

Real College: The Essential Guide to Student Life

By *Douglas Stone and Elizabeth Tippet*

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Reviewed by

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The focus of Stone and Tippet's new book is the "real student," not the perfect, problem-free teenagers found on TV, in movies, or on university promotional brochures. As such, the authors attempt to connect with the mentality and communication style of the Millennial Generation by utilizing humor; short, concise, and straightforward prose; and excerpts from e-mail and instant messenger sessions.

While the intended audience is college-bound students, family members and higher education staff and faculty can also learn much from the book. Family members will benefit not only from its information, but also can use it as a window into the issues their new college freshman will experience. Much of the information presented by Stone and Tippet is common knowledge for those in student services, but the writing style, as well as the nature of the issues selected, provides insight into the mindset of this generation.

Real College: The Essential Guide to Student Life, follows four factious students as they attempt to navigate life, academics, and bureaucracy at a nameless, public four-year residential institution. The characters represent the more common students on a traditional university's campus. Macani, a female with a long-distance boyfriend, rooms with PJ, a student athlete who later acknowledges that she is a lesbian. Across the hall is Rollo, the stereotypical physics and chess nerd, living with Sweeney, the resident womanizer. Along the way, we are introduced to the full cast of supporting characters. Craig is Macani's high school sweetheart and a freshman at a different university. Sweeney's best friend is Duncan, a freshman at a different university. The relationship between Macani and Craig allows the authors the opportunity to discuss issues of long-distance relationships, identity issues, and sex. Stone and Tippet use the Sweeney-Duncan friendship to bring up issues of diversity, acceptance, and differing views of the world.

The book is divided into nine chapters that reflect the authors' views on the divisions common in students' lives: Roommates, Social Life, Academics, Studying, Identity, Relationships, Sex, Parents, and Mental Health. These topics further represent Stone and Tippet's assertion that real students face challenges. The most powerful section of the book comes from the second paragraph of the introduction:

Real students have conflicts with their roommates, parents, and friends. They enjoy some classes and not others, procrastinate, and get addicted to video games. Real students get bored and depressed and do not always have exciting plans for Saturday night. They feel insecure about relationships and sex, face hard choices about drinking and drugs, and struggle with eating issues and body image – or have friends who do. Real students aren't always sure who they are, where they fit in, or what they want to do with the four years ahead of them, let alone the rest of their lives.

If the average student and parent were to read, understand, and reflect on the paragraph above, many of the issues they face would diminish, and the number of hours they spend discussing and worrying about heartbreak and insecurity would lessen.

The style of the text is similar to that of mainstream entertainment – a broad swath of topics and information presented in short, concise, well-written sections. Many topics and issues are given a mere sentence or two, and not one continues for more than a page and a half. Intermixed with the traditional writings are outtakes from e-mail messages sent by and to the main characters, and instant messenger transcripts in which life and higher education are discussed. The readability of the book is quite high; however, given the intended audience of the book, one can question if the conversational style and vocabulary used reflects that of the average college freshman.

There is a great deal of valuable information contained within the 200+ pages of *Real College: The Essential Guide to Student Life*. Some of the most complex issues of higher education and student life are explored. Sections on speaking up in class and study habits are granted additional attention. Some topics are augmented by easy-to-read charts that draw on the authors' thoughts and experiences. The segments of the book pertaining to eating disorders and mental health issues are reinforced with summarized guidelines from the National Institute of Mental Health and provide useful, albeit basic, information.

The appendix contains additional resources pertinent to each chapter. While written to apply to all institutions, the crux of the information is straightforward and valuable. Web site information for some topics is provided, and all chapters have additional books and articles to which a reader can refer. The greatest numbers of links are available for the portions on relationships, sex and contraception, health and wellness, and suicide.

In conclusion, Stone and Tippet provide a concise overview of the college experience for many of today's freshman. The authors' use of current communication media indicates an interest in connecting with student readers. The topics covered include the full gamut of issues and concerns for many headed to college. The strengths of the book lie in its readability, clear sense of direction, and pithy nature. One limitation is the authors' desire to affect a hip communication style and tone. Some of the language and conversations seem rather contrived or forced, and many excerpts containing long monologues and fully (correctly) spelled words, neither of which are common to this generation's media use.

Overall, *Real College: The Essential Guide to Student Life* is a good read and recommended for anyone interacting with traditional university freshmen.