

# Lifeskills 101 (for 1<sup>st</sup> year students)

## What is Lifeskills 101?

The idea behind Lifeskills 101 is to give first year students an overview of what to expect and what they need to be prepared to deal with their first year. It is a short booklet that outlines what will be happening, especially during the first semester in a post-secondary institution.

The dropout rate of college students is much higher in year one than in any other year because there is so much thrown at them all at once with longer, more intense classes, time management, studying, social time, being away from home for the first time, budgeting money, culture shock, etc. This booklet will help prepare you for that.

## Chapters

- Preparing to leave home for the first time
- Adjusting to the culture shock of a new life on their own
- Dealing with living in residence or in an off-campus apartment
- Living with roommates (the good, the bad and the ugly)
- Managing money (rent, tuition, groceries, medicine, etc.)
- Managing time (balancing demands of football with the demands of studying)
- Managing Stress and Mental Health (taking care of yourself)
- Dealing with credit (Making smart decisions about using credit)
- Reality Bites (From being the best to being just another player)

## Chapter 1-Preparing to leave home

This is one of the biggest steps of a young student's life, and also one of the most intimidating, particularly if the school they are attending is out of Province. A new home, a new city, new friends, different culture and tougher, more demanding courses and tighter timelines in the classroom. This doesn't even include the added stress and time management issues if the student is playing a sport.

Organization becomes the number one most important part in making the adjustment to college life. The more organized and prepared the student is going in, the better they will do their first semester and subsequently their first year.

**\*Fact-The average student entering University their freshman year sees an 5-7% drop in their GPA from high school.**

## What to do

Make a plan and stick to it. Set your travel dates up early so that this doesn't cause additional stress with last minute additions or changes. Create a checklist of things that need to be done before you leave and another list for after you get there so you have a specific plan to follow. In stressful situations there's nothing that reduces stress more than being able to look down at a list to see exactly what you still need to get done.

Example (Upon arrival at school)

- Pay school fees
- Pay residence fees
- Pick up dorm room keys
- Unpack
- Purchase school books
- Walk around campus to find your classes
- Write down emergency numbers for school
- Go to athletics center to pick up equipment (if you're playing a sport)
- Get assigned a locker
- Get groceries, hotplate, microwave, toaster, dishes, pots, etc.

This list will look different for every individual, but the idea behind it is the same. The more on top of everything you are in the beginning, the less stressful everything will be once classes and/or sports start.

## **Chapter 2-Arriving at your new home (culture shock)**

A new Province, a different city, a foreign place. Yes, it's still Canada, but Winnipeg is completely different than Calgary as Toronto is completely different than Vancouver as New Brunswick is completely different than Montreal. The people are different, the politics are different, the food is different, the cost of living is different.

**\*Fact-There are three English speaking Universities in Quebec. McGill, Concordia and Bishops.**

Make sure you research the Province, and more importantly, the city your school is in. What is the area directly around the campus like? Is it student friendly? How is the economy of the area, the cost of living, the unemployment rate? Are people in the area considered friendly and welcoming to students or are they cold or even dismissive of students and/or student athletes? What is the crime rate in the area?

Make sure you're comfortable with the overall feel of the city and the campus. Is the campus laid out well for what you need it for? Where is the library in relation to your residence or apartment? Where is the practice field/court/pitch in relation to your dorm or your classes? Research user reviews online of the school and the city. Listen to what others who went before you are saying.

**\*Fact-Throw out the bottom reviews and the top reviews and focus on the ones in the middle. They are the most genuine.**

And here's a big one. What is the weather like? Four seasons? Cold, long winters that never seem to end? Moderate, warmer weather? Example-In places like Winnipeg or Regina or Edmonton they only have two seasons Summer and Winter) and winter can last 7-8 months every year. Some people love it, some don't. It rains a lot in Vancouver. Some people like it, some don't. Know what you like. It shouldn't be the defining reason for your choice, but it's still important to your decision.

### **Chapter 3-Moving In (new home, new bed, new environment)**

Very few things are more intimidating than moving out of a safe, familiar family home (where you grew up) and moving into a foreign, generic, bland dorm room or cheap apartment off campus with 2-3 roommates you may or may not know. Talk about culture shock!

The first thing you need to do is sit down and discuss the merits/drawbacks/costs of living in residence on campus (in your own room or possibly with a roommate vs. living in an apartment with anywhere from 1-4 roommates (or more). Remember that sometimes cheaper isn't better. A shared apartment with 5 roommates may be cheap, but so is the quality of life in that apartment (no privacy, loud, food theft, etc.) and that could have an adverse effect on your study habits, energy, mental well-being and the ability to perform in the classroom or on the field.

If you can choose... choose your roommates well. Choose people who have similar personalities to yours. If you can't choose, learn to compromise. If you choose to live in an on-campus residence is there a floor leader who acts as a mentor to the younger student as well as keeping an eye on everyone? Is there access to 24 hour food from residence without leaving campus? If not, is there something close and safe you can access? What's the area like just off campus? Is it safe? Is there a strong security presence on campus?

If you choose to live off campus in an apartment have you checked the apartment reviews? Do they check references of people moving in or is it a liberal (few questions asked) policy? Is there adequate security in the building? Is there a grocery store and food options within walking distance of the apartment?

**\*Fact-Living on campus can offer a greater support structure than living off campus and may also offer easier access to health and mental health support.**

### **Chapter 4-Dealing with roommates**

This is a tough one. I mentioned it above, but it bears repeating in more detail. One of the toughest adjustments to make in college is living with someone you don't know. Coming out of a comfortable family home and going into a new living situation, that requires you to live with people you just met, can be a very tough adjustment.

I always suggest to kids that they go with a friend and room together if at all possible, whether it's an apartment or in residence. Moving in with someone you've never met is one of the toughest things to do. Doing it as a first-year student is even tougher. You have to hope for the best, and even then, you have to work at the relationship with your roommates or things can go sideways quickly.

Pairing up with other athletes on the team (if you're playing a sport) is good too-and your program may have a plan in place for that-but they still need to be the right players. Are they partiers? Or on the opposite end of the spectrum, are they people who study all the time and don't want to have any fun? Do they stay up late every night? Are they taking sports and school seriously or are they just screwing around? Will they clean the apartment/dorm room or just let it fester with garbage and dirty clothes? Will they wash their dishes or let them pile up for three days hoping that you'll cave and do it for them?

I would strongly suggest setting up a short list of rules that everyone agrees to follow. Keep it simple-Rules about cleaning, rules about noise, rules about use of the television, rules about food and groceries (assigning space in the fridge), etc. You can even assign duties for each roommate, so everyone is clear about who is responsible for what. This may seem silly, but it will be a big help.

## **Chapter 5-Managing time (school, practices, studying, social)**

This is the toughest one to get right, especially for incoming students. High school was challenging enough, and that was child's play compared to your first year at college. All the sudden you go from four to five classes a day plus practice (if you're playing a sport) and maybe some homework to much longer classes, much more homework, possible labs, longer practices plus extra work on your sport (playbook study, film study, coach's meetings, weight and cardio training, etc.) if you're playing a sport.

Plus, a whole new world of distractions has just opened up to you. You're away from home for the first time. You're living on a campus full of people, all experiencing a new level of freedom and responsibility for the first time-without any parental oversight.

It can be intoxicating for young kids to experience this for the first time. And easy to start making bad decisions. Parties, bars, roommates bugging you to go out every night, sporting events, on campus mixers, concerts, socializing, dating, etc. University is your first taste of being an adult and some kids (even good ones) struggle with handling that freedom.

My suggestion-and this is based on personal experience and talking to other kids-is MODERATION. Immerse yourself in the culture of University and campus life. Have some fun and get to know your school, your surroundings and what they have to offer, but do it smartly and do it in moderation.

Establish your schedule first.

- How many classes do you have to carry your first year?
- Do you need to set a Major for your first year? Can you take Arts to start with?
- How many hours per week of class time do you have?
- How much study time will you need to handle that class load?
- How many hours per week for practice in your sport?
- How many hours per week for athletic study and working out?
- Are you considering taking on a part-time job in the offseason?

Once you establish that timeline, and the requirements of the timeline, then you can figure how much spare time you have available to socialize and you can plan accordingly. It may sound like a pain to do this, but it will make your life so much easier and less stressful, especially in that first year.

As for the socializing aspect of school everyone is different and everyone handles it differently. I will say this. It is very easy for even the smartest kids to do stupid things when they are experiencing that kind of freedom for the first time. Think about what you're about to do-and calculate the potential ramifications down the road-before you actually do it.

## **Chapter 6-Managing stress and your mental health (take care of yourself)**

Far and away the fastest growing issue facing kids going into post-secondary school is mental health. Mental health issues (anxiety, depression, OCD) and just plain stress can be overwhelming for kids trying to cope with their first year away from home, especially when you factor in the pressure of classes and potentially playing a sport.

**\*Fact-1 in every 5 teenagers in Canada have at least one mental health disorder**

I have lost count of how many kids I've talked to about their experiences with mental health issues, many of which were previously undiagnosed before they got to school. Young students struggle with the stress of the intense time demands and pressure and feeling like they don't have anyone they can turn to. A young student or student/athlete isn't likely to reach out to a professor or coach or even their peers to talk about something like this. And they aren't likely to reach out to their parents either because of the responsibility they feel for wanting to perform well.

There is a fear of showing weakness or being rejected that affects all kids, but it is even more profound in university students and athletes. Kids feel like they have to fight through it and that they can't show any weakness. Thankfully that fear, and the stigma attached to it, is starting to fade away. Schools and athletic programs have started recognizing just how big a problem this is. They have started implementing on campus mental health awareness programs, support groups and medical support for students. Some schools have even started running peer groups for kids so they can talk to other people who are dealing with same issues and fears they are dealing with.

The best advice I can offer is to take care of yourself first. If you ignore the problems they will not go away. They will become more and more pervasive, affecting your ability to study, perform and function. Talk to people who are qualified and who understand what you're dealing with. Putting your health first doesn't mean you're being selfish. It means you're being responsible and it means you're trying to do the best to help yourself. Only then can you be the best you.

### **Chapter 7-Managing money (creating a budget and following it)**

This is another very important issue to deal with. Managing money is critical to first year students because you have no frame of reference. There is no set plan to follow because you haven't had to budget before or track expenses or deal with credit. It's all new, so it's extremely important to ask your parents for a little guidance on how to plan a budget for weekly and monthly expenses. Things like:

- Tuition
- Rent
- Food
- Transportation (bus, car, train, etc.)
- Medicine (prescriptions, allergies, etc.)
- Student Fees
- Smartphone
- Entertainment (movies, bar, dining out, concerts, dates etc.)
- Miscellaneous (parking tickets, overages on your phone, damage to your car, bike stolen, etc.)

These are just a few examples of some of the expenses you may have to deal with on a monthly basis. It is very easy to lose track of the money you spend every month, especially if you're eating out a lot. Expenditures rise without people even realizing it and all of the sudden, the money they thought they had in the bank is much less than they realized.

I always suggest to kids that they establish a budget, but it's hard to do that if you don't understand your spending habits so what I suggest is to track your spending the first month you're there. This is not difficult or time consuming to do. Just track what you spend each day for at least a couple weeks and see what it looks like. Establish an average based on those numbers and then build a budget around that, allowing a little extra for unexpected expenses.

## **Chapter 8-Dealing with credit**

This is extremely important for young adults. Credit is one of the most important things you will ever use as an adult. It is also one of the most dangerous things you will use, especially young adults using it for the first time. Think about this. Someone hands you a laminated card that says Visa or MasterCard on it and tells you that you now have \$500-\$1,000 to spend however you want. And you don't even have to pay it back right away! What could possibly go wrong?

One of the first things you'll notice when you walk around your campus are people offering you things for free such as credit cards. Credit card companies love University students. Why? Because they make tons of money off of young kids just like you. Here's how it works. Someone offers you a Visa credit card with a one-thousand-dollar line of credit. They don't even charge you anything for the card because they're going to waive that introductory fee...just for you. And that first year is going to come with a really low interest rate... just for you.

What could be better than that? So you go out and start using the card. It starts off slowly and innocently. A movie, dinner at a restaurant, paying your phone bill. But then you see a pair of cleats from Nike you just have to have. \$150 added to the card. That shirt you saw and really wanted? \$60 gone. Jeans? Another \$80. A birthday gift for your girlfriend or boyfriend? \$100 more on the card. And before you know it, the card is "maxed out" and there's no credit left on it. But no problem. The card says you only have to make a minimum payment each month and everything's okay. Pay \$29.00 this month so there's no late charges. So, what's the problem?

Here's the problem. Yes, you made the minimum payment, but you're also paying interest on the unpaid balance on that card every month. That means you're paying anywhere from 9-23% interest on the remaining \$971.00 still owing on the card. So in effect you don't really owe \$971.00. You actually owe \$971.00 plus interest on that \$971.00 every month from that point on...for a card you can no longer use because it's maxed out. And because you're only making the minimum payment each month it doesn't reduce the balance. It simply covers the interest on the balance, and you'll continue to pay interest on that card as long as there is a balance on it. That's why credit card companies love college students.

So does that mean you shouldn't use credit? Absolutely not. Building your credit is essential to young adults in establishing a credit rating that will help you down the road when you buy your first car or get your first apartment and when you eventually buy your first home. Credit is a very important tool for young adults building a future. What it does mean is you have to handle credit carefully because a bad credit rating will hurt you down the road as well. It can keep you from buying your first car or renting an apartment or buying your first home.

So how do you handle it? Talk to your parents about this, but one rule of thumb I always suggest following is "never outspend your ability to pay." That means you don't put any more on the card than you can afford to pay off every month. That serves two very important purposes. One, it builds your credit rating quickly and effectively. And two, it means you aren't paying interest to the credit card company. You keep your money. That way, you still have the convenience and security of using a credit card without the risk of things getting out hand with spending.

## **Chapter 9-Reality Bites (for student athletes)**

One of the biggest and most important lessons for first year players to learn is that you're not special anymore. You may have been the best player on your team in high school. You may have even been one of the top players in the Province, but now you're just another player.

The reality is that every player at the university or college level was a top player in high school. Every single one of them. And they're bigger, stronger and faster than anyone you've ever played with or against before. You don't get into college or university programs unless you were one of the best and that means you need to adjust your commitment level as well as your expectations going in.

Here is the reality. Most players face the very real prospect of getting red-shirted their first year. Even more face the prospect that they won't make the travelling squad and may not play a single play all year. You have to go in and learn a brand-new system that is much more complicated than anything you did in high school. You have to learn to play the game at a much faster speed against players who are ahead of you in terms of their development. And you have to learn how to deal with heightened expectations of coaches who expect you to be able to make those adjustments on your own.

Every year we see kids go off to programs only to end up returning at the end of their first semester or first year because they couldn't make that adjustment. Their grades slipped, their ego took too big a hit at not being the star anymore, they got homesick, the pressure of handling sports and a full class load was too much, etc. It's usually more than just one reason, but at the end of the day every player faces these hurdles. Some are ready for them, some aren't.

So what can you do to make the transition easier and give yourself the best possible chance to succeed? Be realistic going in. Understand how different things are at the next level. Be prepared to red-shirt if that's what the coaches believe is best for your development. They know a lot more about building programs than you do and their reasoning is always built towards to creating the best team, not towards any individual player.

Be prepared and commit your spring and summer to getting better.

- Get bigger, stronger and faster.
- Do workouts that are customized to making you a better athlete in your sport
- Study the program (Get a playbook, watch lots of video, ask lots of questions)
- Study the school (Know the environment, the class times, the campus, etc.)
- Take a reasonable class load (Don't overwhelm yourself by taking too many classes)
- Come into training camp with open eyes and ears and a good attitude
- Play Scout O or D in practice (Show that you really want to help make the team better)
- Be the first player there and the last player to leave (Practice, meetings, film study, workouts)

These are just some examples, but the most important thing is for you to come in humble and ready to work with realistic expectations. Coaches see everything you do, and they've been doing this for a long time, so you're not going to show them something they haven't already seen or fool them. .

They deal with hundreds of kids every year, so the way to distinguish yourself in a positive way is to come in prepared to work hard every day. If you do that, they will see it and you will reap the rewards. Maybe not right away, but it will come as long as you keep working.