

LETTING GO & STAYING CONNECTED: FOR PARENTS OF FIRST YEAR STUDENTS

The college years are an exciting and stimulating time in the lives of young adult students. The first year especially presents as a time of significant change for College students and their parents. In addition to preparing for a professional career, our students face numerous challenges and opportunities to learn about themselves and the world around them. During this time, students will:

- *Make important life decisions,*
- *Develop their personal and professional identities, interests and values,*
- *Evolve from adolescence to adulthood.*

It is important for parents and their college students to discuss a variety of topics in order to ease the transition. Whether the student will be living in a residence or an apartment, or commuting from their parents' home, it is helpful to have frank discussions about such issues as:

- *Finances – Applying for scholarships and loans; who will be responsible for tuition, room and board, textbooks, and other living expenses; will the student be expected to work part-time. Financial Aid may be helpful in anticipating costs and seeking various forms of financial assistance.*
- *Academic Expectations – Yours and theirs.*
- *Communication and Visits – Telephone calls, visits to campus, visits home, e-mail; how much information do parents expect regarding course work and social life.*
- *Social Activities.*
- *Transportation – Will the student have a bicycle and/or car on campus, how will he or she visit home during the semester.*

It is important for parents to understand that all college staff must comply with the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act. Consequently, without written permission, from the student, no information will be released to parents. This includes marks, progression or behaviour issues in residence. All College staff members recognize that this can be distressful for parents especially when they are concerned about their son/daughter. It also is upsetting for parents who are providing some or all of the financial support if they want to know their son/daughter's academic status. Parents are encouraged to discuss this with their son or daughter. Any question concerning the use of information may be directed to the Freedom of Information Coordinator in Human Resources.

ARRIVING AND SETTLING INTO RESIDENCE...

Students quickly realize they have entered a world different from the one left behind. While it can be very exciting, fulfilling and filled with wonderful opportunities, a period of emotional, social and academic adjustment is a natural part of this transition. Students are likely to experience many challenges as they arrive and settle into the routine of college life, such as:

- ***Leaving familiar territory and traditions*** – Students leave behind family, friends, possibly a boyfriend or girlfriend, familiar places and customs, and familiar rules.
- ***Managing new freedoms and responsibilities*** – Great freedom requires greater personal responsibility. In the absence of daily parental guidance, students living in an apartment or residence must be fully responsible for waking up and getting to class on time, deciding when to study and when to socialize, when and what to eat, when to come home at night and when to go to bed, managing their money, doing their own laundry, and making daily decisions regarding their academic and social behaviours.
- ***Changing relationships with parents and family*** – With greater independence and less frequent contact, the parent-child relationship begins to evolve into an adult-to-adult, rather than adult-to-child relationship. This creates both challenges and opportunities for relationship growth for students and their parents. At times, it may be helpful for a student to meet with a Counsellor from Career and Student Success to discuss this adjustment process and how it may impact satisfactory academic performance.
- ***More demanding academic requirements and competition*** – Students may quickly recognize that they are now competing with other students who all were in the upper half of their high school class. Many college students were able to do well in high school without much effort or study and without developing the learning skills (e.g. note-taking, textbook reading, study skills) necessary to succeed in college. Students who are under-performing may find it very helpful to seek individual assistance from our Learning Strategists or Peer Tutors.
- ***Large classes and less individualized attention*** – In high school, students seldom have classes larger than 30 or so. During the first year of college, it is not unusual to enroll in introductory classes that hold up to 45 students or more. It is easy to feel disconnected and unimportant. In order to counter such feelings, students must be able to advocate for themselves. That is, they must ask the professors questions in class or during office hours.

- **Registering for classes and choosing a career major** – It is the student’s responsibility to meet with his/her Counsellor or Academic Program Coordinator to determine the courses necessary for the next semester in order to remain in “good standing” and to register appropriately for the following semester’s classes. If a student is unsure about a career direction, he or she should speak with a Career Advisor. The majority of students either do not know what major to pursue when they initially enroll in college or they change majors at least once during their college career as they learn more about themselves and their true interests, values and abilities.
- **Time management** – In high school, most students spend nearly 35 hours each week in class. In college, they may spend 12 – 17 hours in class. Some days, they may not even have any classes. These periods of non-class time during the day (and evening) can easily be spent in a variety of non-academic activities. Many students are not aware of the general guideline that, for every hour of class time, a student should spend approximately two hours studying and completing assignments and projects. In order to perform well academically and also have time for socializing, exercising and leisure activity, both time management and organizational skills are critical. The Learning Strategists and Counsellors offer workshops and individual counselling, which address issues of time management, effective decision-making and other personal issues.
- **Feeling overwhelmed by course work** – Constant studying for quizzes and exams, reading assignments, completing projects and papers and other responsibilities is not unusual and can lead to procrastination, which only worsens the problem. Some students reveal perfectionist tendencies (i.e. unrealistically high self-expectations or perceived parental expectations) which further immobilize their efforts, add to their discouragement and impede their effectiveness. Such issues, along with test and performance anxiety, are frequent in a college student population and may be discussed with a Counsellor or a Learning Strategist in Career and Student Success.
- **Learning to live in a world of difference** – Diversity of ethnicity, religion, philosophical thoughts and beliefs, interests and values, may be one of the most important developments during the college years. Students are constantly confronted with new ideas in their courses and in their interactions with other students from very different backgrounds. Students at times may feel torn between remaining loyal to long-held family beliefs and making decisions based on new information and consistent with their own emerging values and goals.

Mid-semester...

As mid-semester and mid-term exams approach, relaxation and leisure activities become more and more pre-empted by assignments, projects and studying for exams.

Academic reality sets in and feelings of stress and tension may increase. If a student has not already acknowledged it, this is the time when he or she begins to realize that college requires more work than high school, that time must be managed more carefully, and that the learning skills necessary in high school may no longer be sufficient. This is a time when self-discipline, self-motivation, effective time management and learning strategies are critical to academic success. Peer Service offers workshops and individual assistance in these areas.

If a student does not meet his/her own expectations (or perceived parental expectations) on mid-term exams and papers, he or she may become discouraged or experience feelings of failure, guilt, worry and loss of self-esteem. They may begin to question their ability, their choice of a major, or even their decision to go to college. Occasionally, students develop inadequate coping strategies in response to these feelings. They may skip (avoid) classes, stay out late, spend too much time socializing or on the Internet, develop poor eating habits, or use alcohol or other substances. College Counsellors are available to assist the students with these personal difficulties.

End of semester...

The last several weeks of the Fall semester, particularly between Thanksgiving and the end of the first semester, are typically very hectic for students as they work to complete papers and projects, and prepare for final exams. With only fourteen weeks in the semester, time goes by very quickly and first semester students are often trying to catch up on their assignments in the last weeks of the semester.

Students often experience high levels of stress during this time. Students may feel overwhelmed by what they perceive to be an unmanageable amount of work. They may attempt to study non-stop, stay up late (or all night), neglect meals, or use alcohol, amphetamines, or other substances to assist in relaxing, staying awake, or providing energy.

Along with all of the academic expectations, there are holiday expectations – socials, concerts, organization events and religious events – all competing for the student's time. Maintaining a balance, including sufficient sleep, proper diet and some relaxation is essential for optimal functioning at this time.

Holiday Winter Break...

Students often have ambivalent feelings about returning home for a few weeks. On the one hand, winter break is a much-needed time for rest, a time to re-connect with high school friends and family, and a time to “forget” the pressures of school for a while. However, students who have been living on their own for the past four months may wonder to what extent they will need to return to more restrictive parental rules and scrutiny. Several areas of conflict may arise, including:

- ***Students weary from the final weeks of school semester, view winter break as a vacation, a time for relaxation.*** However, parents often have other ideas, including plans for family gatherings and family activities or chores that have been “on hold” waiting for the student to return. They may expect the student to take a part or full-time job. It is usually best to discuss these issues prior to the break and to re-negotiate expectations that are acceptable to all concerned.
- ***Students, having lived with different rules and less oversight, and having gained a sense of greater independence during their first semester, often are upset when parents want to return to high school curfews or to attempt to “control” their comings and goings.*** These issues need to be discussed and negotiated in order to find a reasonable balance between respecting student’s greater independence and self-reliance, while continuing to maintain household order and tradition.
- ***If this is the first extended visit home since the semester began, it may be during the winter break that changes in the student’s beliefs, values or appearance become more obvious.*** During the past four months, students have been introduced to a “whole new world” of ideas and may be eager to share these with their families. However, parents may view these as challenging long-held family beliefs or values and these discussions can sometimes become sources of contention. An approach which emphasizes an attempt to understand rather than condemn these changes often will encourage more open discussion.

Letting Go...

For parents, the key is to be prepared for changes. There is no way to move through such a transition without feeling some sense of excitement and loss. The excitement is easy to handle. However, the sense of loss or dislocation is less so. As you observe your son or daughter, don’t make snap judgments on the quality or character of the differences. They may change again in the next month, so try to appreciate that your son or daughter’s view of the world is expanding. The following are some ideas for dealing with the sense of loss and successfully “letting go” as your student goes to college:

- **Build an adult relationship with your son or daughter** with phone calls, e-mails, letters and “care” packages. Let him or her control the timing of these interactions to help maintain that sense of freedom
- **Focus on the things you enjoyed doing before your son or daughter began college.** If you enjoyed an activity for its own sake – and not because of some connection to your child – continue it.
- **Don’t feel guilty if you adjust to your son or daughter being in college before other parents do.** Everyone is different, and each parent will make the adjustment in his or her own time.
- **Work to keep your emotions under wrap.** If you burst into tears every time you speak to your son or daughter, he or she may feel even worse about being in school than he or she already does, and/or may stop talking to you.
- **Try not to focus conversations on problems or uncertainties that you’re facing in your life.** Help your son or daughter focus on new goals or activities in his or her life.
- **Try to limit any other major changes in your life for now.** Sending a son or daughter to college is enough of a shock. Changing jobs or moving to a new house could send everyone over the edge!
- **Don’t try and fill your life with new commitments** to fill the void left by your child going to college. Focus on yourself for a while or other members of your family.

Remember that this is a time of transition for both you and your son or daughter. Keep the lines of communication open!

STAYING CONNECTED...

How can you “let go” of your student without cutting off you love and support? It’s not as hard as you might think. In general, students simply like to communicate with their loved ones at home on their own terms, at their own times. Here are some ideas that you can stay connected without infringing on their new-found freedom:

- **Provide your son or daughter with a pre-paid phone card** that he or she can use at anytime. It’s a great way of reminding your child to stay in touch.
- **Communicate via e-mail.** It’s inexpensive and enables the student to communicate with you as his or her schedules allows.
- **Write letters.** Students look forward to the mail delivery everyday, even though they don’t always have the time to write or call in response. Don’t take less communication personally!

- ***Send small care packages*** with items such as food treats, quarters for doing laundry, flowers and local news clippings.
- ***Allow yourself to be a “shoulder to cry on.”*** College can be stressful and frustrating for many students. When your son or daughter calls or writes, just take in the information and don't be judgmental. Often your son or daughter isn't asking for a solution to the problem, he or she just wants to let out some feelings.
- ***If your main form of communication is the telephone,*** here are some ideas for getting the most out of your conversations: Begin your calls with positive news, information that is not controversial. Share news about yourself and life at home, but don't go on and on about people your son or daughter doesn't know or like. Let him or her decide the length of the call, as he/she may need to study or go to class.
- ***Don't ask a question if you really don't want to hear the answer.*** If you respond in a judgmental fashion to something your child tells you, it will limit how much he or she shares with you in the future.

For both parents and students, the transition to college is usually more successful when there is good communication, lots of patience and the willingness to understand of how the changes are affecting each other.

Acknowledgements

Many of the ideas presented in this guide were adapted from the book *Letting Go: A Parents' Guide to Understanding the College Years* authored by Karen Levin Coburn and Madge Lawrence Treeger, and published by Harper Perennial, 1997.

Additional Recommended Readings

- *Don't Tell Me What To Do, Just Send Money.* Helen E. Johnson and Christine Schelhas-Miller, 2000.
- *How to Survive and Thrive in an Empty Nest: Reclaiming Your Life When Your Children Have Grown.* Robert H. Lauer and Janette C. Lauer, 1999.
- *Empty Nest, Full Heart: The Journey from Home to College.* Andrea Van Steenhouse and Johanna Parker, 1998.

Who Are You Going To Call?

- Residence Life Staff (705) 730-5600
- Career and Student Success, Barrie Campus, Building B110 (705) 722-1523 Includes: Counselling Services, Career Services, Peer Services, Centre for Access and Disability Services and Learning Strategists.