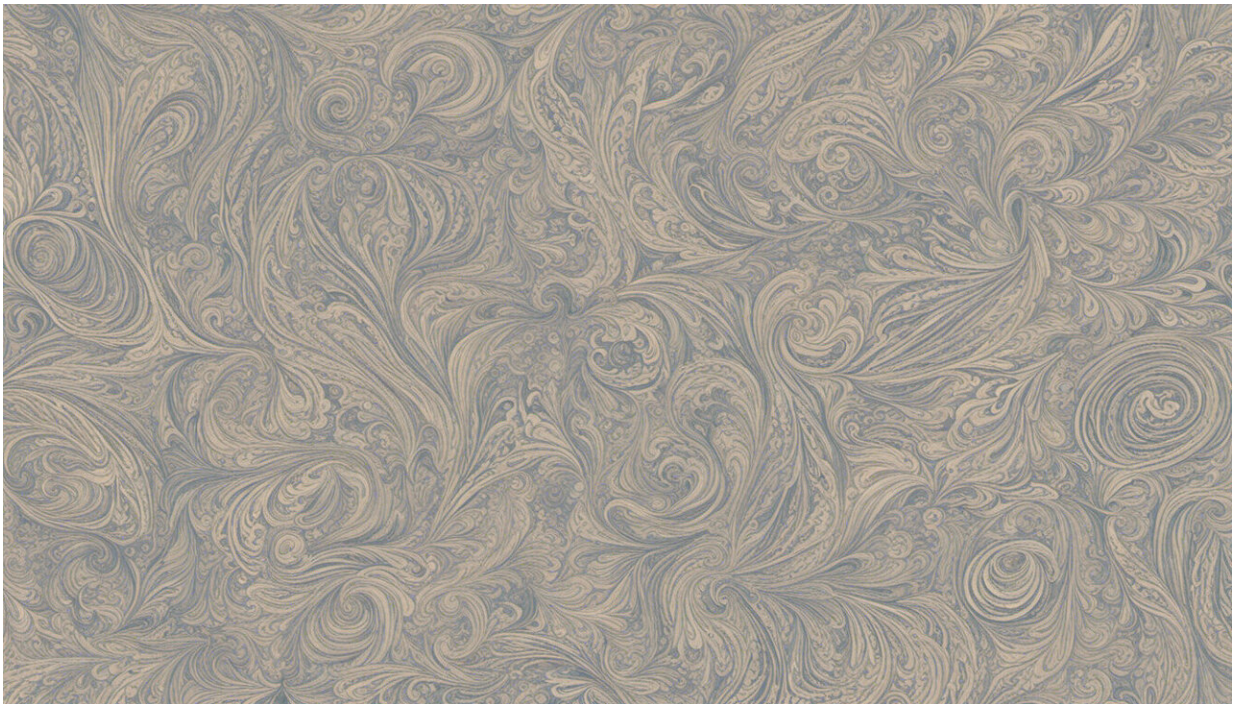


What parents should do to help students prepare for the first year of college

April 4 2019, by Lara Schwartz And Andrea Brenner



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As the school year begins to wind down, high school seniors – and those who care about them – typically have their eyes on two prizes: getting into college and graduating from high school.

While both milestones are worthy of celebration, there's much more that

students and parents should do after those two milestones are reached.

That's the message of our new book, "[How to College: What to Know Before You Go \(and When You're There\)](#)." The recommendations in the book are based on two decades of [teaching](#) and designing programs for thousands of first-year [college students](#), such as "[The American University Experience](#)," a course that helps new students adjust to university life.

We also spoke to college faculty and staff about the many ways that new students arrive on campus underprepared for their first semester of college and incorporate tips from college students about what they wish they had known when they first arrived on campus.

Knowing what to expect can make a major difference in a [student's](#) psychological well-being. Many first-year college students report feeling "[stressed most or all of the time](#)," regardless of where they go to college. A national survey of first-year college students conducted by the JED Foundation, which studies college students' mental health issues, found that students who feel emotionally unprepared for college were more likely to report [poor academic performance and negative college experiences](#).

In recognition of how stressful the first year of college can be, here are five things that we believe can help ease the transition.

1. Make it OK to ask for help

While new college students may be intent upon gaining independence, it's important to stress that knowing when to ask for help is actually a sign of maturity. Along those lines, it's important to encourage students to seek out the various resources that might be available on campus, such as a counseling center, financial aid office or wellness center. Students

who need it should also seek out academic support and tutoring programs. There are also programs to support students with disabilities, as well as diversity and inclusion programs for students who may not feel welcome on campus.

Students should be encouraged to [research the support systems](#) that exist on campus before leaving home instead of waiting until they arrive.

2. Develop empathy

Parents and soon-to-be college students should discuss the time when the parent first left home and what the challenges were. By discussing what worried or excited the parent the most, and what the parent wishes they would have known before moving out, the parent and student can develop a [better understanding](#) and bond over the similarities and differences of their experiences, regardless as to whether the parent attended college.

3. Discuss your expectations

The way that parents communicate their expectations can [affect college students' self-esteem](#).

In our book, we suggest several prompts for things to discuss that range from [personal safety](#) to religious observance away from home. Other topics include how often parents and their children who are in college will communicate with each other, to how the student should obtain health insurance and budget money.

Having explicit conversations with supporting adults will help prepare first-year students to more confidently face the challenges they encounter on their own without parental support (such as the first time a

student experiences an illness or injury in college) and reduce the chance of family conflicts that arise from differing expectations.

For instance, disputes can arise from something as simple as what to do on move-in day. We've found that many parents see move-in day as a last special day together, while students often view it as the first day in their new community, not a time for family togetherness. In our book, we recommend that students and their families discuss their expectations about move-in day. Who will be present? Will a parent help unpack and make the bed, or will the family leave once you are unpacked?

Students and parents should also discuss their expectations about academic work. Will the student provide frequent reports? Do the parents understand that college professors and deans do not communicate with [parents](#) about grades?

4. Emphasize what professors will expect

College level work comes with a new set of standards and expectations that are starkly different from what students are accustomed to in [high school](#). Anticipating these higher standards can save students the time and trouble of finding out these things the hard way after the fact.

High school students can often count on reminders about when assignments are due, and [high school teachers](#) provide frequent feedback about how students are doing in class. In college, students must keep up with their work on their own. A midterm exam and final paper might be the only grades a student receives in a semester. For those reasons, students should plan to visit their professors during office hours to speak about their progress.

The writing required of college students is also vastly different from that required in high school. In high school, most writing is expository –

explaining what you know. In college, most writing will be persuasive – making original claims and providing supporting evidence. We recommend that before leaving for college, students consider the types of assignments they've been asked to do in high school. Do they have experience writing persuasive papers? They should also consider the feedback they've received on their written work. What do teachers say they need to improve? Have they been told they write passionate opinions but need to work on supporting their claims? Students should set a goal to move forward in their writing, and plan to discuss their goal with their professors in office hours before the first paper is due.

Plagiarism and cheating is also dealt with differently in college. In high school, teachers might handle cheating and plagiarism themselves. But in college, plagiarism and cheating violate the school's academic integrity code or honor code and result in larger penalties – including failing a course, suspension, academic probation, or in some cases, expulsion.

5. Expect mistakes, encourage resilience

Faculty and staff expect first-year students to make rookie mistakes as they get familiar with the demands of college.

Students don't need to have it all figured out when they arrive on campus. Chances are new students miss an assignment deadline, lose something of importance, fail a test, or sleep in and miss a class during their first semester. Assure your almost-[college](#) student that mistakes are part of learning and that mistakes are not only OK, but also expected.

It is the [resilience](#) that students show – that is, the ability to adjust to circumstances in the face of adversity and own up to their mistakes – that is a hallmark of being a responsible adult.

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