

Adjusting to College Month by Month

Not all students will share these feelings or experiences, and it might not be 'right on schedule. But research supports this cycle of emotions and events, so being familiar with the possibilities can prepare you for conversations with your student.

Fall semester

Two primary concerns about adjustment to college life are "Can I succeed academically?" and "Will I find friends?" Once the adrenaline of Orientation subsides, the excitement of being in a new environment with new people can fade into anxiety about coursework, homesickness, and stress about new relationships.

All of this newness and stimulation can be overwhelming or exciting – sometimes both at once. Don't panic if your child calls home with transition concerns sometime within the first six weeks of school. The road to independence and autonomy can be rocky-be sure your new student knows they have your support. Sometimes the number of choices open to the student can be taxing to students used to the structure of high school and home: Shall I sleep, watch a movie, or exercise? Red or blue streaks? What shall I wear today sweats or pajamas? Homework or PlayStation?

September

- Homesickness/loneliness
- Experimenting with new freedoms
- Wondering how/if s/he'll "fit in"
- Values crises
- Excitement over friends/activities
- Book buying sticker shock
- Preconceptions of college life challenged
- Feelings of academic inadequacy
- Anxiety over first tests and papers

Things may seem to settle down as campus becomes familiar and less threatening. Lifelines are maintained courtesy of smartphones and social media. Fall Break and Family Weekend can be highly anticipated opportunities for students to touch base with family and friends from home and to enjoy a little TLC.

October

- Loneliness
- Relationship concerns
- Finding balance between social life and academics
- Facing choices to use alcohol/other drugs
- Disappointment in early grades
- Money concerns
- Roommate conflicts
- Frustration with professors
- Anxiety about mid-terms
- Becoming over-extended

Breaks carry their own complications for students used to deciding their own schedule. Will midterm grades set a happy tone? Students may be excited to see their old high school friends. This is also a time for the reveal – as parents get to see for the first time the physical manifestations of their child's journey of developing their identity in different hairstyles, clothes, and food choices. Breaks and holidays are also a great opportunity to host students who are a long way from home. If your student knows someone who is unable to go home during these times, consider "adopting" them for the occasion and help alleviate some of the feelings that go with being far from home.

November/December

- Wondering when they will fit in
- Missing holiday preparations at home
- Worries about returning home for break
- Making travel arrangements

- Stress over spring registration
- Winter colds and illness
- Money concerns
- Worries about grades
- Flurry of end of the semester social activities
- Final papers and exams

Winter Break

The first days of break, parents may find that their students have “crashed.” After a hectic round of exams and social activities, the idea of “vegging” out in front of the TV might be very appealing. For families celebrating holidays and other family traditions, there may be some disappointment that their new student may not be up to the rigor of family time. Other challenges that might be faced may be the family rules of curfew and approved social activities. Your student might also be grappling with the changes in themselves and their friends and wonder about their friendships, old and new.

Spring Semester

After a month at home with friends, family, and pets, students may find the return to college in January harder than arriving in August. While homesickness surfaces right after break, students more readily fall into a positive routine with roommates and others in their social network. Students may feel more confident with their college tasks, though time management might continue to be an issue. Those that did not do as well as they expected the first semester, might buckle down with a renewed commitment. Others may be rethinking their career goals.

January/February

- Getting back into routine
- Homesickness
- Valentine’s depression
- Bad weather/cabin fever
- Desire to get involved in campus life
- Pressure to improve grades
- Housing and roommate decisions for next year

The cold and bleak winter months may find students in lengthy conversations that challenge and explore beliefs and values, as they discover new aspects of their identity. Spring Break arrives just in time to ease the cabin fever of February. Many students begin to explore life outside the classroom and join clubs and other campus activities.

March

- Anxiety over Spring Break plans
- “freshmen 15” becomes apparent
- Money concerns
- Midterms stress
- Applications due for leadership positions
- Spring fever sets in
- Relationship stress
- Summer job stress

As the day warms up, so do many students thoughts about what they will be doing over Summer Break. The weeks from break until finals go by in a blur. Students are caught up in the end of the semester activities of choosing rooms and roommates for the next year, as well as their classes.

April/May

- Good weather distractions
- Concerns about grades
- Excitement or concern about moving back home
- Anxiety over missing college friends, adjustments with high school friends
- Finals
- Packing and storage

How Parents Can Help

- Understand – that stress is a natural response to change.
- Be familiar with campus resources – encourage your student to seek support.
- Do keep the lines of communication open – stay in touch, make a date to talk with one another.
- Don't minimize your students concerns – be willing to listen.
- Don't rush in to save the day – respect your student's new independence. Trust them to make good decisions. Empower her/him by processing options without dictating responses or rushing to solve their problems for them.
- Do keep perspective – understand that your student is still developing their identity as a person and "trying on" new thoughts, ideas, and possibilities, as well as hairstyles and clothing.
- Don't give ultimatums by insisting on commitment to activities, major, or career now – share your child's enthusiasm for new interests and activities. Encourage her to get involved.
- Understand that the expectations for college work are much different than high school – it may be challenging for your new student to get used to the ambiguity of the classroom. Though their opinions are valued, new students are often frustrated by professors who ask them to reflect or react on what they like or do not like about a subject; to provide examples to support their ideas; and to present reasoned arguments to support their thesis. The tradition of the liberal arts is to analyze and evaluate the subjects that they are engaged in and formulate views on the subject that are confidently grounded in scholarship. Students at UIS will engage in this process repeatedly over their four years and will be well served by this experience.

A recent graduate gives the following advice to parents: "One of the most important things my mom ever wrote in my four years at college was this: 'I love you and want for you all the things that make you the happiest; and I guess you, not I, are the one who knows best what those things are.' She wrote that during my senior year. If you're smart you'll believe it, mean it, and say it now."