

## **Supporting Your First Year Student**

All parents, dropping their son or daughter off for the first year of college understandably have mixed emotions. One of the most common emotions, that all parents share, is an anxious concern. For the parents of students with diagnosed learning disabilities, the usual worries are compounded by an additional set. “How will my son or daughter cope with the new work load?” “Will he or she get the accommodations that have been essential in high school?” “Will he or she even ask for those accommodations?” “What if they aren’t sufficient?” “What if the work piles up too quickly and doesn’t get done?” “What if no one is there to help or notice?” After years of finding learning specialists, tutors and therapists and then arranging for their services as well as monitoring the effectiveness of their efforts, parents of students with learning disabilities know how much extra time, planning and effort have gone into their son or daughter’s academic success and subsequent college admission. Now, it is time for the parents to step back from their active and essential role. But, how far back? How can they be confident that their son or daughter will be able to succeed without their efforts? Parents approach this moment with a mixture of pride, hope, and nagging uncertainty. While no strategy will work for all families, here are some general guidelines that can help you make this transition smoother and more successful for first-year college student and you.

Build a Safety Net. Most students who have submitted or will submit evaluations to the Office of Disability Services will have benefited from a support network of practical accommodations that make schoolwork manageable. The accommodations offered at Oberlin might not be identical to those offered to your student in high school. Regardless, your son or daughter is now responsible for sharing evaluations, discussing action plans, and learning the strategies for talking to professors as well as requesting necessary accommodations. Parents can help their first-year student by encouraging the student to go through all the steps in building a safety net. Help your son or daughter make a sensible plan and find out who on campus will be able to help with implementation. Before driving off, make sure relevant documents are in the Office of Disability Services. Make sure that your son or daughter has the name and contact information for the adults or fellow students who will help by taking on some of the roles that you have fulfilled for so many years. Those people can’t replace you, but they can help your first-year student flourish academically in your physical absence.

Make a Parent-Student Agreement. When your son or daughter lived at home, you had frequent opportunities to find out how well the safety net was working. Grades were sent home. Mid-term reports signaled the need for maintaining or adjusting plans. A quick glance at your son or daughter each day answered the unspoken “How are you doing?” Now for the first time, these sources of useful and often reassuring information will not be there. Oberlin will not be sending grades home, similarly mid-term reports will not be offered and, unless you Skype, a quick glance will not tell you how much sleep your son or daughter is getting. All the information now has to come from your son or daughter directly. While you cannot expect a

first-year student to understand the depth of your concern, you can have a clearly spoken agreement about how often you will call, text or Skype and who will initiate the activity. It is best to talk about this to the point where you and your first year student can both agree on how much contact you will have during the first semester. Every family will have a different comfort level, but it is still important to negotiate until everyone can live with the plan.

A Word of Advice to First-Year Students: The excitement of the first-year experience can be intense and exhilarating. Every aspect of your day is filled with new events – new living arrangements, new dining experiences, certainly new sleeping (or not sleeping) patterns and the constant presence of so many similarly excited people your own age. You will have no one to remind you to slow down, to go to sleep or to come home from a party. With all the novelty, it is easy to forget the promises you made to your parents when they dropped you off for first-year orientation. It is certainly easy to imagine that they are just where you left them, at home, doing all their usual things and maybe even feeling as energized as you feel. But that is probably not true. Why does this matter to you? You might think, “They are adults, right? They can deal with this.” But the more you leave your parents to worry, the more they are likely to take action to ease their worries. Maybe they will try to contact your resident advisor, your roommate, your coach or the people in the Office of Disability Services. Or maybe they will just keep their worries to themselves and grow frustrated and angry at you for causing them such pain. No matter what they decide to do, this will not turn out well for you or for them. So, make that agreement with your parents about how often you will call, text or Skype and then stick to it. The more reliably you honor your agreement to contact your parents, the better they will feel and the more likely they will be to trust you (and trust the success of their parenting.) Return their calls or emails.

Following Through: Parents, you have tried to set up a safety net, you have made an agreement about frequency of contact and now you have returned to your possibly quieter home. But what do you do when you feel anxious or when you have not heard from your son or daughter at the agreed upon time? What do you do when you worry about whether they are coping? Or worse, what do you do when you get an unhappy or panicky call and you feel unbearably far away, unable to help? Resist the urge to call the roommate, coach, teammate or student you met at the student support services meeting. Realize that no one will give you a report on test grades, mid-semester averages or sleeping patterns. Do ask your son or daughter if they have spoken with anyone at the Office of Disability Services. Ask them if they have talked to their professors. Encourage them to reach out to the people at Oberlin who are here to help them. Ask them to tell you if and when they have met with the members of their personal safety net. While you do not need to know the content of those meetings or discussions, you certainly can ask for the reassurance that they have happened.

Following Through: Students, if you and your parents have agreed that you will go to the Office of Disability Services, or that you will meet with another professional, then do let your parents know when you have gone to those meetings. If you have obtained accommodations and are finding them helpful, let your parents know that. Don't just call with bad news! Make sure to tell your parents what is working well. In short, give your parents the information they need so that they can see that you are using the safety net that has been provided and that you know how to seek out and use additional help when you find that you need it. Let them know you are learning how to handle yourself as a young adult, that you are taking responsibility for your welfare as you step into your adult years.

A Last Word. This first semester can feel like an enormous shift in your family relationships. With some pre-planning and thoughtful agreements, parents and students can make this transition smoother and, ultimately, more successful for everyone.

Julia B. Osborn, PhD, ABSNP  
Mother of an OC senior