

Study Groups and College Success

Purpose of Study Groups:

Many students fail to realize the potential of study in relationship to learning and mastery of course materials. Students enrolled in doctoral studies, law, and medical programs have taken advantage of study groups as a learning technique for many years. Study groups typically involve three to four students who meet weekly, sometimes more often, to share information, knowledge, and expertise about a course in which they are all enrolled. The study group environment offers students an opportunity to engage in intense discussion about course material. Effective study groups assist students in learning the material in a deeper, more meaningful way. Groups that are effective generate energy, active participation, discipline, and commitment from group members. These dynamics are all important criteria for learning.

Formulating a Study Group:

Several principles should be considered for those who have not participated in and experienced the effectiveness of study groups.

- ◆ Choose members whom you like or respect.
- ◆ Limit membership to three or four participants.
- ◆ Select a group leader who is responsible for convening the group.
- ◆ Establish the meeting time and place for each session.
- ◆ Make a personal commitment to contribute to the group.
- ◆ Do not use the group to replace class attendance.

Ground Rules for Group Meetings:

Members should bring notes, laboratory materials, problem sets, and textbooks to each group meeting. The purpose of the meeting is to share information and to make meaning of the course material-not to judge your knowledge of the course materials against that of the other members of the group or to use the group and its members in the group to make sure you have a complete set of notes. (Having a complete set of notes is one expected outcome of this experience, but it should not be the sole purpose of individual membership in the group.) In effective study groups all members are attempting to enhance their knowledge and application of course material and are striving to be supportive and encouraging of others in the group. Study groups will not work if they are perceived as a hostile, judgmental or intimidating experience.

Suggested Procedures:

- ◆ Be sure that all members agree on the basic content of the lecture notes, their importance, and their meaning.
- ◆ Talk about discrepancies in members' notes. Make sure all members agree about what was said and its meaning. Check discrepancies among members' notes by consulting the textbook or by asking the instructor to embellish or illustrate points made in class.
- ◆ Learn the material at two distinct levels. First, make sure you know the material by drilling one another with questions about its literal or rote meaning. This is the easy part, rote learning. It is helpful at this stage to strive to paraphrase class notes. Attempt to state notes in your own words. The ability to paraphrase, using your own words, has a strong, positive association with memory and learning.
- ◆ The most critical aspect of the group proceeding is making meaning of you literal, rote learning. Do this by using several techniques such as (a) asking one another questions that focus on the application of the material being earned; (b) asking one another to compare and contrast

questions; (c) discussing why the information is useful; and (d) discussing how the material is applied in a broader context. For example, how do several aspects or areas of the lecture and textbook readings come together to make greater, holistic sense? Attempt to discuss the significance of materials learned earlier in the course to the areas being discussed in later class lectures and readings. You must discuss the material. Students engaged in study group discussions sometimes become intimidated. Take risks with your group members. Be creative and think out loud. Listen to how others in the group attempt to make meaning of the course material.

- ◆ "Brainstorm" possible test questions that ask you to apply the material being learned. It is helpful if each group member brings several possible questions to each group meeting.
- ◆ Do not reserve the weekly group concept to a one-session experience before learned. It is too late at that point to gain much from the experience. Also if you only have one session at this time there is no opportunity to question the instructor about the material with which the group is struggling. Study groups offer students the opportunity for in-depth discussion about the course material. They provide an opportunity for students to think out loud and share insights about their knowledge. The time for students to find out what they do not know is before a test or examination, not during it.