How to Succeed in you Classes

The following is a handout for new undergraduates (prepared by the DUS office in MSCS) to offer some simple advice towards the goal of success in your undergraduate studies at UIC.

1. **Lecture & Discussion Classes**
   (a) Lectures are much larger than the classes that you are used to, and have between 60 and 300 seats, depending on the course. Discussion sections and science labs usually have 32 seats or less.
   (b) Most "5 hour" classes meet Monday, Wednesday, and Friday in lecture, and Tuesday and Thursday in discussion. In lecture you need to concentrate on taking notes and understanding the theory. In discussion you should bring questions from the homework and material that you wish to discuss. Do the homework and reading before coming to class! For labs, read the assigned lab material or experiment information before coming to the lab, and make sure you understand what you are supposed to do and why.
2. **Grading Systems**
   (a) The grading system in each course should be described in the syllabus for the course, which is either passed out in the first days of the semester, or available on the course web page. If you have any questions about the importance of different assignments, ask the instructor immediately.
   (b) Your grade may depend mostly on exams, which is different from High School. Some faculty members require attendance, and you can lose a letter grade if you do not attend regularly.
   (c) Quizzes and homework are necessary to learn the material, and should be taken seriously. Check with your instructor to see if you may hand in homework late or make up missed quizzes or exams. It is up to the instructor to allow for turning in homework late. For exams, you will most likely need to provide a doctor's note to verify an illness, or present some other documentation justifying missing the test.
3. **Personal Responsibility**
   (a) Cheating on quizzes & exams is strictly forbidden, and can result in your expulsion from the university in the most serious cases. DO NOT CHEAT.
   (b) Classroom Comportment
      i. **DO:** Attend every class, take notes in class, bring paper, pencils or pens, textbook, calculator or other required tools to class.
      ii. **DO:** Find out the penalties for coming late to class, leaving class early, or eating or drinking in class. Different instructors are bothered by different things. If you must leave class early, explain you situation to the instructor before class starts. If you must arrive to class late on a habitual basis (because of work for example), discuss your situation with the instructor. Remember that you are responsible for every minute of class time. Important announcements are often made in the first and last few minutes of class, so if you arrive late, be sure to ask a colleague in class whether there were announcements you should know.
      iii. **DO:** Find out if you final is a combined section final. Combined section final exams are given at special times and rooms, which you can find out by checking the course web site in the last weeks of semester, or from the UIC web site. <u>You cannot miss a Final Exam</u>. You will fail the course as a result. It is your responsibility to find out where & when the Final Exam will be given.
      iv. **DON'T:** Read newspapers in class, talk on cellphones, or listen to iPods or other MP3 players during class. Do not disturb other students in class.
      v. **DON'T:** Assume that using a "tape recorder" will help you pass a math class (or any class for that matter.) Always ask permission before using any device to record a lecture.

(c) Preparation for Class

i. **DO:** Read the book and do your homework before class; form a study group; go for help in the Math Science Learning Center in room 424 SEO; keep your syllabus; know your teachers' names, office hours and email addresses. (It is always amazing to listen to a student's complaint about a class or instructor, and when asked the name of the person, they don't know...)

ii. **DO:** Notify your instructor if you are sick, or have some other serious reason for missing classes or exams. Usually email is the best way to notify your instructor of a problem, but when you are well, you should speak to your instructor personally, especially if you want to ask for a make-up exam or extension on the homework.

iii. **DO:** Review quizzes and homework before going to office hours. Often, the office hours for a large class can be very busy, so that being prepared means you can ask your questions succinctly, and hopefully get focused answers.

(d) Get enough sleep, eat correctly, and don't work too many hours in a job. Be careful to balance work and study hours. If you must work a lot of hours, then reduce the number of classes you are taking that semester. Fatigue is the number one enemy of performing well in your studies and on exams. That is why sleep is so important before an exam, and even why having a balanced diet can improve your classroom grades.

(e) Study skills and time management are important. Make sure you are studying correctly and not wasting a lot of time. If you are taking 4 or 5 classes, you must plan your weekly study times so that you can give the required attention to each class. Do not let a class "slide" assuming you can make up the work later; often that means next semester after getting a failing grade.

4. **Your Relationship With Your TA**

(a) Prepare before coming to office hours, or for help at the the Math Sciences Learning Center. Make sure you have specific questions about the homework or reading.

(b) The Teaching Assistant's accent (if any) is not an excuse for failing to understand the material. If language seems to be a barrier, talk to your TA about it, or to your Instructor.

(c) Make a point of talking to your TA about the course material. This will help you get used to the TA's accent and speech patterns, and it will help the TA get to know you as a serious student.

(d) Your TA knows you, but your instructor may not. Such is life in a large state university; but if you have the opportunity, do talk with the Instructor about the course - and of course, introduce yourself, so he/she will have a better chance of knowing who you are. The TA does not set your course grade; this is done by the Instructor. Also, if you need a letter of recommendation later in your university career, say to apply for a University Scholarship or summer work opportunity, then you should ask your Instructor for this letter, rather than the TA who is a fellow student as yourself. In this case, it helps if the Instructor knows who you are.

5. **Resources**

(a) Office Hours, Math Sciences Learning Center; Writing Center, Language Labs. Find out about these immediately by asking your Instructor.

(b) Computer Account: As a student at UIC, you automatically have a computer account, with an email address such as "jsmith57@uic.uic". Even if you do not use your UIC address, but prefer to use a google or hotmail or other email account, be sure to set up mail forwarding for your UIC email account, to forward all email to your preferred address. There are often important emails sent out to your UIC address that you should not miss.

(c) Course Web Pages: the syllabus and homework assignments for the course are usually posted on the course web site. It may also offer sample exams, homework solutions, or supplemental material for the course.

(d) Honors College and other campus organizations may provide tutoring and other special help with your classes.

6. **Study Skills & Time Management**

(a) Make an outline of the material as you study. The more senses involved in the learning process, the better you will retain the material. Listen to the lecture, tell someone about it, or read it aloud (in private!) or even copy your notes over. All of this gives your mind the chance to "digest" the material and move the facts and concepts into long-term memory.

(b) Keep a list of problems you can't do. Make this your weekly quiz practice. Can you do all the problems? If not, this is a guide for what your should ask help in understanding. Ask for help immediately; do not procrastinate - most university courses (and especially in math!) move too quickly to allow catching up, once you get behind.

(c) Make up your own sample exams. This makes you think about which ideas are most important and what is likely to show up on the real exam. Have each person in a study group make up a sample exam, then work each other's exams.

(d) Set up a test environment when you study. Lock the door, don't answer the phone, turn off the MP3 player, turn off the TV, don't go to the refrigerator. Set your alarm for 50 minutes and work the sample test. Did you get finished? Did you spend the whole time on the first question? The answers to these questions will tell you how well prepared you really are.

(e) Look for sample exams on the course web page. If they are offered, treat them like the real exam and see how long it takes you to work them. (Here is a discouraging rule-of-thumb: when preparing an exam for a math course, one typically requires that the instructor can do the exam in 15 to 20 minutes total. So, of the 50 minutes provided, more than half are spent "figuring out what the problem is asking, and how you are going to solve it using what was presented in class." The more prepared you are, the less time is required for this process.)

(f) For essay exams, write sample essays on questions you think might be on the exams. Even if those are not the questions on the exam, you may be able to use some of the points you thought of on the exam. Plus, it gets you used to organizing your thoughts quickly. Bottom line: practice, practice, practice! It may not make you perfect, but it sure focuses and speeds up your thinking, and makes your work more polished and organized.

(g) When taking a test:

i. Read through the entire exam first, quickly, making notations as you go, as which problems look easiest, which look like they will take time, etc.

ii. Divide 40 minutes by the number of problems. This is the average amount of time you have for each question. Use discipline, and try not to go over this average amount of time on any given problem.

iii. First work the questions you are certain you know, and can do in a reasonable amount of time.

iv. Go back and work the questions you think you know how to do.

v. Then do the problems you are not sure about.

vi. When working a problem, write in as neat and organized a manner as possible. Highlight your answers, say with a box around them, and any key steps you want the grader to be sure to see. Show your work!

vii. If you get stuck on a problem, do not spend the rest of the exam period working on it. You may get 20 points on that problem, but loose 80 points on the other problems.

viii. Finally, use that extra 5 or 10 minutes at the end of working through the exam, to go back and give one last try on a problem you didn't get, or needed some more work on. If you worked all the problems, then use the extra time to look over the whole exam, and check for mistakes, especially stupid mistakes, which we all can make, all too easily.

ix. Invoke the karma of your ancestors to bring you good luck.

s.h. - August 7, 2008