Understanding the Transition into College

Supporting Your Student Through Typical Transitional Issues

The transition process is not limited to the first few weeks of the semester. There will be additional transitions that will occur throughout the academic year for both new freshmen and transfer students who may have been living at home while attending their previous institution.

The following explains a few areas you can keep in mind throughout the next year:

August: Overall excitement, homesickness, initial roommate worries, experiencing new freedoms, multiple calls or visits home

September: First sets of exams, maybe a few roommate challenges

October: Mid-term grades, personal decision making as to schoolwork/friends/fitting in, consequences of study habits, course registration for the next semester

November: Fall illnesses, exams and papers due, apprehension and excitement about going home for Thanksgiving (What type of questions will be asked? Will the family be proud? Am I heading in the right direction?)

December: Final exams, continued excitement or apprehension about going home for winter break, end of the semester fatigue

January: New semester, evaluate fall semester performance and figuring out necessary adjustments that need to be made

February: Some students miss home again, some are excited to be back at school, some are anticipating Spring Break

March: Spring Break, making choices for the next academic year, deciding to keep current majors or consider new ones, midterms, summer employment or internships

April: Change in weather will bring about sickness for some, end of the semester is quickly approaching, questions of “Am I in the right place? Am I heading in the right direction?” become apparent

May: Final exams, last minute summer planning, choosing to stay or go home.
Making the Transition

Differences between high school and college

Your student was more than likely told by his or her high school teachers numerous times that college is very different from high school. For most students, the fact that college is different doesn’t sink in until they have been on campus for a while and have experienced the differences first hand. To you, some differences may seem obvious, but for your student it could take a while to realize. For example:

**High School**
- Teachers remind students about assignments
- Studying is light for most classes (an hour a night)
- Teachers provide grade reports
- The class expectations are discussed in detail
- The school is open and staffed during set times
- Students’ lives are filled with activities

**College**
- Instructors expect more independent work
- Studying is key (2-3 hours for every hour in class)
- Students keep up with their own grades
- The course syllabus is a contractual agreement
- Instructors have specific office hours
- Involvement opportunities can be overwhelming
- Time management is key

The following are concerns your student may have during their first year

- Separation issues
- Independence
- Choices in selecting a degree
- Career questions
- Study skills and habits
- Time management
- Being accepted by others
- Understanding the college system
- Staying healthy

Some ways parents can help your student:

- Listening to their fears and concerns
- Helping them take initiative
- Knowing campus resources and services
- Sending notes/care packages
- Avoiding “taking care of everything”
- Staying open and positive
- Getting them to connect with a mentor
- Always remaining supportive when things get tough
- Allowing them to make mistakes
- Reassuring them that they learn from mistakes

Suggested Reading List for the Involved Parent

**A New Beginning: A Survival Guide for Parents of College Freshmen**

**Don’t Tell Me What To Do, Just Send Money: The Essential Parenting Guide to the College Years**
Helen E. Johnson, Christine Schelhas-Miller, St. Martin’s Press, 2011, 384 pages, paperback.

**Let the Journey Begin: A Parents Monthly Guide to the College Experience**

**You’re On Your Own: But I’m Here if You Need Me**

**I’ll Miss You Too: An Off-to-College Guide for Parents and Students: What Will Change, What Will Not, and How We’ll Stay Connected**
Margo E. Woodacre and Steffany Bane, 2006.

**Letting Go: A Parents’ Guide to Understanding the College Years**
Karen Levin Coburn and Madge Lawrence Treeger, 2009.
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Topics you may wish to discuss with your student on the drive home from Orientation

Involvement on Campus
• Questions to ask:
  • What organizations or activities did you learn about that you are interested in participating in?
  • Are you planning on talking with the Student Activities department or visiting their website to find something to get involved in?

• Things to remember:
  • Students who get involved on campus right away are more likely to feel connected with the university and are more likely to complete their academic goals than students who do not get involved. They are also more likely to spend their free time constructively.

Alcohol/Drugs
• Questions to ask:
  • Are you aware of the campuses policy of drugs, alcohol, and tobacco?
  • Have you thought about the risks of drinking in college?
  • What sort of things do you think you’ll need to do to stay safe?
  • How would you handle it if you found yourself in a situation where there was only alcohol available to drink?

• Things to remember:
  • Students tend to highly overestimate alcohol consumption levels of other students and will sometimes try to match that expectation with their own behavior. This can be very dangerous.
  • Alcohol is involved in most sexual assaults and violence. Both men and women may do things they regret while drinking.

Major Selection
• Questions to ask:
  • After meeting with your Advisor and hearing about your major during orientation, are you excited about the major you’ve selected?
  • For undecided students: Did you hear anything about any majors you might be interested in looking into? Are you considering making an appointment with the Career Advisor in the Fall?

• Things to remember:
  • There are resources on campus such as Career Services that can help your student decide on a major/ future career suited to his or her interests and strengths.
  • Try to give them the freedom to choose their major. Parents who push too hard will often find that students are not as committed to the major and often aren’t successful.
Communication Connection

Wellness
• Questions to ask:
  • What does it mean to you to have overall personal wellness?
  • What steps can you take to achieve/maintain wellness while you are in college?

• Things to remember:
  • Habits developed during college in regard to overall personal wellness are likely to remain with your student into adulthood.
  • There are many resources available on campus to help your student stay mentally, emotionally, and physically well. These resources includes the Health Clinic and Personal Counseling Services.

Communication expectations
• Questions to ask:
  • Should we set up a regular time to catch up or be more spontaneous?
  • How often are you thinking that we’ll talk throughout the week?
  • Would text or email be easier for you to keep in touch?

• Things to remember:
  • The amount of communication between you and your student will change as the adjustments to life are made, including studying for classes, and getting involved on campus.
  • Having a mutual understanding of how much (and in what ways) you will talk with your student can reduce any tension or frustration.
  • Ask about what your student is experiencing and any organizations or activities they are involved in.

Finances
• Questions to ask:
  • Do you plan on opening a credit card account? (If yes, take the time to educate your student on smart usage of credit cards)
  • How do you plan on paying for ____ (this could be food, gas, entertainment, books, etc. depending on what your student will be responsible for financially)

• Things to remember:
  • After the 12th class day of the semester, student’s financial aid refunds are processed. Many do not spend this very responsibly. This is credited to their selected refund preference. Students who misspend their money often find they don’t have enough to cover their remaining college expenses.
  • It is important that you and your student have the same understanding of who will be paying for what throughout college.