

Just Like Clockwork: The Rhythm of College Life

Certain times in the academic year tend to be universally challenging to students. Parents who understand the ups and downs of the first college year are better able to help their students negotiate the challenges of the transition to college. Below are some typical adjustment issues faced throughout the first year:

AUGUST/SEPTEMBER

- Excitement
- Testing new-found freedom
- Frequent calls and visits home
- Homesickness and loneliness
- Anxiety about roommates, professors, classes
- Final exams

OCTOBER

- Roommate problems begin to arise
- Students question: "Do I fit in here?"
- First test grades returned
- Midterm exams
- Love relationships from home remain strong
- Consequences of decision-making experienced

NOVEMBER

- Midterm grades returned
- Roommate challenges become more clear
- Many exams and papers due before Thanksgiving
- Excitement and/or anxiety regarding going home for Thanksgiving
- First series of campus-wide illness (cold, flu, strep, etc.)

DECEMBER

- Anxiety over preparations for finals
- Excitement and/or anxiety regarding going home for the holidays
- Sadness about leaving new friendship and/or love relationships
- Roommate challenges continue

JANUARY

- "Fresh Start" mentally sets in with new term
- Satisfaction and/or disappointment with fall term grades
- Homesickness
- Loneliness for love relationship back home
- Relief being away from home and back at school

FEBRUARY

- Feelings of claustrophobia and depression set in with winter
- Potential increase in alcohol and other substance abuse
- Challenges with love relationship back home
- Valentine's Day brings out loneliness, isolation

MARCH

- Anxiety regarding finding roommate(s) for next year
- Excitement and/or disappointment regarding Spring Break plans
- Midterm exam stress
- Concern over summer employment
- Concern over winter weight gain

APRIL

- Excitement with arrival of Spring
- Concern over declaring major
- End of semester pressure

MAY

- Final exam anxiety
- Apprehension about returning home for summer
- Sadness over leaving new friendships and/or love relationships at school
- Realization of how college influences life decisions

In addition to these more predictable stressors, student may experience the following concerns throughout the academic year:

- Missing family birthday and holiday celebrations
- Missing participation in family traditions
- Wanting involvement with family maintained, but expecting their desire for complete freedom to be respected (Blimling, 1999)

Major Differences between High School and College

HIGH SCHOOL

Teacher/Student Contact – Contact closer and more frequent (5 days a week)

Competition/Grades – Academic Competition is not as strong; good grades can often be obtained with minimum effort.

Status – Students establish a personal status in academic and social activities based on family and community factors.

Counseling/Dependence – Students can rely on parents, teachers and counselors to help make decisions and give advise. Students must abide by parents' boundaries and restrictions.

Motivation – Students get stimulation to achieve or participate from parents, teachers, and counselors.

Freedom – Students' freedom is limited. Parents will often help students out of a crisis should one arise.

Distractions – There are distractions from school, but these are partially controlled by school and home.

Value Judgments – Students often make value judgments based on parental values; thus, many of their value judgments are made for them.

COLLEGE

Teacher/Student Contact – Faculty is available during office hours (only a few hours a week) and by appointment to address students' concerns.

Competition/Grades – Academic competition is much stronger; minimum effort may produce poor grades.

Status – Students can build their status as they wish; high school status can be repeated or changed.

Counseling/Dependence – Students rely on themselves; they see the results of making their own decisions. It is their responsibility to seek advice as needed. Students set their own restrictions.

Motivation – Students apply their own motivation to their work and activities as they wish.

Freedom – Students have much more freedom. Students must accept responsibility For their own actions.

Distractions – The opportunity for more distractions exist. Time management to students will become more important.

Value Judgments – Students have the opportunity to see the world through their own eyes and develop their own opinions and values.

The preceding was an excerpt from *Helping Your First-Year College Student Succeed: A Guide for Parents* by Richard Mullendore and Cathie Hatch, in conjunction with the National Orientation Directors Association. Copies of this book may be ordered from the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, University of South Carolina, 1629 Pendleton Street, Columbia, South Carolina 29208. Telephone: 803-777-6029. It is especially helpful to those parents sending their first student off to college.