You have been working hard with your daughter or son all through school so she or he could reach this point. Congratulations! They made it! You have been successful. Now it’s time for you to shift gears a bit, slide over, and let them do the driving.

You may have been very involved with every aspect of your daughter’s schooling up to now. You may even have been instrumental in your son’s choice of university and program of study. However, this is the point where that inevitably starts to change and your role starts to lessen, as your sons and daughters take more and more independent control over their studies, their academic business, and their direction in life. This is normal: the University expects it of them, and our upper-year students think it the obvious way things should be. This doesn’t mean there is no role for you in this new situation, but it does mean you need to think about how your role will be different. As I always tell the students, it is better to think through these things and discuss them in advance when the situation is calm, than to try to discuss them calmly when problems have arisen or reached a crisis point.

As a Registrar, I have two suggestions on your new role as the parent of a university student. First, be supportive. Second, inform yourself so you can be appropriately supportive. I don’t necessarily mean finding out about all the minute details of course enrolment and deadlines. That is your son or daughter’s responsibility. I mean informing yourself about university life in general so you can offer encouragement at useful times. If you have not gone to university yourself, our workings, expectations and routines may appear very strange to you. If you have been to university, note that things may be quite different now than when you were at university.

I’ve added this Advice sheet to the series I prepare for UC’s First-Year students because I know that many parents have the same questions about university as their sons and daughters:
- Will they meet people, fit in, and get along?
- What are the academic expectations?
- What will the experience be like?
- What should I do if problems arise?

Yes, they will meet lots of people and make friends for life, likely people even more diverse than their previous friends. They will be sharing an interesting and sometimes intense experience with these new friends. This will likely draw them together and away from those who have not shared this experience. This includes their former friends, and probably you too. Not to worry – this is just part of what you expected when you thought about your child becoming an adult. If you notice that your son or daughter is having a difficult time finding a congenial place in the social world of university, you can make the same suggestion we make: get involved in something outside the classroom. Encourage them to join a student group, play on an intramural team, get involved in an activity that connects them to what they are studying. They (or you) may be concerned that this will take away from valuable study time. We find, on the contrary, that students who have some balance in their lives, who feel they know people and fit in on campus, do better at their studies because their overall morale improves.

The academic expectations we put on our students at the University of Toronto are very high. They are going to a demanding university offering an excellent education, one worthy of your daughter’s or son’s talent and preparation. We expect them to work hard, learn independently, meet deadlines without reminders, and seek help when they need it. We present them with very challenging concepts and a large volume of material to absorb. Not everything will be easy. Remember that they will have peak periods when they have to perform. Try not to make heavy demands on them or load on the family problems at those times. They need all their energy
and concentration to rise to their instructors’ expectations, their own self-expectations, and probably your expectations too. At times in every academic year (and usually at predictable peak points in the term) your son or daughter may appear preoccupied, exhausted, or even discouraged. This is part of the normal variation in a student’s life. However, if this persists, talk with them about it, and please refer them to some of the wonderful support services we have to help students. You can always urge that they contact us, the UC Registrar’s office. There’s lots of help available from people who know exactly what students are going through, but the student needs to come forward to access it.

Your son or daughter will discover hidden strengths at university, but they may also have some setbacks. The work can be very challenging, and even if they have been able to meet every challenge in the past, they may find challenges here that were designed for a few exceptional students or certain students with specific aptitudes. Learning where your strengths and weaknesses lie is part of what students learn in university. By all means, encourage them to work hard, ask for help, have hope and follow their interests and abilities. But please don’t give them the “You can do anything if you just try!” speech at this stage. They may run up against the fact that not all talents are equally distributed, nor does each student have the ability for all things. Urge them to find what they are good at, and then to give that their best, and to seek advice and support on campus.

Most students find that their interests and goals change from what they originally had in mind – or what you had in mind for them. Expect this. It too is part of learning. Students’ horizons are opening up before them; they are discovering new subjects and talents they’ve never known about before. They may not be destined for medicine or law, but that’s fine: most people are not doctors or lawyers. There are many other productive things to do. Stay supportive. If you are a bit disappointed, they are probably more so and need your support more than ever. Try to keep in mind that rewarding careers come about in unexpected ways. Think about your own careers or those of people you know, and how unpredictable such an endpoint would have been at your son or daughter’s age. Supporting your son or daughter in their self-discovery is a critical part of your continuing role while they are at university. You may be pleasantly surprised at how well they handle things.

In general, a student’s experience at university will be rewarding, even if sometimes exhausting. It may feel very different at first and will require some adjustment, but they will warm up to it and do fine. It will be intensely demanding at times, more so than high school ever was. Like any strenuous activity, it may produce aches and bruises, but they will grow doing it. Again, stay supportive.

I know you expect to hear from your daughter or son about how university is going. You may also expect to hear from us about their progress or problems. As Registrar, I have to tell you that this will not happen. There is almost no circumstance under which we would contact a parent. The University’s policy on confidentiality does not permit this. Officials and instructors will treat them as adults. You may see this approach officially when you call up someone here on their behalf. We will ask you to have them contact us directly, as we must deal with students and not with their parents. We expect them to shoulder adult responsibilities, do the things they should, handle problems themselves, and ask for help when they need it. If you ask our upper-year students, they wouldn’t have it any other way.

University is an adult world. Your daughter or son is now an adult. Students will get the most out of this experience if they approach it with an adult mentality, taking charge of their own education and doing it for their own reasons. You have prepared them well for this next stage, and so it is time to let them do it (even if you may still be paying the bills, doing the laundry or cooking the meals). You may have been working as a team of two or three so far; you may have been intensely involved in their education, sports, friends, and other activities. And they may still be relying on you implicitly to do many things for them. But they are in a different place now. It is time for them to be the player and you to be the supporter. Have the conversation with them. Discuss how they are now the ones responsible for their own university business. If you can’t think of an opening topic for this discussion, you can always start by talking over the finances –that’s certainly an
adult topic! Who pays for what, and who does what. Even if you are helping with the costs, make sure they understand that they are the ones responsible for making sure the business gets done.

This is what you prepared them for, and it starts now.

Good luck.

Glenn Loney, Registrar
University College, 1983-2006

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