

The Transition from High School to College

Graduating High School is a time of celebration for both parents and students. Parents are nostalgic and proud while the graduates feel excited with the anticipation of moving on to a new phase in their lives.

The time before a child leaves for college can be a difficult time for both parents and the student, as they anticipate separation. Students expect more freedom and independence now that they have left high school behind. Parents, in the meantime, are trying to maintain limits and some semblance of control, while trying to remain supportive. A child's move to college can elicit a mixture of feelings for parents, ranging from excitement to worry about their child's transition.

While incoming freshmen may be anxious about college life (roommate, getting lost, fitting in), s/he is typically overly optimistic and confident about their ability to manage the challenges s/he will come across. Many freshmen leave or fail within their first year. According to American College Testing (ACT), one in every four college students leaves before completing their sophomore year - and nearly half of all freshmen will either drop out before obtaining a degree or complete their college education elsewhere.

As observed by Dr. William Lord Coleman, an associate professor of pediatrics at UNC School of Medicine in Chapel Hill, "kids go downhill or drop out because they can't get organized enough to forget about the beer-keg party on Sunday afternoon and go to the library like they're supposed to."

High school typically prepares students well academically. Unless a student takes on a heavy course load, the academic demands of college aren't markedly different. What is different is the atmosphere in which learning takes place. College affords students autonomy. They no longer have parents and/or teachers reminding them of exams, homework and other responsibilities.

Along with that independence comes the social whirlwind of college life. In a study from the Harvard School of Public Health, over 40% of students were found to indulge in binge drinking. By far, the highest rate of excessive drinking was among fraternity and sorority members: a staggering 84%. The second highest rate was among school athletes: 54%. The third highest were students living in coed dorms: 52%. Interestingly, the rate for students living off campus was 40%. When looking into colleges, it is important to research schools with reputations as heavy partying schools. Every year, the *Princeton Review* ranks the top ten party colleges in the United States, based on surveys distributed to hundreds of thousands of students.

In-coming freshmen struggle to acclimate to college life for a variety of reasons. They may be homesick, not able to organize academic priorities or have difficulty with budgeting their time - and money. It is important for parents to have a discussion with their child about their expectations and the student's expectations.

Here are some questions that can help a parent talk to their child about the transition:

1. What are your long and short-term goals both academically and personally when you get to college (e.g. acceptable grades, joining clubs, social organizations)?
2. How do you imagine maintaining your priorities? How can you help yourself sustain your academic goals, such as attending classes, organizing study time?
3. What will you do if you think you'll need help with course work? Where can you turn to find the resources you need?
4. What will you do if you feel stressed out at college? What skills, activities have worked in the past? Where can you seek help at college?
5. What will you do if you feel homesick? How much contact would you like to have with us, and what kind of contact (i.e. text, Skype, visits, etc).
6. It is helpful for parents to be clear in advance about their expectations as well. For example, to let their soon-to-be college student know how many years of schooling parent finances will cover, and whether their student is expected to take on college loans. Finally, let them know that you will be understanding and supportive if they run into trouble, and even more so if they let you know early rather than later.