25 Challenges for First-Year Students and Their Parents

Transition Issues

1. **There is the stress of making a good adjustment because students believe their future depends upon their doing well.** Did they make the right choice? How can they be sure? Should they change courses, direction, major? Putting choices into a longer-term perspective is useful. There are many people on campus that can assist them in making decisions: professors, peers, and College staff.

2. **Some students will be homesick, missing their family, friends, and pets.** They will miss old routines and structures.

3. **Students may be ambivalent about dependence and independence.** Some will openly ask for parent support and others won’t tell parents important details. Parents need to ask their adolescent how they are doing without prying too much – while also being accessible and open.

4. **The school may not live up to the expectations set by the brochures and admissions counselors.** Rarely does an admissions pamphlet tell all about the ins and outs, and the limits and shortcomings of a place.

Academics

5. **The work is hard and some students may experience their first low grades.** Most students have done well in high school. Some high school courses are not as demanding as college. A student has to learn a particular professor’s expectations and style of grading.

6. **Students will be expected to maintain their own schedules and develop good study habits.** There is no one around to force the student to study, to go to class, or to get a good night’s sleep. Students have to create a structure that works for them. Time management is a skill that can be learned or improved through work with the Macalester Academic Excellence (MAX) Center (phone number is 696-6121).

7. **Students may become excited about whole new areas of study and may change their career goals and major plans.** Parents who believe their student’s goals and dreams are set in stone may be surprised.

8. **While many classes are small, some students may feel overwhelmed by large classes.** They may be the youngest in the class or the least experienced in the subject matter. Many students are used to being the oldest and the brightest, and this is a big shift for them.

9. **Some professors may not be as exciting and challenging as students thought they would be.** While some professors are interesting lecturers, some are not. Some lead discussion classes and expect students to do a good deal of the talking. This may challenge quieter students.

10. **Some students may have trouble with reading and writing assignments.** The level of writing required may be higher and in greater quantity than what was expected in high school. Some students need extra tutoring in writing, grammar, spelling, etc. (Suggest the MAX Center: 696-6121.) Some readings may be more complex and difficult than expected. Assignments may require several readings and much more time than students allot. Students may develop anxiety about their performance.

11. **Students may really like their advisor, or may not.** If they have an advisor they do not get along with, they will hesitate to ask that advisor for help. Most advisors work well with students but occasionally personalities don’t mix well. Students can change advisors. Communication is the key here, even if personalities don’t match.
College Life

12. There is a maze of things to figure out — such as which courses to take, who to get to know, where to go for this or that. A lot of energy goes into trying to make sense of the new environment. Students may feel confused and bewildered from time to time.

13. Colleges have vocabulary and rituals that are new and unique. Concepts such as deans, provost, convocations may be new. What do students call their professors? Dr.? Ms.? Mr.? They need to ask. Some campus rituals may feel strange.

14. The food is not like home cooking. Students can gain weight during the first year eating too much fat, starch and junk food. Most students will complain about the food. The food here is pretty good, much of their dislike comes from eating at the same place for three meals a day, seven days a week ... and it's not mom or dad's cooking.

15. Students dress differently than in high school. Some have body piercings and purple hair. As your adolescents explore their identity, they may look radically different during the first vacation or two home.

16. There are so many choices that the student can be overwhelmed and may not complete projects and tasks. There are so many clubs, organizations, activities, courses, lectures, sports practices, and concerns that it is sometimes hard to decide what to go to. Work can suffer if the student is spread too thin. Conversely, studies show that judicious active involvement can help students make better use of their time and increase the quality of their work. Some students don’t get enough sleep and get sick because they are committed to too many groups and/or projects. Balance is the key.

17. There is some promiscuous behavior and some drug use. Students have to mature, make responsible choices, and be aware that others may not engage in the most constructive behaviors. Sometimes roommates want to bring their partners into the room. Some students may even talk like “everyone else is doing it.” Keep in mind that this is their perception rather than the reality.

Relationships

18. Students will be leaving old friends behind. They can keep up with them through email and vacations. In some cases, they will go their separate ways. This may surprise and sadden some students, especially those who have had the same friends since grade school.

19. Students will be confronted with different people from a variety of backgrounds. There are cultural differences; racial differences; and differences in sexual orientation, religion, values, and lifestyle. It can feel overwhelming to start over with new people. It can be hard to make new friends. It also gives students a chance to develop a new identity. There will be feelings of acceptance as well as rejection. Coping with new ideas, new people, and the possibility of rejection takes energy.

20. Roommates often have different lifestyles, values, and ways of doing things. A roommate can be particular, messy, reliable, unreliable, assertive, helpful, noisy, confused and difficult to live with. Some students find it challenging to live with a new person. For others, it will be easy and friendships will emerge. If a student calls home to complain about a roommate problem, encourage them first to work things out. There are Residence Assistants (RAs) who have been trained to assist in this process. Students may need to talk about switching roommates if the situation becomes intolerable — for example, if a roommate is abusive. The RA can help with that as well.

21. There may be troubled students who want to rely on your adolescent excessively for support, care, and nurturance. Some students may be very emotionally distraught and needy. This can be demanding and take a lot of time and energy. Your student needs to know when to say, “I can't handle this” and when to refer his or her friend to the RA or for counseling (Counseling Services is 696-6275.)
Home and Family

22. Some students call home often. Others don’t. Understanding student and parental expectations about the kind of contact that will be maintained is important. Have a discussion about what each family member needs as a minimum and wants as a maximum of contact. Also discuss ideal conditions – times of day, days of week that respect each person’s sleep habits, study needs, work schedules, etc.

23. Family structure changes. Parents may experience freedom when the kids leave home, or they may feel a great sense of loss. Or they may feel both! A father may find himself the only male among his wife and daughters. A mother may find herself the only female among her husband and sons. The phone may be quieter than before. New space may become available. When the student returns home, he or she may feel like everyone has gobbled up the student’s space and moved on.

24. Students may choose to not come home for vacations, or may not be able to do so because of cost or distance. They might be invited elsewhere. They might join campus service trips such as Habitat for Humanity. If parents are looking forward to home visits, they may have to adjust their expectations. Communication about expectations again is the key.

25. Parents need to express concern and interest, and empower their adolescent to seek appropriate kinds of help when necessary, to make good choices, and to learn from experience. Parents cannot step in and do it for their student. However, some of the situations can be stressful and difficult for your adolescent. There is a fine balance in taking a genuine interest and offering help – but not encouraging your adolescent to rely on you too much.
Web Resources

Macalester Parent Handbook
http://www.macalester.edu/parents/parenthandbook/
Comprehensive listing of resources, “Your New College Student” section relevant to transition and adjustment issues.

Transition Year
http://www.transitionyear.org/
A useful resource that helps students and parents focus on emotional health before, during and after the college transition.

Student Counseling Virtual Pamphlet Collection
http://www.dr-bob.org/vpc/
A collection of pamphlets written for college students with practical tips on a variety of mental health and wellness topics.

Starting College: A Guide for Parents
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/marshall-p-duke/college-guide_b_1750951.html
Recent Huffington Post article.

Print Resources

Almost Grown: Launching Your Child from High School to College, by Patricia Pasick

College of the Overwhelmed: The Campus Mental Health Crisis and What to Do About It by Richard Kadison and Theresa Foy DiGeronimo

Don’t Tell Me What To Do, Just Send Money: The Essential Parenting Guide to the College Years, by Helen Johnson

Letting Go (Fifth Edition): A Parent’s Guide to Understanding the College Years, by Karen Levin Coburn and Madge Lawrence Teeger

The Launching Years: Strategies for Parenting from Senior Year to College Life, by Laura Kastner and Jennifer Wyatt

You’re On Your Own, But I’m Here if You Need Me: Mentoring Your Child During the College Years, by Marjorie Savage

When Your Kid Goes to College: A Parent’s Survival Guide, by Carol Barkin
Whether the goal is maintaining health and wellness or recovering from stress-induced effects, there is benefit in finding ways to care for yourself physically, emotionally, intellectually, spiritually, and socially. Below are resources available at Macalester College. Use any or all of them to help maintain or regain wellness.

**Counseling Services**  Confidential appointments are available with one of the mental health counselors M-F 9am-4:45pm, except Th 10am-4:45pm. Drop-in appointments are available daily on a first-come/first-served basis. Limited psychiatric services are provided. Off-campus referral guidance is also available. Call x6275 or drop by the Health & Wellness Center in Leonard Center for an appointment.

**Office of Student Affairs**  The Dean offers individualized attention for a variety of student life issues including personal and academic concerns. This is a good starting place for questions or problems in general. Call x6220 or stop by the office on the second floor of Weyerhaeuser Hall.

**Center for Religious and Spiritual Life**  The Chapel offers a place of peace, rest and shelter from the stresses of the world regardless of a person’s religion, creed, or beliefs. Appointments with the Chaplain or Associate Chaplains can be made by calling x6298 or by visiting the Center’s office in the lower level of the Chapel.

**Disability Services**  Individuals with disabilities are protected from discrimination and assured services. With appropriate documentation, services provided may include identifying and providing reasonable accommodations or collaboration with outside agencies for diagnostic services. Accommodations are made upon the approval of the Assistant Dean of Students, Robin Hart Ruthenbeck. Forms can be found at [http://www.macalester.edu/studentaffairs/disabilityservices/](http://www.macalester.edu/studentaffairs/disabilityservices/)

**Lealtad-Suzuki Center**  Personal consultations are available to students with questions or concerns pertaining to multicultural issues. Call x6243 or drop by Kagin Commons for an appointment. Visit the Center’s lounge to relax, study, or chat with friends.

**Medical Services**  Confidential appointments or consultations for medical problems are available with a nurse practitioner and registered nurses M-F 9:00-4:45, except Th 9-10pm. A physician is available at various times during the week. Call the Health and Wellness Center at x6275 for an appointment.

**Macalester Academic Excellence Center (MAX Center)**  Friendly staff and student tutors are available to help with time management, English, creative writing, math, science, multicultural mentoring, and study skills. Tutoring drop-in hours M-F 9am-4:30pm; Sun-Th 7pm-10pm. Drop by Kagin Commons or call x6121 if you prefer to make an appointment.

**Athletics**  Regular exercise, whether in physical education classes, recreational activities, or organized sports, will reduce stress. The Leonard Center provides many opportunities to stay active and fit through gym facilities and classes (e.g. zumba, yoga, pilates). Call them at x6267 for more information.

**Career Development Center (CDC)**  Individual appointments are encouraged for any student, regardless of year in school, who is with wrestling questions about selecting a major or “what next” after college. This is not a “seniors only” concern! Drop by Kagin Commons or call x6384 for an appointment.