

The Rhythm of College Life

For many students, going to college is filled with ambiguity and doubt. It may be their first time away from home for an extended period. There is powerful tension between their desire for more freedom and autonomy and their need for reassurance and support.

Parents, too, have mixed emotions when their children leave home. They often feel a sense of loss accompanied by a sense of freedom. The house seems so quiet. At the same time, the house seems *too quiet!*

Separation Anxiety

People are more comfortable with the familiar. Your son or daughter has probably spent several years with the same friends from the same high school. The teachers are familiar, the school campus is familiar, and the town is familiar. College means finding a whole new set of friends, adapting to professors who do not treat them the way their high school teachers did, and navigating a campus where everything is not located in one building.

Beginning a new adventure on campus at Tiffin University generates both excitement and anxiety. For students who adapt quickly, any apprehension is quickly overcome. For others, the transition may take a little longer and include some struggle with homesickness.

Some students begin to feel anxious several weeks before they even leave home. Others seem OK at first only to find themselves feeling homesick later, perhaps after returning from Christmas break. Most often, though, the first few days or weeks are the most difficult.

At TU, we help students feel accepted and secure by creating an environment in which they can function well and meet challenges successfully. The faculty and staff are sensitive to what students are experiencing. We are proud that the people who choose to come here— faculty, staff, and students—tend to be open, friendly, and supportive. Professionally trained people are always available to help but support is often found in unexpected places. A friendly greeting from a dining hall employee, for example, can make a surprisingly big difference in the way a student feels about the world.

Our advice to parents is, give your son or daughter room to grow. Expect a period of adjustment and avoid becoming overly solicitous about how things are going. Parental anxiety gives your student the impression that you think he or she is still a child, not really up to the challenges posed by college life. Deep down, many parents may harbor this fear--but wise parents try not to show it.

Stay in Touch

One of the many paradoxes of adolescence is: the same person who resented your “prying” questions in high school will probably look forward to hearing from you in college. There was a time when students eagerly anticipated mail from home. Today, parents and students alike

seem more comfortable with cell phone calls and emails. Still, an old fashioned letter or card makes any day a special occasion. And, a box of homemade memories is always appreciated.

After you have given your son or daughter a chance to get settled in, you might consider a visit to their campus. Two or three weeks after the start of classes, student rooms have been personalized and transformed into homes they are proud to show off. It might be a good idea not to come unannounced, though. We have heard rumors that some students don't actually make their beds every morning.

The Rhythm of Life has a Powerful Beat

The speakers are cranked and the house vibrates to the rhythm of the bass. Despite the volume, you can't make out the lyrics—for which you are grateful. There is a tendency for parents to think that their kid's life moves to the beat of the music. Recall, though, that there are biological, psychological, and social forces that are far more powerful. When that child was going through the "terrible twos," there was temptation to despair. Even so, your parents and your friends with children provided consolation. "He'll outgrow it," they said. And they were right.

At Tiffin University, we have seen thousands of in-coming students adapt to the changes and rhythm of college life. As a result of our collective experience, we know what to expect and, therefore, tend to take it in stride. Each new student, though, is having the experience for the first time. In the absence of older siblings, so are the parents. Outlined below is the pattern that we have observed. Perhaps it will help you face the rhythm of college life with greater confidence.

August & September

Students are excited about getting started, but also apprehensive about getting along with roommates and professors. Loneliness and homesickness are common. The academic workload may be significantly more challenging than they experienced in high school and some are going through "buyer's remorse." (Was college, or this college, really the right choice?) The first round of tests often helps them determine if they need to be more diligent or confirms that their high school preparation was satisfactory. Students begin to adjust to working—and playing—with no one looking over their shoulders.

October

Life is a matter of making choices. By October, students are experiencing some of the consequences. Tests and mid-term exams have made it clear if extra help is needed or study habits need to be adjusted. The small class size at TU means that professors know each student by name and have begun assessing aptitude by this time. Guidance, encouragement, and help are provided where needed. Roommate conflicts begin to pop up and students learn how to resolve them. Often, the interpersonal skills they acquire in the residence halls have life-long value. Meanwhile, a romantic attachment to someone back home is being tested by time and distance—and by new acquaintances on campus.

November

Students discover that professors are just so inconsiderate. There seems to be a conspiracy to schedule an outrageous number of exams and papers just before Thanksgiving. Looking forward to the break may trigger universal homesickness. The stress can also increase friction with the roommate. There may also be some issues about how to relate to the people back home. Will they notice changes? Will they see those changes in a positive light? Will they have to explain that they “met someone else” at college?

December

This is the best of times and the worst of times. The first semester ends in early December so students must become serious about preparing for their first college-level final exams. Course selection is made for the spring semester. Some students are growing confident that they can handle college while others are becoming concerned. Even academically gifted students may experience anxiety because of the high standards they have set for themselves. Still, everyone knows that as soon as exams are over, they can head home for a month. Holiday gatherings may generate conflicting feelings. Some students are delighted to be reunited with those they love. Some feel depressed because they are separated from someone special they met on campus.

January

At the beginning of every semester, students swear to themselves that this time it is going to be different. They will adhere to a regular study schedule so they don't get behind and have to cram for examinations. The vast majority, though, treat this like most other New Year's resolutions. It is difficult to concentrate when you are going through homesickness all over again. Still, some are relieved to be back at school where there is more freedom of movement and people who understand exactly what they are going through. Roommates have become good friends or are still negotiating their relationship while sharing disappointment or excitement about first semester grades

February

Class has been back in session a couple of weeks and some are relieved to be back in school. Still, some degree of claustrophobia or cabin fever is common because of the short hours of daylight and more time spent indoors. We encourage students to use our campus facilities to stay physically active. Fitness and academic performance are both enhanced by regular exercise. On a personal level, Valentine's Day can be a reminder of the breakup of a romance back home or celebration of a new campus relationship.

March

Spring break means a chance to head home or to someplace warm. But first, there are mid-terms to get through with the associated anxieties. Some students are already beginning to look for summer employment and thinking about choosing roommates for next year.

April

Northwestern Ohio is teased by the arrival of periodic good weather. Students gather outdoors between classes and try to balance social activities with the rapidly approaching end of the semester. By now, solid relationships have been established with other students who will be missed over the summer break. It is normal to feel uncertain about leaving campus. Campus has become “home” and leaving may mean going to a necessary, but unattractive, summer job. It also means the relative loss of freedom that comes with living under the same roof as your parents. Academic issues include preparation for final exams, registering for fall classes, and declaring a major. These decisions reinforce students’ awareness of the way their choices influence their future direction and prospects for career success.

You’ve changed!

One of the paradoxes of parenthood is the expectation that our children will grow up without actually changing. When they come home for the holidays, we are surprised by what they say or what they wear or what they have done with their hair.

Experimenting with new identities is an essential part of growing up. One of the virtues of college life is that it gives young people a chance to try on some “new clothes” without buying them. Today, they can be artsy and poetic, and tomorrow, they can put on a different hat.

The great thing about paradoxes is that both sides can be equally true. One of the reasons you invest in a college education is to encourage the growth of your child. Sometimes parents interpret the superficial changes they see as rejections of their own long-held values and expectations. Usually, on a fundamental level, this is not the case. Parents who believe in who their children really are (regardless of what they have done with their hair), tend to be rewarded in the long run. Even so, in the short run, it can require a lot of patience. Try to remember the challenges you posed to your own parents before you turned out OK in the end.

Responsibilities

Having responsibilities is not the same as being responsible, though parents hope that one will lead to the other. College students are responsible for a wide range of things that parents, teachers, and other adults once handled for them. Some parents are driven by the desire to manage things for their children and fix every problem. You might, instead, consider the virtues of offering advice—and even then, only when it is requested. Students don’t grow smarter if parents do their homework for them and they don’t become responsible adults if their parents continue to govern their every action.

Some responsibilities are really mundane. Perhaps your high school aged son or daughter had to be awakened more than once before they came to breakfast and headed off to school. In

college, there is no one there to wake them up or remind him to finish their assignments on time.

Some responsibilities become life lessons—dealing with roommates, paying bills and managing money and credit, getting help with academic problems while there is still time for them to be fixed. Students may be faced with moral and ethical questions that require making difficult choices, setting priorities, accepting responsibilities and dealing with the consequences of their decisions.

Isn't that just what you expect from a mature adult?