

What parents and students need to know before the first term begins

Making the College Transition

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When my eldest son went to college, he didn't go far, but he lived in the residence halls, worked, and had an active freshman year investing in his school's theater program. Despite all my years teaching, that year we discovered just how significant going to college for the first time is—both for the student who is leaving home and the family who is staying behind.

This is a brief guide for students who are going away to college for the first time, and for their parents, written from the point of view of a former college student, a parent of three college boys, and a professor. And I realize that for a growing number of families, the student lives at home while going to college. The advice here is for you as well, with a special section just for parents in this situation that may save everyone a lot of grief.

STUDENTS

Most of your education—especially the last four years—has been pointing to this moment. But now what? What should you expect when you go to college in the fall, and what can you do with the remainder of the time to get ready before you head out the door?

1) Don't try to overachieve or underachieve during your first semester.

During my first term in college, I did not take the advice of an academic counselor. Instead I enrolled in the maximum number of units allowed—all of them difficult classes. The results were mixed: I excelled in two courses I really liked, missed an opportunity to invest enough in a course I might have liked (but didn't have time for), and crashed and burned in another class that I still have bad dreams about. (I dream that I receive news that I never really finished that undergraduate requirement, and I have to repeat the work for all my degrees.)

At the same time, I know some students just go for the minimum—minimal units, easy classes, and easy professors. They don't find college very interesting (academically) during the first semester and they also find their ways onto dean of students' "problem students to be aware of" lists. These students usually have too much time on their hands and find themselves investing more in their newfound freedom than in their education. I suggest finding your own middle ground in the classes you take. It's your first semester. You might try taking close to the minimum number of units necessary to

remain full-time, but enrolling in challenging classes—both classes that meet requirements and at least one class that really looks interesting. There will be plenty of time to overachieve later, and if necessary, you can make up for any lost time during summer school. The idea of the first term, however, is to get used to the rhythm and expectations of college classes, to do your best, and to have no regrets in terms of what you could have done.

2) Close the door on high school and focus on the future.

I know this is not easy. You're leaving behind friends, family, significant others, the familiarity of your home and your town, suburb, or city—in some cases, your country—to start a new life. It's hard to say goodbye. On the other hand, there may be some advantages to leaving some of these things or people behind, and college is a good excuse to make the break.

There are few points in life when you really have the opportunity to start anew, even to reinvent yourself (online role-playing games excluded). Are there things you didn't like about your high-school life? Are there things you didn't like about *yourself* in high school? Have you been interested in areas you have never had the chance to try out? Do you want to redefine your relationship with your parents? Now is your chance.

And if you embrace this opportunity, something will happen when you return home from college around Christmas—everyone else will have changed. Family, friends who went away, friends who did not go away, your hometown itself, even your house. (Families are notorious for claiming rooms of the recently departed-to-college. But don't take that personally—they need something to do in your absence, and there are worse things they could do.) You will be the one who has changed, of course, and you'll be seeing the once-familiar with a new set of eyes.

3) Plan for how to keep important people in your life.

Once you close the door on high school, one of the most difficult decisions is which good friends from your “old life” you want to keep, and how to best do that. Another is your relationship with a significant other. College will radically refocus your attention, and, especially if you're living in a residence hall, your new friends will become a second family. This should happen, and it will happen quickly. As a professor, I have seen many students trying to live in two worlds—college and home—and without a plan, the results can be distracting and sometimes disastrous. Think this through. Talk about it with your friends and significant other. Also, choose your new friends carefully—don't be in a rush, don't attach yourself to the first new group you encounter. You'll have a large number of people to select from, and this is a chance to consider how you think about friendship.

4) Attend to your spiritual life.

Some readers probably wish this had been first on the list (even though these items are not listed in order of importance), but the goal of going to college is primarily academic. It's not primarily about a social life, or family life, or a spiritual life. These three aspects of life should always be with you, but if you're attending a Christian college, do not expect it to be Bible camp. College or university is about learning how to think, broadening your knowledge base, understanding how other people think, and preparing for life after college, where all of this will be extremely important. Do not assume that everyone at your Christian college will be on the same spiritual wavelength. Find out where you fit, and care for your spiritual life just as you would your own body: feed it, exercise it, and grow.

If you're not attending a Christian

college, do not assume that everyone will be on a non-Christian wavelength. There are plenty of Christians at state schools or private schools. Again, find a place to fit, and follow the directions above. No matter where you are, locate and visit the campus chaplain. Get a sense from him or her of what opportunities exist on campus.

One more thing: consider finding a local church. It's good to connect with families in the area and with people who are outside the college environment. Sometimes colleges turn into fishbowls.

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5) Learn as much as you can about your new environment.

Although nothing substitutes for actually living through a new experience, finding out about your new environment in advance will soften the culture shock that many students feel at the beginning of college. If you can, physically visit the campus. Regardless, go online and see what you can find out about the college's location and surrounding community, its campus, its students and activities, and your professors. Look through the site and try to locate services that will be available to you. Get out your schedule of classes for the fall and try to find the buildings—get a sense for whether your walk from class to class will be one minute or fifteen. Find your residence hall on the map and try to find some pictures of the rooms. Visit your professors' websites (most easily found through department websites) and see what their interests and expertise are. And do expect a little culture shock. Many students, even

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though they are not eager to admit it, get homesick early in the semester. Ride it through.

6) Do some pre-course work.

The first week of classes can be overwhelming, especially in terms of finding out how much you'll have to read and what your assignments will be. Find your course syllabi online, if they are available and up-to-date; see what books are required for your courses at the bookstore, especially paying attention to the edition of the textbook required. If you find the syllabi, read them repeatedly, so that some of the information becomes second nature to you before your classes begin. Consider buying the recommended editions of the books before you get to your college and do a little introductory skimming and reading. You'll be more comfortable, and a few steps ahead of everyone else, on the first day of class.

7) Begin to make a calendar to prioritize your time.

Once you obtain your course syllabi, note key exam and assignments dates—these notes will help you manage your time, decrease your number of surprises, and help you to decide how to best balance study and social events. Also, write in important family and friend dates—birthdays, anniversaries, and the like. Sometimes important events get forgotten in the frantic pace of a college schedule. Reserve a space at the end of the calendar for some goals you want to set for the year. Write them down and revisit them around Christmas. Then visit them again at the end of the academic year and see how well you have succeeded in reaching those goals. Note how the goals may have changed.

A little work in the summer can make for a smoother transition in the fall. And enjoy your summer—outside of work and thinking about college, find time to revel, rest, and recharge.

PARENTS

Okay, parents, chances are you are feeling conflicting emotions. Likely you are planning how to use the space your child will vacate at home while wondering how all those years went by so suddenly. There are a few things you can do, however, to make the transition to college easier for your son or daughter, their younger siblings, and yourselves.

1) Acknowledge the changes.

If you are married, spend some time with your spouse thinking about the successes you have experienced in getting your daughter or son to college. If you are a single parent, give yourself a few hundred extra pats on the back for what you have accomplished, and share those accomplishments with family and friends. Then, with God and any others you want to include, confess the sense of loss you might be feeling, and recommit your son or daughter to God's care. Pray for them. This is part of redefining your relationship as adults—an action vital to your son or daughter's college experience and adult life.

2) If your son or daughter is living at home, treat them as if they are living at college.

More and more students decide to live at home to save money. Yet students who live at home often struggle because they feel torn between two sets of responsibilities—being a family member and being a successful student. Allow your son or daughter to treat college as a full-time job. Don't allow the home responsibilities they had in high school to bleed over into college life—such as babysitting, helping with the family business, helping with major projects around the house. Expect them to keep their living spaces clean, and work out a cooking arrangement. Don't invade their private space. Work out an agreement about what they will share with you about their grades. Federal law does not permit schools to give parents

access to their students' grades. (One of my sons never shared his grades with us. He graduated in four years with a 3.93 out of 4.0 grade point average—which we found out on graduation day when we noticed that he was graduating with honors. So lack of communication on this front isn't necessarily a cause to worry—some people are just private.)

3) Allow your student to live a separate life.

This is hard simply because having children radically changes your life. They have a way of taking over your schedule and changing your perspectives about what is important. Children give us a sense of how God feels about us. Giving them freedom to live a separate life is a godly action as well; not giving them that freedom will drive them away or could make them co-dependent on you in unhealthy ways. Don't rent an apartment next door to them, don't call too much, and don't pressure them about coming home. Find positive ways to let them know you care; think about expressing your care as you would for adult friends.

4) Be creative in caring.

Send care packages focused on food. (Okay, admittedly, your adult friends would think it's weird if you send them boxes of food, but imagine the joy with which your son's or daughter's residence hall mates will greet a food package.) Perhaps include a couple of movie passes. Don't send things that will embarrass them or try to direct their activities. Sending unexpected cash is always appreciated, but should be done sparingly.

5) Be prepared for some new ideas.

I think that parents, especially Christian parents, often worry about what college will "do" to their children. The truth is, they will come home with some new ideas and perhaps startling insights into familiar things (like their

town, their friends, even their family and their faith). Developmentally, that is what happens at this age. Before college, they were trying to fit new ideas and experiences into the way they have always looked at the world. Now, they're embracing those ideas with more enthusiasm, and their ideas of how the world works are changing. This is fine, even though they will come to the conclusion that you are not as smart as they thought you were. As a parent, you may find it stressful watching them choosing and forming new relationships. But they need to live genuine lives, so remember that you have recommitted them to God. Actually, if students return home at the end of the first semester and do not seem to have been influenced by ideas at college, I would be worried about how they have been spending their time.

6) Before they leave, talk about finances.

Oh, how I wish I had received some parental financial advice before I left for college. Students are making both day-to-day and long-term financial decisions—often for the first time in their lives. Talk to your daughter or son about savings, budgets, smart ways to save money, and the negatives of debt. Do so in a way that makes clear that you're advising them on something that they will be in charge of. Credit card companies prey on new college students. If you are providing financial support, make the extent of that support clear, and stick to it. Do not over-perform or under-perform in meeting your agreement. Doing either sends terrible messages about independence.

7) If you want to take them shopping before they leave for college, discuss with them what they need to buy and then give them freedom to select which items to purchase within the boundaries you establish.

Different family budgets can afford

different things, and differing parenting styles have differing ideas about this subject. Encourage your daughter or son to contact the school about what she or he will need. (Many school websites, and even stores themselves now, have shopping lists for new students.) If a computer is on their list, ask them to check with their school for what kinds of computers the school helps to support, or what kind of computer is purchased by people in their major. (For example, art and music majors typically have software available through Macs that might not be available or as easy to use on PCs. Some schools, on the other hand, are PC oriented in their classroom tech.)

8) Encourage them to work out their problems at school—do not be a helicopter parent.

Now, I must admit, when I first heard this term, I was aghast. I believe I would have died of embarrassment if my mother had contacted my college about anything. But there's something about the age we live in that's very different from when I was a student. As a parent, I found myself tempted to wade into (sometimes actually wading into) difficulties with the financial aid office, for example. But, please, do this as little as possible. Do not make your student's course schedules, do not proofread their papers, do not call professors (or deans or presidents) to complain about grades, and do not call residence hall directors to address roommate problems. College is the great halfway house from adolescence to adulthood and an expensive one at that, so get your money's worth. Allow your son or daughter to begin to work out life's difficulties. If you do not help them to become adults now, it will be very awkward when you have to show up at work with them on the first day of their post-college careers.

At the same time, some pre-existing issues may require you or your child to contact the school. If your student has a learning disability, help him or her to locate the number of the disabilities office on campus and encourage contact. Registering with this office will help get the student the assistance and accommodations that he or she needs. If your son or daughter has a physical or psychological condition or disability, contact the campus health office and ask advice about what is appropriate to disclose and who should (and should not) be

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the recipient of such information. If your son or daughter contacts you during the semester about serious problems, talk them out together and encourage him or her to contact the appropriate person on campus.

9) Help younger siblings adjust.

If there's anything it's okay to remind your college son or daughter about, it is to keep in touch with their younger siblings. This is a responsibility they need to take on. Be aware that younger siblings might be missing their brother or sister who has gone away. Check in with them. Invest in them as well, and try to allow them some adult responsibilities. Equal treatment is often much more watched by siblings than by parents.

That's the beginning of the advice, anyway. College is a new experience for both parents and first-time students. New experiences are adventures—they are part of what makes life exciting. Expect them to go well, and never to go smoothly. God's blessings as you adjust to these new stages in your lives. ■