

## ***The Best Four Years: How to Survive and Thrive in College (and Life)***

*By Adam Shepard*

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Reviewed by:

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Adam Shepard, author of *The Best Four Years*, is a graduate of Merrimack College in North Andover, Massachusetts. He is currently a motivational speaker, who appeals to a variety of audiences across the country. Shepard's speaking tagline, "Empowering people to elevate performance," ([www.shepardspeaks.com](http://www.shepardspeaks.com)) sums up the overall message of this book. This engaging, lively, and sometimes edgy book offers entertaining but real advice to both students about to enter college, as well as those within their first year of college. This book presents an interesting way to frame tough issues new students are dealing with in their transition to college.

In the introduction, the author states the purpose of writing this book "is to offer a little direction. It'll be a hard road, but it can be done, and the fact is that you can have a fun and successful college experience, if only you know how to play your cards right" (p. xiii). Shepard also gives three reasons for writing *The Best Four Years*. Comically, the first reason is to give readers the opportunity to build their vocabulary. The author states, "If you're to be a successful college graduate—or at least sound like one—it's necessary for you to drop these words in normal conversation" (p.xii). Secondly, the author says that several parents have discussed concerns with him that their children have wasted four years in college because they did not embrace the potential for a top-notch education. He hopes this book will provoke new students to seize learning opportunities from all experiences in college. Finally, the author says he wished he had read a book like *The Best Four Years* before he started college. He says, "I can only imagine what life would have been like for me during those four years if I'd had even more direction and motivation" (p. xiii).

The structure of this book provides features which allow for easy navigation. For example, throughout the book, the author boxes and highlights thoughts which he finds extremely important. While the author frames these comments as being on his "soapbox," the strategy of putting a box around specific messages draws attention to the important nature of it. Another feature which assists in easy navigation is a review at the end of each chapter. The book provides three to ten bullet points highlighting important information in the chapter. Also, at the end of the book, three blank, lined pages are provided for readers to take notes and create strategies for putting given advice into action. The author discusses these features in his introduction.

This 10 chapter book is organized by topics which beginning college students will encounter throughout their four years in college. Chapter one, titled "The Transition," discusses basic topics of entering college such as packing too much and dealing with homesickness. The author also provides advice to new students about taking appropriate risks and finding passion to "own" their own life; however, the author is also realistic in encouraging students to get used to rejection and frames college as a place where rewards are not given to those who are average. Finally, this chapter rounds out with advice on how to deal with roommates.

Chapter two, "You're All Grown Up Now," exhibits a main theme of how a new student needs to be skilled at managing all aspects of their new life. The book suggests that students manage their time by making a schedule and being more efficient by organizing life around them. Additionally, Shepard defines relaxation as effectively managing the idle moments of the day, which can eas-

ily be wasted by television, napping, or unnecessary use of technology.

“Days of Destitution” is the catchy title of chapter three, which provides advice on money management. While taking on a part-time job, like waiting tables, is great for obtaining money, the author encourages new students to take on worthy internships or work-studies where they can make money, but more importantly gain experience for their resumes. The author also encourages new students to be Resident Assistants (RA) at least one year during college. Other financial advice given in this chapter includes having a budget, paying with cash, establishing needs versus wants, and establishing a rapport with financial aid advisors.

Shepard states, “Your first priority in college—above all else—is to get an education” (p. 72). This first sentence of chapter four, “Be an Expert,” starts this chapter off with solid advice. The author suggests students should strategize how to be number one in a specific area. Further, he encourages students to choose their major based on what they love to do, not just how much they will be paid. Another chapter theme is suggesting that students write outside of class. In an effort to reflect and discover aspects about themselves along with getting used to writing more and better, writing every day is encouraged. The author focuses on grades in chapter five, which is titled “Study Like Your Grades Depend on It.” This chapter discusses preparing for an academic life by building a solid foundation. This groundwork can occur by developing a personalized best study system, taking ownership of education, surrounding oneself with smart individuals, and studying in short bursts rather than one long marathon session

“Taking Initiative, Getting Involved” is the sixth chapter, which focuses on getting involved on campus. Doing research on different types of extracurricular activities on campus and getting involved is important, especially during the first year of college. The author stresses participation in the political community, whether passionate or not, because it develops several needed skills. Additionally, the author states that there is a college sport for everyone, whether it is an intramural, club, or varsity sport. Overall, the main theme of this chapter is the importance of getting involved because it is fun and educational.

Chapter Seven, “Break Time!,” provides some thoughts on how students should best use their time off. Beyond being responsible at times like Spring Break, students are encouraged to embrace opportunities in front of them during breaks, such as taking trips, keeping their minds sharp, and focusing on not burning out by keeping too busy during break. Following the theme of rejuvenation, the author discusses strategies in how to best use social time in chapter eight titled, “A Social Affair.” The author simply states, “Meeting people is your responsibility” (p. 186). He also encourages readers to meet their RA and surround themselves with good people. He says that happy students party smart, drink slow and in moderation, don’t do drugs, take risks to find romantic interests, hook up when ready, wear a condom, and get help if they or their friends are abusing alcohol or drugs.

In chapter nine, simply titled “About Your Health,” Shepard discusses the importance of students paying attention to their health. Simple strategies, such as eating right, exercising daily, and getting help at the first sign of trouble are provided. Finally, chapter ten, “Get Connected, Stay Connected,” discusses strategies for finding a job after college and supporting future college students. Making and keeping connections is tough work, but worth it. The author suggests that students should start an address book and take ten minutes a week to write people. Once they are established, students should provide internship opportunities for current undergraduates and donate back to their college. This not only “pays it forward,” but it helps students stay connected.

Overall, this book is a nice resource for orientation, retention, and transition professionals. Since it is written with an incoming freshmen or first year student in mind, it is a quick and easy read. I appreciate how the author tackles some tough issues new students face including homesickness, roommate situations, choosing a major, studying, alcohol consumption, and sex. Shepard creates a hook by providing an edgy story or interesting anecdote to introduce tough topics, such as drinking

and sex, and then brings up an important lesson or point. As professionals, we face how to delicately discuss these issues, while giving a strong message about the importance of them all.

The Best Four Years could potentially be a successful book for a first-year or common reading program. There are several areas within the book that are appropriate for discussion. Depending on the focus of the new student reading, each chapter provides great discussion on real issues that face new students. While this book provides numerous strategies and advice on how to embrace opportunities in a new college environment, professionals need to be cautious in how they use it. Shepard does an excellent job of framing the book as a peer providing advice; however, if similar topics are discussed in the same manner by more seasoned professionals, it could be misinterpreted as a parent directing a child of what not to do. Professionals need to be aware of the book's topics in order to prepare the best way to facilitate discussion around some potentially uncomfortable topics.

Additionally, because of the, at times, edgy nature, the book may not be appropriate for all institutions. While appropriate, the discussion around drinking, drugs, and sex may not be suitable for all institution types. Overall, I value this book's message and the style in which it is presented. As stated earlier, its comical nature is excellent for the primary intended audience, students who just graduated high school and are entering college, or those who have recently entered college.