Help! I struggle while classmates seem to breeze through coursework

Dear Alice,

All the people in my major seem to breeze through homework, tests, and absorb every lecture like they've heard it a million times. This leads me to believe that I might have chosen the wrong major, even though it is what I really want to do. I'm already a senior, so changing majors now is out of the question for me, since I've already made all the arrangements for graduation. I know I will graduate with a very low GPA... not even high enough to get into graduate school in my major. The coursework that I'm headed towards in my last two semesters seems like total rocket science to me and asking for help, even from close friends in my major, is very embarrassing. I normally wouldn't mind asking my friends for help, but they have very belittling things to say about other people who don't understand the concepts. Plus, everyone that tutors for my major is also in my classes, so asking for help there is also impossible. I feel that if I don't get help and start understanding things essential to my major, I will completely abandon the idea of going to graduate school, or even trying to get a job related to my major. I don't want four years of schooling to go to waste... what should I do?

Answer

Dear Reader,

There's a lot to be said about committing yourself to something you really want to do. You obviously have interest and drive when it comes to your major, which is not only commendable but telling about the sort of person you are. Perhaps thinking further about why you enjoy your major can fuel you with the motivation and energy you need to enhance your performance during your senior year.

Before you compare yourself to others, think about your reasons for choosing the major you did. What, specifically, about it jazzes you? What has kept you committed up to this point? Maybe you can construct a list to reaffirm your decision so you can easily refer to it when doubts about your dedication to your chosen subject start creeping up.

As you said, the people in your class seem to breeze through the work. It is possible that your perception of their experiences in class may differ from the reality. Perhaps the reason your peers say belittling things about others is because they, themselves, struggle to understand the coursework. People will sometimes say condescending things about others as a defense mechanism? in this case, they don't want others to know they're challenged by the work, so
they verbalize how weak others in class are. Most likely, you are not the only one feeling the way you do about those specific classes, your major, or college in general.

Perhaps organizing a study group for the classes you are having trouble with would make sense. This idea might allow you to tackle difficult topics more constructively, as well as reassure you that you are not alone in feeling challenged. This is also an opportunity to learn how to ask for help. It’s often said that it takes more strength to know when and how to ask for help than to say nothing/do nothing at all. Rather than asking classmates or friends, you could also start with your professors. Make an appointment during their office hours. Your professors, major advisor, or academic dean could shed light on ways to become better versed in the class material. They can help you with effective studying techniques or refer you to someone who can. They can also discuss strategies for applying to graduate school? if that is what you want to do? such as taking summer courses to boost your GPA.

If this major is really what you want to pursue for your graduate studies or future career path, there’s no need to abandon it. Instead, think about what you can do so that you grasp the material better and have a positive experience during your senior year. Maybe rethink your major a bit. Perhaps rather than being involved in the more challenging side of your major, another perspective makes better use of your skills, while maintaining your interest or passion. For example, if your passion were academic biology, rather than bio research in a lab, you may be better suited to teach biology or to edit bio textbooks. The point is to consider how you want to apply the information you’re learning in your classes. Even though the classes you’re preparing for feel like rocket science, they may be easier to manage if you have a concept of why and for what you are taking them.

Two other thoughts: It’s not clear when you began to feel overwhelmed by the material. It’s also not immediately apparent whether the source of your feelings of inadequacy is more having to do with emotions or whether it could be a learning issue. To further explore this, it’s likely worth a visit to the counseling services on your campus and/or even the campus disability services. These are two avenues that can help you discover more about what’s going on, and then be better equipped to find effective solutions.

Being a senior in college can be challenging enough in itself without having to stress about how to make it through classes and your major requirements. It may be useful to confide in a friend outside of your major about the challenges you face. Sometimes having that one person who you can vent with and lean on can make a world of difference in managing your stress and feeling more grounded. Use your motivation to seek out the people and resources that can give you the support you need.

Alice!
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Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) (Morningside) [9]
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