

Some Thoughts on the First Year Experience

Dear Family Members,

Having your children begin their university careers can be a stressful experience for parents, especially if they haven't lived away from home before. During this important time of transition for the family, many parents put their own feelings and reactions on hold while helping their children prepare for university life. Attending to their own emotional needs, however, as well as their children's, goes a long way toward helping everyone feel comfortable with the challenges that going to university brings.

The student's first year

Courses at university are quite different to high school. Students have fewer hours of actual lectures, but are expected to work a lot by themselves at home or in libraries. For each hour of formal classes students should be spending around 2-3 hours on out of class study, researching, reading or doing assignments.

Good grades in high school are a sign of potential to succeed at university, but university is a "different ballgame". Students have to be more independent than they were at school, they aren't reminded of assignment deadlines, or that they must study for an exam. They may have to form a study group and use textbooks independently to really understand a topic. This change in the learning environment together with having to make new friends can cause "new student" stress, but most students settle down with a bit of support from parents. Counsellors can help too.

Workload and stress levels will vary according to the time in the academic year. The last weeks before the end of semester are peak times for stress with exams coming up and assignments to complete. Parents can help by relieving students of other demands and providing a calm, quiet and understanding environment. This is the season for keeping your sense of humour through student moods and short tempers. Students study best when they pick the time of day when they are not tired and can concentrate well. They need to make study a priority, so it helps if there is flexibility around when domestic chores are done.

The Later Years

If your daughter or son cruises through first year, that's great. But the real test may be yet to come. In some courses the first year is designed to make sure everyone has covered the same basic course content - and then in second year the course becomes tougher. So success in first year does not mean that there is room for complacency. On the other hand, as students begin to focus on their favourite subject areas, success in first year is often followed by even higher grades in later years.

Balancing study and home

At university students are expected to think and act as adults. At home, however, they may be expected to live by the family rules and do what parents think is best. Differing opinions and beliefs, choice of friends, amount of study being done or simply telling you their movements can easily lead to friction if not handled diplomatically. It is important to listen to your son's and daughter's viewpoint and treat his/her opinions with respect.

Balancing study and social life

Some parents feel anxious that their daughter or son is not working hard enough. Whilst a serious effort is needed, students also need to relax and enjoy themselves. All work and no play can be counterproductive, especially if it leads to "burn out" and depression.

Deferring or taking leave of absence

A student's wish to take a year's break between high school and university or a year off during their course often makes parents very uneasy. Parents may worry that the student will get out of the study habit or lose motivation and never complete the course. Frequently, students do come back from a break refreshed and with a better understanding of why they are there.

What your child may experience:

For your son or daughter, university will likely be a period of intellectual stimulation and growth, career exploration and development, increased autonomy, self-exploration and discovery, and social involvement. During this period, your children may forge new identities or seek to clarify their values and beliefs. This may require an examination of self, friends, and family. It may also be a time for exploration and experimentation, and a period in which your children may question or challenge the values you hold dear. The changes your son or daughter may experience can occur quickly, as they begin to develop new peer relationships, gain competence in new areas, and learn to manage their independence. It is important to recognize that every child will experience his or her own unique set of challenges and adjustments, just as every parent will have different expectations for and reactions to their child's university experience.

What parents may experience:

Often overlooked is the fact that the university experience is a significant transition for parents as well as their children. As parents, you may experience feelings of happiness, excitement, and pride when your child leaves for university. At the same time, you may feel a sense of sadness and pain and have many understandable fears and concerns about your child's future and well-being. You may worry about your child's safety and ability to care effectively for him or herself. You may fear losing your child as he or she begins to function more independently and form deep attachments with peers. You may be concerned about how your child will deal with alcohol, drugs, and sexual relationships. You may also wonder how your child's performance in university will reflect on you as the parent.

How you can support your child:

1. Although your child wants and needs to become more autonomous during this period, it is important for your son or daughter to know you are still there for them and available to talk about issues which arise. Maintaining a supportive relationship with your child can be critical to their success in university, particularly during their first year. If you and your child were not particularly close prior to their leaving home, it is still important for you to convey your support. You may be surprised to find that some space and distance from your child can help improve your relationship.
2. It is important to maintain regular contact with your child, but also to allow space for your child to approach you and set the agenda for some of your conversations. Let your child know that you respect and support his or her right to make independent decisions and that you will serve as an advocate and an advisor when asked. Finally, recognize that it is normal for your child to seek your help one day and reject it the next. Such behaviour can be confusing and exhausting for parents, so make sure to take care of yourself by talking about your feelings with your own support system.
3. Be realistic and specific with your child about financial issues including what you will and will not pay for, as well as your expectations for how your son or daughter will spend money. It is also important to be realistic about your child's academic performance, recognizing that not every straight-A student in high school will be a straight-A student in university. Help your children to set their academic goals; encourage them to do their best and to seek assistance if needed.
4. The fact that your child has left home does not necessarily prevent family problems from arising or continuing. Refrain from burdening your children with problems from home they have no control over and can do nothing about. Sharing these problems with your children may cause them to worry excessively or feel guilty that they are away from home and unable to help.
5. Find out contact information for people involved in the various aspects of your child's university experience. These individuals may include academic advisors and deans, financial aid officers, and residence hall staff. If you have questions, or if a particular problem arises, call the appropriate person, but make sure to involve your child in a joint effort to address the problem.

How you can support yourself:

1. Recognize that it is normal to have mixed feelings when your child leaves home. Feelings of pain and loss often accompany separation from loved ones. It is also normal to feel a sense of relief when your son or daughter leaves for university and to look forward to some time alone, with your significant other, or with your younger children.
2. Allow yourself to feel whatever emotions arise during this period of adjustment; develop and maintain your own support systems.
3. Do your best to maintain your own sense of well-being. This may involve eating and sleeping well, exercising, and setting new and creative goals for yourself. If your son or daughter has moved away to university, perhaps it is a good time to do some of things you put off while your child was growing up. Taking on a new project or hobby can be an excellent way to channel your energy and feelings.

Brandon University Student Services

Student Services offers a variety of services to enhance your child's academic success and emotional well-being. These include individual and group counselling for students experiencing a variety of personal-emotional issues; crisis-response services; educational workshops for improving academic success; career testing and workshops; self-help materials; peer-tutoring services; and a variety of on-line resources. For a more detailed description of each of these services, please return to the Brandon University homepage and click on the appropriate links.

When might counselling be appropriate for your child?

Students seek counselling for many reasons including, but not limited to the following: loneliness and adjustment issues, concerns about career choice and/or academic performance, family concerns such as alcoholism or divorce, emotional difficulties such as depression and anxiety, roommate conflicts, eating disorders, problems with alcohol and drug abuse, and suicidal feelings. Students may be seen by Brandon University's counsellors or referred for other psychological or psychiatric services depending on the nature of the presenting issues.

How Brandon University's counsellors can help parents

Call a Counsellor

We invite parents to call Student Services (204-727-9739) to speak with a counsellor if they have any questions about our services or if they are wondering how to assist a son or daughter struggling with a particular issue. We can also provide parents with referrals to counselling services outside the University.

Confidentiality is essential to the counselling relationship we establish and maintain with students who seek our services, so we adhere to strict guidelines for confidentiality. We understand and appreciate that parents often wish to be involved when their son or daughter seeks counselling; however, we are not permitted to talk with parents in any way about their child's participation in counselling without the student's written consent. We cannot confirm or deny that a student has come to see our counsellors for a counselling session; nor can we disclose the name of their counsellor. However, if parents are worried about a child, they are welcome to contact one of our counsellors and share their concerns.

Self-help information

Brandon University counsellors have developed web sites with access to self-help on a wide range of issues (e.g., grief and loss, students in distress, anger management, computer multitasking) that may be useful to parents and their children. For self-help information on how to deal with various personal problems, see: <http://www.brandonu.ca/student-services/personal-counselling/> or: www.dr-bob.org/vpc/

Setting up an appointment for your child

We prefer that your son or daughter call Student Services (727-9739) to schedule his or her own appointment. We have found that they know their schedule best and they are more likely to keep their appointment if they have scheduled it. A counsellor can talk with you about ways to encourage your student to schedule an appointment and how to talk to him or her about counselling.