to study alone and therefore I’m at my best when I study and learn with 2 other focused individuals. I can study with a group of friends, but this isn’t as effective for me. It can also vary based on the course, the material, and the testing method.*

You need to **find learning techniques** that work for you. For example, most university courses have a memorizing portion and if you don’t naturally have photographic memory, here are a few things that could work for you:

a) Use flash cards – this can also help you take your studying anywhere you go

b) Group similar items together and memorize them

c) Make silly sentences

d) Make acronyms – a couple well-known ones are ROY G BIV (Red, Orange, Yellow, Green, Blue, Indigo, Violet) or BEDMAS (Brackets, Exponents, Multiplication, Division, Addition, Subtraction)

e) Make a mind map - web things that flow together. This works really well for processes with different steps. For example, if you’re analyzing the human brain, you start with memorizing external features and then the left and right sides of the brain, and finally the functions of each. These types of things can be mapped.

*These are just a few examples of methods that work. I always make flash cards with a question on the front of the card and the answer on the back. Whenever I need to test myself, I pull out my flash cards and study. I write my flash cards while reviewing the slides, going through the*
textbook or during class when something useful is discussed. I also use mind maps with acronyms. I’ll make acronyms for all the areas in a process, then map out the sub-processes for each of those items and come up with acronyms for those too. Because I’m a visual learner I’ll practice drawing out a mind map with acronyms dozens of times to retain it. Interestingly, I also memorize better when I’m standing rather than sitting. For essay type course I’ve gotten help with research tools and finding information from the campus library, which could help you too. Little tricks and habits can help you excel in your academics, you just have to try and find what works best for you.

**Overcoming Loneliness**

After your first few weeks in university, the excitement of university begins to dissipate and your friends get busier with school. All of a sudden, the days become quieter and the stress of academic life starts to set in. If you’re a residence student or live away from home, you begin to get homesick. This is pretty common for students. It’s important to remember that there are hundreds of students around you feeling the same way, you’re not alone. You’ll also start to miss your high school friends and the free time you had in the summer. This is where university gets busier as mid-terms and papers are quickly approaching. The secret to overcome this anxiety is to talk to the people around you; most students are actually in the same situation. Don’t isolate yourself from people because it will only make things worse. You can get through this with the support of your friends and family. It’s tough to adapt to the university life, but you’ll get there! You are not alone!

**Making New Friends, Losing Old Ones**

With your new environment, friends, and academic demands it will be difficult to maintain the same level of relationships you had with your friends from high school. There will come a point when you can’t keep in touch with all of your friends from high school without significantly compromising your university experience. It’s important for you to keep your good friends from high school as they are part of your support network, but inevitably some of these relationships
will fade over time. With the friendships you put on the backburner, you can catch up during your summer break or holidays. It’s a normal process to lose old friends and make new ones, but you must mentally prepare yourself for this because it is a big transition.

*I still keep in touch with some of my best friends from high school even after finishing university but I have also lost touch with many. As a good friend of mine once said, “Friends there are many, but special friends are few and far between – and once you find one, hold on to them for dear life because they are precious.”*

### Be Open to New Experiences

One of the most important lessons I learnt in university is: “Be open to new experiences”. Let’s be honest, university is all about new experiences. You may not be comfortable taking on a leading role for a club or even going to a university party, but it is important to break down the barriers that make you uncomfortable.

Therefore, if you’re shy, try introducing yourself to a couple of new people per day throughout orientation and the first few weeks of school. This will help you overcome your shyness and it could make a big difference in your life. If you’re more outgoing, you can set a higher target for yourself. Also, if you’ve never joined a campus group, try signing up for a few.

*I wasn’t too involved in high-school. I’d say I was an average student in terms of involvement. When I started university, I was “open to new experiences”. I tried running in an election to represent the concerns of all first-year students on the Board of Directors of the Student Union. This was something I never thought of doing before university. This was definitely out of my comfort zone, but I knew I wanted to meet new people and I had a fresh start to do it! The best part is that it’s a win-win situation. Had I lost, I still would have met hundreds of new friends while campaigning and I would have learned from my mistakes. I ended up winning that election and gained valuable insight into the concerns of thousands of first-year students and made lifelong friends in the process.*

If you don’t try to do new things, you’ll never know what could have been. It’s up to you to make the first move.
Find a Mentor

Finding a mentor is critical because they have experiences that you can learn from. A mentor is someone you can grab a coffee or lunch with and pick their brain. When you’re in a tough spot, they are a phone call away. Always be on the lookout for a student senior to you that can be your mentor. This is a common thing most people don’t realize, but people like giving back; this means that people above you, would like to mentor you. There are a few crucial times in your university career where you will need a mentor and where you can learn by being a mentor.

When you start your first year, try to find a mentor. Having someone to guide you, who has gone through the courses you’re going through and understands exactly how you feel during this transition, is invaluable. This person can help you if you’re questioning what you’re studying or why you’re in university. Having a mentor in your first year is very helpful and it will definitely help to calm your nerves. Mentors can also give you good study tips or personalized course specific advice. There might be mentorship programs run by different clubs and academic societies at your school. They can pair you up with a senior student who has experienced what you’re in the process of experiencing. Your mentors can teach you their tips and tricks for getting through university and how to stay organized. These are wonderful programs and make sure you use them to the fullest!

As you progress through university, you can look for mentors who are in their final year or recent graduates. They can share their experiences from the graduating process, looking for employment, applying for further schooling, to the post-undergrad life. This is important because most students don’t know what to expect once university is done or even how to get through the graduation process.

As a way of giving back in your senior years of university, you could mentor junior students and you might learn from a different perspective. You can also look for a recent alumnus or a professional in your field that is willing to mentor you. Your career centre may be able to help you find a mentor in your field. This can help you prepare for graduation and the “real” world.
How to Prepare for Exams

Exam time is when you would expect everyone to be in the library studying their hardest. However, when you walk into the library during exams you can expect to see 50% of the students playing games, including Candy Crush and Tetris. Normally during the year, approximately 20% of students are playing games at any given time. You might think this is absurd because students are in the midst of crunch time, less than 2 weeks from being done, yet many students are procrastinating. This could be a result of poor organization and a missing personal reward system. Gaming could be an important part of your life but just be careful, as we all know gaming can consume such a significant part of our productivity that it could negatively impact your academics. Conversely, you could make it into a motivator and spend some time playing games if you meet your targets. Students ought to have goals and personal rewards for staying on track and meeting targets. You could create a study schedule and plan out what you will do each day. If you hit your daily targets, you can reward yourself by playing games, watching a movie, or doing another fun activity before going to bed. If you meet your goals 3-5 days straight, you can reward yourself by going shopping for a half-day on the weekend during the exam period. If you study hard throughout the entire exam period, you can reward yourself by splurging on a spa day or something you’ve been wanting for a while. Setting goals for yourself will help you look forward to daily and short-term rewards which will help you focus throughout the exam period. This will significantly increase your productivity and your grades.

During my first year, I made a lot of the common mistakes such as poor planning and pulling all-nighters and it really hurt my academics. I didn’t keep up with my courses throughout the semester, which can happen. Then I panicked because I didn’t have a study schedule and determined I should pull a few straight all-nighters. I didn’t eat healthy, I didn’t go to the gym, and I sat in front of my books for 24 hours a day for a few days straight. By the time it got to my exam, I blanked out because of a lack of sleep and I was flustered because of my high stress levels. After my exam I was a zombie due to a lack of sleep. I stopped at a friend’s residence on the way home and sat down for a few minutes to chat. I fell asleep as soon as I sat down. I woke up a day later decorated with markers, makeup, and all sorts of other things as if I was the main attraction at the circus. If you don’t want this happening to you, try to get regular sleep throughout the exam period! As I progressed through university, I gradually improved my exam
period strategies. A few things that I learnt through trial and error are keep to your study schedule, consume ‘brain’ foods such as almonds and fish oil, eat healthy and stay active, make sure you have a method to de-stress during the exam period, and try not to pull overnighters.

**Switching Programs**

You’re not alone if you don’t know what you want to do as a career. You’re not alone if you don’t like what you’re studying and you switch majors. In fact, research shows that over 50% of students will switch their majors at least once. Perhaps you’ll be in the group that switches your major, but the important thing is that it is “better late than never.” If you find something you love, you’ll excel at it. If you excel at it, money and happiness will come. Therefore, follow your passions. It’s still a good idea to have a backup plan in case things don’t work out, but explore and find what you love in university. You can do this by ‘auditing’ (sitting in on) lectures to see what the class is about. You can talk to friends and senior students to find out what their program is like or you can always ask the professor about a course you’re interested in.

*Here’s my experience with career uncertainty. I came into university under contract with the Royal Canadian Air Force always wanting to be a military pilot. I had a 13-year contract and although I was secured for a full-time job, I wanted to study something I enjoyed and could use in the future. I started off in Management because I was scared to take a calculus course which was required for Commerce. I was never good at math and I would never dare to take on derivatives. Management didn’t require calculus and that’s why I thought that was the best choice. After a while, I started thinking about different options, I was fairly open-minded about the possibilities. I talked to a mentor of mine who was a student a couple years ahead of me. As I walked in I said, “I want to study computer science”. We talked for hours about why I thought this was the best choice. She asked me tough questions to test if that’s what I actually wanted to do. I left that night knowing I would be a computer scientist. A few days later, I walked in and said, “I want to be a chemist” she said, “why?” and I said, “I’m good at it, I did good in a high school course.” We talked about it and she questioned me. I went home pondering her questions. Over the next few months, I would frequently explore new programs that sparked my interest. My mentor helped me think about the programs and challenged my reasoning. In the end, I went to*
her and we talked through the possibilities. I told her that I wish I could do commerce, but there’s a calculus requirement and there’s no way I can do calculus. After a while, she convinced me that if I try hard enough I’ll succeed. I decided to actually give it a shot and I enrolled in calculus for the summer. This was hard for me because my family lives 5000 km away, and I wanted to go home for my first university summer. I stayed that summer to study calculus and I passed it. I entered the Commerce program against any prediction I could have made when I started university. I ended up leaving the military at the end of my first year because this wasn’t the right career choice for me. The commerce side actually led me to my first corporate job only months later.

**Take a Leap of Faith & Learn to Fail**

The university experience goes beyond academics; it’s also about building your experiences outside of the classroom. Try doing things you never thought you could do. Try running a large scale event or try joining a team even if you think you might fail. Failure is one of the most important lessons you can learn and there is no better place to learn it than in the university setting. Now I’m not saying to fail a class, it’s better to get the help you need or drop the course before it gets to that point. But take a leap of faith and try things regardless of the outcome. Set goals for yourself that are tough and see how it goes. It’s a win-win for you. If you succeed, you’ll learn a lot, build confidence and you’ve accomplished something great. If you fail, it’s tough, but you learn a tremendous amount from your mistakes and it will help develop you as a person.

_In my first year, I thought I would be fine volunteering 40+ hours a week while taking a full course load. At times, I would miss my classes to attend meetings and run events. I justified this in my head by saying, “Well if I represent all first-year students, I can’t let them down.” By spending so much time on activities and with friends, I didn’t realize that I was letting myself down academically. I ended up dropping some of my first-semester courses. This was very tough for me because one of the primary reasons you’re in university is to exceed your personal academic goals. I felt like a failure and it was a major low point for me in university. I spent weeks trying to figure out how this happened. Now perhaps some people would give up their co-
curricular activities and put the blame on that. I didn’t. I decided to learn how to manage my
time better by always having an updated schedule and having time blocks for classes, studying,
and co-curricular activities which is discussed above in the “Get Organized & Strategize”
section. I attended all of my classes in my second semester and improved my grades. I also
increased my involvement through additional volunteering and initiatives. I learnt from my
mistakes and worked on a resolution that would improve my academics, but also preserve the
things that are important to me. It’s all about taking that leap of faith and if you fail it’ll still be
an experience that you can look back on and appreciate the benefits.

“Even the biggest failure beats the hell out of never trying.” - Grey’s Anatomy adapted from
Benjamin Franklin

The majority of students enter university and give up almost everything they do outside of school
to focus on academics. Instead of doing this, try to have a healthy balance between your
academics and co-curricular activities. You risk losing your self-esteem by abandoning the
things you love. This in turn can make the study environment even more challenging. Finding
that balance will vary for all individuals, but, most students and alumni will tell you that finding
that “sweet” spot between academics and non-academics is key to staying healthy and
optimizing your university experience. Participating in activities can take your mind off
studying, help you de-stress, and improve your time management. It’s actually proven that
volunteering or working for approximately 15 hours per week will improve your university
grades. On top of that, you’ll build your personal brand and your resume! You can do something
you love, potentially earn some money, learn to manage your time better, and you’ll be building
your soft-skills and experiences for future jobs.

**Becoming Independent**

When starting university, you’ll either live at home or away from home. Both of these
experiences are discussed below.

**Living at home:** You’re accustomed to how things have always been at home and it’s likely to be
one of the areas in your life that isn’t changing drastically. Now that you’re in university, you’ll
experience increased academic pressures and if you don’t have a good study environment at home, try to study at a coffee shop or the library. Parents might not understand how much change is occurring in your life or how overwhelming university can be. You can set your own schedule, but communication with your parents is key so that they don’t worry. You ought to put enough time and effort into your classes so that you do well. While starting university, parents can be a tremendous help or a big distraction. It’s important to take the help and support, but also the responsibility for your education and experiences.

It’s not recommended to be a typical “commuter student.” These are students who go to class and go home. That’s it! They don’t know too many people at their university, they don’t study on campus or do activities outside of the classroom. Clearly, you can miss out on a lot of great experiences. However, if you participate in a number of activities outside of the university, you’re still active and that’s fantastic. If not, make sure you do not fall into the “commuter student” trap. Once you start this, it is a very hard habit to change.

Part of becoming an adult is learning to make your own decisions and this will lead you to becoming independent. In this process, you will make both good and bad decisions, but it all contributes positively to your development. If you don’t become independent, you might not learn how to manage your time fully when you’re done university. Everyone’s circumstances are different, but learn to take control of your university experience and your life.

Living on Residence or away from home: For most students, this is the first time living away from home. It’s a great opportunity to learn to be independent. While living at home you probably never cooked, did laundry, or went grocery shopping on your own. These are things you need to learn to do while managing your time. Try to schedule or at least track where you’re spending your time. A lot of students fall into the trap of having this ‘unlimited freedom’ and play video or computer games 10+ hours a day, stop going to class, and it’s a downward spiral from there. There’s nothing wrong with doing that once in a while, but it’s all about balance and making good decisions. If you’re on residence, you can ask Dons/Resident Assistants or friends on how to do laundry or to get groceries with you. Just remember that students all around you are in the same situation.
When I started university, I lived on residence. I never really cooked proper meals before in my life, only canned soups, TV (Microwaveable) dinners, sandwiches, and junk food. I occasionally did my own laundry while at home, but generally my mom would do it. When I started university, I literally ate at the cafeteria every day and had my freezer stocked with TV dinners and frozen pizzas. This is what I ate every day for over 4 months. At the cafeteria, my usual was the burgers and fries. The only vegetables I consumed were the pieces of lettuce and the bits of pickle on my burger. I literally did not eat fruits and vegetables for 4 months! I didn’t always feel the best and I started getting disgusted by the food. I didn’t feel good about myself, and it was the result of what I was eating. It got to a point where, I would rather not eat, than eat anymore cafeteria food and TV dinners. I got into a very unhealthy cycle and I got to a point where I would feel sick to my stomach whenever I walked by the cafeteria or thought about eating. I actually started skipping a lot of meals. I started skipping lunches and dinners for days on end. I didn’t realize that my body just needed healthy alternatives. These are hard to find at university cafeterias. I realized that I wasn’t being independent. This wasn’t the right way to do things. I decided to start going grocery shopping once every few weeks and at least picking up some fruits, veggies and healthier frozen foods. I got more of the things my body needed and I felt more energized and alert.

Everyone gets into bad cycles, but realizing it and actively working to change the habit is the critical part. You can learn from my mistakes and try to eat healthy while living on your own. It’s important for you!

**Mental Health**

Keeping healthy, minimizing stress and discussing any issues you’re going through are great ways to strengthen your mental health. Mental health is one of those key things that most people ignore and it affects all ages. It is rarely discussed and the pressures of university can impact students significantly. There can be added stresses for students who live away from home, have language barriers, take a tough course load, have financial pressures, live in a new environment, have relationship problems or stress involving family and friends. These are the types of things that can cause some students to consider self-harm or suicide. This is a normal thought and it
may cross a student’s mind during a stressful period. But it is important to explicitly tell someone how you’re feeling. Mental health isn’t something you should shy away from talking about. If you’re experiencing anxiety, loneliness, or significant stress from things going on in your life or university, you should immediately talk to a Don/RA on residence, the university clinic, or a mental health counsellor.

Here are some strategies to improve your mental health:

1) Exercise
2) Set Personal Goals
3) Stay Organized (use a calendar)
4) Volunteer for an initiative you are passionate about
5) De-stress by doing things you like e.g. watching a movie, chatting with a friend

**What to do in Your Summers Between Years**

How you will spend your summer break each year is an important decision. Here are few things you could do:

a) Relax

b) Travel

c) Take courses/summer school

d) Take on part-time or full-time work

e) Learn new things outside of school (dance, languages, sports, etc.)

f) A combination of the above

I highly recommend a combined approach that will contribute towards your long-term development, but also meeting your short-term summer goals. Travelling is one of those things
that a majority of people want to do, but never get around to it. Travelling helps you build your own personality while opening your eyes to the world abroad. You can do a study/summer abroad to a new country that you’ve always wanted to visit. This will allow you to travel, study, and have fun with friends all at once. Although this can be expensive, there are scholarships for these types of programs that may help to cover some of the costs. This is definitely something I wish I had done, and you will still have a couple months of the summer to potentially work and bring in an income.

It’s important to get the experience from travelling which will help develop your social skills, put you in situations that you are not used to, and discover new things about yourself. You will gain a new perspective about the world going forward and maybe even learn a new language.

Working is also highly recommended as it will supplement your income, and it will build important independence skills which will help set you up for success throughout the rest of your career.

Volunteering has more flexibility and can provide wonderful opportunities. In general, you will gain more personal development from volunteering rather than paid work because of the greater responsibility.

**How to Network**

Networking is an important thing, but most people don’t know how to network. It’s a fine line between talking about your activities and strengths to keep someone interested without making it sound like you are bragging. I’ve gone to a number of networking events and these can range from social events to recruiting events for various companies. There are standard questions that can start conversations such as introducing yourself (first and last name), your year and what you’re studying. Then you can ask “what do you do?” This is a simple way that allows you to virtually introduce yourself to anyone at a networking event. The formula for success comes in a few parts:

**Network up and down.** What this means is don’t only “network” with the people superior to you. This is one of the most important things to know about networking. For example, let’s say
you’re at a recruiting event or a social event with faculty, staff and students. At these events, I strongly recommend meeting new students as well as recruiters/faculty/staff. You never know who you’re going to meet; it could be the next Mark Zuckerberg, Bill Gates, or Steve Jobs. Even if it isn’t the next superstar, there are always things you can learn from others. Every single person has something that you can learn from.

**Help others including your competition.** I’m a strong believer in always helping others even if you’re competing with them. At a networking event, introduce other people you know or have just met from networking to other students, recruiters, faculty, or staff. This can’t hurt you because you’re connecting people. This actually HELPS YOU! Now think about it from the perspective of recruiters or professors. By introducing others to them, you help expand their network and you did a good deed. They see you as being genuine, confident and a strong leader. Of course, if it’s a recruiting event, you could potentially introduce someone and they could end up getting the job that you want. But I don’t think this is a negative thing. I believe that if you do good deeds, things will work out, which means there are better things in the near future for you.

*During my first year of university and early into my second year of university, I attended a number of recruiting events with the “Big 4” global accounting firms (Deloitte, Ernst & Young, KPMG, and PricewaterhouseCoopers). I encountered a very cut-throat environment, where students would circle around a recruiter. Sometimes, if I wanted to join a circle, some students would see me coming and would block off any available space, or they would slowly push me out of the way with their shoulder. This was very frustrating and I didn’t like this. I decided to do things differently from day 1. I introduced people I knew and didn’t know to recruiters. For people that I knew, I introduced them to recruiters by name. For people I didn’t know, I invited them into the circle by introducing myself first, and then introducing them to the recruiter. I also consistently spoke highly of the quieter people in our circle to the recruiters to encourage the shy individuals to participate more and become more comfortable. I strongly believe that if you do the right things, good things will come. They did for me; I was hired by PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC), the largest accounting firm globally, at the start of my second year.*

**Make friends not “Networks”.** A major problem with networking is that a student goes in with the expectation that someone else is willing to give away this wealth of knowledge and
Networking is actually a 2-way street. The secret is to actually build friendships rather than networks. You can always ask them what they do in their career and they’ll talk about that. You should actually talk about what they do outside of work and be a good active listener. People love to talk about themselves and in particular their hobbies outside of work. Find out what they do to de-stress or what they do for fun. Find out about where they have travelled and what they want to do in the future. If you actually look at this as an opportunity to build a friendship, you will have a greater chance of standing out among your peers. If you’re speaking with professors, they tend to be excited about the research that they do because it’s a large part of their lives. Find out more about the things that they are excited about.

**Be yourself but don’t be nervous.** Students are generally nervous at these types of events because they are worried about making a bad impression or saying something “stupid”. What I realized is people prefer someone that tries rather than someone who doesn’t. If you make a mistake and make a conversation awkward, it’s really not as bad as you think. It’s actually better to still make an impression than none at all. If you do make a mistake, try to fix it, and then move on. It’s better to make mistakes and learn from them while in university rather than later on. If you’re nervous about introducing yourself to someone, take a deep breath, run through your self-introduction once in your head, and walk over.

Networking is very important, and you should start in university. If you talk to most adults, the majority will say, “A network or a contact helped me secure at least one or more of my career jobs.” This is vital to your present and future well-being. As practice, you can start early in university, it’s a great learning opportunity. If you do this, it could have immediate benefits too. Regardless, it will set you up for a successful future because once you graduate, networking becomes extremely important. You don’t want to get to that stage without practicing how to network effectively.

*When I entered first year, I didn’t have good grades. I didn’t know what I wanted to do or what I wanted to study. In the second-half of my first year, I was considering studying commerce. I decided to go to a networking event with the “Big 4” global accounting firms. Accounting firms basically only hire 3rd and 4th year students for summer internships. I went to this event and I was actually very nervous. But I thought to myself, “I can make mistakes. I’m a first-year student, no one will judge me and no one really knows me.” I went around and introduced*
myself to a number of recruiters and students. I smiled a lot and talked about what I was studying and what I like doing in my free time. I introduced a lot of 3rd and 4th year students I had just met to the recruiters. I received business cards from a few recruiters and from speaking with other students I learnt that it was customary to send a thank you email to the recruiters to let them know that I enjoyed the conversation. I did that and it led to a series of emails back and forth. I had a fun evening meeting new people. I became more interested in accounting and the people were fantastic. I continued going to a couple of events and the recruiters were all really impressed that a first-year student would attend events like these. A couple of recruiters told me about a new initiative being launched to hire second-year students. As marketing for the initiative began, I told my friends about it and encouraged them to come to the networking events. There was an event at the start of my second year, where I invited at least 100 of my friends to come to the event and learn about it. Most of my friends said, “We’ll worry about that next year or later on, we need to focus on our grades.”

I still decided to go and I had never been more nervous. On my way to the event, I met 6 other students who said the accounting firms only hire 90%+ students. One student actually said that she had a 100% in the first-year accounting course. I had a 67% average in my first-year accounting course. I knew that the accounting firm would only hire 1 or maybe 2 students at a maximum from our school. I had absolutely no shot. I looked at the positive side of this, I had no pressure because I was 100% sure I wasn’t going to get it. I used it as a learning opportunity. I went to the event and met a ton of new people and just had fun. I introduced the new friends that I had met on the way to the event to the recruiters. I was told at the end of night to make sure I applied to the position even though I said my grades weren’t very good. The recruiter said, “That’s alright, it still might be a good learning opportunity if you get an interview.” I interpreted this as, “There is a zero chance of me getting the job, but maybe I’ll get an interview.” I applied and I put in the time on updating my resume and cover letter. I still didn’t spend too long because this was just practice for me. I was thrilled when I got asked to schedule an interview a few days later. I did a Facebook search to find out who else worked at PwC that went to my school. I noticed there were 2 fourth-year students who were summer interns with PwC. I decided to message the two of them, even though I didn’t know them. Shockingly, they accepted to help me even though I didn’t know them. They both ran through mock interviews with me, gave me tips, and information about my
interviewers. I was a bit nervous for my interview, but again I looked at the fact that I shouldn’t be, because it’s a learning opportunity and my grades were too low. There was a 0% chance I would get hired for this program, especially if someone else had a 100% average in their accounting course.

I went to the interview, fairly relaxed and told my stories about what I had done in university, displayed my passion of helping people, and smiled a lot. The interviews went by fairly quickly but the interview with the Partner of the company was tough. He didn’t smile even once throughout the entire interview and he would not give me any eye contact. This threw me off quite a bit because I was relaxed, making jokes, and using every moment as a learning opportunity. I left the interviews knowing I didn’t get the job. The next day, I was studying with my study group, and my phone started ringing. I picked it up and it was the Partner from PwC. He said, “Congratulations, we would like to offer you a position with PwC.” I was so excited that I literally screamed out loud and did a happy dance!

Things often work in your favour when you least expect them to. I had never thought that I would have been hired. To this day, I still don’t know exactly how that happened, but I was very fortunate. To be hired by the largest global accounting firm at the start of my second year was beyond my wildest, most optimistic dreams. This story should be an inspiration to you to just take a chance, don’t always expect an outcome, but always try to learn from every moment. Don’t worry about making mistakes, it’s part of life and things always work out in the long run!

**Building Your Brand (and Your Resume)**

Building your brand and your soft-skills is vital. Universities don’t tend to focus on extra-curricular clubs, councils, sports, etc. on the same level as your academics. Your brand can be what you personally stand for. It might be the first impression others get within a few minutes of meeting you. It is what others who know you would say about you. Basically, to build your personal brand, the simplest way to start is to: First, update your resume. Second, look at the areas you are weaker in and work on those. Third, work on building your strengths and furthering your experience in those areas. Then think about where you want to be in a few years. What types of experiences or jobs do you want by then? Example 1: Look at the entry level
positions you want after graduating and determine what types of experiences people had when they got to those positions. You can do this by discussing it with recent graduates in the field that you want to work in, contacting recruiters from those types of companies, finding employees on LinkedIn, or doing a quick Google search. Example 2: Look at graduate school applicants that have entered into the programs that you’re interested in pursuing. Try to meet some of those people through LinkedIn, finding students on the website of the program, or ask the department to introduce you to a current student. This can help you understand what is needed in terms of both academics and your personal experiences to achieve these positions. It’s important to note that you DO NOT have to know what you want to do in 4 years. Just some ideas of what you may want to do. This will help you build up to those experience levels over the next few years.

Write down what you need to do to build your experiences and soft-skills over the next few years. This is the foundation for your goals over the next 5 years. You could also have shorter term goals, such as weekly (to ensure productivity rather than procrastination), monthly, and annually. Now that you have these goals, you need an action plan. The action plan is how you will get to those goals. These could be short-term goals such as:

1) Update my resume
2) Visit the Career Centre for advice
3) Apply to 10 campus positions per week
4) Find out and meet the managers for the jobs I am applying for

Building your brand will be a work in progress but examples listed above can help you achieve your target. From there, set yourself up for positions that build your strengths and improves your weaknesses. University has a ton of opportunities, such as executive positions on clubs, councils, sports teams, etc. where you can learn things such as leadership, teamwork, budgeting, and time management.

Career Searching
Career searching is one of those things that is rarely taught and hard to learn. I’m sure you have a mental list of the top companies in the world you would like to work for. For many people, that list might include Apple, Google, Facebook, Goldman Sachs, etc. Most people might only do the first two steps below but here are some additional ideas that may help you:

1) Read the company website

2) Check the company’s job portal

3) Email the recruiters to see if you can get a meeting

4) Find out what division you might want to work in

5) Find people on LinkedIn that work in that area and introduce yourself

6) Maybe Twitter can tell you where the managers go for coffee or dinner and you can politely introduce yourself

These are just a few ideas to help you go above and beyond in the increasingly competitive job market. It’s all about staying organized and self-determination.

**Last Few Months of Your Last Year**

Your last few months of university is a milestone. You’re looking at finishing classes, writing final exams, and entering into the “real” world. This might be your last time being a student. You might be overwhelmed by all of the change that’s about to occur, but you have to remember that you’re not alone. Once you’re in your last year of university, most students can’t wait to finish. Although this is completely understandable, it’s also important to make the most of your last year. You might be nervous about graduating, because you still don’t know what’s next, whether you’ll do grad school, find a job, travel, etc. It’s a tough world awaiting you. Your goal can be to turn this nervousness into productiveness. You can do this by making goals and plans that will ease the transition. These can be goals such as applying for 10 jobs per week or making a 1-3 year plan after graduation. Thinking about the possibilities and coming up with alternatives will help reduce your anxiety and allows you to focus on the things that matter.
My last year of university was both overwhelming and exciting. I decided to make the most of my last year by improving my grades and getting more involved than in previous years. In the first semester of my last year, I decided to take 4 courses along with a professional finance exam (CFA Level I), which requires over 300 hours of study. During my last semester of university, there were still a number of courses I wanted to take; I decided to take 8 courses to see what my personal limit is. This may sound excessive, and it is actually more courses than university guidelines allow for in 1 semester, luckily I wasn’t questioned. At the same time, I balanced it with a number of extra-curricular activities which included 3 volunteer positions and 5 part-time positions which are briefly explained in the “About Aly Madhavji” section.

The amount that I took on in my fourth year was definitely a bit excessive and it wouldn’t have been sustainable for a longer period. Despite the numerous activities, I achieved a 3.90 GPA out of 4.0 in my last year, which included a 3.93 GPA in my last semester with 8 courses simultaneously. It was a great learning experience to know what my limit was, and this helped me improve my time management and my stress management. I think this is important because every student should put themselves slightly outside of their comfort zone, take on a little bit more and see if you can excel in that situation. It can be things that you enjoy doing to minimize the stress. It’s a good strategy for continuous improvement.

Summer After University

The summer after university is a transition point from being a student to either grad school, working, or starting your career. At the start of the summer, if you’re still looking for a full-time job or searching on what you could do next, actively spend a few hours each day for 1 month working on this. Be disciplined about it by having a set schedule for the times that you will work on it. It’s important to create “time blocks” for your summer. Also, plan a trip if you can afford it. It’s one of the best learning experiences and it can be less expensive than you think. You can travel to Africa, Asia or another part of the world you’ve never been to. You can learn a million new things and it can open your eyes to a whole new world. You could work/teach and travel in many different places around the world, such as Asia or Australia.
When I graduated, I had no plans for the summer. I had a few part-time jobs and volunteer positions that continued until the end of June. This meant that I had July and August without any plans. I had friends that wanted to travel Europe. After thinking about it, I wanted to do something a bit different. I decided to go to Africa and climb Mount Kilimanjaro, the world’s tallest free standing mountain. It was something that I could only have dreamed of doing and it would push my mental toughness to a whole new level. It was 7 full-days on the mountain; it was excruciatingly difficult but I finally reached the summit. This was one of the best experiences I’ve ever had. Soon after, I went to relax at the resort island of Zanzibar, Tanzania. I went to Safari the Masai Mara in Kenya, which is known for being the setting of “The Lion King” movies and rafted the River Nile in Uganda, the world’s longest river. These are bucket list types of things. I spent some time visiting villages, talking to children, met people that ran orphanages, and I donated everything I brought with me except for the clothes on my back before my flight home. These were experiences many people could only have dreamed of, but anyone can do it. It’s all about planning and determination. These are once in a lifetime opportunities that you can seek out, especially after graduating.

**Takeaways & Top 10 Themes**

If there are only a few things you could take away from this, I would hope you:

a) Enter university with an open mind and make the most of the fresh start

b) Get involved in university with a good balance of healthy lifestyle, academics, volunteering, and part-time employment. These are all keys to success and you should try not to focus solely on academics.

c) Learn to stay organized by using an agenda or a calendar and keep a To-Do list

d) Learn to study effectively and efficiently and adopt your strategy on a course-by-course basis depending on the way the course is tested

e) Learn to be the best you can be and have fun doing it!
Here is a recap of the **Top 10 themes**:

1) Orientation week

2) Strategize an approach to your classes

3) Organize your study schedule

4) Learn how you best study

5) Find learning techniques

6) Find a mentor

7) Network up and down

8) Help others including your competition

9) Make friends not “Networks”

10) Be yourself but don’t be nervous

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**About Aly Madhavji**
Born in Burnaby, British Columbia, Aly Madhavji completed a Bachelor of Commerce at the University of Toronto in June 2012. In his first year, Aly served on the Board of Directors of the Student Union representing the voice of all first-year students. He was instrumental in the introduction of a campus-wide pre-exam study break by involving over 1800 students, faculty, and staff. Aly coordinated two successful referendums that annually raise $12,500 and $25,000 to support the campus food bank and to help student refugees in the pursuit of Canadian higher-education respectively. In his second year, Aly was a residence Don for upper-year students. He spearheaded a number of significant improvements from gathering suggestions from students across campus. Aly was named the Residence Ambassador of the Year. In his third year, Aly was the President of Residence Council, a student government, which was known as one of the most active and successful student groups on campus. Aly was a Peer Academic Leader for first generation first-year students to ease their transition into university. He was recognized with the Top Residence Student of the Year award. In his fourth year, Aly was an elected Governor of the University of Toronto where he was a member of the Executive Committee and Academic Board of the institution. Aly was a teaching assistant for two courses, Management in a Changing Environment and Operations Management. He held part-time positions as a Microsoft Campus Leader, Awards Agent for CampusPerks, and as a Bloomberg Ambassador to help secure students internships and full-time jobs. Aly was the Executive Director of Residence Council where he strategically came up with the idea to secure $10,000 of financial need based bursaries for Residence students. Aly was a Books with Wings Coordinator with the University of Toronto International Health Program where he raised 312 university textbooks, with an estimated value of $15,000, for students in rural and impoverished areas around the world. Aly was awarded the Principals Involvement award and the Gordon Cressy Student Leadership award. Throughout his four years, Aly served on the highest governing body of the University of Toronto Mississauga along with two terms on its Academic Board.

Aly served for one year in the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) with the rank of Officer Cadet. Aly is also a recipient of the Royal Canadian Legion Medal of Excellence. Aly holds the Canadian Investment Manager (CIM) designation which he earned through the Canadian Securities Institute and is pursuing his Chartered Accountant (CA) and Chartered Professional Accountant (CPA) designations with PwC. Since graduating in June 2012, Aly played an active role to bring a Co-Curricular Record to the University of Toronto, which was introduced in
September 2013, to officially recognize the extra-curricular activities of students. Aly serves on the Board of Directors of the University of Toronto Mississauga Alumni Association and the College of Electors of the University of Toronto. Aly is the VP Strategy and Chair of Access Empowerment Council, a not-for-profit organization created to inspire disengaged and marginalized youth and engage isolated elderly around the globe. Aly has been featured in The Medium and The Varsity newspapers, the Ismaili Magazine, Mississauga Magazine, and University of Toronto Press. Aly loves to spend his free time outdoors, playing sports, and maintaining a healthy lifestyle.

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