

A Whole New World

Captain James Clark and the men of the United States Marines, 2nd expeditionary corps, were sent to the jungles of Burma in the late 1920s. They were on a recon mission, ordered to scout out the jungle and return with intel on the land, inhabitants and potential obstacles.

During their mission, everything that could have gone wrong did. Hostile natives ambushed them repeatedly. Like the unceasing drip of rain from the trees, the attacks came. Some men caught malaria. Others went mad, wandering into the jungle—to a fate still unknown. Heat, humidity and a crushing despair clung to what was once a stalwart party of toughened soldiers.

Eventually, bedraggled and all but destroyed, the corps reached a wide, swift-moving river. They decided to split into two groups and attempt to hack their way to safety. The first group to get out would go for help and assist in a rescue mission to get the other.

The first group waited only a couple hours before rushing off in the direction they thought best. The second stayed behind for a couple days. They rested, treated their wounds, built tools and gathered what food they could before setting out.

Weeks later, the second group stumbled out of the Burmese jungle into a village. Barely alive, they were still coherent and together. When they got to the nearest U.S. military outpost, they were told no word of the other group had been found. A rescue mission was launched, and when that failed, another set out. The remains of the first group were never found.

Now that you've used your imagination for a while—yes, I made up that story—realize that even in this fiction lies an important truth: He who fails to plan plans to fail.

You may be preparing to jump into the jungle of college. It's a plunge into exciting unknowns past the ragged edge of your life and the experiences that have brought you this far. You may have high aspirations, or you may just be figuring things out as you go.

I'm not saying you'll barely survive, although you may well emerge from your college years with a heightened craving for caffeine—but also with a hard-earned degree.

No, I believe you can do more than survive. You can thrive. But you'll need tools.

As a recent graduate of Regent University, I want to share what I've learned with new students to help them succeed. So think of me as your outfitter, as someone who made his way through and out of the jungle.

Fuel Your Brain

Nothing kills an engine faster than putting junk in the gas tank that doesn't belong. Your body is the same way.

Like clean fuel, a good diet is the greatest protector against the seemingly unstoppable freshman 15. More importantly, healthy food choices power your brain. On the other hand, bad fuel means bad performance, and thus, bad grades.

The hardest part about adopting a good diet is the shift in mindset. At home, the food in the fridge is the food you eat. If you use the same mindset in some school cafeterias, the freshman 15 will be knocking on—actually more like kicking in—your door.

You now have the responsibility to stock your own fridge. You may or may not have a fridge in your dorm room, but that doesn't bar you from embracing healthy choices. Take the water, not the soda. Give those fries shade, and grab that apple instead. Green vegetables are your friends. Experts say

to aim for five smaller meals as opposed to three big ones. In short, when we're talking healthy fuel, less is more.

These simple decisions take a lot less willpower than getting up at 6 a.m. to run off that unwanted 15 pounds. Baby steps turn into powerful strides in time, and your good decisions get easier the more often you make them.

The undergraduate dorms at Regent have full kitchens, an immense blessing. I was able to cook what I wanted and make affordable choices with health in mind.

Sleep is as important as food. Yes, the zzzs are undoubtedly one of the most overlooked and disregarded aspects of college life.

If sleep were represented as a puppy—dog lovers, hang with me here—it would be abused and underfed, used to being yelled at and kicked. It's pitiful, but it's uncannily symbolic of the brutal cycle to which most students subject themselves. Wake up early, stay up late, sleep five hours. Do it again and again. Repeat for weeks on end, and you have a sickly body.

When you sleep, your body repairs itself. Your muscles heal, and your mind is eased. In short, the puppy catches a break. And you'll thank yourself if you can nail your sleep schedule. It takes some discipline, but it's the way our bodies were meant to rest, in rhythm.

If you can master these two things, eating and sleeping, you'll not only stay away from packing on the freshman 15 and getting sick, but you'll also be happier and more alert.

Bond With Friends

No one is meant to be an island. No one should be alone. Forming friendships is one of the most important parts of any college experience. Some of the people you bond with in your college years will be what one of my mentors called "lifers,"

people who stick around for life.

Friends teach you about how to work with others, when to compromise and when to be downright selfless.

When you're in relationship, the rules of give-and-take govern your words and actions. It's a two-way street on which you learn how to move back and forth; it's hard to be selfish and keep good friends.

The Lord has shown His love to me many times through friendships. Sometimes it was through an encouraging comment, and other times, through a hot meal and a hug.

In the end, friends teach you about yourself and how you treat others—or maybe how you should start treating others.

Crave the Challenge

I'll never forget the first day of English 101. I walked into class, perky and ready to conquer the world. When my professor entered, I was startled by her resemblance to what I imagined she would look like, which was mostly based on the appearance of my high school English teacher.

She told us we could write a 750-word essay about a historic event, so I chose 9/11 as my subject. Big mistake!

I worked on that paper for hours. I typed away into the evening. I even played the Schindler's List soundtrack to get my emotional rhetoric flowing. Proud and plucky, I turned in that paper. But when I got it back, the pages were practically dripping with red ink. My professor had torn apart every paragraph, sentence and phrase. But she also said she believed in me and saw major potential, even amid the glaring flaws in my work.

I eventually got over my pride. I took her advice and wrote my second paper with her edits in mind and got a far better grade—and, thankfully, a lot less red.

As time passed, that professor became one of my favorites. I craved the challenge she gave her students and signed up for more of her classes. I took the opportunity to visit her office to talk about studying and working in English beyond my undergraduate years.

One summer, I went through a fitness craze. I convinced myself to do a triathlon and even called my professor for advice. She promptly mailed me a full training schedule and a plethora of related information.

I didn't end up entering the event (I found barbecue to be far less challenging—please don't think I'm a hypocrite for all the things I said about fitness), but I did find a professor who cared about me not only as a student but also as a person.

I've had many other exemplary professors. Whenever I met with them, they almost always showered me with sound advice. And my grades usually got better in their classes.

Remember, some professors have been in school or studying a subject as long as you've been alive. They're a treasure trove of wisdom and knowledge, and it would be a shame not to learn from them. Whether you love or hate them, there's plenty to be learned. Some can offer advice on a certain career or field, and others, good old-fashioned wisdom.

Yes, it may require jumping out of your comfort zone, checking the syllabus to find their office hours and making the effort to meet with them, but you might learn more in one five-minute conversation than in a semester of lectures.

Educators want to see initiative, and they want to help. Give them the opportunity to do just that.

Find Your Purpose

If you haven't yet learned to find your identity in Christ, college is the perfect time to set that foundation. If you

don't know where you stand spiritually, your efforts to better yourself or even find yourself are futile.

During your undergraduate years, you'll constantly ask yourself, "Who am I?" "What is my purpose?" and "What am I created to do?" And you'll be bombarded with questions about your career and future on Thanksgiving, Christmas and every other family holiday.

For years, I struggled with feelings of inadequacy and imperfection. When I finally latched onto the truth that God loves me and realized nothing I do will ever change that, I learned to walk confidently in freedom as a child of God.

It's likely you have a Bible already, but if you don't, be sure to get one, then find a Scripture reading plan you can realistically stick with even through the demands of college life. It's important!

Overall, I hope I've given you a better chance of getting out of the jungle. Yes, there's a lot more I could write about—study habits, the most underrated extracurricular activities, dating pitfalls—but I think I've hit on the essentials for starting and finishing college well.

If you remember nothing else, I pray this advice stays with you: Trust God and keep going even if you make mistakes. Pick yourself up and don't beat yourself up. Navigating the jungle always goes better if you're fueled, equipped and willing to persevere.

Getting that diploma may seem far away, but time will fly. Your days in college—good, bad and ugly alike—hold the potential to be some of your best. As author Ursula K. Le Guin wrote, "It is good to have an end to journey toward, but it is the journey that matters in the end."

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