

Coaching the confused college student

Volume 3 Issue 5 - 2015

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News

Parents write

Our college freshman son recently informed us that he will not be returning to school next year. Unbeknownst to us, his grades have been slipping since the start of the academic year. We know how we feel: angry. But we're not sure what to do. Any suggestions?

Legions of parents wait the day when children are "launched" into the world of college. As mixed feelings settle into parental stomachs, freshman embarks on a path that leads to a world of possibilities. While most navigate their way with success and deftly follow their ambitions, a significant number become "grounded" by confusion and despair. This leaves parents awash with worry and looking for their own "survival seminar." If this sounds familiar, consider these coaching tips:

College plans often need adjustment, some more than others

Its one thing to hear that your child intends to change their major, it's quite another to learn they have failed out and are returning home. Parents must resist riding the wave of disappointment in their child and reframe the meaning of this event. Students need time to "get their head together" and don't respond well to interrogation and accusation. Try to view this experience as broadly as possible, reserving judgment and preserving the relationship. Offer supportive advice such as the following: "Everybody has times in their lives when the unexpected happens. Try to look at this as a temporary setback that takes time to figure out."

Await the opportunity to patiently discuss circumstances at college and review future options

Initially act more like a sounding board than an advice giver. The objective is to review mistakes, deliberate over past decisions, and gently appraise the effort and prioritization placed into coursework. Don't add pressure to an already pressured situation by insisting upon a premature plan. Suggest a "cushion period" of at least a few months where decision making is suspended and open ended discussion is the rule of thumb. Consider hidden factors that may be at the root of the problem. Don't be misled by your child's blanket reassurance that "everything will be fine." Without the structure and parental oversight of high school, some freshman is unable to discipline themselves due to a climate of temptation and/or the presence of undiagnosed learning disabilities or ADHD.

Other possible interferences include roommate troubles, social isolation, ego wounds, and fallout from a failed relationship. Probe these possibilities through gentle questioning about how they spend their time, new friendships, course troubles, and the manner in which they organize and lead their academic, social, and athletic life at college.

Be receptive to outside help in planning for the future

Just as families utilize college advisers in high school, they should especially consider seeking help in the midst of a "college crash." Even if the student is unwilling, parents can gain insight and direction from meeting with a psychologist qualified to evaluate the problems and offer recommendations. Strongly encourage student participation for maximum benefit. Students may find that confidential consultation is best suited for full disclosure of all the factors that impinged upon academic performance and college life.

Acknowledgments

None.

Conflicts of interest

Author declares there are no conflicts of interest.

Funding

None.