

From the Office of Student and Academic Services

"Student Engagement for Success"

UNDERSTANDING A STUDENT'S FIRST SEMESTER

The first year of university is a period of transition as students learn to live on their own, meet new social, academic and personal challenges and encounter new ideas and new people. Having some idea of the challenges your student will face can help you be an effective support person. While no two students will experience first year in quite the same way, the chart below outlines some of the predictable high and low moments for a typical first year student.

TIME	TYPICAL EXPERIENCES	POSSIBLE RESPONSES	WHAT PARENTS CAN DO
Orientation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student moves into apartment or dormitory, says goodbye to family • Meet house members, roommates, Residence Staff • Busy and hectic Orientation days filled with many sessions, activities and events 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excitement • Fear • Loneliness • Homesickness • Self-doubt 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listen • Encourage independence, but reassure your student that you are still part of his/her life • Listen to student's concerns. Don't try to talk him or her out of loneliness, homesickness or fear. Let them know you have confidence in them. Remind them of past achievements • Encourage your student to view this time of life as an opportunity for discovery and growth • Inquire about specific events, i.e.: "How was the Orientation event last evening? How have you set up your room?"
Early September	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attend classes, receive syllabi, meet Faculty and classmates • Begin job-on/off campus • Class add/drop period • Begin to establish relationship with roommate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overwhelmed by academic expectations • Difficulty learning to live with someone's habits. • Homesickness • Worry about growing apart from family and old friends, partner • Enjoying new independence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listen • Use e-mail, snail mail to stay in touch • Show genuine interest in student's experiences • Encourage your student to get to know a variety of people • Encourage communication with roommates • Avoid feeding fears • Encourage student to participate in campus events for first few weekends
Mid September	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Settling into class/work routine • Residence social activities/Events • Exploring opportunities for campus involvement • Developing time management habits, sign up for free Study Skills workshops 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Questions about identity - where do I fit in here? • Homesickness • Becoming more familiar with campus • Enjoying classes, excited by new ideas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listen • Inquire about course content, show interest in what they're learning • Send clippings, information about home, high school, friends • Encourage involvement

Late September	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing study habits, forming study groups • Trying to keep up with social activities, work and academic demands. May be neglecting sleep, health 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stress • Fatigue • Less homesick • Feeling a part of campus life and community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listen • Inquire about projects • Send small care package-healthy snacks, herb tea, a surprise
Early October	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Roommate tension may grow as stress increases, initial courtesy wears off • Thanksgiving Weekend signals a much needed break • Connect with old friends 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self doubt • Missing home and past life 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listen • Encourage student to seek help from professor • Do laundry, cook favorite dishes, make him or her feel special
Mid-Late October	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mid-term crits and tests • Break up with partner • Advisement and pre-registration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stress • Difficulty managing social and academic demands • Frustration - I always got A's in high school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listen • Discuss mid-semester grades with student. Listen. Encourage the student to seek help from professors in courses that are challenging. Remind him or her that it is not too late to make changes • Encourage student to talk to his or her instructors about mid-semester grades
Early November	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Papers/tests/crit results - reality check on academic performance • Thinking about declaring/changing major • Running short of money • Final papers, projects assigned • Sign-up for tutoring appointments at the Writing Centre if editing help is required for papers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anxiety if still unsure of major • Stressed with demands of work, school and social life. If student hasn't developed good time management by now, it shows • Frustration - I always got A's in high school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listen • Discuss interests, goals. Don't push student • Engage student in reflection about academic performance - i.e. "What do you think you did wrong? What can you do differently to do better on the next paper or test?" • If student is sick, encourage him or her to get help from Saint Mary's Health Services or a local physician
Late November	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Final papers/ projects due • All-nighters • Relationships with friends, family, partners and roommates strained by stress 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overwhelmed by all that needs to be done in the next few weeks • Excited about social activities that end off the semester • Fatigue and stress 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listen • Help student maintain perspective and realistic expectations • Discuss family plans for the up-coming break • Another good time for a care package -gift certificate to a local restaurant or the mall
December	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Final crits/exams • Packing to go home 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anxiety about first university finals • Fatigue and stress • Excited to be going home • Possible family conflicts over boundaries, rules, new habits and opinions may develop. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listen • Let student know you're proud of him or her for having a successful first semester • Relax old standards during vacation; discuss new rules with increased freedoms. • Don't fret over new habits - most are short-lived.

January	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2nd Semester 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Happy and/or sad to be returning to campus and routine. • Renewed interest in academics: a "fresh start". • New goal setting, confusion over academic program. • Homesickness and loneliness can resurface. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage student to seek out academic help (e.g., meet with Professor, seek out counselling services). • Listen to student as they voice concerns/fears. • Encourage career counselling.
February	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Winter 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For some, low mood and/or depression as winter sets in along with stress and anxiety over academic pressures. • Relationship issues may mount around Valentines Day. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raise your concern to student; encourage them to seek counselling on campus or at Dal Counselling & Psychological Services.
March	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ramping up to the end of the academic year 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Planning for next year: living arrangements, roommate issues, academic programs. • Academic pressure: term papers and projects due, term ending. • Concern over winter weight gain. • Worry over summer employment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage student to seek out help from Student and Academic Services re: Housing, Counselling & Psychological Services, Professors, Career Planning.

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