



Before Heading to College #1 - For Parents & Students

Houston Dougharty, vice-president for Student Affairs at Grinnell College, who has spent much of his 24-year career advising parents on how to prepare their children (and themselves) before setting off to college provided much of this advise.

There are five things you must talk about before your kids leave (or shortly thereafter, if you read this and feel the need to play catch up...) he writes:

[1]What's the communication plan? Given the many easy ways we can communicate these days (cell phone, texting, Twitter, e-mail, etc.), students and their parents should agree on how — and how often — they will communicate during the school year. Determining this in advance can help keep parents informed and connected, while fostering the student's sense of independence — a critical step in the early days of a new college experience.

Who sees the grades? College students' records are protected by the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). It restricts institutions from releasing grades and other educational records without a student's written permission. Students and parents should discuss what level of disclosure is mutually expected and acceptable, as well as what campus policies address this matter and what releases may need to be signed.

What about sex, drugs and alcohol? Many students have experimented with these while in high school, but for some, there will be new temptations. Fortunately, this generation of students tends to be open to advice and feedback from their parents about these critical issues. Success in the first year of college is often linked to a student's capacity to make good social choices.

How to manage all this time and freedom? Few high school seniors have had to be fully responsible for waking up, getting to meals, scheduling study and work and creating their own curfew. Good habits for using tools like alarm clocks, day-planners and calendars don't come naturally. Also, when the winter holiday break brings students back home for a few weeks, do the old high school years' rules still apply?

Whose experience is this, really? Families need to have a plan for taking advantage of campus information and resources so that parents are confident their children are enjoying a positive learning environment while allowing them to create their own college experiences and advocate for themselves.

Adapted by Personal Safety Nets® from Lisa Belkin's Motherlode series regularly published in the New York Times (August 2009)

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