



**CAREER CUES**

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**W**hat happens once a student enters a top university and quietly begins to struggle? Anand did everything right: top grades, a prestigious school, and an Ivy League admit. Yet, within a year, he was back home, overwhelmed and unable to cope. A high performer in his grade, Anand had begun to show emerging signs of attentional difficulties and procrastination that were manageable in a structured environment. But with total independence and no restrictions, Anand began to struggle. Socially popular and well-liked, he found it hard to say no to parties. He began missing classes, failing exams, and falling behind. What began as small lapses slowly started to compound and, within a year, the gap became too difficult to bridge.

Anand is not alone. Many high-performing students struggle at university for reasons that have nothing to do with intelligence. Here are some insights on the reasons for this.

**Factors**

The university requires students to adapt to an environment that provides little structure and almost no accountability. No teachers checking homework, no preparation notes before exams, and no parents to manage routines and deadlines. Parents, teachers and career counsellors often assume academic success in school to be a blueprint for suc-

cess at university. But university is not school; it demands independence, discipline, and self-regulation in ways students are often unprepared for.

Developmentally, between the ages of 13 and 18, teenagers are forming their identity. They are trying to establish who they are, what their friends think of them, and where they fit in socially. After the age of 18, as they enter college, they are fine-tuning this identity while also navigating new peer groups.

Success is now determined by many other factors: initiative and clarity (of goals across academics, career, and social life), executive function (evidence

of planning, prioritising, and completing tasks independently), identity and peer alignment (choosing friends who reflect one's values, interests and choices), interpersonal skills (navigating social situations and being able to set boundaries), and resilience (ability to recover from setbacks).

In some cases, when these factors are not well-developed during teenage years, a familiar home and school environment often supports and compensates. Lack of planning and organisational skills may be masked by parents completing projects or constantly setting study reminders. Poor social skills may

go unnoticed in a stable school and familiar social life for many years. These seemingly minor gaps often become amplified at university. In such situations, students can navigate these circumstances through targeted counselling and a renewed focus on building specific skills.

As students enter senior school, it is advisable to look out for some red flags: Are parents or counsellors more worried about college than the child is? Does the student struggle with basic responsibilities such as deadlines, punctuality, and follow-through? Are their peer relationships either isolated or overly influenced? Do they seem to

# First real test

## Why high-performing students may struggle at university



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lack direction or internal motivation? Do they avoid conversations when overwhelmed?

**Tips for counsellors**

If you pick up red flags, discuss them early with parents and brainstorm with the student on the implications.

To help build executive function, advise parents to consciously, carefully, and gradually step back from reminders and supervision, while clearly communicating why they are doing this. Encourage parents to share their concerns and align with their child on the need to take on responsibility for themselves.

Bring awareness to the extremities and the impact of unhelpful peer group influence, and on how to retain identity while being part of a group.

Try to understand why there is a lack of motivation. What is the issue: identity, competency, or complacency? Or is lack of family support or involvement?

Be supportive and create a safe space for discussion. Listen without judging or offering quick solutions. Do not dismiss concerns as trivial or insignificant.

If there are persistent or chronic difficulties, refer the student and parents to professional help.

Ultimately, the goal is not just to get into a good university but to be able to thrive there.

*The writer would like to acknowledge the contributions of Dr. Pramit Rastogi (Medical Director, Steps Center for Mental Health) to this article.*

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