

**THINGS TO UNDERSTAND AND REMEMBER ABOUT A COLLEGE HISTORY
COURSE (OR ANY COLLEGE COURSE) AND PARTICULARLY THIS COURSE
Buckner F. Melton, Jr., J.D., Ph.D.**

**(Freshmen and other first-year college students need to pay particularly
close attention to this handout)**

1) **This is not the thirteenth grade.** This is college. That means that for most of you this course will be more demanding—a lot more demanding—than any course you took in high school. It's supposed to be. If it isn't, then I'm not doing my job right. The people of the state of Georgia have decided, in establishing this college, to subsidize your education at an institution of higher learning, and they expect to get a return on that investment. It's my job to see that they do—it's how and why I earn my princely (HAH!) salary. So please don't compare this course to anything you did in high school or complain about how hard it is.

2) **I am not your mother. Nor am I your home room teacher.** Again, this is college, not high school. In college you don't have home room teachers, and if you're not at the age of majority (i.e., 18), you're very close to it, and once you reach it, your mother will likely be a lot less involved in overseeing your life. But even if she stays involved, I am not she.

What does this mean? It means that in college—certainly in this course—you are expected to take nearly all of the responsibility for doing the course work, attending the class, taking coherent notes, mastering the course material, meeting the deadlines, doing the assigned reading, being aware of schedule changes, and showing up for quizzes and exams. I will not badger you about your failure to do the work. I will not hunt you down or call you or email you (much less contact your parents) asking why you weren't in class or why you didn't show up for the exam. I will not delay giving a quiz because you're running a couple of minutes late. I won't give you extra credit assignments to help you overcome your failures to do the regular work. In fact, as long as you don't disrupt the class or otherwise impair the opportunities of your fellow students to learn, I don't care what you do; it's your life. I hope you'll take the opportunity to learn, but I can't make you. So if you miss an exam or fail the course or experience some other unpleasant outcome, your first recourse in trying to understand why should be to look in the mirror, not at me. If after doing so you still believe that the outcome is somehow my fault, the burden is going to be on you to prove to me—or if need be to the school administration—exactly how and why that's so.

So if all that is on you, where do I come in? What are my responsibilities to you? I do three things.

- First, I have the duty to present the material in a competent, professional fashion and work with you in class to help you understand it. I have been teaching in college/law school longer than most of you have been alive, and I believe I do an acceptable job of this. So does

Middle Georgia State, or it wouldn't keep employing me. If you disagree, you're welcome to try to convince the school administration otherwise.

- Second, on quizzes and exams, I have the duty to evaluate—again, in a competent, professional fashion—how well you've done so. Again, I believe that I consistently do so. If you disagree, then once again, you're welcome to try to convince the school administration otherwise.
- Third, if you have questions about the material that, after reasonable efforts on your part you still don't get, I will make myself reasonably available outside of class to try to answer those questions. I will also be happy to a) discuss possible solutions to how personal issues may be affecting your work in the course, b) discuss questions about becoming a history major, c) discuss questions that have arisen in other courses that I think I may comment intelligently upon without intruding into the other professor's bailiwick, d) give unofficial subjective advice or views, where I believe that I am competent to do so, as to future courses or programs of study for you to enroll in, and e) devote reasonable resources to discuss any other subjects that, in my view, relate somehow to your career as a college student and future professional that I believe myself competent to comment upon.

Other than these three things, it's all on you.

3) Some of you will have to work harder than others for the same outcome.

This is unavoidable and something that I can't help. By the time you begin my course, some of you will have had high school American history courses more recently than others. Some of you will have had more American history in high school than others. Some of you will have had better high school history teachers than others. Some of you will have been exposed to a better overall high school curriculum than others. Some of you will have had courses in high school or college that have given you a better background for understanding the material in this course, while others have not. Some of you will have developed better study habits in your previous education than others. Some of you will have more aptitude for calculus, or physics, or economics, than you do for history, while others of you will have more aptitude for history. I cannot help any of this. If you believe you were short-changed in high school when it came to your preparation for college, or for my course in particular, you may choose to contact your high school's board of trustees or your local board of education to complain, but that doesn't change the fact that I can't help it.

It may help you to understand that I am not trying to fail anyone in this course. As a teacher, I have dedicated my professional life to helping people learn and understand, not to attempting to fail people. This course, while hard, is designed to be passed by the average college student. That doesn't mean that every student will pass it, and that doesn't mean that every student who does pass will do so with the same degree of effort. Regardless of that, as noted above, the lion's share of the responsibility for passing the course rests on you, not on me.

4) I can explain it to you, but I can't understand it for you. Again, this is where you come in. The greatest teacher in the world cannot learn the material for you, or understand the material for you, or pass the exam for you. As your teacher, I will do everything I can—within reason—to make sure I have explained to you, in a competent and professional fashion, everything you need to know to pass the quizzes and exams (and, more importantly, to actually learn and understand the material in this course). Beyond that point I cannot (not will not, but cannot) go. A surgeon can perform a heart bypass or a liver transplant on a patient, but that patient, by then eating buckets of lard or drinking Everclear to excess, can frustrate or destroy the surgeon's work, even if that surgeon is the greatest in the world. I promise to do as good a job of teaching you as I can. After that, it's on you.

5) It's easier to keep up than to catch up. The most important thing you'll learn in college is not what year Columbus discovered America, or Ohm's Law, or the Pythagorean Theorem, or how to take a patient history. It is how to manage your time and take responsibility for your own performance. The rule of thumb is that for each hour you spend in a college classroom, you should spend two additional hours outside of class learning the material. Let's do the math. If you're taking a five-course load this semester, with each course meeting for an hour and fifteen minutes twice a week, then you're spending twelve and a half hours in class each week. Twice that is twenty-five hours. Twelve and a half in-class plus twenty-five outside of class equals thirty-seven and a half hours, or something close to a forty-hour week. Sounds like a regular job, right? Coincidence? I think not.

Frankly, the rule of thumb may not be sufficient. As noted above, some of you, through no fault of your own, may have educational deficiencies, such as weak preparation in high school, or the fact that high school was years ago rather than just a few months ago. In the first year or so of college, your study skills may be inefficient, underdeveloped, or rusty; in that case you may need to put in significantly more than forty hours. If that bothers you, consider that most highly successful people have had to work far more than forty hours per week, at least on occasion, to get where they are, and nearly all salaried employees have individual weeks when they have to work a lot more than forty hours. As a result, in college, you should see forty hours as a minimum—a starting point—that you're prepared to add to considerably. Some weeks, when exams are coming or big assignments are due, keeping your workload down to forty hours will be impossible unless you want to fail a course or two. If that scares you, remember that the heavy work load is an investment in your future and that everyone who has ever graduated from college has likely been in the same boat at some point.

This work load should also tell you that you can't just ignore the responsibility of learning the material until the weekend before (or worse, the night before) the exam. (Well, you can, but you probably won't like the result.) There is simply too much material to learn in a few hours, much less by pulling an all-nighter before the exam and coming in sleep-deprived. It's a far better strategy, and one that will be much easier on you, if you study diligently from day one (that's what my weekly quizzes are designed, among other things, to help you do).

If you have a life outside of school—particularly if you have an established family and/or a full- or part-time job—I cannot help that. I assume that you know better than I what your commitments and capabilities are, and that you have chosen your course load accordingly. In doing so I am respecting and honoring your mature judgment rather than attempting to be your mother. I know that it is often hard to juggle family and employment commitments with getting a college degree, and I salute you for it, but I cannot compromise standards to take account of it.

6) Behaving rudely, especially in class—to me or to another student—will never ... ever ... ever make things better. People have forgotten how to behave civilly. Part of this may be the pressures of modern life, or the anonymity of the Internet that lets people say things irresponsibly without taking ownership of them. That is no excuse for bad behavior in this course, and I won't tolerate such behavior. You **will** address me with civility and respect in all circumstances, and I will reciprocate. You **will** address your fellow students with civility and respect in all circumstances. We may discuss anything in this course, including sensitive and controversial political and social issues, since they form the very heart of history, but all of us **will** do so with civility. If you believe you have a legitimate point of view, concern, or grievance, raise it civilly. On the other hand, if you publicly challenge another student's good faith, or my good faith, or my competence as an instructor, or make threatening or violent statements or gestures, you are subject to prompt disciplinary action, up to and including (in extreme cases) expulsion from this school and even arrest and criminal prosecution. Such behaviors are **never** warranted. You're a grown-up. Act like one.

So there you have it. Is this handout a sure-fire guide to acing the course or being successful in college? Nope. But it's a start. Pay close attention to what's written here and you'll have a leg up on where you would have been without it, and those fellow students of yours who didn't read it. Best of luck!