

WHAT HAPPENS NOW?

A guide for parents of Gustavus students



Remember what it felt like when your child first began to walk, first went to school, first began to drive, and first dated? The first year of college is another in that series of firsts. Over the next year, your son or daughter will embark on a remarkable journey—college life. This is the stage when he or she takes the next step toward becoming an adult. It is a time full of exciting adventures, challenges, newfound dreams, uncertainties, unfamiliar faces, new surroundings, and personal growth. As you watch this process take place, you may feel a sense of satisfaction, personal fulfillment, and relief. You may also begin to feel sad or as if you are being left behind. Most parents will experience a combination of both.

As a parent of an entering college student, you follow a parallel road of change that includes a mixture of feelings and experiences, especially if this is your first or last child to leave home. You may experience very positive changes in your life, such as more room at home, a lower grocery bill, or more access to the family car. In addition to these, other more subtle changes can be anticipated. With more time together, you and your partner may now have the opportunity to talk more, get to know each other better, and reclaim some of the lifestyle you shared before children were a part of your life. Similarly, you may now have more time and energy for your other children and their interests and activities. It is also a time of reflection on the years that have brought you and your college student to this turning point.

This time of change suggests a redefinition of your role as a parent, as you transition from protector to guide, adviser, and sounding board. The relationship with your son or daughter may take on new dimensions; time together may become more precious; you may struggle to find a balance in the degree of involvement with your son or daughter's life. Whatever form that changes may take, please be aware that as an individual and as a family, you will be affected by your son or daughter's college years.

The common goal of most parents, from any background and culture, is to see their children succeed, be content, and develop into responsible adults. So that you may continue helping your child reach these personal goals during this time of change, we have included some information we hope will be helpful to you.

THINGS TO EXPECT

CHANGES

Starting college and being exposed to many new challenges and experiences can affect your daughter's social, vocational, and personal choices. It is also a time when she will begin to formalize her identity, which involves a process of questioning and exploration. Realizing that change is a normal part of the developmental process can be helpful.

MOVEMENT TOWARD SELF-RELIANCE

One of the basic tasks for first-year students is to separate from their parents and homes, regardless of whether they live on campus or with you. All new students will be faced with additional freedom, added responsibilities, greater demands, and more choices. They will also have less structure or guidance than they have had in the past.

Students will need to learn how to make decisions and choices without the structure and guidance once provided by you. While balancing freedom and responsibility can be a challenge for new college students, it is a valuable lesson that will carry them through life. This not only allows them to invest fully in college life, but also assists them in acquiring the skills needed later to live independently after they graduate.

Students' new freedom and responsibility can also place difficult demands on the family. Other family members may have need of their own that conflict with college students' need to separate and take responsibility for themselves, such as parental needs to be reassured that academics are going well. Trust and communication are paramount at this time.

IDENTITY FORMATION

According to child psychologists, this is a time of great change in young adults' lives. As they progress through this period, they will increasingly define who they are, what they believe in, and what they want to do with their lives. However, to do so they may begin to associate with and belong to particular groups, explore different courses and interests, and question previous beliefs. They may appear confused at times before they reach self-definition.

EXPLORING INTIMACY

New relationships emerge at this time in students' lives. Some will end old relationships, some will have their first love, others will explore new kinds of relationships. At times, their relationships may be the most important thing in their lives. It can be difficult for families, particularly if they have been very close, when students shift away from family members as their primary supports and increasingly look to friendships and romances to satisfy their desire for closeness and intimacy. Students usually learn more about themselves through these experiences.

NEW EXPERIENCES, CONCEPTS, PHILOSOPHIES

In their search for greater self knowledge and clarity about their identity, students may try out new ideas, theories, and experience to see if they fit with what they already know about themselves. Don't be surprised if they come home with ideas that are different than those taught at home, with questions on issues that once were taken for granted, or even with a new earring or haircut. Take it in stride. What is important is to keep communication lines open.

APPROVAL

Although students are exploring a new independence and identity, parental acceptance and approval remains extremely important. This sometimes can be a challenge when you do not agree or approve of particular choices or opinions. Give your student support whenever possible.

CONFUSION AND INDECISION

While your son may start with an idea of what he wants to do, what he believes in, and what he likes to do, it is also possible that down the road, he will question such certainties. He may dive into new experience after new experience, or he might regress and cling to old, familiar ways. This is normal and part of the process of defining himself more clearly in the long run.

APPREHENSION

New situations, new faces, new expectations, and uncertainties about her new environment can lead a new college student to start out slowly and go through an adjustment period. This is common at the beginning, especially in the first semester. Reminding your daughter that she has faced new situations in the past, and identifying how she handled those situations, can assist her transition.

ACADEMIC ADJUSTMENT

Your son's academic experience in college will probably be very different from his experience in high school. College forces students to solve problems and express and defend a point of view. Memorizing information, while an important part of learning, is usually not sufficient to earn good grades. College will push your son, and thus frustrate him at times.

You will be curious about his academic performance. When asking for progress reports, ask your son to avoid words like "fine," "OK," and "class average." Instead ask for numbers, for example, 78 out of 90 points, 35 with a class average of 30, etc. If your son doesn't make the grades he expected to make, be supportive—he is probably more disappointed than you are. If this becomes an ongoing problem, encourage him to seek help from his professors or adviser.

MISTAKES

All students will make mistakes during their college experience. Making a mistake can be an important experience and useful to future situations if one can learn from it. Remind your daughter that we all make mistakes and it is necessary to develop skills to handle them and move on.

Mistakes, failures, and disappointments are a necessary and normal part of maturing. At minimum, we expect students to get parking tickets, get sick, or change majors. While students should be held accountable for their mistakes, encourage them to keep these errors in perspective. For example, if your daughter fails a class, she hasn't ruined her life. However, she will have to stop blaming her professor for the grade and perhaps take the course again to graduate. Remember, college is a period of transition and adjustment to adult responsibilities.

STRESS

College is stressful, and the demands on students will at times exceed their resources. Remember, all the stresses facing anyone who moves to a new community, takes on a job for which he has not been fully trained, and adapts to a new social life will be active in your son's college life.

His reactions may range from losing sight of priorities and becoming over-involved in social life to exaggerating responsibilities and withdrawing from social life. Most students achieve a happy medium between these extremes. However, if your son shows signs of being too involved or too withdrawn, we suggest that you talk to him immediately. Despite the common view that "these are the best years of your life," the stresses of college are very real.

MONEY

On their own for the first time, some students have problems managing money. Sit down with your daughter to discuss this. Decide on the large issues of paying for tuition and room/board, as well as the smaller ones such as spending money. Meet again after the first semester to evaluate and revise your plan. Your daughter will be bombarded with offers for credit cards and many students accumulate debts they cannot pay. Don't let the important topic of money "work itself out." Take charge of initiating discussions.

VACATIONS

Adapting to your student's return home after being in college can be as difficult as the initial leaving. Make room for your new adult. You may wish to negotiate some new house rules and curfews that recognize your daughter as an adult. This may make vacations easier for the whole family.

Try to leave your daughter's room at home intact for at least the first semester. If a younger sibling wants to "move up," wait until the next term and let your daughter help with the transition.

HOMESICKNESS

Many students experience homesickness during their initial adjustment to a new environment (and periodically throughout their college years when pressures mount). Students are more prone to homesickness if: 1) they have no experience with living and working away from home; 2) they are reluctant to initiate social events; 3) they have hobbies that do not involve other people, such as computer games, reading, etc.; 4) they have no friends outside of your hometown; 5) your family is moving to a different town during the year; and/or 6) your family is experiencing distress from separation, divorce, or illness of a family member.

Homesickness is uncomfortable for both students and parents, and you will worry in proportions equal to your son's unhappiness. However, homesickness is usually transient and will pass. Each bout with homesickness builds the "antibodies" of coping skills to help the next episode be less intense.

HOW YOU CAN HELP YOUR SON OR DAUGHTER

It is important to remind yourselves of what you already know about parenting. The elements that have enhanced your relationship with your son or daughter will still work at this time of transition—mutual trust, caring, respect, commitment, and effective communication. As the nature of your role as a parent begins to change, remember that your son or daughter will still need you—just in different ways! What follows are some helpful tips from parents who have experience the college transition.

STAYING IN TOUCH

Whether they are living with you or not, whether they let you know it or not, whether they are trying to prove their independence or not, your child will still need you to be available. If your son is homesick, reassure him that it is normal. Stay in close touch the first few weeks and let him know that you are there when he needs you.

PHONE CALLS: Phone calls to and from home will usually help your daughter adjust. Decide how often you will talk at a minimum (e.g., once a week) and let her know if she needs to talk more often she can call you. While hard on your phone bill, this helps reassure your daughter that she has not lost family ties or security.

VISITS: Visit your son on campus to meet his friends and see his surroundings. He'll be impressed at the effort you put into being a part of his life here. Be sure to arrange these visits ahead of time.

LETTERS AND E-MAIL: Write, even if your daughter doesn't write back. There's nothing more depressing than a week of empty mailboxes. News from home and family, however mundane it may seem, is always welcome. Don't be discouraged if you don't get a reply to every letter. It doesn't mean she doesn't care; she is just busy.

CARE PACKAGES: Care packages are always welcome, especially before and during exams! A gift of homemade cookies or stress-relieving games is a great way to let your son know you are, and that you understand how much stress he is under during these college years.

ALLOWING INDEPENDENCE

College students are moving into adulthood. You can help by giving them the room to take the responsibility that is necessary. Assist them in their own decision making process. Offer a broad range of choices and possibilities, share your decision-making techniques, and reflect back to them what you are hearing. Try not to make decisions for them or tell them what to do. Remember, trusting them to make decisions for themselves lets them know you believe in them.

When you are concerned with their recent choices, remind yourself of the foundation you have given them up to this point. They carry it with them. Most of the time they make decisions that will contribute to their personal growth as a human being. You may need to accept changes in their values and goals, and to respect them for whom they are becoming. You may also need the courage to watch them make mistakes and be understanding without saying, "I told you so."

COMMUNICATION STYLES

LISTEN: Take time to listen attentively to your daughter's excitement as well as to her difficulties without offering solutions. Often she is not looking for you to solve the problem, but to understand how she feels about it.

BE INTERESTED: This is a new world for your son. Ask questions about new experiences, the friends he is making, what he is learning in his classes. If he doesn't share his experiences with you immediately, don't give up. Often, students talk to parents more in their later years of college. Be open to those opportunities when they arise.

DON'T OVERREACT: If you want your daughter to share her college experience with you, don't overreact to what she tells you. If you blow up, worry excessively, are exceedingly disapproving, or are mistrustful, she will be much less likely to share her experiences with you in the future.

BE ENCOURAGING: Encouragement means to give courage. You can offer your son a helping hand toward a successful college experience by reminding him of his strengths, previous successes, and forthright ways he has handled failures in the past.

BE A MODEL: Share your own experience of starting some new situations, such as going to college, moving to a new country, or beginning a new job. Talk to your daughter about what helped you to make the adjustment. Be willing to hear how her experience may be different from yours.

BE PATIENT: Changes, mistakes, confusion, new identities—all of these are challenging and stressful for both you and your son. Allow time for him to sort things out. Be patient and understanding, with both your son and yourself.

BE FLEXIBLE: Your daughter needs the opportunity to pull away and come back, to try on new ideas, and to experiment with her identity. What she is sure about one semester any change the next. Flexibility will not only help her, but will also help you keep up with the changes without becoming frustrated.

BE SUPPORTIVE: College and the transition in your relationship with your son may be as confusing for him as it is for you. Let him know that you understand the stress associated with this challenging time, and that you will support his decisions as he tries new things.

MAINTAIN A SENSE OF HUMOR

Laughter is a great antidote to many ills!

GUSTAVUS RESOURCES

Encourage your son or daughter to utilize the services that are in place on campus to assist students. The staff and faculty you meet at orientation represent a college community committed to assisting the maturation and education of your son or daughter. Stress to him or her that reluctance to ask for help is not the same as maturity.

Academic Advising

507-933-7027
204 Johnson Student Union

Chaplains' Office

507-933-7446
101 Old Main

Financial Aid Office

507-933-7527
Carlson Admin. Building

Alcohol and Drug Education

507-933-7665
Jackson Campus Center

Counseling Center

507-933-7027
204 Johnson Student Union

Health Service

507-933-7630
Jackson Campus Center

Campus Safety

933-8888
Norelius Hall

Dean of Students

507-933-7526
Jackson Campus Center

Residential Life

507-933-7529
Jackson Campus Center

Center for Servant Leadership

507-933-7272
Johnson Student Union

Finance Office

507-933-7502
Carlson Admin. Building

Student Activities Office

507-933-7598
Jackson Campus Center

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