

A Parent's Guide

*UNDERSTANDING THE
TRANSITION TO COLLEGE*



www.udel.edu/Counseling

Center for
COUNSELING
& STUDENT
DEVELOPMENT

This booklet is designed to help parents understand some of the important transitions that take place as a part of the college experience.

As students begin college, parents and families can be greatly influenced by the adjustments that students go through. Included in this booklet is information to help you anticipate these changes and prevent potential problems. The counseling services available at the University are also described.

By providing this information, we hope that parents will be in a better position to support the efforts of their students.

CHANGES YOU MIGHT EXPECT

Most parents report the experience of sending a son or daughter to college as one filled with anticipation, anxiety, confusion and hope. By opening day of the freshman year, many changes have already begun to happen. The students become more independent, gain competence in new areas, and learn to develop healthy peer relationships. The college years are a time for students to continue maturing and learning how to manage life in general. What does that mean for you as a parent? Here are some of the messages you may hear:

- *“Help!”/“Don’t help!”*

It is sometimes frustrating for parents to go through the growth process with their students, not knowing how to be helpful and receiving messages which are unclear or incomplete. Students may add to the uncertainty by changing rapidly — rejecting help on Tuesday and actively seeking it on Wednesday. We’ve often heard about parents in great distress because their student predicted a poor outcome on an exam, but forgot to provide an update when the results were better than expected.

As a parent, it can be difficult to know when to help, when to step back, and/or how worried to get. Usually a parent’s best guideline is to provide a steady, supportive home base while recognizing that there will be ups and downs in students’ needs and expectations. Try to follow the leads of the students and encourage them to work through a problem with you acting as the coach or cheerleader. Help

them balance their thoughts and emotions to make their best decisions. Let them know that you respect their right to make a decision and that you will serve as an advisor when asked. Remind yourself to notice and appreciate their new skills; students often want their families to recognize their progress toward becoming adults. And, remember to take care of yourself in this “Help!” / “Don’t help!” process that may cause you a lot of confusion and exhaustion.

- “*So whose decision is it anyway?*”

Most parents have a high investment in their student’s decisions. Problems arise, however, when parents are *more invested* than students. It can be hard to lessen involvement in a student’s decisions out of fear that the student won’t assume responsibility. The irony is that students often don’t step up to the task of being responsible *until* parents step back. After all, it’s easier to ignore problems when someone else is worrying about them or working to solve them!!!

Taking a step back as a parent is uncomfortable, and at times frightening, because there is no guarantee that students will assume responsibility nor that they will make the same decision as you would. The fear that the student is not accepting responsibility in the interim makes many parents lose a lot of sleep. There is, however, no need to walk away disinterested and/or frustrated. Consider providing a concerned voice (“We’re interested in what you decide, but we know you have to sort this out for yourself.”) and remind yourself that you *are* helping by working with your student on developing his/her own decision-making skills.

- “College is different than I thought it would be.”

For many students, coming to Newark means finding out what college and life are about. It means learning that being a nurse means more than taking a patient’s temperature and that psychology isn’t necessarily the major for people who like helping others. It also means learning *how* to study and *how often* to study. Academic expectations are more rigorous than in high school. Students accustomed to receiving “A’s” and “B’s” have to work much harder to earn the top grades in college. They also have to determine when they should be studying and how to motivate themselves to do so. Ultimately, they learn when to ask for help and when to resolve issues on their own.

Coming face-to-face with new *challenges* is common in college. Finding *support* in dealing with these challenges is equally important. The University has many resources (e.g. counseling, academic advisement, Writing Center, and much more) to address students’ needs. In their quest for independence, students sometimes assume that being an adult means it isn’t necessary to ask questions.

Parents can remind students that asking questions and using available resources reflect maturity — and that doing these things does not detract from their autonomy or growth as an adult. At the same time, parents and other family members can serve key roles in providing the support needed without actually taking charge and doing for your student what they need to do for themselves. As they venture out to meet the world, students tell us that it is important to know that their parents will offer consistent support. The influential role which parents have in the lives of students continues through college and beyond.

- *“I’m back!”*

The first visit home from college is usually an interesting one for the entire family. Students may return home thinking that their newly found independence will be recognized and appreciated by the family. In contrast, parents and siblings continue to live in their usual style and generally expect that the established “house rules” will still apply.

Parents can anticipate that their expectations will differ from those held by students during those first visits home. Instead of creating a situation in which a battle ensues, seeking a compromise that honors both the family’s needs and the growing independence of the student might be an appropriate goal. If your son or daughter is commuting to school from home, consider the ways in which his or her new level of responsibility and independence will be acknowledged in the home.

Describing the many experiences which students and their families will have during college is impossible because each family is different. The professional staff at the Center for Counseling and Student Development (CCSD) would be happy to talk with you about your specific situation. If you wish to consult with a CCSD professional, please contact us at 302-831-2141.

WHAT THE CENTER FOR COUNSELING & STUDENT DEVELOPMENT OFFERS

All students who pay the Student Health Fee are eligible for psychological counseling and/or psychiatric services. Both the counseling and psychiatric services of CCSD are intended to provide short-term assistance to students dealing with personal, career, and educational concerns which may be barriers to their academic progress.

After an initial assessment of a student's concerns, the psychologists will determine if an individual's needs may best be met by CCSD services or are beyond the scope of those services. In the latter cases, such individuals will receive a referral to other sources of assistance, on or off-campus.

The CCSD does not provide forensic services that involve litigation or require court testimony.

IF YOU KNOW YOUR SON OR DAUGHTER WILL NEED

6 COUNSELING

It is not unusual for a student to come to the University having already received counseling at home. If this is the case, please call CCSD to consult with us to determine if your student needs can be addressed in our brief treatment model. Others may not have previous counseling experience but might have a difficult time in making the transition to college. In either of these circumstances, students and parents are advised to use the *consultative services* of the CCSD to get information about the best options available to them. Parents are also reminded that continued support and involvement by them is often crucial to the well-being of the student. While the University aims to provide a supportive environment for students, it cannot replace the essential role of family.

WHAT ABOUT CONFIDENTIALITY?

Counseling often involves the disclosure of sensitive personal information. Any information a client shares with CCSD staff members is protected by professional ethics and state law, and is not released, except upon a student's written permission, in circumstances which would result in clear danger to the student or others, or as may be required by law.

What does confidentiality mean for parents? It is understandable that you may wish to be involved when your son or daughter seeks counseling, but the confidentiality issues described above must be recognized. Often, the best source of information for parents about the counseling process is to directly ask the student for the answer. Beyond that, if more information is

desired, the student must sign a written release specifically permitting us to communicate with you.

WHY MIGHT COUNSELING BE SUGGESTED TO A STUDENT?

People seek counseling for many reasons, ranging from a wish to solve a longstanding problem to a desire to enhance their personal growth. To address the personal, educational and career concerns of the students, the CCSD offers both *group and individual counseling*. Students come in to discuss issues such as: roommate conflicts, anxiety and stress management, depression, eating disorders, career choices, and family concerns such as divorce and alcoholism. Students may also receive *psychiatric services* if medication is considered essential to the treatment of their concerns.

Here are some of the common instances when counseling might be recommended to a student:

- *Fundamental or traumatic changes in personal relationships* — such as a change in a romantic relationship, the death of a family member or friend, divorce or separation in the family, etc.
- *Significant changes in mood or behavior* — such as withdrawal from others, asocial activity (e.g., lying, stealing) spells of unexplained crying or outbursts of anger, or unusual agitation.
- *References to suicide* — since it is difficult to distinguish between serious threats or passing idle thoughts of suicide, judgment about the seriousness of a situation is best made in consultation with a psychologist or psychiatrist.
- *Anxiety and depression* — these are two of the more common symptoms which can significantly impair a student's functioning.

- *Psychosomatic symptoms* — concerns such as tension headaches, loss of appetite or excessive eating, insomnia or excessive sleeping or chronic stomach distress, etc.
- *Alcohol and drug abuse* — evidence of excessive drinking, drug abuse or drug dependence is almost always indicative of psychological problems.
- *Career choice concerns* — often these concerns reflect the student's struggle to understand him/herself and the world of work. Sometimes it reflects a problem with decision-making in general.
- *Concern about academics* — such as contemplating dropping out of school, worrying about possible academic failure, or considering a transfer to another school.







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