

Innis College: Differences between University and High School

Many new students find that before they arrive here, their expectations of university are the same that they had of high school. These expectations can be academic, such as the work load, personal, such as employment, or social, such as meeting new people and making friends. Once students arrive, though, they realize that the University of Toronto and their high school are completely different. To give you some idea of the possible differences between your high school experience and your upcoming experience at university, we have asked students from all years and disciplines to reflect on the differences that they found when they first arrived here and throughout their first year.

Don't Give Up

University is not high school! It is much harder and more demanding; so don't get discouraged if your marks aren't as high as they were in high school. It's expected that a university student's grade will drop around 10%. Also, even though your first test doesn't go as well as you expected, don't give up! First university tests are always scary and this may affect your performance on the test. But don't let this discourage you. Rather, let this be a way to help you realize that university tests are at a higher level, and you can better prepare yourself for the next test! From experience, I remember I was extremely upset about my first chemistry test and I felt like giving up. However, I started preparing for the second test much earlier and told myself not to be scared. As a result, I did much better and I was happy with my grades.

- Second-year Life Science student

Transition: High School to University

When looking back at high school, I picture it much like that of a cheesy 80s movie. You know, high fiving everyone as you walk down the hall, Molly Ringwald as your best friend and John Cusack holding a boombox above his head. Then you head to university and your life turns into the traditional 21 century movie. So, 300 Spartans fighting, the world coming to an end by floods and zombie attacks. Ok, that might be a bit of an exaggeration, but you get the idea that they are different.

I went from a small town school where I knew everyone in it, getting to know my teachers and being involved in multiple extra-curricular activities to being lost in my 300 person classes, completely broke and getting terrible marks. Coping financially was the toughest part of my first year. While in high school your funds go towards gas and concerts, university requires you to pay the devastating prices of tuition, rent, food and printer ink. While you assume OSAP will cover the majority of your living expenses, it doesn't always and you have to learn how to budget your finances. While you're used to the one-on-one contact with your teacher, I found it comforting to be lost in a large classroom. I may have just stopped listening because I wasn't living in the fear of being asked a question, or the teaching style was different, but my marks dropped significantly

in my first year. While they say to expect over a 10% drop, it still isn't comforting when you see your final grades.

I don't want you to panic. My grades are back to what they use to be, I don't feel lost in this big city anymore, I have friends and my finances are starting to finally make sense. Strangely enough all the stress and panic of first year makes you feel more ecstatic when things actually start working out.

- Third-year Humanities student

Differences between High School and University

The transition from high school to university can be exciting and terrifying all at once. Going into university you will meet lots of new people, learn new things, and maybe even move to a new place. Although it can be tough, the new lifestyle and all of the experiences that come with it can be rewarding (and really fun!) if you keep your academic life in order.

Time Management

One of the biggest differences between high school and university is personal time management. Balancing classes, readings, extra-curricular activities, work, and a social life can be difficult. In high school your time is well structured and there is often class time allotted to read or do work. However, in university creating a balanced schedule is up to you. Looking at your university schedule in the summer, it might seem as though you will have a lot of free time - you might even have less than fifteen hours of class a week. However, the majority of learning will be done independently. You are expected to do the assigned readings (which can be heavy) and assignments on your own, and you must set aside your own time to do these.

The independent nature of university classes can make it easy to fit in a lot of hours at a part time job. Even though you may have a full week day off, this will be valuable time to read, research, and work on essays and assignments. Although it's tempting, be careful not to work more hours than you can handle. Start off small and see how many hours you feel comfortable working to balance your work load.

Independent Learning

Unlike in high school, university professors do not remind students of upcoming assignments or necessary readings. You will be given a syllabus in the first week of class that will contain all of the important dates and deadlines for the semester. Not only is it up to you to budget the time that you will need for essays and assignments, but to remember to keep up with the assigned readings in time for the corresponding class. Although it might seem like this material is covered in lecture or tutorial, don't fall into the trap of skipping readings. They are often more detailed and provide the background necessary to truly understand and benefit from lectures. After all, you don't want to be cramming 900 pages of readings into one night before an exam!

In high school, you have weekly (if not daily) contact with your teachers, and you are able to ask questions or seek help quite easily. However, in university you can be in a class with hundreds of other students, which obviously makes asking a question quite difficult. To make things easier you will be expected to attend tutorials, which are small meeting groups of students where you will discuss readings and clarify any questions you might have. These sessions will be led by a Teaching Assistant (TA) who will also be marking your work. If you still have questions, you will be able to contact your professors during their office hours or through e-mail. Basically, the onus is on you to seek assistance if needed - it's up to you to know when you should seek advice on assignments or course material.

- Fourth-year Humanities student