

FROM HOME TO THE TOP!

Parenting A First-Year College Student

A PREFACE TO PARENTS

As a college counselor for the last 20 years, I've seen lots of parents leave their children — sometimes tearfully, sometimes joyously — at our doorstep. I've left two of my own at colleges as well. I'd like to share with you a few things I was glad I knew at that time.

College is a new and different place. Hundreds of young people eating, sleeping, studying, playing, loving, and potentially aggravating one another 24-7, as they say, gives the word “community” a whole new meaning. Your child will be exposed to people from many places all over the world. Many of these people will expand your child's horizons measurably, giving new perspectives and sharing new ways to have fun — some great and some not so great. The exposure to new academic knowledge and the potential of the professional “real world” out there is both stimulating and terrifying.

First year students cope in lots of ways. Some desperately try to fit in and drink and party and pierce their body parts. Others opt for individuality, shaving their heads, growing a beard, or smoking Indonesian cigarettes. All are searching for who they are, separate from parents, hometown, old friends and family.

As parents we somehow no longer seem to have much of a role, and look on, sometimes with amusement, sometimes with shock, and often with anxiety. In my experience it is really important to remember that underneath all the newness and experimentation, the sound values we've instilled still live. They may be in cold storage, but they're there nonetheless.

What can we do? We can listen, support, and help them look at each situation from all sides. We can urge them to take responsibility for their own behavior and find ways to help a bad situation. We can applaud their successes, not enable bad behavior (such as giving them more allowance when they spent what they had on partying), and keep hold of the “Whom To See For What” sheet, referring them to college offices to help them with things you can't.

Then what? Send care packages and newsy notes. Don't fill them with stories about who's arguing with whom, though — college students worry too, and they need to keep their mind on their studies. Then just love them and take a course, write a book, exercise, enjoy your younger children, buy some new makeup or golf clubs and relax. Good luck!

PARENTING A FIRST YEAR COLLEGE STUDENT (From a Student's Perspective)

Your student, along with a couple of million others, is about to enter a time at once exciting and frightening, a period of joy, pain, discovery and disappointment. These students enter a four-year period of their lives from which they'll leave as much different persons than they were when they began. And, like it or not, you're entering this period with your son or daughter. You'll experience the same happiness and defeats as they... second hand, but just as vividly or achingly.

If you don't believe me ask my mom. She watched and waited and worried through four years of ups, downs and in-betweens. She patiently accepted my progressions and my regressions. She tried, and sometimes failed, to understand my way of thinking and doing and being. And, maybe because of her, maybe in spite of her, I left college after four years a much different person than I began. A much happier person.

So my advice is: watch and wait and worry and accept and understand. Your children will be happier for your efforts. So will you. Of course, no one can ensure that you'll completely survive your child's first year at college, but there are some guidelines that might help you to make it with a minimum loss of sanity and a maximum strengthening of your new relationship.

The suggestions which follow are based mostly on careful observations of mistakes and breakthroughs made by my parents, myself, my friends as parents, and the parents of many students over the years. At most, they'll prepare you to deal effectively with some predictable first year conflicts. At least, they'll make you think about your reactions to them. And that can't hurt.

Compliments of the Student Development Center
For counseling referrals contact:
Cheryl Culotta, (518) 327-6340
cculotta@paulsmiths.edu

BITS AND PIECES

**(Advice, inspiration, reflections, myth busting, and other words of wisdom
for parents of soon-to-be first-year college students.)**

RULE #1 - DON'T ASK THEM IF THEY'RE HOMESICK

The power of association can be a dangerous thing. A friend once told me, "The idea of being homesick didn't even occur to me, what with all the new things going on, until my mom called one of the first weekends and asked, 'Are you homesick?' Then it hit me." The first few days and weeks of school are activity-packed and friend-jammed and the challenge of meeting new people and adjusting to new situations takes a majority of a first-year student's time and concentration. So, unless they're reminded of it by a well-meaning parent they'll probably be able to escape the loneliness and frustration of homesickness. And even if they don't tell you during those first few weeks, they do miss you! (P.S. Don't let them give up. The most homesick, hating-it-here student I ever knew loved it so much at Paul Smith's she wouldn't go home for the summer following freshman year!

RULE #2 - WRITE! (even if they don't write back)

Although first-year college students are typically eager to experience all the away-from-home independence they can in those first weeks, most are still anxious for family ties and the security those ties bring. This surge of independence may be misinterpreted by sensitive parents as rejection, but I'd bet that most first-year students would give anything for some news from home, however mundane it may seem to you. That said, 99% won't ever admit it. But there's nothing more depressing than a week of empty mailboxes. (Warning: don't expect a reply to every letter you write or e-mail you send. The you-write-one, they-write-one sequence isn't often followed by college students, so get set for some unanswered correspondence.) E-mail is a wonderful form of communication, and students often do use it. Snail-mail letters and packages, however, are really anticipated with pleasure!

RULE #3 - ASK QUESTIONS (but not too many)

College freshmen are "cool" (or so they think) and have a tendency to resent interference with their newfound lifestyle, but most still desire the security of knowing that someone is still interested in them. Parental curiosity can be obnoxious and alienating, or relief-giving and supportive, depending on the attitudes of the persons involved. "I-have-a-right-to-know" tinged questions, with ulterior motives or nagging, should be avoided. However, honest inquiries and other "between-friends" communication and discussion will do much to further the parent-college student's relationship.

RULE #4 - EXPECT CHANGE (but not too much)

Your student will change. It will happen either drastically within the first months, slowly over the two or four years, or somewhat in between that pace. It's natural, inevitable, and it can be inspiring and beautiful. Often, it's a pain in the neck.

College and the experiences associated with it can affect changes in social, vocational and personal behavior and choices. A former wallflower may become a campus sweetheart, a pre-med student may discover that biology is not for him after all, or a high school radical may become a college egghead. You can't stop change, and you may not even understand it, but it is within your power to accept these changes. And it's to the advantage of you and your student to do so.

Remember that your college student will be basically the same person that you sent away to school, aside from those aforementioned interest changes and personality revisions. Don't expect too much, too soon. Maturation is not instantaneous or overnight and you might discover him or her returning home with some of the same habits and hang-ups that you thought he or she had grown out of. Be patient.

RULE #5 - DON'T WORRY (TOO MUCH) ABOUT MANIC-DEPRESSIVE PHONE CALLS OR LETTERS

Parenting can be a thankless job, especially during the college years. It's a lot of give and only a little take at times. Often when troubles become too much for a freshman to handle — a flunked test, ended relationship and shrunken T-shirt all in one day — the only place to turn, write or dial (usually at the parent's expense) is home. Often, unfortunately, this is the only time that urge to communicate is felt so strongly, so you never get to hear about the A paper, the new boyfriend or the domestic triumph. In these times of crisis, your student can unload trouble or tears. After the catharsis, he or she will likely return to routine, relieved and lightened, while you inherit the burden of worry. Be patient with those nothing-is-going-right, I-hate-this-place phone calls or letters. You're providing a service as an advice dispenser, sympathetic ear, or punching bag. Granted, it's a service that makes you feel lousy, but it works wonders for a frustrated student. Like I said before, parenting can be a thankless job.

RULE #6 - VISIT and CALL (but not too often)

Visits by parents (especially when accompanied by shopping sprees and/or dinners out) are part of the events that first-year students may be reluctant to admit liking, but would appreciate greatly. And feigning disdain of those visits may be just another part of the first-year syndrome. These visits give students a chance to introduce people from both of their worlds, school and home, to each other. Additionally, it's a way for parents to become familiar with the students' new activities, commitments and friends, and, perhaps, more understanding of as well. Spur-of-the-moment surprises are usually not appreciated. Pre-empting a planned weekend of studying or other activities can have disastrous results. It's usually best to wait for Family Weekend in October to see your student and the school; that way you may even get to see a clean room. As for phone calls, calling early in the morning or too often will not usually go over well, either. Calling once a week at a set time can be the best for most students. Remember, their job now is to take over their own life and their own decisions, as well as taking their own responsibility for themselves. They need to wean themselves from you.

RULE #7—DO NOT TELL YOUR STUDENT THAT "THESE ARE THE BEST YEARS OF YOUR LIFE"

The first year, and the others as well, can be full of indecisions, insecurities, disappointments, and, most of all, mistakes. They're also full of discovery, inspiration, good times and people. However, in retrospect it's not the good that always stands out.

It took a while, and some help of some good friends, for me to realize that I was the one who was normal and that my paperback-novel perceptions of what college was all about were inaccurate. It took a while for me to accept that being unhappy, afraid, confused, disliking people and making mistakes — in other words, accepting myself — were all part of the show, all part of this new reality, all part of growing up. It took a while longer for my parents to accept it.

Any parent who believes that all college students get good grades, know what they want to major in and always have activity packed weekends, thousands of close friends and lead carefree lives is wrong. So are parents who think that college-educated means mistake-proof. Parents who perpetrate and insist upon the "Best Years" stereotype are working against their child's already difficult self-development. Those who accept and understand the highs and lows of their student's reality can provide the support and encouragement where it's needed most.

RULE #8 - TRUST THEM

Finding oneself is a difficult enough process without feeling that the people whose opinions you respect most are second-guessing your own second-guessing. One of the most important things my parents ever wrote to me in my four years at college was this: "We love you and we want for you all the things that make you the happiest; and we guess that you, not we, are the one who knows best what those things are." They wrote that to me during my senior year. If you're wise, you'll believe it, mean it, and say it now!

ONE MORE MESSAGE...

At Paul Smith's, we emphasize the values of integrity, community, diversity, respect, self-confidence, responsibility, excellence and experience. In my experience, alcohol and drug use can get in the way of living those values and it is very important to discuss this with your student. Studies show that substances are the number one factor in school dropout rates and poor performance. It is important to share this with students, as well as clarifying your expectations and values in a concerned way. This is an important step in helping to prevent abuse.

It is not the same as when we went to school. College binge drinking rates are up, and marijuana is much more potent than it used to be. Students are coming into college having used these — some of them extensively. However, surveys tell us that everyone does not use substances, no matter what students think. They need to know it is OK to abstain.

Studies also show that you can make a difference, so read up, educate yourself, and give clear messages. Good luck!

Adapted from the National Orientation Director's Association

Suggested Reading List for Family Members

Letting Go: A Parents' Guide to Understanding the College Years, by Karen Levin Coburn and Madge Lawrence Treeger. "Letting Go" leads parents through the transition that their student experiences between the junior year of high school and college graduation. The authors explain how to distinguish normal development stages from problems that may require parental or professional intervention. The latest edition explains the differences between college life today and the college life parents experienced 20 or 30 years ago. It features a completely new resource guide that introduces parents to campus technology, useful websites and other organizations providing information on a wide range of topics.

Don't Tell Me What To Do, Just Send Money, by Helen E. Johnson and Christine Schelhas-Miller.

When children leave for college, many parents feel uncertain about their shifting roles. By emphasizing the importance of being a mentor to your college student, this book shows parents how to influence their college student while still supporting their independence. The authors offer valuable insight into the minds of college students and provide parents with simple suggestions for improving communication with their children. Filled with humorous anecdotes and realistic dialogs between parents and students, this comprehensive guide covers a wide range of issues including financial matters, academic concerns, social adjustment and postgraduate choices.

Helping Your First Year College Student Succeed, by Richard H. Mullendore and Cathie Hatch of the National Orientation Directors Association. This informational pamphlet focuses on letting go as a long-term process that should never be completed. The authors encourage parents to renegotiate their relationship with their student as an adult. This concise guide features ten sections about the major events and feelings parents and students will likely experience during the first year of college and offers suggestions for resolving these issues.

Let the Journey Begin: A Parent's Monthly Guide to the College Experience, by Jacqueline Kiernan MacKay. As you and your first-year college student begin the school year, many questions may arise. Parent orientation will be one opportunity to get answers to your questions. Knowing what to ask will help you maximize the benefits of your orientation. Use the strategies in "Let the Journey Begin" to tackle problems and find solutions. Start with these questions and review more FAQs in Chapter 2. Remember, there is always something new to learn!

When Kids Go to College: A Parent's Guide to Changing Relationships, by Barbara M. Newman and Philip Newman. This practical guide will answer that important question and tell you how to make the most of these exciting years. Topics covered in this book include identity formation, values development, career exploration, social relationships, sexuality, alcohol and drug abuse, romantic relationships, dorm life, personal freedom, depression, discrimination and college bureaucracy.

Parents, the following information is presented to students in a variety of ways. We felt it might be helpful to those of you who are unsure of what to expect for your students.

Ways college and high school are different

- ❖ Course reviews are built into high school classes.
- ❖ 6 hours per day, 180 days,
- ❖ 36 weeks, 1,086 hours
- ❖ College is usually 15 hours per week (not counting labs), 30 weeks, 450 hours
- ❖ This means you have to do that extra work on your own to do as well as you did in high school!
- ❖ That's 22.7 more hours per week on your own to do as well as you did in high school.

Tests

- ❖ High school-Weekly; at end of chapter; frequent quizzes
- ❖ College- 2-4 per semester; at end of 4-chapter unit; at 8 a.m. on the morning after a big weekend

Grading

- ❖ In high school passing grades guarantee you don't flunk out- they may be based on level of improvement
- ❖ In college you need a cumulative average of C or above to graduate; grades are based on mastery of course content

Teaching in high school

- ❖ Teachers often take attendance
- ❖ May regularly check notebooks and homework assignments
- ❖ Lecture from textbook and often use blackboard and worksheets
- ❖ Teachers impart knowledge and facts

Teaching in college

- ❖ College professors may not take attendance, but you need to be in class.
- ❖ Seldom check homework or monitor daily work
- ❖ Often lecture and rarely teach you the textbook
- ❖ Require library research
- ❖ Challenge you to integrate information from a variety of sources
- ❖ Synthesis (putting it all together) is different from just memorizing

Ways to Handle Distractions

- ❖ Negotiate with roommate(s) about study time.
- ❖ Beware of the telephone.
- ❖ Learn to Say No!
- ❖ Hang a "Do Not Disturb" sign on door.
- ❖ Avoid noise distractions.

Other ways college and high school are different...

Freedom

- ❖ In high school most of your time is structured for you and there are many limits set by parents, teachers, and other adults- buildings are monitored.
- ❖ In college you must monitor your time and personal freedom- research says this is the greatest problem college students face!

What does this mean to you?

- ❖ More personal freedom!
- ❖ To make your own decisions
- ❖ To monitor your time
- ❖ To do your work when you want
- ❖ To go to class
- ❖ More personal responsibility
- ❖ To do your own review
- ❖ To spend time outside of class doing your work (2-3 hours per class hour)
- ❖ To monitor your own attendance and make good decisions

Ways to impress your professors

They have certain expectations, so...

- ❖ Look at the instructor when he or she is speaking.
- ❖ In class, use the instructor's name at least once a day when you talk to him or her.
- ❖ Make one good comment or observation in class each day.
- ❖ Arrive early, leave late.
- ❖ Get ready to leave only when instruction is finished.
- ❖ Accept criticism as constructive feedback.
- ❖ Even if you have not completed an assignment or don't like it, always hand your paper/project in on time.
- ❖ If you do not understand, ask the instructor to please explain.
- ❖ Learn to use a word processing program in the Academic Support Center. Corrections are easier, work looks neater, and you can make corrections the instructor suggests easily.
- ❖ Always go to your instructor first when there is a hassle with your work. If you can't get help immediately, it is OK to ask others.
- ❖ Find a study buddy or create study groups.
- ❖ Never skip a class to prepare for another class. This infuriates instructors and just puts you further behind.
- ❖ Get involved with clubs, organizations, sports and other activities.
- ❖ Social integration is important.

When/where to study

- ❖ Study difficult subjects first.
- ❖ Be aware of your best time of day.
- ❖ Use time well (study while you're waiting for an appointment, for friends, for a class to start, etc.)
- ❖ Listen to tape-recorded notes with headset.
- ❖ Review notes on 3"x5" cards
- ❖ Use regular study area
- ❖ Study where you'll be alert

To help yourself and your student through this early stage and beyond, practice the following thoughts and behaviors:

Eliminate discussions of major controversy.

Avoid being too enthusiastic or too critical.

Carefully select reminders of what to do.

Affirm confidence in student potential.

Listen, listen, listen.

Keep your sense of humor.

Don't let it worry you that the same person planning her life can't seem to do her laundry.

Praise accomplishments often.

Consistently communicate with your student (e-mail is great!)

Take comfort in knowing that formation of identity, independence and intimacy are as much a part of college as calculus and literature.

College is expensive. Work cooperatively on reasonable budgets.

Keep in mind that time management challenges students.

Don't compare your student to siblings, friends or others.

Remember HOW — Honesty, Open-mindedness, Willingness — as you talk to your student.

Used with permission. Mullendore, R. H., & Hatch, C. (2000). *Helping Your First-Year College Student Succeed: A Guide for Parents*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition.