Letting Go

Hello and welcome to the “Letting Go” session of the Virtual Summer Orientation and Academic Registration. My name is Laura Corbett-Contorchick. I am the Coordinator of Counseling Services for Saint Francis University. The purpose of this presentation is to provide parents of new students some helpful information, tips, and resources to assist you and your child with the transition to college.

Counseling Center

Students work hard to get to SFU, and you, as their parents, have worked hard to support them along the way! There are many resources available to help students thrive in mind, body, and spirit during their time at SFU and in the years that follow. At Saint Francis University, we prioritize the physical and mental health, safety, and wellbeing of each and every member of our community. The Counseling Center, located in Saint Francis Hall, provides free and confidential counseling services to students, including individual, couples, and group counseling. If assistance is needed with arranging for mental health services in the community, the Counseling Center staff can assist students with referrals to a variety of local treatment providers. The Counseling Center staff also provides consultation, information, and referrals for parents of students, by request.

In addition to counseling services, the Counseling Center provides outreach and programming on a range of relevant topics throughout the year, including anxiety and stress management, relaxation and mindfulness, dating and relationships, drug and alcohol prevention and education, and more. Resource information on mental health disorders, substance abuse, and holistic health and wellness is available at the Center and is provided to students upon request.

For more information about our services, please visit our website at www.francis.edu/Counseling-Services/

The Transition

The transition to college is often one of the most exciting and challenging times in students’ and parents’ lives! For most teens, college marks the first time they will be living away from home for an extended period of time. Even for those who will continue to live at home, the transition to college life brings a whole new level of freedom and responsibility - freedom to make their own decisions and the responsibility to make good choices about managing their academic work, extra-curricular activities, leisure time, and maintaining their physical and mental health and wellbeing.

Moving to college can also bring personal and emotional challenges. Relationships with family members and old friends will change, and while the opportunity to meet new people and build new friendships is exciting, it can also be stressful. Despite these challenges, college presents a unique opportunity for
students to make new connections, enhance relationships, and develop personal skills and awareness that will last a lifetime.

For those entering college with a prior history of medical or mental health issues, it is important to plan ahead to make sure any needed care is able to continue without interruption. Staying mentally and physically healthy will go a long way with helping to ease the transition to college. Check out these resources for more information:

https://www.settogo.org/supporting-mental-health-from-a-distance-when-should-a-parent-intervene/


Freedom and Responsibility

For the first time in many of their lives, new college students experience the freedom to decide for themselves what they will do, when they will do it, and with whom! Many new college students welcome this new-found freedom. Others may find it strangely unfamiliar or difficult. Decisions that may have been influenced by parents about nutrition, sleep, and physical and mental health care and maintenance are now the responsibility of the student. It is important that parents talk with students about how to make healthy choices about personal safety, and when to seek help, support, or professional care.

With increased personal freedom comes greater responsibility. New college students must decide when and how to study, with whom and how much they will socialize, whether they will become involved in activities, how to budget money, when to exercise, and how to make time to eat and sleep. They must learn how to balance class time, activities, completing academic work on time, taking care of themselves, and having fun. They will schedule their own classes, buy their own personal items, make healthcare appointments and be able to ask professors or other university staff for help. New college students need to learn how to take the initiative to address their responsibilities for the first time in their lives. Talk with your student about:

- What decisions, challenges, choices or difficulties do you expect your child to handle (at least at first) on his/her own?
- On which decisions will your child seek your input?
- At what point and/or under what circumstances should your child ask for help?

(Time: The Jed Foundation, 2020; Set to Go, 2020)

Time Management

Freshmen typically experience changing demands on their time. Days are less routine and predictable. Some freshmen feel they have no time for themselves because of their multiple obligations. College classes may seem difficult and draining and may involve more hours of studying. However, other students may find their academic workloads manageable, but they may not feel comfortable relaxing in their free time. Here are some time management strategies to share with your child:
• **Planning.** It will be helpful to have a general plan for the day. Some parts of the day will be well defined, such as class time, but other parts of the day will be less structured. Try to schedule daily activities and tasks, such as assignments, social obligations, meals, exercise, and self-care practice.

• **Prioritizing.** Some things are more important than others. It’s better to take care of the important and urgent items before the things that can wait. But be aware of any tendency to procrastinate, especially with the longer-term projects!

• **Staying organized.** Keeping obligations and activities organized will be a big help. A calendar, planner, or app can make keeping organized easier.

• **Finding balance.** Finding ways to balance schoolwork, other obligations, self-care (meals, sleep, and exercise), social life, and fun actually increases efficiency, effectiveness, and overall performance. Turns out, having some time to socialize and have fun is good for you! Taking some time to “chill out” and read or watch a video may even help critical thinking and problem-solving skills!

• **Learning to handle unstructured time.** It is great to have some free time to relax, catch up with friends, think, play, or take a nap, but some people have difficulties managing time when there is no set schedule or activities. Think about making a list of pleasurable activities that there may not be time for on most days and use unstructured times as an opportunity to do some of these things!

  (The Jed Foundation, 2020)

**Changing Family Relationships**

When a child leaves home for college, the entire family experiences a transition! Living under the same roof and seeing each other nearly every day helps families stay connected. As children grow and mature, they naturally move toward greater independence. As students adjust to freedom and responsibility in college, relationships with parents and other family members are bound to change. Freshmen and their parents may fear losing aspects of their relationships with each other. Changes may be inevitable, but that doesn’t mean that the relationship ends, but rather the nature and the balance of the relationship shifts and evolves. The extent of these changes is dependent on a variety of factors that are unique to each family and relationship. Thinking about and anticipating some of these changes in advance may help make the adjustment for you and your family a little bit easier.

First-year students may call home or, if possible, visit frequently, especially during their first few months away. It may be difficult for them to say goodbye at the end of holiday or semester breaks. It may also be difficult to readjust to curfews, chores or care for younger siblings on visits home. Parents also need to adjust during this period. Their children have become independent in some ways but are still somewhat dependent upon their parents. Talk with your child about how roles and boundaries may change in your relationship. Identify ways that you will stay connected. Will it be via email, text, phone, video call, or regular visits? Work together to define responsibilities and decision-making. What kinds of things will your child handle on their own...doctor appointments? Finances? In what ways will he or she still want your help?
Be patient with each other. This is new for all of you! Work to keep the lines of communication open and be flexible enough to recognize that needs may change throughout your child’s first semester and first year. There may be times when your child needs more frequent contact and support, particularly during the first few weeks of adjustment and during times of increased stress, such as during mid-terms and final exams.

Finally, realize that you may experience a wide range of feelings during this time of transition: from sadness, fear, and loneliness, to a sense of relief or peace – and/or everything in between! There is no “one-size-fits-all” when it comes to the college transition. There is a wide range of “normal” feelings – and that is okay! The most important thing is to maintain open communication with your child, seek support when needed, practice self-care and compassion, and don’t forget to pat yourself on the back for a job well done! (Set to Go, 2020)

Want to know more? Check out this information about new communication guidelines for you and your family at: https://www.settogo.org/cardstack/new-communication-guidelines-for-you-and-your-family/

**Changing Friendships.**

Like family relationships, your child’s other relationships may change. Old friendships, new friendships, and even romantic relationships can all be sources of both opportunities and challenges. Most new college students have to work at establishing connections when they first arrive on campus. Making new friends isn’t always easy and your child may struggle to find his or her place. For many students, it takes weeks or even months to start building healthy relationships. Parents can help support them during this time by encouraging them to be patient and actively look for opportunities to socialize and meet new people. It is important to remind new students that they are not alone, even if they feel lonely. Parents can help support new students by normalizing these feelings and reassuring them that almost all first-year college students are “in the same boat” when they arrive on campus!

During this time of adjustment, your child may want to seek support from “old” friends. Existing friends can offer a valuable network of support, especially if they are experiencing their own college transition and adjustment. Old friendships can also change in ways that may be difficult for your child to accept. Time, distance, and differing life paths can create conflict in old friendships. So, while you may want to encourage your child to maintain connections with old friends, especially during the adjustment to college, be ready to support your child with any changes in established relationships (Set to Go, 2020).

**Here are some things you can recommend to your child:**

- Look for opportunities to socialize. Campus clubs and organizations are a great way to meet peers with similar interests.
- If possible, maintain contact with old friends. Texting, FaceTime, social media, or phone calls will help ease the adjustment.
- Roommates, other dorm residents, and classmates can be a good source of support!
- Reach out to high school alumni who are attending SFU. There is a good possibility that they may be willing to offer some tips about campus life, and you’ll make a new connection! If you don’t know if anyone from your high school is at SFU, your guidance counselor may be able to give you some information.
• Plan to visit with old friends during breaks. It may help maintain the connection and give you something to look forward to.

Other Relationship Changes and Challenges.

Along with family relationships and friendships, students may encounter other relationship changes and challenges. Separation from significant others, roommate issues, and range of other types of interpersonal conflict may complicate the first-year transition to college.

Many students leave high school boyfriends or girlfriends when they go to college. Students may disagree with their boyfriends or girlfriends about whether it is ok to make new friends or see other people. One or both partners may struggle with feeling lonely, sad, or jealous, especially if one partner seems to be happier and better adjusted than the other. Breakups for first-year students can be especially painful, particularly if the student is struggling with other aspects of the college transition (Set to Go, 2020).

Roommate issues can present another challenge to new college students. Many students come to college with high hopes that their roommate will be a close friend and may feel disappointed if the reality falls short of the expectation. Freshmen who live on campus must learn to negotiate conflicts with roommates and others. Sharing living space in close quarters can often lead to disagreements about noise, cleanliness, sleep interruption, and a range of other issues. If students are unable to successfully resolve these issues on their own, the SFU Residence Life staff will be available and ready to provide the information and resources necessary to help students find appropriate solutions to the problem.

In addition to peer relationships, Freshmen must learn to navigate new relationships with adults at college. Parents typically interact much less with the university than they did with their sons’ or daughters’ high schools, and students must communicate directly with professors and other staff. Learning how to deal with diverse personalities, varying communication styles, and different expectations can be stressful for new college students. Encourage your child to communicate, ask questions, and reach out for assistance, when needed. Many perceived problems can be avoided and stress levels reduced simply by practicing open, productive communication!

A Note About Diversity...

Your child is about to become a member of a SFU’s richly diverse community! What an exciting opportunity for students to learn and grow and expand their worldviews! For many Freshman, college is the first place where they encounter people from different backgrounds, who have had different experiences, and may hold different values and beliefs from their own. Meeting and engaging with others who have different perspectives is an important aspect of the intellectual and personal growth that is an integral part of the college experience. In a diverse environment, if is helpful to encourage students to engage through respectful dialogue and keep in mind the following suggestions:

• Listen for understanding
• Speak from the heart
• Suspend judgment
• Hold space for differences
These reminders can help your student make the most of learning in a diverse and intellectually engaged environment of civil discussion and discourse (USC, 2020).

**Homesickness**

There are high expectations that the college years will be among the best in one’s life. If students feel unhappy or deeply dissatisfied, it can be very confusing or scary. It is normal for many new college students to feel sad, lonely, or scared during the few months of college. Everything is new and different and the comfort and safety of family and friends can feel worlds away. Homesickness is a normal experience for new college students who find themselves trying to satisfy their own needs in a new environment, surrounded by strangers. Each individual has different tolerance for change, as well as unique coping skills. The experience of homesickness can encompass many feelings, including fear, grief, sadness, and loneliness.

**Tips for Dealing with Homesickness**

There is no simple cure for homesickness, but the good news is, it won’t last forever. Many times, simply talking about these feelings can help. Here are some strategies you can share with your child to help alleviate homesickness:

- **Acknowledge That You Feel Homesick.** Missing family and friends and feeling sad are natural responses to leaving home.
- **Talk About It.** Talk with an R.A., a friend, a parent, a brother or a sister who has experienced leaving home.
- **Keep in Touch.** Increasing contact with family can be helpful during difficult times. Be flexible and keep the door open for communication.
- **Bring Familiar Items.** Pictures of family, friends, pets, and other reminders of home can bring a sense of comfort and help ease the transition from home to college.
- **It Takes Time!** Adapting to new situations can take time! Over time, significant feelings of homesickness will decrease, though a sense of “missing home” may remain for a long time.
- **Practice Self-Compassion:** Realistically assess expectations and accept that homesickness is a healthy and normal experience for new college students. Being gentle with oneself during this time can help reduce feelings of stress.
- **Know When to Seek Help:** There are times when, despite our best efforts, we are unable to resolve issues on our own. If feelings of homesickness do not seem to be improving, or if these feelings worsen over time, reach out for help. The Counseling Center staff is available to assist students with homesickness, college transition, and a wide variety of other issues. (Adapted from Allegheny College, Suggestions for Coping with Homesickness)

**College and Stress**

Stress is a normal part of life, especially during periods of transition and uncertainty, and college is no exception. The American College Health Association (ACHA) National College Health Assessment shows that student stress is the single biggest hindrance to academic performance at college. Today’s college students face a host of pressures: greater academic demands, exposure to new people and temptations, the prospect of life after college, and more. Parents should recognize that, while a certain level of stress is healthy and can be motivating, excessive stress can cause real problems.
Common college student stressors include:

- Continual and mounting academic demands
- Trying to make friends
- Being on one’s own in a new environment
- Relationship issues, including dating and changes in family relationships
- Financial responsibilities
- Exposure to new people, ideas, and temptations
- Awareness of one’s sexual identity and orientation

Fortunately, the majority of stress your child will experience can be helpful and stimulating. Experts agree that, if balanced correctly, stress can be a positive motivator that increases self-awareness and productivity. While some sources of stress cannot be avoided, others can be prevented or diminished. Discuss with your child how to tell the difference so that unnecessary stressors can be minimized. (Set to Go, 2020; College and stress. https://www.settogo.org/college-and-stress/)

**Most Stressful Times During Freshman Year**

There are certain times during the first year when college students are more likely to experience increased levels of stress and difficulty with the transition:

- The first two weeks and last two weeks of the semester
  - While the first few weeks of college are spent trying to acclimate to new surroundings, people, and expectations, the last few weeks are spent trying to wrap up assignments and preparing to go back home for a period of time, leaving the new friends and routines that students have worked so hard to establish.
- During mid-terms and final exams
  - College mid-terms and final exams may be different than any other kind of academic assessment students may have encountered in the past. These exams can involve “high stakes” and high stress, during an already uncertain time.
- Before or after mid-semester and holiday breaks
  - While most students look forward to going home for breaks, it can be stressful for some students, for a number of reasons. Other students may embrace the comfort and safety of home so much that they are reluctant to return to campus when the break ends.

Checking in with students and maintaining open lines of communication during these difficult times may help reduce feelings of stress.

**Stress Check**

Excessive stress can sneak up on students over time, and they may not notice it until they begin to experience its physical or emotional effects. Too much stress can lead to unhealthy and potentially serious physical and emotional consequences. If any of these warning signs persist over a series of weeks or interfere with your child’s ability to function, it’s important to reach out for help.
Here are some signs that your child may be experiencing excessive stress:

- Changes in eating or sleeping patterns
- Headaches
- Irritability, frustration, or angers
- Recurring colds and minor illnesses
- Frequent muscle aches and/or tightness
- More disorganized than usual
- Difficulty completing tasks
- Increased perception of pressure

If you think your child is experiencing higher than typical stress levels, urge him to contact the school’s mental health or counseling center. (Set to Go, 2020, College and stress [https://www.settogo.org/college-and-stress/])

**Awareness Activity**

A good college transition begins even before freshman set foot onto campus! Here are some awareness activities for you and your child. Answer the following questions and compare responses. You may be surprised what you learn!

- List three things your student will miss most about home this fall.
- List three adjustments you anticipate making this fall.

**We asked SFU Freshman...**

In a recent survey, we asked SFU freshman to list what they missed most since starting college.

As expected, they most missed their family and friends, followed by their bedrooms and pets.

We also asked them about their level of appreciation for their parents since starting college...

<Drumroll!> Overwhelmingly, freshman shared that their level of appreciation for their parents increased since starting college!

So maybe Mark Twain’s words hold some truth!

**Recent Counseling Center Survey Results**

As we near the conclusion of this presentation, you may be feeling more - or less - ready to send your child off to college. Whatever your concerns, know that the SFU Counseling Center is available to help you and your child, not only with the college transition, but with any other difficulties he or she may encounter during the freshman year and beyond. We surveyed students about their experiences with the Counseling Center...as you can see, 100% of students indicated that they would refer a friend to the Counseling Center...and between 95 and 100% of students believed that the services they received at the Counseling Center contributed positively to their academic performance and their ability to remain at SFU.

**A Final Thought**
As a final thought, I’d like to leave you with the words of C Day-Lewis:

I have had worse partings, but one that so
Gnaws at my mind still. Perhaps it is roughly
Saying what God alone could perfectly show-
How selfhood begins with a walking away,
And love is proved in the letting go.

Links and Resources

Finally, here is a list of helpful links and resources about the college transition, student mental health, and more! We look forward to seeing your child at SFU and we wish you all the best!