

## **A Guide for Parents of First Year Students**

Congratulations! Your daughter or son is now a University of Michigan student. This developmental period of young adulthood will be a significant transition time both for your student and for you as parents.

For your daughter or son this will be a time of intellectual growth and exploration, making decisions and plans for the future, developing increased autonomy, developing a greater sense of identity, and clarifying values and beliefs. The process of clarifying values and beliefs will require an examination of self, of family and friends, of the many values and beliefs that are shared with you, and of those that are different. Part of the growing process means that your student will go through periods of questioning that sometimes will mean questioning those values that are important to you.

Sending a daughter or son off to the University of Michigan is also a new stage of life for YOU, the parent. Whether this is your first child or your last child to leave home, this time requires an adjustment for you as well as for your daughter or son. It is a time of "letting go." Your role as a parent is to understand and accept that these changes are part of the process of your daughter or son becoming adults. The relationship between you and your daughter or son will change some as they meet the challenges of developing autonomy and creating a life of his or her own. This is the major developmental task of young adulthood.

This transition, while exciting, can at times be a trying experience for everyone. As parents you may have fears and concerns that are quite normal. You may fear that the cultural and family values you have worked hard to instill in your student may be lost or diluted. You may fear "losing" the relationship you have had with your daughter or son as they become increasingly autonomous. You may wonder if they really can take care of themselves and have enough knowledge and will be responsible when faced with making decisions about alcohol, drugs, or sex.

You might also wonder how your child will make sense of the new experiences he or she encounters and how can he or she deal with them in a productive, positive way? We all make sense of the world through the lens of our life experiences, our family values and history, and our cultural and ethnic identity. It may be helpful to understand that your daughter or son's response to this new situation is the culmination of a lifetime of responses to other situations. All the learning they have received from you up to now is a part of who they are; it is a part of what they bring to any new situation. Of course, they will need time to adjust to the new situation, need time for "trial and error", for exploration and experimentation. You may notice new clothes, music, ideas or beliefs. You may notice that they are forging a new identity, questioning and challenging old values and beliefs, keeping many, yet taking on new ones. Much in the same way they might try on new clothes, looking for the best fit, they may "try on" some new ideas or perspectives. As parents, you may be in the best position to help them through this period of adjustment and change.

## **What can you do to help?**

1. Support their growing sense of autonomy and offer guidance.
2. Communicate regularly and with loving support. How openly do you and your daughter or son discuss feelings, concerns, and differences in opinions?
3. Listen. Get to know their reactions to their new world. Their reactions are not the same as yours. Your daughter or son is not you and may have different needs, likes, skills and desires than you have.
4. When you problem-solve with them, encourage him or her to take an active and equal role in the problem-solving process. It would be best not to immediately tell them how to resolve a problem. Instead, ask them "What ideas do you have? What do you think will work best for this situation?" Teaching them how to problem-solve will contribute to their own sense of competence and self-reliance that will be important skills to have as they go through life.
5. Expect that your student will make many changes during his or her academic study. The average college student changes academic majors four different times. It is common that many university students are not able to graduate within four years.
6. Expect there will be changes in your relationship with your child. Change is inevitable. It is best to understand this and to facilitate positive changes within the relationship rather than attempt to prevent change from occurring.
7. There may be some conflict, but the relationship you have created over the past 17-18 years are very much a part of him or her and will always be there.
8. Be alert to signs of unresolved stress in your child. Experiencing some stress when entering a new situation is quite normal. You can reassure your child of this.

If, however, the stress persists over time and you believe that it is interfering with their daily lives, encourage them to talk to a professional counselor in a safe, confidential environment at the Counseling and Psychological Services office on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor of the Michigan Union.

Times of transition are exciting yet difficult. Please give yourself and your child the gift of patience as you all begin this new journey.