“Master your Bachelor’s” at Regis University’s College for Professional Studies

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Contents

Introduction..........................................................XX

Tip #1
Master your Degree Plan................................................XX

   Continually study your Degree Plan until it ALL makes sense. And when it comes to selecting your courses be sure that you “Know Your Options!”

Tip #2
Master your Assignment Criteria......................................XX

   You write one; we read many. Extra care to ensure that you understand what is expected leads to better grades and better relationships with your faculty. And when it comes to coursework, size definitely matters.

Tip #3
Master your Research Skills.................................................XX

   You may know a lot about a subject; others have written books about it. What works best is a blend of experience and productive investigation, so while you’re in school, be sure to develop strong research skills. You might even gain specializations useful to your career and other important aspects of your life.

Conclusion..........................................................XX
Introduction

“Greetings everyone. On behalf of my fellow faculty and the dozens upon dozens of dedicated and hard-working administrators and staff here at Regis, it is my pleasure to help welcome you into your baccalaureate studies, here Regis University’s College for Professional Studies.”

The above statement, or something pretty close to it, has served as the “opening line” for a popular presentation of mine, made countless times since the early 90s in an ever-evolving series of programs generally referred to as “New Student Orientation.” I am quite honored now to be asked to replicate the most recent iteration of my presentation into print.

I feel differently, sitting at the keyboard, from that excited sense of issuing the following tips directly into the eyes, ears, and minds of living, breathing (sometimes palpitating) new students, whose energy and enthusiasm have served to fuel my expression. However, I find an equivalent excitement in knowing that these tips, in the written form, will reach far more students, in and around our Colorado and Las Vegas campuses, and, indeed, from coast to coast and across the globe, thanks to advancements in distance education that could scarcely be imagined, when I began teaching and speaking for Regis.

If there’s one source of special pride that has always enhanced my motivation and driven my teaching and other duties at this excellent university, it is the sight of plentiful students of mine marching proudly across the stage on Commencement Day, the day of “finishing,” which, by name, is also the day of beginning. You can get there from here!

Nobody who understands education and learning would promise you a smooth and predictable journey toward that long-sought goal of yours. In fact, real learning requires otherwise. You must navigate the road, negotiate the twists, maintain your “vehicle” for best performance and durability, and, at all times, embrace growth along the pathway, which will sometimes appear clearly before you and sometimes have to be blazed through the thicket of the unknown. Prepare yourself for an incredible journey into a new and better you.

In the pages that follow, I offer you three general but important tips toward mastering this journey toward a fruitful conclusion. These tips reflect the best practices and most helpful approaches demonstrated by successful and fulfilled students of mine across more than 250 courses taught, mostly to adults, at this school. In recent years, I have called this presentation “Mastering Your Bachelor’s at Regis,” so I will stick with that theme and material in this essay. I hope you find the following tips and ideas interesting to ponder, amusing to reflect upon, and reasonable to put into practice. Your goal is now on the horizon. May the following aid you in that direction.
Tip # 1

Master your Degree Plan

Continually study your Degree Plan until it ALL makes sense. And, when it comes to selecting your courses, be sure that you “Know Your Options!”

By now you have likely held in your hand an apparently complex and quite official-looking “planning form” known as your Degree Plan. This document is often referred to as your “roadmap” to graduation. Let’s take a moment to consider this document and its importance, over the next months and years, to your life.

I would not attempt, in a speech or brief essay, to review all the details, requirements, options, and other technicalities of this formal document. But I will put on the table the idea that the student who continually takes time and care to develop a mastery of this document’s sections and functions will enjoy his or her studies much more than one who does not ever take the time to fully understand the many requirements, and also the openings, available.

It is not enough to have a basic working understanding of parts of your Degree Plan. For best results, you must understand this complex form top to bottom, through and through. Classmates sometimes come to you for help—that’s the picture we want. But here, to help our discussion, is the very basic format of all these documents, regardless of major. The graduation requirements shown on the Degree Plan, regardless of major, come in three major categories. These include (1) “Core Studies”—courses and types of courses that all Regis graduates must fulfill; (2) Major Requirements—including, sometimes, specializations to select within the major); and (3) General Elective credit—which can be anything else; students are allowed, depending on several factors, about 30 hours in this wide-open slot. Depending upon what may have transferred in for you (and the requirement slots thereby filled) and what you may have already taken at Regis, plus what requirements you might fulfill through the Testing Center or the Portfolio process (these are issues to discuss with staff from those offices or with your advisor—you have certain slots” on the Degree Plan already filled, and other slots are still “open,” needing to be filled. That’s how the document works. The tricky part arises in slots that can be filled many different ways.

I run into lots of students who have taken the time and made the effort to master this complex “roadmap.” These are students who, on the first night of class, answer my question, “So why are you taking Communication Theory?” with an answer that reflects precision and good judgment. Maybe the student will answer, “I’m in this course because it’s a foundational course for my major, and even if I change majors, as I’m considering, this course will still give me the three
hours I need toward my social science Core requirement.” Now, wouldn’t you like to be the student who answers such a question in such a well-informed way? Please believe me: you would like to be this student.

On the other hand, what is just as common (I guess I’ll admit it, even more common), is an answer that is only somewhat informed—sometimes problematically so. For example, another class I frequently teach is Persuasion, Influence and Motivation, BA/COM 437. I can’t recall beginning of section of that course without at least one student answering my first-night question with “I’m taking this course because it’s required for my major.” “Interesting.” I answer. “You might like to know that there is no major here at Regis for which this course is required.” Oopsie.

“Well,” the student replies, “I need it for something—my advisor said so.” This is a recipe for trouble. In fact, there is actually no major, nor even an “Area of Specialization” within a major, that actually requires this particular course, nor is there any Core requirement that mandates this course. One thing you can count on from your academic advisor is a high degree of familiarity with the workings of your degree plan. It is the practical center of his or her professional universe. Therefore, this person’s advisor would never have called this class “required.” However, the student, lacking a good handle on the degree plan and its related vocabulary, might have heard things that way. The student is, after all, “required” to fill the six hours for the social science requirement in Core Studies. Did the advisor recommend BA/COM 437 as one popular way to fulfill this requirement, and the student heard that as “this course is required?” It’s hard to say just how this miscommunication occurred, but it would not happen that way with a student who has mastered the workings of the degree plan; hence the importance of Tip #1!

Since we are working this case-in-point a little, let’s use it as a reminder that the Undergraduate Programs guidebook (the one that comes out each academic year and includes the schedule of courses, campuses, dates and times), provides thorough details on the Degree Plan requirements for all the various majors and all their specializations. If you check that book right now, you’ll discover at least two specific slots where BA/COM 437 could fit in.

For one possibility, as mentioned above (and I know you are verifying all this in your guidebook right now), notice how BA/COM 437, as with any “communication” course, can count toward the “Social Sciences” slice of the Core Studies requirements. (The Core Studies page appears right before all the individual majors are presented and broken out). Can you see how that works? What else counts as social science coursework, while you’re looking there? These are things you need to know. Also, notice that our example course appears, in the communication major “Areas of Specialization” as one of the four courses, from which any three may be selected, for the Leadership track. See how these options work?

There’s a big difference between “this could fill an open ‘slot’ on your degree plan” (which is what the student’s advisor probably said) and “this is required,” which is what the student probably heard. As course instructor, I prefer students who really want to be in the class and
know exactly why they’re there. Wouldn’t you? Perhaps the student, had he or she better understood all the available options, might have chosen a different course to take, toward filling whatever requirement this course is meeting. Instead, he or she is in my class, believing it to be “required.”

I hope that you are coming to see more and more importance in “mastering your degree plan.” By doing so, you will come to know your options through and through, which means you will take the courses that you most like to take, which means that you will more easily find the motivation required to fulfill the course requirements (aka “homework”) that we hope will challenge you. Your dean, degree chairs, academic committee members, course facilitators, and, many others at this school have worked hard to provide you with an ample menu of choices, just for this purpose. But you must do your part.

Your advisor can recommend courses that fit your stated goals, needs, and desires, and he or she can help make sure you do not take courses that will not at all fit into your Degree Plan. But only you can make the right call in cases where multiple options exist, as is the case in a great many places on your degree plan, so *master this document*. 
Tip # 2

Master your Assignment Criteria

You write one; we read many. Extra care to ensure that you understand what is expected leads to better grades and better relationships with your faculty. And when it comes to coursework, size definitely matters.

You write one; we read many. It is a mantra I repeat plentifully to my students, and you may even find the reminder elsewhere in this book. Please understand that I do not make this statement for purposes of intimidation. To the contrary, I remind you of this important reality so that you will reach within your capabilities and produce something original, something I would not otherwise see in the set of papers collected, though all are written from the same instructions. In other words, do not try simply to “get it right.” Instead, work knowing from the requirements and expectations, and, within those guidelines, craft something that only you could have produced. Allow me to explain.

First let’s consider why you are writing a certain paper in the first place. I doubt that you raised your hand and begged, “Oh, Teacher, may we please write papers for next week?” The instructor has made this request of you, not the other way around. If you can understand the assignment in the larger context of the overall coursework required—seeing its role in the gameplan of the syllabus—you will be much better able to understand the course requirements and where, within them, your best learning opportunities await.

Take the teacher’s perspective for a moment. If you were teaching this class, and you assigned this assignment, what would you be looking for in terms of “signs of growth”? That is what we teachers want to see. We do not need for you to prove you “already knew all this.” And we do not need to learn how today’s topic is not all that relevant, as you understand your world. Those are interesting critical stances, and such thoughts might cross your mind. There are times we may assign that very paper. But please remember that right along with the paper that asserts “I have a better plan for this week’s paper,” the instructor will find a nice bunch of papers that did just what was asked, demonstrating well that the learning opportunity inherent in the assignment facilitated student growth. Lots of papers will show this; let yours be one of them.

But “Wait!” you say. “I don’t even understand this assignment. How can I somehow imagine its role within the larger course gameplan? The instructor was in a rush by the time we got to ‘next week’s homework,’ and now I don’t even understand what I wrote down in my notes!”
Let’s call that an everyday case of communication breakdown. Is not the preferred mode, and we work to avoid it, but it can of course happen in any class, as with anywhere else. Rather than to figure out who’s to blame, let’s focus on your interests. You have a paper to write. The reader will know what he or she is looking for—after all, he or she likely invented the assignment and made up the instructions. So before you spend another minute working on an assignment for which your instructions are unclear, here’s what to do: contact the instructor for clarification.

What’s that? Your paper is due in two hours? Oopsie. That is definitely going to impact the “assignment clarification” process. Like you, your course facilitator balances numerous roles. We might spend a whole day “working the e-mail,” and can therefore answer an incoming question in minutes. But there are other days where we may not get to our computer until late at night, if at all that day. So here is a plan, under our present topic of “master your assignment criteria,” that is especially practical and takes “the blame game” out of the picture altogether.

Let’s say your class meets on Tuesday nights. On Wednesday, pull out your course materials, and study over the assignments—reading, writing, and anything else. Think about how you will approach your assignments. As you think this over, you might think of some specific questions regarding how you will fulfill your plan of attack. Now you have a “good question” to e-mail to your instructor, and you are doing it on the right day. Whether your reply comes in a few minutes, or in a day or so, you’ll have your answer with plenty of time to work productively with the information that comes back to you.

Let’s take that one step further. Since you didn’t simply write, “I don’t understand the assignment,” but instead asked a specific question as to the appropriateness of a possible approach, you have made a great impression upon your instructor. We just love good questions. Yes, “every question is a good question,” as the cliche goes, but there are some questions that are really good. Questions exploring creative possibilities within the assignment criteria are usually placed in this category.

Be warned: if you e-mail your facilitator a really good question, you may end up on the phone for a while. And to think, all you had wanted to know (for example) was whether you could analyze a case that happened in the past, or must it be something that is ongoing right now. That half-hour on the phone with your instructor surely did open up a great idea for your paper. See? We are in this together, but it is your extra effort that will lead to your extra benefit, including any extra effort toward making sure you’ve “mastered your assignment criteria.” And if your extra effort involves out-of-class communication that leads to an enhanced relationship with your course facilitator, then all the better for everyone!

Here’s one last point on this subject, before we move on to Tip #3. One aspect of your assignment that is almost always prescribed in the instructions is its length. Whether this is a page count, a word count, a time limit, or something else, we usually ask for a certain amount of “treatment” for the given assignment. It is not fair for you to write twice as much, nor is it not fair for you to write only half. It doesn’t matter if you were “really into it” or “not really into it,”
the job is to meet these requirements. Quality is another matter and of course is the most important aspect of your work, but size is directly quantifiable and hard not to notice.

My advice over the years has been simple: meet the length requirements, but do so at the shorter side of the range for oral assignments and on the longer side for written assignments. For example, under assignment instructions calling for “a speech of five to ten minutes,” a sharp and effective oral presentation lasting six minutes delights everyone in the room. Such brevity, within the assigned range, also helps the facilitator to manage the clock (so we won’t be rushed when it comes time to discuss next week’s assignment!), given that other students will push the maximum time limit and a few may even exceed it. What you do in class, orally, is on everyone’s dime. You want the A? A good plan is to nail the five-to-ten minute speech in six minutes.

In contrast, what you write for your instructor need not be kept to the shorter side. Here’s where you push toward the maximum length allowed, using the full length range to better develop your ideas, provide examples, define key terms in more depth, and otherwise strengthen your case. I’m not talking about adding “fluff” (by whatever name) onto the back of a paper to make it longer. I’m talking about “infilling” the paper, from the inside out, looking for good places for added clarification or depth. You will find further information on how to plan, structure, and “infill” a great paper in the chapter of this book titled “Successful Communication for Adult Learners.”

Bottom line, whenever you have a question, whether it regards length or any other consideration, your best bet is to ask your instructor—early in the week. Not only will you get your question productively answered, you will enhance your relationship with your instructor. Both are valuable outcomes from your efforts to “master your assignment criteria.” And remember, if you’re shooting for an A, which indicates “outstanding,” make sure that your work is not immediately “standing out” in the wrong way, as too short or too long. Within the assigned range, for the oral presentation it’s best to “go short,” and for the written assignment, stretch out a little and let your ideas “go long.”
Tip # 3

Master your Research Skills

You may know a lot about a subject; others have written books about it. What works best is a blend of experience and productive investigation, so while you’re in school, be sure to develop strong research skills. You might even gain specializations useful to your career and other important aspects of your life.

A tremendous resource in Regis University’s College for Professional Studies is the remarkable experience base of our students. Incredible possibilities arise when teaching, let’s say, an accounting class that features, among the students, a number of practicing number crunchers of one type or another (one classmate works in accounts receivable; another in payroll; and so on). But as rich a resource as this is, it can also present a sense of “expertise” that might lower one’s sense of the need for research. True, adult learning coursework is often assigned in terms of learner experiences, in the form of “reflection papers” and the like, but you want to be sure to bring fresh insight to the experiences that you’ve had and reflect upon. As I have said often, in talks at new student orientations, “You may know a lot; others have written books.” Use research to add depth and insight to your present expertise, whatever it is or whatever you are wishing it to be.

You write one; we read many. Our mantra rears its head again. Some of the papers teachers read feature a credible and relevant connection to sources of information unearthed by the student. Whether quoting directly from the source or just making reference to it as support for a fact or claim found there, such displays of research and support can elevate the force and academic strength of almost any written assignment. In other words, to improve your research skills is to improve your grades.

But there are other reasons, along with those of grading, for developing strong research skills. As an adult learner, you are embedded in community life, organizational life, family life, and a lot of other “lives” that are pressing here and now. The issues that concern your various “lives”—some would say your various “identities”—make for great subject matter in your Regis coursework. As you engage your studies, you have much more at stake than just your grade. Use this chance to better understand and to improve situations of importance.

Adult learners live in the Now. And Now happens to be, among other things, part of the Information Age. Whatever issues you’re pondering, as you consider your approach to a given
homework assignment, there is useful information available for your retrieval and consideration. If you are doing homework that is related to one or more of your “real lives,” then you especially owe it to yourself (and those around you) to do your due diligence as a gatherer of relevant information. The point is that going back to college gives you a great opportunity to update and refine your research skills, which can, indeed, “raise your grade” (in life!) in many ways.

Now the question becomes, what do we mean by “research”? The term has many meanings within academia. In undergraduate programs, we are not usually talking about gathering original data and analyzing it. Mainly we mean going out and finding credible sources of information to inform and support the things you say and write as a student. But does it count as “research” if you merely “google” your subject? Does Wikipedia count as an academic source? In truth, these are hotly debated questions. The general arena for this debate could be called “credibility of online sources.” Some online sources are very credible; others are not. Search engines, such as Google, and reader-developed information catalogs, such as Wikipedia, make for great starting points in one’s research; most academics will agree to that. I certainly use both in my own research. But such web-based research serves mainly to spark ideas and identify authors and works worthy of further investigation. Web searches can be a start for your research, but they shouldn’t be the finish.

An excellent resource, when looking further into authors and works identified in more general web searches, is the Regis library. For students in the Denver Metro area, going there in person has its advantages, namely access to the exceptional and dedicated staff there, who will sit side-by-side with you to help you get going on your research and will answer your ongoing questions, as they come up. But these same staff can be accessed online as well. Simply click on the Library link, from the Regis homepage, and you’ll find contact information readily available, including contacts for “reference” assistance, which means help with your research. This library link is the access point, or portal, for the majority of the academic research that goes on at Regis University. Learn to use this resource.

Along with the question of “what counts” as valid research, and where to find it, comes the issue of how much research to include in one’s paper or presentation. I have polled many Regis students from many majors regarding this question, and one answer that comes back is this: For many assignments there is no “required research,” per se, at all. What a great opportunity, I answer, for their work to stand out: research has not been required, and yet you included some anyway. Whatever it is you had to say in the paper, you found some current information that adds to its merit and credibility. If I assign a five-minute speech, I don’t want the student to “go the extra mile” and speak for 10 minutes. We talked about that earlier in this essay. But I have never seen a paper that featured research, even if not assigned, and thought, “Sorry, no research allowed.” This is the extra mile you should go! If the assignment instructions require a “minimum of three sources,” find and use five. The instructions require six to eight sources, show 12. Now that stands out in the right direction! And not only will extra research strengthen your paper, it will better develop your expertise in areas that matter to you (that’s why you chose them as topics and material for fulfilling your assignment).
Of course, I cannot provide here a tutorial on online research using the resources available to you through the Regis library portal. Furthermore, the online interfaces and resources themselves are always changing, so whatever I might write here could become outdated by the time you read this. That’s the good news. The resources and tools that Regis subscribes to and invests in are constantly being updated, as library science unfolds. This not only gives you better and better access to information, it makes you a better and better learner within an ever-changing skill set, one of ever-growing in importance. As you work on your research skills, using the library’s resources and database interfaces, you will gain flexibility and speed in figuring your way through any number of information retrieval schemes that you will encounter, as our Information Age zooms along. Imagine how helpful it will be to your career to be “the one” in your workgroup who can, on short notice, find and retrieve various information to aid the cause.

And speaking of personal benefits that also benefit others, while you are sharpening your research skills, you will find yourself building a “personal library” of articles and other documents that you save on your computer, preferably clearly-named folders. Put some thought into how your name and organize these folders, and save your research abundantly to them. As this personal library grow, you will find yourself gaining useful expertise in these areas. If you can continue a line of research from one class to another (ethical considerations of “X” in classes on ethics; administrative considerations of “X” in management courses, commercial aspects of “X” in marketing courses, etc.) you will surely find yourself gaining a diverse and credible expertise on “X,” whatever it may be. For one memorable former student of mine, “X” centered on high-tech communication strategies within and between Girl Scouts troops, to give you a specific example not necessarily focused on workplace concerns.

Use this great opportunity—going back to college—to develop excellent research skills. It will improve your coursework, improve your ability to navigate information systems of many types, and improve aspects of your life that you will come to address in better-informed ways. Your tuition helps to pay for the extensive resources bought and/or licensed by Regis to aid the quality and possible impact of your work here. Take advantage of these resources.
Conclusion

As I close this written version of an oral presentation made many times, if never twice in just the same way, I realize that there is a common theme among all of those speeches, a theme underlying the three tips provided above. Indeed, it is our shared mission to challenge you to become a more fulfilled person and a more valuable community member. Toward these goals, this program has developed remarkably over the years, responding to student needs with ever-new programming, assistance, and resources. As much as we intend to challenge you, we intend to challenge ourselves, toward providing what you will need to rise up and succeed. But you must make use of these resources; we cannot do that for you.

Master your degree plan. Take advantage of the expertise and genuine concern of your advisor, but know that the driver of your journey should be you. Know how your degree works, and know your options clearly and completely. That way when you walk into each and every course, or log onto the online forum to introduce yourself, you can say with confidence and accuracy: Here’s why I’m in this course.

Master your assignment requirements. Consider every moment you spend on your Regis studies as precious; we do. And in these precious moments, if you’re not sure about any requirements, or if you have an idea that might make the assignment even more valuable, just ask—early in the week. It beats finding out in class that your work “stands out” in the wrong direction.

And master your research skills. Use the boundless resources available to you through your Regis password. In this age when everything and anything is available to us online, there’s just no excuse for going into projects and decision-making uninformed. Be the research star in your local sky. Gain some real expertise in an area of importance in your life. Build your personal library, and organize it well. Become a lifelong learner in information retrieval. You’ll graduate with a higher GPA, and you’ll find yourself valuable everywhere you go.

I sometimes end this speech with a half-kidding reference to the adult students at Regis as being “genetically superior.” Are you one of those students surrounded by people who already have their degrees? That would hardly be unusual among our undergraduates. Well, we know how your degreed coworkers and associates got there, but who let you in? You must have something special going for you. Well, we have something special, too: you! Enjoy your studies, and I hope that the three tips shared above help you to find abundant and self-sustaining value for the hard work you’ll put in, as you rise up to meet the challenges that await you, as you work your way to the Commencement stage.

Godspeed on your journey. – Mike Zizzi