

## A Parents' Guide to Freshman-Year Woes

By Frank Rizzo

The computer is packed. The checking account's been opened. You've bought-out your local Bed, Bath and Beyond. You are the parent of a college freshman, and you have successfully negotiated the challenges of getting your son or daughter ready for the next big adventure. Sit back, put your feet up. But don't get too comfortable: More challenges lie ahead. During the coming semester, you can expect at least one "I'm having a crisis; what should I do?" phone call (*at least one*). The tough parenting choices continue. When to send cash? When to say "no"? When to listen and sympathize? When to advise and intervene? With a nod of thanks to David Letterman, the following Top Ten List is offered to help you meet the challenges of your new and exciting role as the parent of a college student. Drum roll, please...

### The Top Ten Freshman Cries for Help

#### 1. "It's really hard to make it to my 8 a.m. class!"

Time management is a skill that many adults are still learning, and it can be a real challenge during the college years. In college, class attendance may or may not factor directly into the student's grade; some professors do penalize students who repeatedly miss class. Perhaps more importantly, people can't learn the material if they're not in class. Reading a textbook or copying someone else's notes can be helpful, but the professor's expertise is what you're really paying for! Urge your student to go to bed at a reasonable hour on weekdays, and to set her alarm clock to get up an extra half-hour early. A shower or quick breakfast before that 8 a.m. class can help a person get moving. Being there is half the battle; being there *awake* is even better!

#### 2. "I couldn't find parking, so I missed my exam."

Parking is a hassle at almost every college campus. For resident freshmen this may not be an issue, since many colleges don't allow them to keep cars on campus. But for upperclassmen and commuting students, finding a place to park can be a challenge. Once again, time management is key. Advise your student to get to campus early; being there ahead of time reduces stress. It also offers an opportunity to grab a cup of coffee before class and review those notes one more time.

#### 3. "I can't stand my roommate!"

Most freshmen had their own private living space at home, so sharing a room can be a life-changing social experiment. Having a roommate is an opportunity to forge a great friendship. It's also a chance to learn and practice vital interpersonal skills like negotiation, compromise, and conflict resolution. When your child calls home saying that he can't live with his roommate one more minute, don't over-react; urge him to give it a little more time and effort. Often, college roommates become lifelong friends. However, if your student has serious concerns about a roommate's behavior (e.g. the roommate drinks alcohol, uses drugs, behaves in a threatening or abusive manner), you or your child should seek immediate assistance from the office of Residence Life or the Dean of Students.

#### 4. "There's nothing to eat in the cafeteria."

Not true! Today's campus cafeterias offer a wide variety of nutritious choices, from burgers and pizza to salad bars and full, hot meals. Students should explore their options and be proactive in meeting their personal nutritional needs. Most campus food service offices will provide, upon request, information on various offerings' calorie count, fat content, etc. And menu options are available for students with medical, religious, or cultural restrictions.

#### 5. "I didn't think I needed to buy the book for that class..."

Sometimes, when money is short, students think they can get by without purchasing the assigned book; they'll try to manage by sharing a book with a friend or borrowing a copy from the library. That way lies madness. *Students need the books to pass the class.* If cost is an issue (and textbooks can be quite expensive), remember that most college bookstores sell used, as well as new, textbooks. And there are several Web sites where discount textbooks can be purchased. Wherever your student gets her book, she needs to be sure to obtain the edition the professor has specified.

**6. "Nobody told me I had to start working on my final paper before the last week of class!"**

Early in every college course, students receive a syllabus. This document outlines the course expectations, including readings, tests, and papers—often with specific deadlines. So students know, very early on, when major projects are due. Your student should become familiar with the syllabi for his courses, keep them handy, and refer to them often. Also, urge your child to be proactive: If he's unsure when the next big test or paper is, he should *ask*. Once again, it boils down to time management; sooner or later we all have to learn that the wages of procrastination are stress and work that's less than our best.

**7. "There's nothing to do here."**

Wrong! Every college campus offers a diverse array of student clubs, social and cultural events, intramural sports, and volunteer-service opportunities. In addition, students can use their ID to get free or discounted admission to many events in the wider community. Encourage your child to get involved in campus life, especially in those early days when it's easy to fall prey to homesickness. Getting involved is a great way to make friends, and campus participation and leadership will strengthen the student's résumé.

**8. "I'm involved in so many activities that I don't have time for my school work."**

The flip-side of the previous complaint. With so many choices and only 24 hours in a day, students must learn to select and prioritize. Learning when, and how, to say "no" is an important part of becoming an adult. Advise your student to beware of over-committing. Campus activities and social life are important, but they can distract young people from keeping their eyes on the ball. Remind your student that "the ball" is academics: learning as much as possible and earning that coveted sheepskin (preferably with honors) is what college is really about.

**9. "I don't know what major to choose!"**

Don't panic if your freshman seems unsure about his future career path. It's beneficial for students to explore their options and find out where their real interests lie. Practically speaking, required courses take up much of the first two years at most colleges. But by the second semester of his sophomore year, your student should be focusing on a particular area of interest. It's important for him to get to know his academic advisor, who can help him sort out his options and stay on track to graduate in four years. Please remember that a well-rounded education is as important as the specific degree. Often, career paths are not determined by college majors.

**10. "I'm destitute and suffering like never before ....please, PLEASE send money!"**

About that new checking account—don't be overly generous. Freshmen living on campus have very few out-of-pocket expenses. After all, you've paid the room and board, tuition and fees. Most student activities are free or nominal in cost. Determine in advance with your student her monthly spending allowance. Establish limits and stick to them; learning to manage money is another important milestone on the road to adulthood. Your student may also want to consider campus employment. Most colleges offer students opportunities to work a few hours a week to earn spending money; these jobs provide good experience, and campus employers can be excellent references in the future. A final thought: Caution your child against those tempting credit-card offers. Credit cards are all too easy for college students to obtain; many students get one (or two or three) and quickly run up significant debt. OK, *now* you can sit back and relax! Armed with this list, you are on the road to success as the parent of a freshman. Just remember that all college students experience first-year jitters and the growing pains associated with increased independence and responsibility. The occasional frantic call home probably isn't an indicator of serious trouble. The best gift you can give your emerging adult is ongoing communication: listen, be supportive, expect a few bumps in the road, and encourage your student to stick it out and work it out. Sure in the knowledge of your love and support, your child will be well prepared to embrace the challenges and opportunities of the next four years. *Frank Rizzo is the dean for Student Development at Marymount University. In this position, Mr. Rizzo is responsible for the Counseling Center, the Career and Internship Center, Residence Life, Student Activities, Student Employment, International Students, Orientations, and the Student Health Center.*

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