

I believe that one of the things about me that allowed me to get to where I am today is my constant curiosity and my reach to the opportunities that hint to me. For a person like me, the first semester at Cal (UC Berkeley) felt like being in a room with hundreds of doors (symbolizing opportunities), and each time you open a door, you find gold. Then, you find yourself in a dilemma. Should you keep opening as many doors as you can, and grab as much gold from each door; or should you just choose one, and move forward behind that door delving into deeper and deeper levels of commitment, leaving destiny lead you where it will.

To help new students who might feel similarly about starting their journey at Cal, here are some tips:

Class preparation

Before your class at Cal starts, review the prerequisites thoroughly. This will allow you to:

Refresh your memory, to the point that during the semester you won't need to review old knowledge—just directly apply it.

See if the content in the class at Cal is the same as the content in the class you took before.

For example, for a class I took at Cal, Discrete Math was a prerequisite, and since I took this prerequisite in Miami, only 90% of the content was similar to the Discrete Math class here at Cal, so I had to study that missing 10% by myself. If I hadn't, in the middle of the semester, when the teacher started talking about concepts from that 10% assuming all students know them, I would have felt lost and confused.

Learning shortcuts

Sometimes, even if you can learn things by yourself, other shortcuts can make the learning faster, especially when you only need broad knowledge of a subject, not detailed knowledge.

For example, when I first wanted to do research, I started asking around on campus, and I found an enormous number of programs and projects. However, during a class called Transitioning to a Research University, every student group had to prepare and present a research program in 10 minutes. I attended class on presentation day, when students spent 1 hour for the presentation for every student's assigned program. That way, in 1 hour, I learned what would have taken me 36 hours to learn by myself (assuming each student took 6 hours to prepare her/his own presentation).

Overwhelm

There are so many amazing activities you can do here at Cal. To name a few:

Research: At Cal you'll find the best research projects in the world in so many fields, and it would be wasting opportunity to not get involved in at least one of them.

Clubs: There are so many diverse clubs, like the ones that do tech consulting for the biggest companies in Silicon Valley.

Sports: Almost every sport has different skill levels and time commitments. In soccer, for instance, you can join the professional-level varsity team that trains almost every day. For a smaller time commitment, you can join the club that plays about three times a week. For a once-a-week fun game between friends, you can join the intramurals, etc.

With all the available activities, it is difficult not to get overwhelmed, especially since classes at Cal are time consuming and difficult. What I did to avoid this is:

I ranked the activities in order of urgency. If one of them can wait for the end of the semester, the next one, the summer, or next year, then I put that activity on hold, and start with the one that I want to do now, or have to do now.

Personally, I chose to play sports 6 hours a week every semester, to start doing research the second semester, and to not join clubs at all, just to attend their most interesting events twice a semester or so.

Difficulty of classes

If a class goes too fast:

Allocate more hours of your time to study for it,
or take a less time-consuming class.

If you feel that other students are smarter than you, this can mean two things:

First, it can mean they already spent more hours than you on the content taught in class. In this case, to be on the same level, prepare more before the class starts.

Second, it can mean that their mental abilities actually allow them to learn faster. In that case, let's say that it takes them 5 hours to learn what takes you 10 hours. Then when they spend 5 hours studying for a test, you spend 20 hours, and you'll get the better grade.

In other words, if you want to get the best grade, study harder, for more hours. However, it's crucial to study smarter too.

There are so many geniuses at Cal, from teachers, graduate students, tutors, and classmates; asking their help is one way to study smarter.

Another one is joining study groups and teaching others in your class, which allows you to strengthen your knowledge and to discover gaps you might have missed.

Conclusion

The tips above are the ones I made for myself, according to my experience so far at Cal. While they did work (since I got a 4.0 GPA), you should still tailor your own tips depending on your classes, your interests, and your study habits. Good luck!