

RANDOLPH-MACON WOMAN'S COLLEGE

November 2006

Seasonal Student Issues

There's a seasonal ebb and flow when it comes to student issues. Here are a few things your student may be experiencing this month:

- ➔ Roommate problems and floor tension
- ➔ Academic pressures due to procrastination, workload and lack of ability
- ➔ Burnout
- ➔ Not feeling like they have the stamina to keep up the pace through finals
- ➔ Job search stress for holiday break
- ➔ Problems from increased alcohol consumption
- ➔ Lack of initiative to find new friends or activities because it seems social groups are already set up
- ➔ Concerns about going home at Thanksgiving time—whether it's concern about seeing changes among old friends, how things will be with family members or dealing with a romantic relationship

Empty Nest Syndrome

What is this thing they call “empty nest syndrome”? And are you suffering from it, now that your student has been away for awhile?

According to *Psychology Today*, empty nest syndrome refers to “feelings of depression, sadness, and/or grief experienced by parents and caregivers, after children come of age and leave their childhood homes.” Many parents of college students go through it in one shape or form.

What It Looks Like

This syndrome manifests itself in various ways. They include:

- Feelings of sadness
- Spending time in your student's empty bedroom as a way to feel close again
- Having more free time and energy
- Figuring out the family dynamic without your student in the everyday mix
- Adjusting to a more peerlike relationship with your student

Sometimes, an empty nest hits hard, causing overwhelming sadness, excessive crying and feeling that your useful life has ended. If that's the case, it may



Empty Nest Syndrome: How Will it Affect You?

Here's a simple quiz to gauge how the empty nest is impacting you:

<http://quiz.ivillage.com/parenting/tests/nest.htm>

be time to talk with someone and possibly get professional assistance.

Another compounding factor in this whole equation, particularly for women, is that, at the same time their student is leaving for college, they may be going through menopause and caring for elderly parents who increasingly rely on them. While studies show no increase in depressive illness among this population, that *is* a lot to handle. Treat yourself well during this time of transition.

A Deeper Relationship

The “empty nest” that first came to national prominence in the 1970s has changed with the times. Being in touch with your student at college, via various technological means, helps with the transition. One researcher, Karen L. Fingerman, PhD, a professor at Purdue University (IN) and author of *Mothers and Their Adult Daughters: Mixed Emotions, Enduring Bonds* (Prometheus Books, 2002), says that

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Handling Challenges with Professors

One conflict that may arise during a student's college career is a conflict with a professor. These conflicts often result because of the following issues:

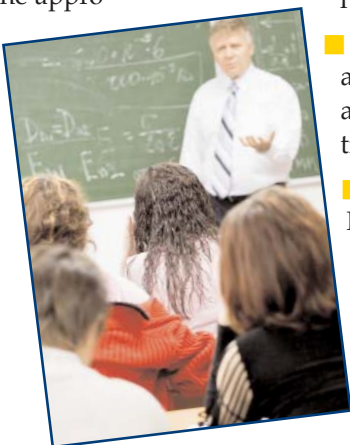
- The professor impedes class participation by making students feel uncomfortable asking or answering questions because of his/her response to inquiries and ideas.
- The professor is unresponsive to communication attempts, such as requests to meet outside of class time, emails asking for help or questions asked in class.
- The professor does not accept any excuses for missing class/deadlines, even in extreme circumstances.
- The professor provides inconsistent expectations, such as changing requirements/deadlines related to quizzes or assignments with little or no notice or setting different expectations depending on the student.

5 Steps Students Can Take

If your student complains about problems with a professor, encourage him/her to do the following:

1 Talk with other students.

- Tap into the RA, if living on campus. RAs are able to direct students to the appropriate folks for help and offer advice on how to proceed.
- Other students in the class might be feeling similarly. Suggest that



your student talk with others to gauge their thoughts. She may be able to work with them to deal with the concerns and talk with the professor.

2 Meet with the professor individually.

- Schedule a time to meet with the professor to address concerns. It might be best to ask for a meeting time outside of scheduled office hours, so other students are not waiting for the professor's time.
- Bring a list of concerns and feedback to the meeting. Try to frame criticism constructively rather than just complaining or blaming the professor.
- Give the professor a chance to respond to concerns. After all, understanding is a two-way street.
- Talk with a friend, RA or Resident Director before the meeting for help in framing the conversation. These people can help your student elaborate and clarify points.

3 Talk with his/her advisor.

- Remember that an advisor's role is to advise students on all aspects of their college career—conflicts with professors are no exception. Advisors currently are or have been professors, so they can help your student in crafting his conversation points.
- Try to remain constructive and respectful when putting an advisor in the position of potentially criticizing a colleague.
- Enlist the advisor's help. Keep in mind that if a situation warrants the notification or involvement of a department chair, an advisor will be able to navigate the political scene more effectively than your student.

4 Meet with the Department Chair.

- If the issue your student is having is of a personal nature, or if he is uncomfortable addressing the professor directly, the department chair can serve as a neutral source of assistance.
- Think about what the goal is for the meeting before attending. A department chair is not likely to agree to fire a professor. But, he/she may be able to clarify the department's expectations for assignments or speak with the professor directly about concerns.

5 Meet with the Dean of Faculty or Vice President for Academic Affairs.

- Use campus resources. The worst thing your student can do is nothing. If your student is not getting the needed help or is not being heard, suggest that she try to meet with a higher-level administrator. If the professor is the chair of the department, your student may need to schedule a meeting at this level anyway.
- Be prepared for the meeting. Wasting a dean's time is definitely not a good idea. Bring documentation of concerns and any proof, if applicable.

Overall, students should not be afraid to voice concerns or to ask for help. If something does not feel right, it probably isn't. College is about learning. If a professor is being unreasonably difficult or unprofessional, your student's ability to learn will be compromised. There are plenty of folks on campus who are willing to help your student. All he or she needs to do is ask.



A Family Thanksgiving without a Fumble

Families often fumble a little during the Thanksgiving holiday, as many times it is the first or second time your college student has returned home since leaving in August. Put your game strategy in place to help ensure a winning weekend for all.

Make Sure Your Student Has a Space.

It's common for rearranging to take place once a student has departed for college. Has your college student lost his bedroom? If so, make sure you prepare a space for him to sleep and store belongings, prior to coming home. This way, your student won't feel put out by or a burden on you.

Talk With Your Student About Lifestyle Changes.

Rather than waiting until your student comes home, talk beforehand. It's quite likely that your student's sleeping, eating, dressing and thinking patterns have changed during the last couple of months. Try to avoid surprises by discussing these new habits and perspectives ahead of time.

Try Not to Plan Too Much Ahead.

While it's likely that you will have a scheduled family gathering for the holiday, try not to plan beyond that—at least not without your student's consent. You will appreciate the quiet time together as a family and your student may want to organize gatherings with friends on her own, too.

Prepare Siblings for Your Student's Return Home.

If you have other children, they will be anticipating your student's arrival, too. Remind them that your student will be very excited to see

them, but also will have a lot to do while he is home. This will help alleviate disappointment if there is not enough time for extensive one-on-one interaction.

Review and Renegotiate Expectations Together.

Even though your student's habits and behaviors may have changed, your expectations of her may still be the same. Keep in mind that your student has operated independently over the last months. Hopefully, she is more adept at making decisions.



Take a Commercial Break!

Reconnect with your student by...

- ▲ planning a family game night—pull out the old board games or play a little Texas Hold'em
- ▲ going to a coffee shop
- ▲ sharing photos from the last couple of months
- ▲ attending a local high school event
- ▲ staying up late one night chatting
- ▲ cooking a Sunday brunch

Make a point to talk with your student about expectations such as curfew, assisting with chores around the house, interacting with family members and more. Being proactive about this will help alleviate tense situations. If you are willing to adapt your expectations, let your student know this, too.

Communicating your “plays” effectively is certain to score you a touchdown this Thanksgiving!

New Thanksgiving Traditions

To usher in this new era of your family's life, why not incorporate a new tradition? Some possibilities include:

- ▲ Bake cookies together the night before your student goes back to college so he can share them with friends back on campus
- ▲ Take a Flannel Family Photo where you all wear flannel shirts or pajamas and strike a wacky pose!
- ▲ Instead of shopping on the day after Thanksgiving, work as a family to create a holiday package for a local family in need
- ▲ Address all the holiday cards while sitting around, listening to seasonal music and noshing on eggnog
- ▲ Encourage siblings to stuff notes in your college student's luggage so she finds them when she returns to campus

It's never too late to start a new tradition!



Raising Awareness, One Week at a Time

Awareness weeks are educational programming tools used on many campuses to, well, raise awareness regarding a variety of topics. Some important ones are coming up in this next month or so. Here's a sampling so you can raise your own awareness, too. This should give you and your student some interesting things to talk about!

National Hunger & Homelessness Awareness Week • (Nov. 12-18, 2006)

The National Coalition for the Homeless and the National Student Campaign Against Hunger and Homelessness sponsor this awareness week each year, one week before Thanksgiving, to help the public become more aware of these issues. For an interesting first person perspective, link to www.nationalhomeless.org/panhandle.html to read "Panhandling: A Little Understanding."

For more info, go to: www.nationalhomeless.org/getinvolved/projects/awareness/index.html.

World Kindness Week • (Nov. 13-19, 2006)

The Random Acts of Kindness Foundation encourages people to practice kindness and to "pass it on" to others. This awareness week celebrates community and individual acts of kindness.

For more info, go to: www.actsofkindness.org.

National Game & Puzzle Week • (Nov. 19-26, 2006)

This one is more for fun! Do some sudoku puzzles or play board games with your student when he/she returns for Thanksgiving. Get other siblings involved, too!

For more info, go to: www.crayola.com/calendar/detail.cfm?event_id=166&year=2006

National Family Week • (Nov. 19-25, 2006)

The premise behind this week is that children live better lives when their families are strong and families are strong when they are connected to things like accessible health care, applicable education, affordable housing and more in the community.

For more info, go to: www.nationalfamilyweek.org/

National Family Health History Day • Nov. 23, 2006

Have you talked about family health issues with your student? Well, Thanksgiving Day has been designated as a day for families to sit down and talk about their health history. To help in that pursuit, the U.S. Office of the Surgeon General has created a web-based tool called "My Family Health Portrait." It helps users organize family history information and print it out for doctors. You can also share family history info via computer with other family members.

It's free and can help families predict health disorders that may have moved down the generational line. This Thanksgiving, why not give one another the gift of health awareness?

Source: www.hhs.gov/familyhistory

Empty Nest

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the parent/child relationship often improves when the student leaves home.

"People may worry about losing their child when the child leaves home," Fingerman says. "In fact, they're not. They're going to have a more mature, more emotionally meaningful and deeper relationship with them to look forward to."

Enjoying Your Nest

So, enjoy the extra time and energy that comes along with an empty nest! Dig into hobbies that you've been pushing to the back burner. Consider different career possibilities. Spend time on leisure activities without feeling guilty.

Your student may be gone—for now—yet he will always be part of your life. Create a welcoming "nest" for him to return to during breaks and stay in touch while you're apart. Those empty feelings will soon fade as you both focus on developing your new adult relationship.

Sources: "Empty Nest Syndrome," *Psychology Today* online, <http://www.psychologytoday.com/conditions/emptynest.html>; "An empty nest can promote freedom, improved relationships," APA Online, April 2003

"Feelings of worth can flourish in an atmosphere where individual differences are appreciated, mistakes are tolerated, communication is open, and rules are flexible—the kind of atmosphere that is found in a nurturing family."

~ Virginia Satir