First Semester Guide For College Parents
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Introduction

Just a few months ago, you watched your student toss their high school graduation cap in the air.

Then, in the blink of an eye, you were waving to your student in the rearview mirror as you drove away from their freshman dorm.

When your college student starts their first semester, it’s not just a big deal for them. It’s a big deal for you, too.

Whether they’re attending school in the city where they grew up or across the country, you’ve got to figure out how to provide support from a distance.

The support you give will take many forms. Maybe you want to help them learn to manage their own expenses, or even open their first student credit card.
Or maybe you want to be sure that you stay emotionally connected while your student goes through many new experiences: harder classes, finding friends, adjusting to dorm life and dealing with social pressures.

In this guide, you’ll learn how to sort through financial issues like creating a list of monthly expenses, deciding on an allowance, and helping your student find an on- or off-campus job.

You’ll also get 5 tips on how to provide emotional support to your student from the sidelines, like scheduling weekly check-ins, learning how to step back and let your student problem solve, and creating a thoughtful care package.

Last, we’ll offer guidance on how you can talk to your student about important issues and social pressures in college — and why you need to. These conversations aren’t always easy, but they’re worth it.

Here’s your complete guide to surviving and thriving during your college freshman’s first semester.
Financial Support for Your Student

Monthly allowance, help with bills, a shared checking account — these are all financial considerations you should be going over with your new college student.

Before they leave home, talk to your student about these common expenses:

- Cell phone bill
- Dorm furniture and decor
- Residential meal plan
- Laundry money
- Going out to eat
- Groceries
- Entertainment (movies, live music)
- Local travel (bus or train pass)
- Traveling home (gas, bus or plane tickets)
- Recreational travel (spring, summer or winter break)
- Electronics (smartphone or laptop, chargers, monitors)
- School supplies
- Personal items (toiletries)
- Sorority or fraternity dues
- Gym membership
- Auto insurance
- Campus parking permit
- Gas
- Car repairs and maintenance

Sit down together and list all their typical monthly bills, and potential expenses for their first year at college.

Decide which of these expenses your student will be responsible for, and which you will cover or help pay for so there is mutual understanding before your student kicks off the semester.
Student allowance

Some college parents choose to give their students a monthly allowance to help pay for certain expenses, and to help their student maintain some savings.

There are a few approaches you can take to help your student manage their allowance and so that both of you can track their spending.

One strategy is to create a student checking account that’s linked to your own account.

You can set up an automatic transfer of a set amount to your student’s account each month.

Then when they use their ATM card, you can see everything your student is spending money on.

You can work together to see where they may be overspending, like on clothes or fast food. This can help you guide your student to make smart purchases, and to recognize their own spending habits.

After the first year, especially for students making good money through summer employment, an allowance may no longer be necessary.
Extra spending money

You may decide that your college student should be responsible for earning and saving money for “extra” expenses like movies, eating out, new clothes, etc.

Maybe you’ll agree to pay for textbooks freshman year but your student will be expected to pay for their books moving forward.

In the same way, you might buy new clothes before your student’s first semester at college but they’ll be responsible for new clothing after this (except maybe a few special items like an interview suit, a nice dress, winter coat).

Discuss what “extra expenses” mean to you, and what they mean to your student. Decide who will pay for what before the semester starts.

SPENDING MONEY VARIABLES TO CONSIDER:

- Social life: Mostly on or off campus?
- Weekends: How often will they come home?
- Location: The cost of everything tends to be higher at an urban campus (though internet shopping can be an equalizer).
Working during the school year

Your student may feel ready to pick up an on- or off-campus job during their first year at school. A job can help them pay for extra expenses, save money and make new friends.

Some parents prefer their students to settle in and wait until second semester freshman year or sophomore year to get a campus job.

If your student is already pretty busy with extracurriculars like sports, the college newspaper or extra classes, you may decide it’s more important for them to prioritize their studies and activities over working.

But if your student is looking for a part-time or seasonal job, they can seek employment on or off campus.
On-campus jobs

First, your student may qualify for federal work study as part of their financial aid package.

For students without work study, there are still many on-campus employment opportunities.

Recycling truck driver, writing tutor, climbing wall instructor, research or teaching assistant, cafeteria worker — these are all examples of on-campus jobs that may be available to your student.

Many campus offices hire students: admissions, alumni/development, housing and residential life, food services, museums and theatres, buildings and grounds, etc.

Off-campus jobs

Off-campus jobs are a great way for your student to get involved in the broader university community beyond the boundaries of campus.

From waiting tables to working at a gym or in retail, your student can meet local people from different generations and make social and professional connections while they make money.
Unexpected costs

Unexpected expenses can always arise. A new phone or laptop, car repair or a medical bill — you can’t anticipate everything.

Have a game plan established with your student so you’re ready when these unexpected and larger expenses come up.

☐ Will these things come out of your student’s savings?

☐ Will you split the bill down the middle with them?

☐ Will you pay for them in full and set up a payment plan for your student to pay you back over time?

Lastly, be sure to revisit your student’s financial needs and the intensity of their schedule (increased academic pressure, more hours dedicated to sports, etc.) each semester or year.
Emotional Support for Your Student

As your son or daughter makes the shift to college and creates a new life on campus, your role as parent will change. Instead of being the main guide in your student’s life, you’ll be coaching from the sidelines.

But that doesn’t mean your student doesn’t need your guidance and support. They may be more independent than ever, but they will still look to you for help as they encounter new challenges.

Here are 5 ways to provide emotional support for your student as they navigate their first year of college and beyond.
1. Stay connected with check-ins.

Whether it’s a weekly email, phone call or Skype session, try and stay connected with your student while still giving them space to explore their new life as a college student on their own.

They’re encountering new viewpoints and perspectives that may challenge their own belief systems and experiences. During your check-ins, give your student the ability to explore ideas without being judgmental.

Understand that changes in viewpoints, behavior, dress, eating and sleeping habits, and relationships with parents are all to be expected during the college years.

However, if you suspect that some of these changes may be signs of bigger problems

Do some research on the college website so you’re familiar with available resources, and trust your instincts.

(alcohol or drug abuse, academic problems, etc.), refer your student to counseling services at the student health center.

Do some research on the college website so you’re familiar with available resources, and trust your instincts. Your student may need you to suggest or even insist that they reach out and get some help.
2. Let your student solve problems.

When your student calls home with an issue, it can be tempting to go into super-parent mode and immediately intervene.

But giving your student time to solve their own problems can help them flex their problem-solving muscles for the future. It will also lead to them learning how to utilize on-campus and community resources as they become more rooted at school.

Colleges have many resources to help students cope with a wide variety of challenges. From academic counselors to residential advisors to college-provided student therapists and more, your student’s school is packed with programs and professionals who are there to offer guidance and assistance.

Be sure to voice your love and support, but also express confidence in their ability to deal with what’s going on, and wait for them to work things out on their own. Step in if your student seems to have hit a wall and exhausted their own solutions.
3. Hold off on changing your student’s room.

Your freshman is going through several momentous transitions: living on their own for the first time, making new friends, passing their first round of college exams, and more.

Their old bedroom is their home base, whether they visit once a month or once a year.

You do not have to preserve the room as a shrine to their childhood, and chances are they’ll understand (eventually!) that it makes sense for their room to be given to a younger sibling or repurposed as a guest room or family office.

But if you can, try not to leap straight into a remodel during their first semester, or even the first year. They will be so grateful and relieved to come home to their own safe, comfortable, familiar space for Thanksgiving and winter break.
4. Don’t discount your parting words.

Before you drive away and leave your student to spend their first night in the residence hall, make sure to offer some words of support.

Your student is taking a huge leap into a new chapter of their life. Something as simple as, “I love you,” “I’m behind you” or “I’m proud of you” can be a lifeline for them to hold onto.

If you find yourself struggling to express yourself verbally, write your thoughts down and leave the letter on your student’s desk or pillow. Or mail a letter as soon as you get home.

Chances are, your student will remember your words whenever they’re feeling scared, overwhelmed or stressed.

DISCOVER MORE TIPS TO MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR STUDENT’S SEND-OFF DAY.
5. **Put together a care package.**

Nothing will brighten your student’s day after a long week of studying like a care package sent from home.

Include home-baked cookies, a gift card to a local restaurant or coffee shop, a cozy hat or pair of warm socks, and a heartfelt note.

**Freshman Fun Box** is a service that curates useful and delightful items your freshman will need and love. You can choose from gift cards, treats, toiletries, electronics and more.

Send a single Fun Box or take advantage of their monthly subscription service that provides seasonally appropriate items and treats.
Talking Tips for Parents and College Students

Having conversations about life away from home, the college landscape and how to handle “what if” situations can be empowering for both you and your student.

By broaching these sometimes tough topics, you can hear your student’s concerns, fears and hopes. And maybe they’ll even glean a few words of wisdom from the person who loves them most — you.

THE TIPS ON THE NEXT FEW PAGES WILL HELP YOU:

- Talk about drugs and alcohol
- Talk about sexual health and consent
- Talk about time management
- Believe in yourself and your student

FIRST SEMESTER GUIDE FOR COLLEGE PARENTS
Talk about drugs and alcohol.

Research shows that as a parent, your opinions can have a strong influence on your student’s decisions about using drugs and alcohol.

According to the Drug Free Action Alliance, “students whose parents shared messages encouraging the avoidance of alcohol and the adoption of healthy alternatives were less likely to use alcohol and experience negative consequences from alcohol.”

Discuss the consequences of underage drinking with your freshman, and the importance of setting drink limits when your student does drink.

Talk about using the buddy system at parties to help your student stay safe.

Do your homework so you can explain how certain drugs (both street/illegal drugs and misused/abused prescription drugs) affect the body, and how mixing drugs and alcohol can have deadly consequences.

Your student may roll their eyes now, but when the time comes to make choices, they’ll be educated about the potential outcomes.
Talk about sexual health and consent.

Sexual health impacts your student’s emotional and physical health, and health is the foundation of their well-being.

Although not all college students are sexually active, a large portion are — and some for the first time.

Talking to your student about contraception, emotional health regarding sexual intimacy, and attitudes about sex in general can help your student think about their own values and attitudes about sex.

All college students — regardless of gender — bear the responsibility for preventing sexual assault on campus. And that’s important, as sexual violence on college campuses is a pervasive issue.

What is your student’s understanding of consent? What kinds of situations might require that your son or daughter stand up as an active bystander?

“If we educate our children that consent is the only way, it becomes the standard and our kids are safer and happier in the long run.”

REBEKAH JONES
Counselor and Supervisor at M.E.S.A.

Rebekah Jones, Counselor and Supervisor at M.E.S.A. (Moving To End Sexual Assault) in Boulder, Colorado said, “Through my training at M.E.S.A. I have learned that it’s impossible for either party to give consent if anyone is under the influence.

“Having a son of my own graduating from high school this year and a teenage daughter only highlights the importance for me. If we educate our children that consent is the only way, it becomes the standard and our kids are safer and happier in the long run.”

NOT SURE HOW TO START THE CONVERSATION?
Here’s a resource for parents to talk to their students about sexual health and consent.

LEARN MORE
Talk about time management.

Your college student has been tasked with a huge new challenge: independent time management.

They’re now responsible for when and what they eat, when and how much they sleep and exercise, how often they do laundry, and how many hours they spend socializing vs. studying.

There will certainly be a learning curve as they figure out what works best for them.

Be a sounding board for your student as they reflect on their experiences and challenges in time management, and only offer constructive advice when they ask for it.

Here’s a resource for starting the conversation on time management.
Believe in yourself and your student.

One of the most important things to do before and after any conversation with your student?

Trust that you’ve done a good job.

No parent is perfect — we all misspeak, say things we don’t mean, or have trouble saying the things we wish we could.

You may not get to every topic on your mind and in your heart. But sometimes one conversation will lead to another, whether it’s right away or days or weeks later.

It’s likely you’ll never regret the conversations you have with your son or daughter. But you may regret the ones you didn’t have.

Despite the occasional fumbling, the important thing is that you’re trying.

Even if your student doesn’t feel like talking about something right now, they’ll get the message that you’re there for them when they’re ready to reach out.
The first year presents new challenges for every student. Academic, emotional and physical stressors can be enhanced by change.

Moving away from home, taking classes that are much more demanding than high school, more independence and feeling like a small speck in a sea of new students can be a lot to handle all at once.

But at the end of the day, your student will live and learn as they grow — just like you did! They will make mistakes, and be the wiser for it.

For more information visit CollegiateParent at www.collegiateparent.com.

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