

Student Concerns

Parents as coaches

By Sonny Wong with Elena Pizzamiglio

At the beginning of every school year, many universities provide information to guide new university students through their transition from high school to university. However, this transition is a process rather than just a point of entry. Students' academic careers have several stages. Throughout their university years, there are challenges students have to face and decisions they have to make in order to prepare for successful graduation and integration into the workforce or for the acquisition of additional education. This article is for parents of university students.

As career counsellors, we have some ideas on approaches that parents may want to take in order to assist their children to make smooth transitions from one academic year to the next. There are three common scenarios that many university career counsellors encounter when working with students. With each scenario we ask parents to consider a coaching approach which will help their child-student find his way through his problems to a meaningful educational experience.

Scenario 1: Your child tells you that she does not want to be in a business management program; she would rather pursue an arts degree.

Many students come to the career counselling centre seeking advice because even though they may have high grades in their professional program, such as engineering or business, they would rather pursue a program in the social sciences or the humanities such as sociology or history.

As career counsellors, we explore with students their personal and professional interests, their values, their personality etc. in order to assess if they are in the program for which they are best suited. If a student's preference is not the one suggested or approved by the parents, there can be disappointment on both sides.

Therefore, in conjunction with counsellors, you as a parent can ask yourself the following questions:

- What is my child telling me?**

- **Am I concerned with what my child is going to be able to do upon graduation with his degree?**
- **Does my child not want to follow in my footsteps?**
- **What is best for my child?**

After some reflection, work collaboratively and communicate openly with your son or daughter in order to choose a new program of study, if that seems to be the route to go. Remember when coaching your child through this decision-making process, it is often not what you say, it is how you choose to deliver your insights that will be helpful or not. Many students have reported that they know their parents are right, but they don't like the way the parents talk to them.

Scenario 2: Your child performed well academically in his first and second year, but in third year, there is a significant drop in grades.

Students frequently come to us with this problem. Sometimes it is a matter of referring them to workshops on note-taking, time management, procrastination etc. However, for others, their grades are symptoms of other underlying issues, which are causing poor concentration or lack of motivation. We sometimes discover that they are depressed, have an eating disorder, or are experiencing other serious health issues. We make referrals and connect students to the relevant services.

As parents, you can help your child by becoming acquainted with the university's non-academic services through browsing the university website. As well, remember that all of us at some point or another can experience unexpected challenges resulting in depression or other mental health issues, but they can be, and should be, addressed as openly as physical health issues. In some cultures talking publicly about personal or family problems is shameful. However, in North American culture, seeking help is considered sensible and a way of improving oneself and therefore making the families stronger now and for future generations.

Scenario 3: Your child approaches you to discuss leaving university to go to community college.

Many students have told us that they never wanted to go to university; they wanted to go to a community college in order to be practically trained for their careers. They say that they enrolled in university to satisfy their parents' expectations. They want to know if

is better to complete a university degree or a community college diploma. By graduating with a diploma instead of a degree, are they limiting their future financial success or their chances of having a meaningful career?

We highlight for them the recent changes that universities and colleges have made to meet labour market demands. Many colleges now offer bridges to university degree programs; for example, students can study at a college for two years and have the option of attending a recognized university for two or three more years to earn a university degree. As well, there are many collaborative programs by colleges and universities which attest to the fact that both types of educational experiences (a more practical and a more theoretical one) are fully valid. Lastly, it is noteworthy that a fair number of students attend a college program subsequent to completing a university degree.

As parents, you can discuss with your child these new options and assist her in finding a program which incorporates both types of education and her learning style. It is through an open, collaborative approach to this new situation that both you and your child can reach a satisfactory solution.

The role of education in our society is changing, and to meet the unique needs of our students—your children—many universities provide learning tools and services for them; we have mentioned a few. To ensure your children's success, we suggest, once again, that you use open communication and a coaching approach, both of which allow your children to exercise their decision making skills and develop their independence while working cooperatively with you.

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