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The College Reality Check

Many high school seniors dream of the "perfect" college experience—socializing every day, acing every class, attending exciting events, and creating unforgettable memories with lifelong friends. We've seen this version of college in countless movies, on TikTok, and all over Instagram and social media. From dorm room tours with cute decorations and color-coordinated bedding to clips of friend groups laughing on campus lawns, it all looks so effortless and fun.

But is that really how college is for everyone? As a high school senior about to start college in a few months, I've felt the pressure to live up to that dream. People keep saying, "These will be the best four years of your life," like it's supposed to be this magical time where everything falls into place. But if I'm being honest, sometimes that just makes me feel nervous. What if college doesn't live up to those expectations? What if I struggle, feel lonely, or change my mind about what I want? That pressure to have the *perfect* college experience makes it hard to remember that it's okay if things aren't picture-perfect. The truth is, the idealized version of college life is more of a myth than a reality. A lot of the things we believe about college, like that we'll instantly make tons of new friends, know exactly what we want to study and be when we grow up, or live a life that looks like a Pinterest board, are unrealistic for most people. These myths are fueled by media, social expectations, and even adults who look back at their college years with rose-colored glasses. In reality, college is different for everyone. It comes with excitement, but also with struggles, stress, and lots of growth. Hopefully, this helps more students feel okay with having their *own* version of a college experience, whatever that may look like.

One of the most common myths is that college is this amazing, fun, social world where you meet your best friends on day one and spend every weekend partying, going to events, or just hanging out with your roommate. Honestly, I believed that for a long time. TikTok and Instagram are filled with college students showing off their fun experiences of game days, roommate bonding, parties, and cute campus moments. It's hard not to compare yourself to that and wonder if your experience will be good enough. But the truth is that not everyone will click with people right away. Making friends can take time, and it's actually really normal to feel lonely at first.

According to *The Vanderbilt Hustler*, social media plays a huge role in shaping false expectations. Price (2024) writes, "Students often feel pressure to match the curated versions of college life they see online, even when their reality looks very different." These perfect-looking

posts usually leave out the awkward first conversations, the homesickness, or the anxiety about fitting in. I've already had moments in high school when I felt like everyone else had more friends or was having more fun than I was. That insecurity might follow me into college, too. While some students find their friend group right away, many don't, and that's completely normal. College is full of people still figuring themselves out. It's not always about parties or socializing. Sometimes it's doing homework alone, feeling homesick, or just trying to get comfortable in a new environment. In a candid reflection, college freshman Emery Bergmann shared, "I just assumed that once I was at school, I was gonna have a million friends; I was gonna just party all the time... but it's just not like that. I haven't really found anyone I'm super close with" (Bergmann, 2017). Her experience underscores how common it is to feel isolated during the transition to college life. If we talked more openly about that reality, fewer students would feel like they're falling behind socially when, in truth, they're just going through a natural adjustment period.

Another myth that a lot of people believe is that once you get to college, you'll magically know what you want to major in and everything will come easily. You'll pick a path, stick with it, and succeed in every class like it's no big deal. I can't count how many times I've felt the feeling of pressure and stress that I *should* already have my major figured out and be 100% confident in what I choose. The reality is that a lot of students change their majors, struggle in classes, or even doubt their path entirely. According to Harper College (n.d.), many students switch majors at least once during their college career, and academic uncertainty is more common than most people admit. The site also mentions that financial stress is a big part of the college experience too. Not everyone can afford to go full-time without working, and balancing school with work or financial pressure can make academics even harder. This myth makes it seem like failure or changing your mind is a bad thing, but that's actually just part of the process. College is about

discovering what you're passionate about, trying new things, and sometimes realizing that your original plan doesn't fit anymore. That doesn't make you a failure; it actually makes you someone who's growing. I've started to understand that it's okay to be undecided and that it's okay if I struggle at first. Nobody has it all figured out right away, and we need to stop pretending they do. As Aiden Hartong, a senior visual communication and design major, shared, "Over the past year, my mental health struggles have made my employment very inconsistent. I think that makes me worry about money more." His experience underscores the significant impact that financial stress can have on students' well-being and academic performance.

This myth really hits home because I've heard so many people talk about how the "best" colleges are the ones with the highest rankings. There's this pressure to go to a big-name school and act like that automatically means you'll have the best experience. But the truth is, just because a school is highly ranked doesn't mean it's the right place for you. According to *College Confidential* (2022), rankings can distort what students think college should be and often lead them to chase prestige over fit. These lists are frequently based on things like alumni donations and acceptance rates, not student happiness, support systems, or mental health resources. What really matters is whether a college feels like a good fit for your personality, goals, and needs. Some students might thrive at a competitive university in a big city. Others might feel more at home at a smaller, quieter college where professors know their name. There's no one-size-fits-all, and success isn't defined by how famous your school is. I've come to realize that the right college for me is one where I feel supported and challenged, not one that looks good on paper. College should be about personal growth, not external validation.

Another big myth is that college students instantly become super independent, doing everything on their own with zero help. This includes cooking, cleaning, budgeting, managing their time,

and making adult decisions like it's no big deal. I'll admit, part of me is excited about having more freedom. But I'm also nervous. I don't know how to do everything yet, and I'm not sure I'm ready for it. I've heard from other students that the transition can be hard. The American College Health Association (2021) reported that many college students face high levels of anxiety, depression, and stress, especially during their first year. Trying to keep up with everything while also adjusting to a new life away from home and what they're used to is a lot. It's not realistic to expect yourself to be perfectly independent right away. College is about learning, not just in the classroom but in all aspects of life. You're not supposed to have it all figured out the moment you arrive. It's okay to mess up, ask for help, and lean on others. That doesn't make you weak; it makes you human. As one student shared, "I overwork myself and push myself to get stuff done, but my issue with work is that I'm very tired throughout the day" (Pierotti, 2021). This highlights how balancing work and academics can lead to exhaustion and stress. Recognizing that it's okay to seek support and take breaks is crucial for maintaining mental well-being during college.

Finally, there's the myth that college is this smooth journey toward your dream life. You go in, work hard, get internships, graduate, and then magically get your dream job. But real life sometimes won't follow a straight line like that. On *College Confidential*, a discussion titled "Does a Perfect College Exist?" (2022) shows how many students deal with academic failures, rejections, or totally unexpected twists in their plans. Setbacks are part of the experience. They help build resilience, teach you what you actually want, and help you grow into who you're meant to be. Success isn't about everything going perfectly. It's about how you handle things when they don't. That mindset shift has helped me feel less scared about the future. If I fail a class or have to take a break or totally change my path, it's okay. That won't make me less successful; it makes me more real. The "perfect" college experience is a myth. It's something

we've been sold by social media, movies, society, and even adults who forgot how hard college really was. While there are definitely exciting and joyful moments in college, it's also filled with challenges, growth, and figuring things out. And honestly, that's what makes it valuable.

Writing this essay helped me realize that I'm not alone in feeling this pressure that comes with college and the future. A lot of students are worried about whether their college experience will "measure up." But the truth is, college isn't supposed to look one certain way. It's different for everyone. Whether you take four years, five, or even longer to finish; whether you make tons of friends or just a few close ones; whether you stick with your major or change it three times, that is okay. What matters most is that you're growing, learning, and finding your own path. The pressure to live up to a "perfect" college experience can make students feel like they're failing when really, they're just being human. After doing this research and reflecting on my own fears, I've realized that it's more important to focus on *my* experience instead of chasing someone else's highlight reel. I want to go into college with an open mind, ready to accept the highs *and* the lows. I also want to be kind to myself when things don't go according to plan, and I hope others do the same. If you're another senior like me, getting ready to step into this new chapter, I want to tell you this: It's okay if your college experience doesn't look like a movie. It's okay if it's messy. That's where the real growth happens. Don't chase perfection. Just be honest, be you.

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