When Christopher Conoley started at The University of Texas at Arlington last year, he knew his classes would be hard, but he believed that he was ready. Calculus proved his nemesis.

Conoley had taken calculus in high school and thought he had retained those lessons -- he aced the two first tests. But when the class moved into calculus II principles, he began to slip.

"That's when it started getting into rough waters," said Conoley, 19, a sophomore majoring in business.

Calculus was the B that should have been an A.

"I wish I would have known the difference between knowing that college is hard and knowing that I was prepared," said Conoley, who as a UTA orientation leader has been offering advice to freshmen this summer.

Freshman year is a time of new beginnings and independence. Experts say it's also a crucial time when students learn to balance schoolwork with social life.

Colleges have added resources and programs aimed at helping students on a number of fronts, including financial aid, tutoring and counseling. Many require or strongly encourage freshmen to attend summer orientations so they can get a head start on campus life and meet other students.

"Coming in, it is a lot better if you know people," said Brian Joyce, UTA's associate director of the New Maverick Orientation. UTA had ushered some 3,000 freshmen through its summer orientation by late July.

Joyce said students need to be able to answer: "Where do I go? What do I do next?"

Tips for freshmen

Orientations help freshmen know about different aspects of college, Joyce said. They learn how to register online. They discuss how dual-credit or Advanced Placement credits from high school will be interpreted at college. They can ask about how many credit hours are appropriate per semester and get tips on keeping their grades up.

"They leave here and they are prepared," Joyce said. "They know what to do."

Reflecting on their freshman year, some sophomores said it's better to show up for school
ready to ask questions and participate. They offered a handful of tips for success:

Live on campus the first year.
Register for classes as early as possible.
Stay in touch with your family.
Assess how you fared in classes (what worked, what didn't).
Be self-disciplined.
Listen to academic advisers.
Don't be afraid to talk to professors.
Participate in campus activities.

Shaye Kelley, a 19-year-old sophomore at Tarleton State University in Stephenville, said she wishes she had lived on campus the first year.

"I missed out on a lot of fun," Kelley said. "All my friends would get together and go to the dining hall."

Kelley said that while she commuted between Stephenville and Dublin, she missed out on study sessions at lunch or in the dormitories. Kelley also learned the importance of registering for classes online as soon as the sign-up period begins.

"I learned -- finally -- to do it at midnight as soon as it opened," she said, adding that registering with an adviser works somewhat smoothly.

Discipline and calls home
Kelley also stressed the importance of touching base with parents.

"Use common sense," she said. "Anything can happen in a college town. Be sure to call parents to check in."

Bailey Limmer, 19, a theater major at the University of North Texas, said freshmen need to be disciplined and fight the urge to miss classes. Limmer went to the library or park to do her homework after classes to stay focused. She said that habit also prevented dorm distractions such as television or naps.

"It kept me from procrastinating," she said.

UTA's Conoley said that at the end of each semester, students need to reflect on what they did correctly or poorly in their classes.

Lena El Fakir, a sophomore at UTA, said she wishes she would have listened to her adviser and not wasted credits on classes that don't count toward her major in education. She also said students who don't get along with a professor or who are struggling with a professor's style of teaching should get tutoring (free for UTA freshmen), attend subject clinics or try to find a way to connect with the professor.

Thomas Craig, a 19-year-old sophomore at UNT, said freshmen need to get involved in an interest, such as a campus club or intramural sports.

"You start meeting new people, and you don't even think about your homesickness
anymore," Craig said. 
Craig said getting involved is part of the reason the first year of college can be a great time.
"You get a fresh start and you get to meet new people," he said.