



# Question and Answer with Michael P. Keaton, the author of *Start College Strong:* *What Every First-Year Student Needs To Know*

## Q&A

### **Q. Tell us about yourself and your educational background.**

A. I am a native of Seneca, SC, and I'm married with two kids. I earned an associate's degree in management at Tri-County Technical College, then two bachelor's degrees at Southern Wesleyan University – a BA in History and a BS in Business Administration. After several years working for a company in Greenville, SC and three years as a college Admissions Counselor, I began teaching high school. I entered graduate school at Clemson University in 1999, earning a master's degree in history. I then began teaching college courses in adult evening programs (in the years before online courses existed), but I also taught middle and high school classes during the day. Southern Wesleyan University asked me to teach several first-year seminar courses on an as-needed basis, and I taught as an “adjunct” professor for six years in both the traditional program and the adult evening program. I was eventually hired full-time, so I went back to school once again, earning 18 doctoral credit hours in Clemson's *Policy Studies* program, and I completed my PhD in Humanities (History and Philosophy) at Faulkner University in Alabama.

### **Q. Give a brief description of your book, *Start College Strong*.**

A. *Start College Strong* is what every incoming college student needs to know about college, how it works, what to expect, and what college expects of them. Universities have specialized processes, specific systems, and their own jargon, and yet they expect high school students to magically know how the academic world operates. *Start College Strong* explains the terminology, how things work on campus, both academically and in student life, and it offers practical advice on things like time management, study skills, research, writing papers, giving presentations, etc. There's also a section





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that focuses on the student: physical health, mental health, career plans, goal setting, and taking responsibility.

### **Q. What led you to write *Start College Strong*?**

A. In teaching first-year students in both history courses and in first-year seminars, I realized that there was a large knowledge gap between what they assumed college would be like and what college is actually like. We assume that students will ask if they have questions, yet I've encountered many first-year students who "don't know what they don't know," so even if they knew *who* to ask, they don't know *what* to ask – or even that they *should* ask. I was placed in charge of creating/modifying our first-year seminar course, and I held that role for many years before 2020. Every year, I would search in vain for an appropriate textbook. There are many books on how to get into college, and there are many books on financial aid. There are some books that focus on the social aspects of college – things like packing for your dorm room, making friends, pledging a fraternity/sorority, or dealing with a problematic roommate, but I could not find a book that explained how college actually works. After I was consulted regarding a possible overhaul of our first-year seminar course in 2022-23, I decided to write the book I needed.

### **Q. Who should read this book?**

A. *Start College Strong* is for anyone planning to attend their first semester of college – or anyone actually in their first semester of college. The book is designed so that it can be read any time before the first semester, but it can also be used as a textbook for any first-year seminar course. Most colleges and universities teach a first-year seminar course that introduces students to both college life in general and that specific university in particular. *Start College Strong* answers basic questions, provides a great deal of practical advice, and focuses the student on their specific situation; by doing these things, the book frees up class time for those seminar instructors to focus on building





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relationships with their students and allows them time to assist students with their individual problems.

**Q. You mentioned that the book focuses students on their particular situation. How does that work?**

A. You'll find a number of questions at the end of each chapter. A few questions reference something specific in that chapter, but most of the questions focus on how the student's university operates. For example, each student should receive academic advising. Chapter four describes the process and offers several variations of how that might look. The end-of-chapter questions ask the student to list their advisor's name, where their office is located, and any deadlines associated with pre-registration. Other chapters look at how "majors" typically work, so those questions ask specific information about the student's chosen major. *Start College Strong* is a combination survival manual and behind-the-scenes tour, but by answering the end-of-chapter questions, the student is also creating a personalized reference book.

**Q. There are "Pause and Reflect" exercises as well as quotes from college graduates scattered throughout the book. What led you to include these exercises?**

A. The "Pause and Reflect" exercises provide a moment for the reader to think about what they read and how it applies to them and their situation. For example, what classes did you love in high school? Why? What classes did you dislike? Why? Did you like/dislike the subject, or did you like/dislike the teacher? Were your least favorite classes all first period? Does that mean you dislike anything that happens early in the morning? Whatever the subject might be, the "Pause and Reflect" exercises invite the reader to think about their past reactions and attitudes and consider how that might affect their experiences in college. The student quotes are from a variety of college graduates (and, at the time of publication, a couple of college seniors), most of which are from the last 15





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years, but there's one from 1978 and one from 1967; some college problems are timeless. I asked, "What was the biggest problem during your first year of college – and how did you solve it?" I tried to include one of these responses per chapter because new college students need to understand that everyone has problems; even though they may feel like they're the only one, they are not alone. I received a variety of answers, but I believe it's *telling* that approximately sixty percent of the responses revolved around problems related to time management. There are also several exercises between chapters that prompt the student to prepare for some non-academic situations. How do I make a budget? Where is the health center? Where can I park? What is the university's mailing address? What clubs or intramural sports are available? What are some local off-campus activities? These types of things are important to think about and contribute to the student being prepared for all aspects of college life.

**Q. The book is very conversational in tone, and the chapters are relatively short. Was there a reason you chose this style?**

A. I wanted to make the book as accessible and easy-to-read as possible. As a history professor, my job is to tell stories, so I tried to stick with that style as I explained the various topics. Imagine that you asked me for some college survival tips, and I started talking – and continued talking. That's essentially the book...I'm talking to you about these topics like we're having a conversation over lunch. While I do offer a number of practical suggestions and a lot of "do this/don't do that" advice, the overall tone is encouraging. Every year, tens of thousands of students survive their first semester, and I tell them that they can do it too. As for the length of the chapters, I aimed for short and to-the-point. Some chapters are obviously longer than others, but we've all had that textbook reading experience of thinking, "this chapter's never going to end." I didn't want that to happen to anyone reading *Start College Strong*. The chapters are also narrowly focused on specific topics, and this is related to its use as a textbook. As an instructor, if I want to cover a specific topic in one class





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period, I can assign that particular chapter; I don't have to worry about specific page numbers or other topics creeping in. The book is organized into three sections – the *System*, the *Academics*, and *You* – but an instructor can assign the chapters in any order they prefer. For example, when I teach a first-year seminar, the first topic I cover is time management. In the book, time management is covered in chapter fifteen, but I could assign that chapter as the first reading, and it wouldn't cause any problems.

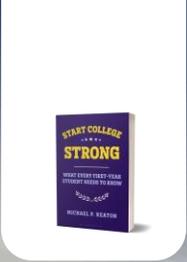
## **Q. How did you come up with the title?**

A. I began writing the book in the fall of 2023, and my working title for the first year was “What Colleges Expect You To Know.” My editor, Helen, thought I needed something punchier, so several conversations led us to *Start College Strong*. You hear “finish strong” all the time, but it's important to start strong, too. This is particularly important in college since that first semester is crucial; it can determine if a student finishes college at all. A strong start leads to a strong finish, and that means a college degree.

## **Q. And the book is available where?**

A. *Start College Strong* is available in paperback and hardcover through Amazon, Bloomsbury, Barnes and Noble, Walmart, and a host of other online retailers. Your local bookstore might have it in stock, but if not, they should be able to order it for you. It's also available for the Kindle and in several Ebook formats (PDF, Epub, and Mobi). If you're planning to attend college, this is a book you need. If you have a child or grandchild who will be attending college, this is a great gift that will help them survive that first critical year of college. If you're a college administrator, this book will create stronger students who stay in school. I truly believe that *Start College Strong* will be beneficial to everyone who reads it.





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Publisher: Bloomsbury Academic

Release date: February 5, 2026

ISBN: 978-1350557772

English, 240 pages

Available in Hardcover, Paperback, Kindle, and Ebook (PDF, Epub, and Mobi)

Categories: College Guides, College Skills, Study Skills

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