Letting Go: Advice for Parents

Sending your child off to college is a time of transition in your family. Whether it is you first, middle, last or only, you will probably experience both the joy of launching your child into a new life and the anxiety about how well he or she will do. Will she make new friends? Will he go to class and study? Will she make good decisions and stay safe? You may experience grief at losing the daily connection with your child, and yet find it nice to be removed from the daily tensions of living with an emerging adult.

The process of letting go began in the first years of your child’s life. You were letting go when your child took her first steps and you allowed her to fall and get up to try again. You were letting go when you waved good-bye on his first day of school. You were letting go when your child first drove the car or went off for the weekend with friends. At each point, you encouraged your child’s steps toward growth and independence, yet provided the support and assistance he or she needed.

It can be especially difficult to let your child go off to college as he or she may be out of contact with you for long periods of time and have many new experiences (both good and bad), which you are not part of. Your role is the same as it has always been allow your child the freedom to learn and make his or her own mistakes but be there to provide support and guidance. In the classroom, your child may get discouraged and question his or her ability to succeed. Outside the classroom, life is chaotic, exciting and over stimulating for most college students. You may receive calls from your child complaining of stress and exhaustion or about roommate and relationship or loneliness.

Dos and don’ts of interacting with college age children:

• Do listen, listen and listen some more
• Do ask them to describe what they’re doing.
• Don’t lecture or constantly bring up issues you’re worried about.
• Do show that you have faith in them.
• Do acknowledge that what they are dealing with is difficult.
• Do help them problem-solve about options.
• Don’t tell them what to do.
• Do help them figure out where to go for help and how to access campus resources.
• Do keep in touch.
• Do keep them informed of changes at home. Don’t keep them in the dark.
• Do schedule a planned visit to campus, but don’t expect their undivided attention when you’re here.

“For parents, the freedom freshman enjoy can be hard to accept. So can recognizing how little you can now appropriately and directly do to shape the daily round of your son’s or daughter’s experiences or his or her lifestyle choices, curricular or career plans…a young person is setting out on his or her own life’s course. Don’t try to hold the course you set and have been sailing together for seventeen years. It is very hard to sail a ship with two pilots. Come along, by all means. But keep in mind that it is a new voyage, someone else’s voyage. This way college can be the shares and happy embarkation it ought to be…”

Harvard Parents’ Handbook
Need Additional Help?

North Idaho College counseling services offer free group and individual counseling/psychotherapy for these and related issues for NIC students. For more information or to schedule an appointment, stop by Student Health & Counseling Services (2nd floor of SUB) or call 769-7818. All appointments are strictly confidential.