Top 10 mistakes college freshmen make
Here's how students can avoid making poor choices when entering the college world
By Lindsay Lyon
lindsay.lyon@indystar.com

August 7, 2006

Each year, many college freshmen falter as they navigate the path to higher education. From too much socializing to sub-par study habits, poor choices can often derail a new student's first semester. Take it from Deborah Spinney, executive director for student development at the University of Indianapolis. From her 16 years experience in the academic world, Spinney has pinpointed the 10 most common mistakes and offers tips for staying afloat.

1. Assuming college is an extension of high school
Students shouldn't rely on study habits that got them through high school; the workload in college is much heavier and more complex. Many find themselves unprepared to meet the new demands placed upon them. Plan on spending the same amount of time studying for a course each day as spent in the classroom. If extra help is needed, don't wait until midterms to seek aid.
Christy Collins, 21, fell into this trap her freshman year at Purdue University. In high school, Collins got straight A's without much work. She could scan a textbook 10 minutes before an exam and ace it. That method failed in college. As a pharmacy major, her chemistry and calculus classes required more time than she realized.
"I assumed I could just fly through freshman year without putting in any effort," Collins said. "I started skipping class, thinking I could just show up on test and quiz days and glance over the book a few minutes before. I didn't get A's anymore."
Faced with more in-depth exams, Collins' grades began to plunge. Concerned, her parents pulled her out of Purdue and enrolled her at the University of Indianapolis, where she's now a rising junior and back on track academically.

2. Being overly ambitious
The heavy course load that seemed manageable in high school could easily be overwhelming in college. Freshmen are often tempted to load up on courses to ensure graduating in four years. However, college is a time of transition. Students won't be able to acclimate properly if their're trying to manage 18 credits on top of new academic and social demands. Instead, they should aim to take no more than 12 to 14 credit hours their first semester.
"Students who sign up for the maximum amount of credits either have to withdraw from the class or fail it," Spinney said. "They have a miserable experience and don't enjoy college life. A much wiser avenue is to enroll in summer courses to make up for only taking 14 credits during the year."

3. Saving money by not buying the books
Bad idea. College courses move quickly, and once students fall behind in the reading, it's difficult to catch up. Still, many students opt to share texts with classmates or check out old editions from the university library to cut down on cost. But when exam time looms, students scramble to swap a single book, and everyone's studying suffers — or if they find an old edition of a book the professor uses, chances are it won't be numbered the same. Page 67 in one could be Page 100 in another.
"Students need their own books right at their own fingertips so they can read at their convenience and highlight the information they find useful," Spinney said. "That money is well-spent. Students may not want to spend the money on books because they know they may not keep them forever, but they're investing in their futures. In the long run, it pays off."
Last year, 21-year-old Nick Gressley learned this lesson the hard way. Then a junior at Purdue University, he enrolled in a genetics class and wasn't willing to buy the expensive textbook.
"I figured I would absolutely never need it again and that I wasn't going to study out of it anyway," Gressley said. He failed the course.
4. Ignoring e-mails
In the age of Palm Pilots and BlackBerrys, it's hard to imagine that technology-savvy students don't check their e-mails regularly. Think again. Many miss important university-wide messages or notes from their professors regarding homework due dates, exam periods and syllabus alterations. E-mail should be monitored as regularly as traditional mailboxes. Professors won't be sympathetic to students who skipped class because they didn't receive the e-mail about a room change.

5. Working too much
Some students have to work part time to fund their education. But if they're scheduled to work 20 to 30 hours a week, they'll have no time left for studying. Freshmen who need jobs should not make commitments to bosses until after they've assessed their course loads. Wait until after the first week of classes to pile on the hours.

6. Looking for help in the wrong places
Struggling students need not work through their problems alone. Universities are well-equipped to offer help with a variety of academic issues. Aside from utilizing a professor's office hours, students can visit math and writing labs, schedule peer-tutoring sessions and attend workshops that help build study skills.

"Seek these resources out, know they exist and use them early and often," Spinney said. "We expect students are going to need help, and they're not going to be the only students or the first students to need assistance."

7. Thinking the professor is a god
Freshmen often forget that professors were once in their shoes. Profs aren't as intimidating as they might seem. In fact, they're typically quite the opposite -- generally quite accessible and approachable. Don't be afraid to stop by their office during office hours to discuss course material or to strategize ways to maximize success.

8. Over-socializing
Newfound independence can be a mixed blessing. Freshmen suddenly bestowed with booming social lives can easily find themselves in academic trouble. With parties, new friends and an abundance of social organizations, students can be distracted from their educational goals.

Erin Paul, 21, knows from experience. As a freshman at Ball State University, Paul's weekends always began on Thursday nights. As a result, her grades fell.

"Your GPA is really easy to bring down, but really hard to bring back up," said Paul, a soon-to-be senior.

"Looking back, I definitely wish I would have put more time and effort into my school. I've learned you can go out, have a good time and still do well in school without taking it to the extreme."

If students define themselves as those who like to socialize, Spinney advised they utilize the daytime hours to get their work done.

9. Under-socializing
Equally detrimental to a new student can be a deficient social life. Freshmen who isolate themselves from campus activities miss out on a complete college experience. Too much time spent studying can make for a lonely existence. Typically, there's an activity for everyone on campus. Whether it's a club or a volunteer service project, it's important to find ways to connect with others who share similar interests.

10. Choosing the wrong career path
Many freshmen feel pressured to choose a major before entering college.

"Students often declare their majors hastily without thinking about whether it's a proper fit for them in terms of their academic preparation or their strengths," Spinney said. "Students can waste a lot of time and money in a major they're not happy or successful in. I mean, how many 17- or 18-year-olds really know what they want to do for the rest of their lives?"

Unless students are dead-set on a career, they should dedicate a semester or year to taking general education classes, experimenting with different possibilities. Spend time finding the best fit, and visit the campus career office for support.