



freedom overload

by Kristen Fischer



In high school, Katie Sylvester was a typical “good kid.” As an honors student and captain of the swim team, she didn’t smoke or drink and almost never broke curfew.

This past August, Katie graduated from Central Michigan University (Mount Pleasant, MI) after getting her bachelor’s degree in just three years. Looking at her, you would never know that she strayed from her very own yellow brick road during college.

So, what happened?

“I got to college and my senses were overloaded,” recalls the 21 year old. “There were so many things to do and people to meet, and no one to tell me ‘no.’ My classes took a backseat.”



Carissa made school work her top priority from day one.

How Easy Is it to Slip?

Without her friends from home, Katie was intent on meeting new friends. That usually meant she was out past 2 a.m. five nights a week. She also took an on-campus job, which sometimes required night shifts.

“My nights were filled with drinking and parties, my early mornings with working and that left my days for sleeping,” says Katie, whose GPA declined from a 3.4 in high school to a 2.7 in college. Her health suffered, as did her relationships with friends from home. She cut off some friendships altogether.

It wasn’t until that summer after freshman year that Katie says close friends were persistent, and made her see the negative effects of her behavior to help get her back on track. She vowed to pull herself together and returned the next school year with a confident attitude about accomplishing her goal. Luckily, Katie stuck to the plan. She stopped skipping classes, adhered to a regular sleeping schedule and saved partying for the weekends.

“I set specific goals for myself and kept myself on track academically,” says Katie of her turnaround. “I still have fun and go out, but I do it in moderation.”

Katie’s story is tame compared to some. But it still begs the question: How can students experience freedom college brings and balance their schoolwork at the same time?

Striking a Balance

Sarah Jane Poulton, 22, a graduate of Hollins University (Roanoke, VA), says students not only need to get their schoolwork done, but also should make time for a social life.

“College is about class, but it’s also about discovering yourself and how you click or don’t click with the people you surround yourself with, finding out what’s important to you through extracurricular activities and having fun,” she says. “There has to be a balance in each student’s life between bearing down on the books and exploring the world around you.”

Although Sarah got a little overly involved with extracurriculars at first, she soon realized she had to make some time for her studies.

“The trick to not going over the edge is knowing yourself,” advises Sarah.

"You have to know how much time it takes you to read a chapter, write a paper, do your lab write up and so on."

She also struggled to make time for dating.

"Fortunately, this was an experience I was able to learn from before it got too out of hand," she says. "I realized eventually that no boyfriend is more important than my classes, activities and friends at school."

Carissa Gores, 20, a student at Santa Clara University (Santa Clara, CA), believes she was able to stay balanced because she made schoolwork her first priority, but took time to relax and establish friendships as well.

"Freedom is all about finding out what is right for you," she explains. "For many people, there is an initial struggle to find the right balance, but I think this is part of the process."

Making Ends Meet

For Mark Banks, 20, a student at Virginia Wesleyan College (Norfolk, VA), sticking to self-discipline has worked.

"From the beginning, I've made it a point to never miss a class," he says. "Considering class time from high school to college has been cut in half (or even less), I tell myself that there is no reason to skip a class for the sake of my social life."

Although there is a tendency to procrastinate when it comes to homework, having to go to class the following day to turn it in serves as a motivation to make schoolwork Mark's priority.

Jamie Lynn Robitaille, 21, a graduate of Utica College (Utica, NY), used her spot on the school's volleyball team to make friends and stick to a regular schedule. For her, the busier she was, the easier it was for her to manage her time. Being on the team made it easier to make an initial group of friends, and she didn't have much downtime between studying and sports.

She thinks many freshmen go overboard with freedom simply because they want to make friends, not because they want to destroy their college careers. When Jamie served as a resident assistant, she encountered many students who were burning the candle at both ends in order to fit in.

"When the opportunity arises to do something with a group, they feel awkward passing it up," Jamie says. "I don't think it is a situation of peer pressure, but rather a situation of not wanting to be considered an outcast."

Preparing for Independence

Sometimes anticipating how you will act and react to social situations at school can help. Truc-Lan Vu, 18, an incoming freshman at the College of New Jersey, (Ewing, NJ), began school believing she'd be able to gauge how much time she could spend socializing once she figures out how to manage her time.

"I'll definitely give myself permission to stay out late, but not to the extent that my grades will slip," says Truc-Lan.

Avoiding a Freedom Overload

So what causes some students to be able to manage an active social life with schoolwork, and others to develop drinking problems, drop out or get kicked out of college?

According to Dr. Andrea M. Macari, a psychology instructor at Suffolk County Community College (Long Island, NY), some students are able to monitor themselves effectively because they have an internal desire to do well.

"However, for some students, they don't have this need intrinsically," she says. Because their parents have defined limits for them for the past 18 or so years, some students don't see the need for balance, or strive to reach it, she adds.

Katie, now completing an internship, recalls how it felt to be unbalanced, but knows it all happened for a reason.

"If I hadn't bottomed out my freshman year I might not have worked as hard to redeem myself," she admits. "But I don't recommend trying it."



incoming freshman Truc-Lan (left) is mentally preparing for her new independent lifestyle; Jamie Lynn (right) stays busy at college with classwork and volleyball.

Enjoy the privileges of freedom on campus *and* stay on track academically.

Set limits and make commitments. Limit partying to the weekends, or commit to studying at least two hours a day, says Macari. She also recommends writing out a contract specifying how you'll stay on track. The pact should also include consequences for bad behavior. Sign the contract with a witness and hang it in a prominent place as a reminder, she says.

Use friends for accountability. Ask a buddy to help keep you in check. "This type of checks and balances can help you recognize your own problematic behaviors," Macari adds.

Take advantage of resources. Acquaint yourself with campus resources including the counseling center, student health center, peer counseling center, alcohol and drug awareness organizations and study centers, says Macari.

Avoid dangerous behaviors. Steer clear of drugs, gambling and promiscuous sex, advises Boyce Watkins, finance professor at Syracuse University (Syracuse, NY) and author of "Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About College" (Blue Boy Publishing Co., 2004). "Think of college freedom like a really fast car," he says. "It can be exhilarating and allow you to travel faster than ever before, or it can kill you if it gets out of control."

Develop a healthy voice. Not only can you replay your parents' valuable advice in your head when making decisions, but you can try to develop an inner voice that questions your behavior and offers practical suggestions, says Natalie Caine, M.A., who founded the California-based Empty Nest Support Services.

Stay protected. "There are ways to cut loose and stay safe," Caine adds. For starters, let a friend know if you're going to a party, or bring a cab number in case you need a ride home.