Your Path to Success

Alumni Advice on How to Achieve Your Goals

WMU Alumni Association
Welcome Alumni-in-Training!

You may not be thinking about it right now, but in a few short years, you will be a Western alumnus or alumna. There are many ways to become involved with Western’s alumni—both now and once you’ve graduated.

Get involved as a student!
Join the Student Alumni Association

Every year, students begin their college careers with many of the same questions and concerns that you undoubtedly have. Because you’re about to embark on the same path that WMU alumni have already traveled, we asked them to share suggestions and advice to help you stay on course as you pursue your degree.

Starting out on the right road makes for a smoother journey, leaving you plenty of time for learning, laughing and building memories.

The WMU Alumni Association
Take advantage of this time to learn who you are! That is going to be the building block for your life in the future!
Jessie Heath, BBA 2003
Alumni Mentor

Enjoy your new life. Your college experience goes way beyond the studying for your career. You now enter a new phase of your life journey, the most drastic being your independence. Establish your disciplined study habits early and make sure that you budget your time to include the plethora of wonderful activities that a major university such as WMU can provide. Try to involve yourself in community service projects so that you learn one of life’s greatest lessons; it is in giving that you will receive.
Duane Dunham, BS 1964
Association Member, Distinguished Alumni Recipient

Be patient and listen more. Make sure that you take full advantage of the total college experience.
James Pews, MBA 1996
Association Member, Alumni Mentor

Get the academic background to be able to approach the challenges of career and life from an intellectual perspective, but remember that success also relies on trusting your intuition and taking chances. Without the combination of both, you’ll spend your life on the “safe” path and never truly leave your mark.
James P. Holden, BS 1973
Association Member, Distinguished Alumni Recipient

After 20 years in business, I realize that there is an extremely high correlation between successful people and those who busted their butt in their 20s. If you don’t get off to a good start, it is unlikely that you will shift gears later in life.
James Pews, MBA 1996
Association Member, Alumni Mentor

Don’t let the freedom go to your head.
Brent Helson, BS 2001, MBA 2004
Alumni Mentor

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Association Member, Distinguished Alumni Recipient

Dedicate yourself, develop your interests, discover your unlocked potential and always remember to devote time to others. Live unselfishly and live on purpose—I promise you, not a day will be wasted.
Kelli Talicska, BS 2001, MA 2004
Alumni Volunteer

Work hard at whatever makes you happy, be a student all of your life, respect yourself and others, honor your commitments and constantly strive for balance in your life.
Thomas L. Reece, BA 1964
Association Life Member, Distinguished Alumni Recipient

Do the very best you can and do it always with integrity.
James Bultman, MA 1966, EdD 1971
Association Life Member, Distinguished Alumni Recipient

Well, flying over the Korean countryside with my Commander, he turned to me and said: “Learn where to build sidewalks.” This means, he explained: “think smartly...think efficiently...be logical. Notice that sidewalks are built at right angles, but folks cut angular paths from A to B, across the grass, bypassing the sidewalks!”
Steve Harris, BBA 1973
Association Member, Alumni Mentor

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Thomas L. Reece, BA 1964
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Approach life as a lifelong learning and growing experience. Build your career and life on a set of values. Aim high and expect a lot.
Richard Haworth, BBA 1964
Association Life Member, Distinguished Alumni Recipient

You can accomplish almost anything if your vision is clear, you are highly motivated, you act ethically and respect all those around you.
Richard Whitmer, BS 1963
Association Life Member, Distinguished Alumni Recipient
Spend a small amount of time each day reviewing your notes from class and you will save yourself hours in preparing for exams later.

Apply for part-time work on campus. Try to form a study group in any class that you may be having difficulty in. See the instructor immediately if you have a question that your group (it may just be you and one other person) can’t answer from an assignment.

Doug Ackley, BS 1987
Association Life Member, Alumni Mentor

Get a good start because it will be twice as hard to bring your GPA up the last two years. I also would say that internships should be required. It gives you a little taste of what your job will be like coming out of school. While I think these are obvious, it doesn’t seem like enough people recognize the importance of both.

Kris Bosio, BBA 2000
Young Alumni Advisory Board

Unless you absolutely know what degree you want to pursue, I would strongly suggest that most incoming freshmen spend the first year on general studies rather than pressuring yourselves right off the bat.

Chuck Luley, BS 1967, MBA 1972
Association Member, Alumni Mentor

If you haven’t already done so, go to the University Counseling and Testing Center and go through the career counseling. It’s an invaluable service in assisting you in identifying your strengths and developing your course of study. Be sure to spend some of your college career living on campus in the dorms.

Kirk Hoffman, BBA 1986
Association Life Member, Alumni Association Board of Directors

Relax, it’s college. If you are taking 20 credit hours so you can get out in 3 or 3.5 years, you’ll look back and regret your undergrad days. College may or may not be the best days of your life, but it should be a good and fun experience. Learn good study habits. Set aside a couple of hours each day (after classes, before dinner or right after dinner) and study/read course-related stuff. Actually “learn” the material covered in class required for your major and do not simply memorize the concepts only to regurgitate on exam day. If you take the time to learn it, you’ll suffer less in later classes (especially grad school).

Aaron Dentel, BS 1997
Young Alumni Advisory Board

An undergraduate liberal arts education possibly coupled with a post-grad degree (MBA, law, etc.) is the key to success. The basics still count—reading, writing, and arithmetic!

Peter Schweitzer, MBA 1967
Association Member, Distinguished Alumni Recipient

Don’t get too specialized and if you are interested in accounting and finance, don’t avoid taking a significant amount of mathematics and statistics.

Jim Leisenring, MBA 1964
Association Life Member, Distinguished Alumni Recipient

The best advice is to find a way right from the beginning to manage your time so that you don’t get behind. The hardest thing is to balance time for school work, social activities and physical activities.

Jespen Denbrook, BA 2002
Alumni Mentor

Take a wide berth of courses. In this day of multidisciplinary research and technology, it really pays to have a broad base of knowledge and skills. Even an extra semester or year of coursework would be worth the time and effort. Graduate schools view breadth very favorably. Also, find the best, most productive people (profs and students) and become part of their world.

J. Thomas Dickinson, BA 1963
Distinguished Alumni Recipient

Keep all your options open. Although I was able to use some of my early accounting classes as business electives, I should have started out with more of an open mind on a major. I could have used these electives for classes that were closer to my major. Changing my major also required a couple of heavy credit-hour semesters that could have been avoided.

Mike Fisher, BBA 1986
Association Member, Alumni Mentor

Get off to a good start and keep on improving. Industry looks for individuals with the ability to be successful in their early years and become outstanding as they grow. Don’t take on too much in your first year. Being a volunteer is great unless it affects your ability to perform academically. Know when you are overcommitted and scale back.

Anthony Tortorella, BS 1971
Alumni Mentor

Do not cut corners when it comes to your education. Take your studies seriously, and especially focus on becoming a good writer. Concentrate and focus to become good in math. If you master those two areas, there will be little you cannot pursue. Most of them can happen at the same time.

Association Member, Alumni Mentor
Don’t worry about finding the “right thing” for you to do. Focus on doing well, whatever you are doing. Spend your time in college developing an identity and learning about life. Do this well and the right profession will find you.

Timothy I. Williams, BM 1999, MM 2001
Alumni Mentor

Work on getting a 3.3 and keeping it. Practice job interviews while actively looking for summer internships. Those two things get you the great jobs. Most important, don’t get so caught up in worrying about tomorrow that you don’t enjoy today.

Peter Kenyon, BBA 1999
Alumni Mentor

Spend your summers doing something that will help differentiate you from other students at WMU, as well as other schools. When I look to hire someone for a position, I look for someone who did more than flipping burgers or lifeguarding. Be innovative and your job prospects will be much better, and you will be more successful in a company that you join.

Dave Beauchamp, BA 1991
Alumni Mentor

Try to find a part-time job, internship, even volunteer at the type of job you plan to work at upon graduation. You want to see the reality of what you are actually going to be doing. You don’t want to spend four years in a field that sounds good but you won’t like when you actually get a job there.

Mike Walling, BS 1993
Alumni Mentor

Make the most of what you are studying and really get to learn the subject. Make sure the degree you are studying is marketable and also a degree that you really want to study. I would highly encourage you to become familiar and experienced with as many computer software programs as possible because employers want people with computer skills.

Jason Hess, BA 2002
Alumni Mentor

Study! Study! Study English and obtain a well-rounded education. Plan! Plan! Plan your lives, plan for options—“a way out.” If you can work in several areas equally well with enthusiasm, there will always be career options and employment for you.

Mary Creason, BS 1944
Association Life Member, Distinguished Alumni Recipient

Since business is essentially the foundation of every profession, no matter what it is, every student should attend at least one business course so they can comprehend how business works.

Jack Clifford, BA 1956
Association Life Member, Distinguished Alumni Recipient

Looking back, I would have highly considered a study abroad experience. In business today, there are numerous opportunities to work abroad either on an assignment or on a work trip, and the maturity and experiences that come along with being immersed in another culture are invaluable. In addition to that, I would have pursued a minor in a foreign language, with the extent of knowledge obtained to be able to communicate and conduct business with that country.

Karen Pagorek, BBA 1999
Alumni Mentor

Make sure you have internship experience and/or a job experience when you graduate. Real life experience is much more important than just text book knowledge.

Heidi Pfannes, BS 1987
Association Member, Alumni Mentor
Whether it is a social group, sports group or club, it is important to get involved and to interact with others. Getting involved is also a great way to begin the networking process that you will need once you graduate from Western. The people you meet in college could become your future clients, patients and colleagues.

Brandon Britton, BS 1996
Alumni Mentor

First, get a job. Time is the enemy of college students. The fact that you have a job will force you to better manage your time. The second thing is to stop and be in the moment. This is not a recommendation to party. It is a call to get involved in your school. Join a professional fraternity, be involved in student government at the different levels, or go to the artistic performances and sporting events. Expand your horizons and be willing to try new things.

Cally Campbell, BM 1999
Association Member, Alumni Mentor

Open yourself to the tremendous opportunities that are available on Western’s campus. Broaden your horizons, both personally and professionally, and take advantage of every opportunity that is there to experience the intellectual and personal growth that is made possible by a collegiate experience. Work hard, play hard, and make a commitment to make a difference in the lives of others and make a difference in your chosen profession.

Barbara A. Mieras, BA 1972, MA 1984
Association Life Member, Distinguished Alumni Recipient

Make sure to get involved with campus activities. There is something for everyone, and if you can’t find what you’re looking for, start your own organization! Campus activities are a great way to meet people with similar interests, network with people going into your same field or develop leadership skills by holding officer positions within the organization. When interviewing for my first job, I found that employers were more interested in my campus activities and work experience (such as internships) than just my GPA and degree.

Stephanie K. Postma, BBA 2003
Association Member, Alumni Mentor

A successful person after graduation will need to be able to multitask, interact with others and maintain an open mind since the business world is a wild environment. To obtain real-world readiness, you need to be actively involved both academically as well as socially on campus. Diversification is the key to the success of all individuals. Never stop learning, set emotions aside and have fun!

Anthony Majewski, BS 2000
Association Member, Young Alumni Advisory Board

I think one of the greatest assets of WMU is Miller Auditorium. It’s a first class performing arts facility that compares to some of the finest in the country. Be sure to take advantage of the programs that are offered there—it was one of the best things I did as a student and even though I still don’t like opera, I learned to appreciate other forms of art and music that keep me entertained to this day.

Kristine M. Pierre, BA 1981
Association Life Member, Alumni Mentor

Attempt to establish a meaningful balance between academics, a positive and rewarding social life and giving back to the community (volunteering). The University environment provides an opportunity to invest in these three areas, and they should be utilized equally with prudence. The opportunity to interface with people from all over the world should also be used to increase knowledge about diversity in a positive, meaningful way. Dialogue with people who don’t look like you and have different backgrounds and lifestyles. Open up your mind and let new information and knowledge pour in.

Anitta Y. Oro, BS 1966
Past President of the Alumni Association, Association Life Member, Alumni Mentor

Live in the residence halls. Make friends with your professors. Get involved in a student organization. Understand that the memories you make and the friendships you form will last you a lifetime. You may only be a student at WMU for a few years, but you will always be a Bronco!

Erin Czelada, BA 2001, MA 2004
Association Member, Alumni Mentor

Get involved on campus, as the contacts you make there will prove to be invaluable in the future. Thanks to those I met, I had a good job through school and many perks. And my current career path was thanks to someone I had met at WMU.

Kurtis J. Pake, BS 2003
Association Member, Young Alumni Advisory Board

Pick an organization or activity and get involved in at least one thing outside of classes—I think it helps students feel more connected.

Marcia Koestner, BS 1974, MA 1985
Association Life Member, Alumni Association Board of Directors

www.western.edu
I had much support from my professors at Western. They started me on my way. And along that way I have learned to believe in myself and to realize that a career, in any field, is not always based on talent but also on persistence, patience and above all, passion.

Susan B. Anthony, BM 1975
Association Member, Distinguished Alumni Recipient

Find someone within the University to be a mentor and guide, as this will be helpful as you look to make a variety of different decisions during your time on campus. Challenge yourself, ask a lot of questions and have fun!

Scott Kilgren, BBA 1993
Association Life Member, Alumni Mentor

Determine a good reason to speak to every professor at least once a week, if even for a few moments only at the conclusion of class. More times than not, the professor will take a greater interest in your improvement, your learning will be more complete and your professor will be more willing to accept your perspective on a test answer originally declared incorrect. Don’t let anyone else determine what your interests are and read everything you can get your hands on, whether posted on a kiosk, handed out curbside or stuffed in your mailbox. You’ll discover what really interests you most.

Jim Klapthor, BS 1987
Association Member, Alumni Mentor

Make sure to establish a support network for yourself—a group of people to whom you can turn for guidance, advice, and encouragement. Look to your professors for academic support, to individuals who are successful in your potential career for occupational support, and to your family and friends for emotional support.

Sarah Papke, BBA 2003
Association Member, Alumni Mentor

Establish ongoing week-to-week dialogue with family and/or a mentor during the first two years, as it can be relatively lonely making decisions at such an early age (for some of us) that have impact on the rest of your college career.

Carl Phalin, BS 1978
Alumni Mentor

Find a professional mentor (in the field you think you want to join). Considerable time can be saved by spending just a little time with a person who represents where you think you will be in four to 10 years (you might find out that’s not where/what you want to be after all, or if it is where you want to be, you might find a better/best way to get there). You will also create lasting professional and personal relationships that will help you later in life.

Terry K. Morrow, BS 1998
Association Member, Young Alumni Advisory Board

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Carl Phalin, BS 1978
Alumni Mentor

Talk to as many people as possible about their jobs. Find someone whose job you think you would enjoy (no matter how high the position in an organization) and discuss how they got there.

Jeffry Bothwell, BBA 1999
Alumni Association Board Member
As quickly as you can, find something you care about. It can be an academic interest, or a student organization, a service endeavor—anything. But really become a part of it. Devote some serious time to it and some serious thinking. Become close with people who share that interest and enjoy forging those deep, committed friendships. Have a plan. Have a goal, something to work towards. Be thankful for the chance to go to Western Michigan, and play some part in this University's great history. Be ready to grow and change, but do not forget where you came from. Develop the character and values that will guide you through life—and define your identity as an adult. Treat your WMU experience for what it is: one of those rare chances to truly be anything you want. Be something great.

John Knowles, BA 2003
Association Member, Alumni Mentor
Alumni Association Board of Directors

My advice would be to follow your dreams, and if this is what you want to do, do it. Be true to yourself and your talents.

Marin Mazzie, BS 1982
Association Member, Distinguished Alumni Recipient

Keep your goal in focus. Graduation may seem far, far away on the first day of freshman orientation, but as semesters go by, friends and roommates come and go, time will advance and you will be growing. Have fun, but plan accordingly to accomplish what you have set out to do and after graduation, your intangible reward will be the satisfaction of a successful time at WMU.

Christy Parsch, BBA 2003
Association Member, Alumni Mentor

There are so many new things to do—set yourself an academic benchmark that you feel you need to achieve. It can be your personal monitor of how to manage your time. If you’re safely attaining your benchmark, enjoy the extra-curricular. If not, refocus.

Lynn Kellogg, BA 1976
Association Life Member
Past President of the Alumni Association

Develop a passion for lifelong learning and education and to endeavor to follow the concepts of servant [volunteer] leadership in your professional and personal lives.

Robert H. Bruininks, BS 1964
Association Life Member, Distinguished Alumni Recipient

Work hard, worry about what you can control and pursue your dreams. So much time is spent worrying about things out of our control and what lies ahead, that it is important to focus on today’s task and your own responsibilities and things have a way of working out for the best.

David Dombrowski, BBA 1979
Association Life Member, Distinguished Alumni Recipient

Try to get all your formal and graduate education goals done before starting a family.

Antonio R. Flores, MA 1977
Association Member, Distinguished Alumni Recipient

Pursue your passion. I did. I disregarded concern for wealth in favor of doing the thing I loved to do. I’ve ended up being rich and amply rewarded and happy.

Huey Johnson, BS 1965
Distinguished Alumni Recipient

Dealing with setbacks and failures is a key part of the learning process. It is possible to lose your drive and motivation especially when you have a setback. Remember to stay positive and trust yourself.

Dean A. boyfriend of the year, BA 1945
Association Life Member, Distinguished Alumni Recipient

Any goal can be achieved as long as you are clear on your objectives and are determined to succeed.

Samuel J. Simmons, BA 1949
Association Life Member, Distinguished Alumni Recipient

Western gave me a good foundation and made me well-prepared for the future through a variety of experiences, including community involvement and campus activities. Get involved in grassroots efforts to change community norms for the better.

Mary Ann Solberg, BA 1964
Alumni Mentor

Tired of trying to achieve your goals? It’s time to take a step back. Get a second opinion from someone you trust. This could be a friend, family member, or mentor. Sometimes, a fresh perspective can help you see things differently and make progress again.

Ronald E. Hall, BS 1965
Association Life Member, Distinguished Alumni Recipient

The majority of college students reach a very low point in their academic careers (a Waterloo if you will) i.e. a blown crucial exam or a flunked class, or the realization that you’re in the wrong curriculum. You think about quitting or stopping for awhile. Don’t; it happens to most students. Keep going; once you face your demon and persevere, it’s all downhill from there, because you will know you can handle anything.

Ronald E. Hall, BS 1965
Association Life Member, Distinguished Alumni Recipient

You can achieve your dreams if you stay focused and relentless in your approach. Don’t let anything distract you from achieving your goal.

Neil Smith, BA 1977
Distinguished Alumni Recipient

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Huey Johnson, BS 1965
Distinguished Alumni Recipient
1. Establish a good student-to-professor relationship. This will assist you in your coursework and for future networking opportunities.

2. Look at all programs/scholarships which will assist you in your graduate work. I was a resident advisor and assistant director of Siedschlag Hall. I would encourage all students to apply for this assistance, which will help establish lasting friendships with the dormitory residents and assist in developing leadership skills.

3. Have fun and enjoy WMU. It is a great university.

Georgia Ann Moss, BS 1973, MA 1981
Association Life Member, Alumni Mentor

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1. Don’t get distracted with the social life and parties. Although fun, this time brings little value to your career, and the lost education time and skills cannot be replaced.

2. Technical writing will be very valuable along with good communication skills.

3. Strive to be in a summer company program so you can learn early how the corporate world works. It will help you understand what you need to retain in your classes more.

4. Take a foreign language.

Keith Vandenbussche, BS 1984
Alumni Mentor

1. Manage your time by drawing out a daily plan of things to do.

2. Always speak the truth.

3. Find your own errors.

4. Remove your own errors.

5. Have good will and respect for others.

6. Know your own limitations.

7. Remain within limitations.

8. Respect the law and authority.

Mohammad A. Khan, MDA 1989
Alumni Mentor

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1. Don’t bring everything you own to college; it won’t all fit in your residence hall room and even if you find a way to pack it all in, you won’t use half of what you bring. Bringing too much just makes your living area crowded and unmanageable. You can always bring something you need to WMU after you’ve been home for a visit.

2. Also, don’t worry about declaring a major right away. Be undeclared for a year or two and really explore your general education/liberal studies courses. Having to change your major three to four times is a lot of extra paperwork! There is no rush.

Cindy Paxavola, MA 1986
Association Member, Alumni Mentor

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1. Remove your own errors.

2. Place items to school. Jewelry, high priced stereos, etc., leave at home.

3. Invest in a trunk. You can put a lock on this when you are gone, so it will be safe. Invest in a lock on it.

4. Don’t bring anything you own to school. Look to see if you know that your items are safe.

5. Make sure you don’t bring very valuable things to school. Jewelry, high priced stereos, etc., leave at home.

Cindy Paxavola, MA 1986
Association Member, Alumni Mentor

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1. Wait to buy your books until after you have gone to your first day of class. Sometimes the professor changes the books she wants you to use. Shop around. Check online. Don’t buy the new books. Look to see if the bookstore has the same book gently used.

2. When it’s time to sell your books back, run to the bookstore. They only take a certain amount back, so first come, first served.

3. Make sure you don’t bring very valuable things to school. Jewelry, high priced stereos, etc., leave at home.

Cindy Paxavola, MA 1986
Association Member, Alumni Mentor

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1. Focus—Know your expectations and know your limits (don’t let someone take you where you know you do not want to go).

2. Planning—See your counselor often and keep on the right path to finish what you started.

3. Fun activities—Find an activity you like to do and have some fun. This will make it easier to buckle down when it is time for tests and exams. Having some fun makes you not feel like you are crammed down with study. Of course, anything to the extreme can be dangerous on campus.

4. If you qualify, register to be in the Lee Honors College. Not only do the classes are more challenging, the scholarships are more plentiful, and the classes are more interesting, but you get to register before anyone else, the classes are more challenging, the scholarships are more plentiful, and the end results are more rewarding.

Jessica Hendren, BBA 2005
Alumni Mentor
1. One can never have enough sleep, healthy nourishment (not beer and/or junk food!), and quality counseling from administration, faculty and cohorts, as a college-university learner.

2. Higher education is 90 percent self-directed motivation and commitment to the process and system, and 10 percent perspiration.

3. “The road to hell is paved with good intentions”—actions speak louder than mere words.

4. Heed the immortal words of Shakespeare: “...above all, to thine own self be true”

5. Cheers, and carpe diem, all! Go forward, freshmen, and change a world full with challenges and opportunities to make a positive contribution to society.

Robert E. Dratwa, MBA 1966
Association Member, Alumni Mentor

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1. Build a resume of professional experiences anywhere and everywhere you can—this is critical and the more the better, so don’t wait. Start volunteering, pursuing internships (paid or unpaid) and getting involved in student associations related to your major or interests—even if you aren’t 100 percent sure what your major will be.

2. Take advantage of professor office hours, especially in core subjects to your major.

3. Utilize the Alumni Association’s mentor program. These folks are working in the careers you hope to have. There’s really no better resource available to you, and they are already willing to help.

4. Enjoy yourself. College is a unique time in your life so soak it in and absorb everything you can. Make a specific point of finding different things to do around campus like film festivals, theater, music and guest lecturers.

5. Get a good hat and gloves—that January walk from the “Valleys” to early morning classes is brutal.

Jeff Blunt, BA 1991
Alumni Mentor

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1. Enjoy college—it is a once-in-a-lifetime experience—but remember to balance; college is your step to your life.

2. Figure out what you want to do with your future—college is the place to try different careers.

3. Take classes that interest you—learn what you can. It makes you a well-rounded person.

Roger Beilfuss, BBA 1988
Association Member, Alumni Mentor

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