

IF I COULD, THIS IS WHAT I WOULD TELL THE PERSON(S) “PUTTING SOMEONE THROUGH COLLEGE”

Nothing cuts so severely to the emotional bone of a parent or guardian than having someone tell them how to raise their child or what an adult can do that is best for their ward. Yet every year I get questions that indicate many parents or guardians seek ideas on how to best help their child during the collegiate experience. In response I offer these suggestions addressing the concerns of parents and guardians of the “traditional” student (17-22 yrs.). I use the term parent(s) to be all inclusive. Anyone who is the natural, adoptive, or is legally responsible for the fiscal and/or emotional support of the student is, in my mind, a parent. All caring parents experience some trauma or re-adjustment to the empty nest and often compensate by seeking to help their offspring. I find many parents also want to be part of the college experience.

What follows are suggestions and recommendations **ONLY**, some of which may apply to you the reader, or to some parents you know, or not apply at all. Many of these points are seemingly repetitious but each has its own nuances. I try to see each child, **NOW BECOMING AN ADULT**, as a unique individual. I believe every set of parents, every single parent, or foster parent to be also unique. It is my opinion they can be of enormous help to their collegians without seeming to interfere in ways other than just “paying the bills” and even if they are not paying them. These suggestions require energetic patience and an expectancy of a thousand surprising sacrifices. All parents will go through a learning process while their child is engaged in “academics.” When their child is doing well, they feel well. When their child is in pain, they are also in pain. Having said that, here are the suggestions for you parents to consider.

1. WRITE THEM A LETTER OR SEND THEM A CRAZY GREETING CARD WHEN THEY LEAST EXPECT IT. Make it a habit! Phone calls are nice but any spoken message is soon forgotten and is sometimes viewed as an interference on their time. And e-mails are easily deleted. There is something about mail from home that carries a deeper meaning: You took the time to sit down and say something. Tell them that their high school classmates **JOE JOCK** eloped with **SUSIE POMPOM** and they are now living just down the street in that little white cottage with red shutters. Or that the class clown **SAMMY KNUCKLEHEAD** is still cruising the main drag in his beat-up old heap looking for a date. Let them know that you think they will do themselves proud even though the initial adjustment to collegiate life will be unsettling. The beauty of an unexpected card or letter with a message (not just a signature) is: They have to read it and cannot talk back. You would be amazed at how many students take pleasure in re-reading a letter or hanging up a card from home for all their peers to see. I think many parents will also be pleasantly and emotionally surprised at what they can say in a letter to their children. The recipients may ridicule it, even make fun of it but I assure you that 99 times out of 100, **THEY WILL LOVE IT**. By the way, don't expect an answer. Of course, if you want them to be viewed as royalty by their peers for about ten minutes, send them some home-made goodies.

2. LISTEN TO THEM. When they make that selection of what college to attend, what major to select, or career path to follow, listen to them. If they ask your opinion, give it freely and make your suggestions in a calm manner, but let them make the final decision. Don't hesitate to compliment them for it. You certainly want them to do more than just attend school. Many students may not know why they are going to college other than it is expected of them or they see no future for themselves if they do not. If their choices are restricted because of geographic location or family economics, they need to know this. But if they have choices, can go anywhere, select any locale, you have an opportunity to observe their decision making process. It may be faulty, it may be silly, it may smack of genius. But it is their willingness to make a decision and abide by the consequences that suggests they are now growing and maturing. Hard as it may be, you must make every effort to refrain from telling them what to do. You and I both know they will likely change their minds and do so more than once. But they need to talk themselves through the experience and you must let them. You will have "urges" to jump in with both feet and may even take over. Watch those "urges."

3. TALK TO AND WITH THEM, NOT AT THEM. Advisers are well aware if a student's opinion is honored at home. Those who must be continually hand-held or find it impossible to make decisions are usually those who were "talked at" and told what they must do. Simply put, they exhibit the attitude that no one really cares what they do, say, or feel. The behavior of the father in the movie *THE DEAD POET'S SOCIETY* is not common. But I have also observed and experienced, it is not rare. Dialogue is an art form that needs constant nurturing and encouragement. Far be it from me or any adviser to tell parents how to raise children but please encourage them to talk, share their thoughts (silly and otherwise) and to express themselves without interruption or ridicule. I am being selfish but it is very hard for me or any advisor to help students who cannot or will not express their concerns, aspirations or feelings because they find it impossible to believe they are of worth. Their home experiences were that anything they considered of value was unimportant, indeed, often the subject of ridicule. If you want to see a defeated child, it is one who endured a life of ridicule.

4. PLEASE, DO NOT ASK THEM WHAT THEY ARE GOING TO DO AFTER COLLEGE DURING THEIR FRESHMAN YEAR. They have enough difficulty selecting classes and they feel enormous pressure to make that decision which may have life long effects. Pushing them to focus on the future can have an adverse effect on their present performance. They want to please you, indeed, make you feel proud but they must also learn they need to please themselves. You would do them a real service if you encourage them to seek out all the services on the campus that can help them. They have access to everything from advising staff or professional counselors to career placement opportunities. The four or five years of collegiate life goes very fast, but the only obligation they have during the first year is to be the best freshman academically they can be. If they fail to develop an academic goal by the time they are in upper class work, encourage them to seek academic counseling. As they prove their capabilities they will come to understand just what they may be able to do after graduation. Remember, it is to the college's or university's benefit to help them succeed. What I am really trying to say is, **DON'T PLAN THEIR FUTURE FOR THEM.** Of course you will have

expectations for them but I would suggest they will develop expectations for themselves.

5. WHEN THEY CALL HOME UNEXPECTEDLY, DON'T PANIC. They may simply be homesick and want to hear a familiar voice. Parents get excited (deservedly so) when they receive a call that begins, "Now, Mom (or Dad) don't worry but . . ." or "Guess what? You are not going to believe this but . . ." On the other hand, it may not be a real crisis, but if your child thinks it is, consider it so. There can be no finer compliment to you than for your offspring to call you simply because they want to hear your voice. If it is a real crisis, there are campus services that can help and that the call they make to you may be their way of asking if you will support them in seeking help. They need to know that you will approve of whatever action they plan to take. If, however, you do disapprove, be honest with them without becoming angry (a real talent on your part). It also helps to tell them you enjoyed the call (even if it is at 2 am) and they should feel free to call anytime just to "chat." In this day and age of the ubiquitous cell phone, they can comply with that suggestion almost at will.

6. DON'T BLAME THE UNIVERSITY FOR THEIR MIS-BEHAVIOR. They are going to be subjected to situations, opportunities and temptations in which they bear sole responsibility. The university cannot protect them from making errors of judgment if they are determined to commit them. If they fall in love the very first term (a very common occurrence) and then are jilted, they may act out. If they seek acceptance by becoming very social, their grades will show it. They are going through the process of developing a new social network away from high school. They find that starting over is difficult and some react by engaging in what you may see as foolish behavior and they view as being "sophisticated." When called to account by you or university authorities, they usually relate their version of the truth. This is otherwise known as **HERE IS THE WAY I WANT YOU FOLKS TO HEAR IT.** If you or any parent blames the university because of the child's inability to handle the many temptations, I strongly suggest that he or she be taken home so as to allow them a period of "maturing."

7. ON THE OTHER HAND, IF YOU DON'T HEAR FROM THEM FOR AN EXTENDED PERIOD OF TIME, INITIATE A RENEWED PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIP. Usually when they get into a social or academic bind, they will likely seek your help and please, listen to them when they call. But if they don't contact you after a long period of time, make it a point to call them just to let them know you are alive, are concerned about them and would like to chat. Keep the chatter light. It is of little benefit to all parties for parents to contact the student services office or an academic advisor and find that the university representative is bound by the laws of confidentiality. It may surprise some parents to know that advisers do get calls from concerned parents wanting to know "Is our kid still there?" So any re-establishment of communication must be between the parent and child.

8. IF YOU INTEND TO VISIT THE CAMPUS, LET THEM KNOW YOU ARE COMING. They know they are supposed to be pleased by a nice surprise visit but sometimes academic or social obligations are demanding their attention and your "sudden" appearance can be unsettling. They should be warned in advance that you are dropping by. Even a ten minute

warning is better than **ZIP**. Prior contact is an act of courtesy in general and a very important recognition that your child may have responsibilities that require excluding you. If they can, they will involve you somehow. After all, it is nice to “get a free dinner out on the folks or something.” But don’t just walk into their dorm, fraternity, sorority or apartment without a call. There does exist the possibility that you might walk in on a situation they do not want you to know about just yet. Painful as that fact might be, it is still their life and you are asked to respect it.

9. IF AT ALL POSSIBLE, VISIT THEM ON UNIVERSITY SPONSORED PARENT’S DAYS. No one is lonelier than a college student whose parents chose not to come to a university sponsored parent’s day activity. Most students are proud of their parents (hard to believe isn’t it?) and want to show them off. Why not? If you tried to do your best by them, they will show their appreciation. Your pride in them is often returned many times over. I have witnessed situations wherein the parents promised to appear and then fail to show expressing the attitude, “What’s the big deal?” Your offspring will always need your moral and psychological support. Take advantage of university sponsored situations to strengthen that support.

10. IF YOU WERE PUZZLED BY THEM IN HIGH SCHOOL, YOU WILL CERTAINLY BE CONFUSED BY THEM WHILE THEY ARE IN COLLEGE. Their university experiences will contribute to your amazement. If they have an open mind, not a vacant one, they will be exposed to new ideas thus permitting them to polish their innate academic and intellectual skills as well as mature. They may remark about how the country should be run, the university re-organized and how you or someone else should lead their lives. They are becoming aware of the power of words, developing a sort of new language and in general, are beginning to feel a little better about themselves. They are definitely exposed to new ideas and thoughts. Face it, they like being, as they see it, “one up on the folks.”

11. IF THEY SUDDENLY DECIDE TO CHANGE THEIR PROGRAM, BE SUPPORTIVE. Many students experience a real trauma when they seek to change their major program. They often feel “the folks” won’t understand (and you might not) or will disapprove or that something is wrong with them because their first choice “just wasn’t right for them.” They may not be able to explain the why of the change or the why of their feelings but they will need to feel that you will be supportive and that you will try and understand. If your pre-engineering son or daughter suddenly changes to a graphic arts program, encourage him or her to be the best graphic artist ever. You may be truly disappointed but the very act of supporting their right to change their mind can be one of the most important gestures you will ever effect. Always keep in mind they are in collegiate studies to learn for themselves, not to please any observer.

12. PLEASE REALIZE, COLLEGE IS NOT VOC-TECH TRAINING. Almost all students enter the university so as to get that degree which will “guarantee” them that great job. The sad reality is, a degree will not guarantee anything. Lack of a degree will insure that a career search will be very difficult. It is not the student’s fault they feel a degree is necessary.

Universities as well as society as a whole have promoted the value of a degree as an employment device. But all students must understand (and your support is absolutely essential in this) that a degree indicates a new level of skill achievement in the basics. No matter how many degrees they acquire, if they cannot demonstrate superior skills in writing, oral communication, listening, decision-making, acceptance of constructive criticism and evaluation of productivity, they will not experience much success. They must think in terms of goal setting and applying their learned skills as to how to achieve those goals. They should realize there are no greater bores than those who always talk a good story about how they are going to “conquer the world,” but somehow can never demonstrate just how they will achieve that expressed aim. It is my opinion that the bars and coffee houses of this country are filled with people straddling stools or occupying chairs trying to explain to anyone who has the patience to listen about what they could have accomplished if they had only done this or that. The fact is, they didn’t do anything but talk in terms of wish fulfillment. You want your child to enjoy his coffee, not lament over it. They must realize, it is the person, not the diploma, who gets hired.

13. IF THEY DECIDE TO STOP-OUT, COMPLIMENT THEM. If they are seriously considering a “stop-out” for academic or personal reasons, respect that choice. Any student who has formulated a rationale for a stop-out has made a monumental decision. It is very common for many students to feel they should leave school for a period of time, do a little work at a job, find out a bit more about what society can offer or demand and maybe simply get away from the college scene. Those whose goals are undefined (or who find collegiate studies less than inspiring) may need a “stop-out.” It might be the best thing they could do for themselves. Not everyone should but if your child tells you he or she wants to work for a while, let them. I can almost guarantee (note that I said almost) they will return to the university as better students. Some parents argue “they may never return.” That is a possibility but if they have a good mind, keen observation skills and a willingness to grow, they will return to campus. Many of you may remember that if you spent time in the military, or worked for a few years before committing to school, you entered better prepared to study. If your child is a first generation collegian, he or she may need that extra time to think things through. Encourage them to take it.

14. LET GO. That is probably the hardest thing for you or any parent to do. It serves as a reminder that you are getting “more mature.” Yet it is essential for your child to “spread wings.” You must be supportive and yet, remain an observer. You must show you are concerned and not be judgmental, that you want to help but not be interfering. You are their backup. They will see no contradiction in wanting to be free and yet demand your involvement. They want to be thought of as “mature” and yet will themselves talk like children when trying to explain their goals. Be assured they will seek your advice and yet, try to escape your influence. They think being a freshman is difficult but they are in for a real “jolt” when they become seniors about to graduate.

15. PLEASE DON’T COMPETE WITH THEM. Many parents judge their child’s productivity “by how well he or she does things in relation to how **WE DID IT** way back when.” Well, what may have worked for you may not be the best way for them. If it is, let them

