

Making the Transition

A FAMILY/SUPPORTERS GUIDE
TO THE FIRST YEAR OF UNIVERSITY



“It is nice to know there are people on campus to help my daughter if she needs it.”



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INTRODUCTION

CONGRATULATIONS!

If you have reason to be reading this booklet, chances are that your family member is preparing to embark on a new and exciting stage of life – university. The transition to university can be an exhilarating yet anxious time for the first-year student. As supporters, you play a vital role in helping your family member adjust to a new environment and the increased freedom and responsibility that comes with it. At the same time, you will no doubt be experiencing some mixed emotions of your own ranging from pride and excitement to worry and “empty nest” syndrome.

This booklet discusses some of the changes and challenges that you may experience and offers some tips on how to support your first-year student as they join the Saint Mary's community.

Please remember: There are many people on campus who are happy to help and answer any question you may have. A list of key resources and telephone numbers is located on page 16 of this booklet. Do not hesitate to contact them.



ADJUSTING TO UNIVERSITY

THE TYPICAL STUDENT TRANSITIONS

The transition from high school to university is filled with change. While every student is different and some may adapt more easily than others, virtually all first-year students will require a period of adjustment in the following areas:



1. NEW ENVIRONMENT

Saint Mary's has more than 7,400 full and part-time students. Many first-year students feel overwhelmed by the size of the campus and the fact that they may not see a familiar face from home everyday. Students also have to adjust to lecture-style instruction as compared to traditional classroom instruction. Even the fact that they don't have to raise their hand to ask permission to leave during class or that university does not have bells to signal the beginning and end of lectures is a huge difference from high school.

2. CHANGES IN CLASS SIZE

Large classes can be intimidating, especially for students who have attended small high schools. While Saint Mary's makes every effort to keep classes small, some first-year classes can have more than 90 students. Even the most outgoing new student can feel lost and overwhelmed in such a big group. Class sizes tend to get smaller as students progress in their degree program.

3. TIME MANAGEMENT/LEARNING STRATEGIES

The demands of university require that students must spend more time on their academics than they did in high school, even if "homework" is not given. In addition to lecture time, students have to keep up-to-date on readings, assignments, tutorials and lab work. As a general rule, students should spend four hours in outside study for every hour that is spent in the classroom. Some students didn't learn success strategies in high school and consequently, never learned an effective approach to their academics. While these students may have done very well in high school, this probably won't be the case at university due to the dense course material and short semesters.

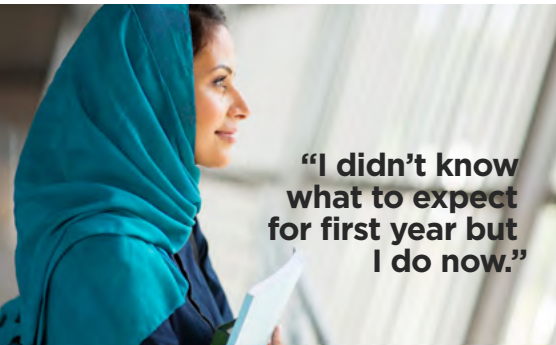
Financial pressures also mean that a large percentage of our students hold part-time jobs during the academic year. Add to this all of the exciting opportunities that the university offers for extracurricular activities, as well as the demands of a social life, and it's easy to understand why so many first-year students have difficulty achieving a balance. The first year is about learning to find this individualized balance through effective time management.

ADJUSTING TO UNIVERSITY

THE TYPICAL STUDENT TRANSITIONS

4. INCREASED FREEDOM AND FLEXIBILITY COMBINED WITH INCREASED RESPONSIBILITY

First-year students usually welcome the freedom and flexibility that the university environment provides, but are often unprepared for the personal responsibility that comes with it. In addition to making choices about when and how to study and participate in extracurricular activities, many students find that they must take on a number of personal responsibilities for the first time in their lives. These include budgeting, buying personal items, and making appointments to take care of health needs. Coupled with the fact that attendance is not usually taken in class and professors do not hound students if assignments are not turned in on time, it is easy to see how first-year students can encounter problems if they do not take personal responsibility for all aspects of their lives.



**“I didn’t know
what to expect
for first year but
I do now.”**

5. CHANGE IN SOCIAL SUPPORT SYSTEMS

It is not uncommon for first-year students to know very few people when they arrive at university. Even students whose friends do come to the same university usually find that few if any of these friends end up in their classes. Making new friends can be difficult at first and students may feel isolated and alone until they are able to do so. That is why we encourage students to attend Welcome Week events.

Many first-year students – especially those who are away from home – also experience a change in their pre-existing relationships after a few months at university. While some students develop a greater appreciation for their friends from home and make an extra effort to stay connected, others feel that they no longer have as much in common with their high school friends and find that the friendships have waned.

6. STRUGGLE WITH INDEPENDENCE AND IDENTITY

By the age of 17 or 18, young adults begin dealing with the challenges involved in becoming independent and autonomous. At this time in their lives, they are defining their own identities, challenging existing values and beliefs, and adopting those that work for them. This process of separation and self-discovery can be very difficult for both young adults and their family members/supporters.

SAINT MARY'S IS HERE TO HELP

Saint Mary's University offers a variety of programs and services to help first-year students make the transition to university more easily. For more information about any of these resources, please contact Student Services at 902-420-5761.

1. CAREER SERVICES

First year is a great time to begin thinking about selecting a major, identifying interests, values, skills and making a career decision. Saint Mary's Career Counsellors help students with this process through the use of self-assessments, individual and group counselling. Students are encouraged to visit the Career Development Centre for assistance with resume writing and interview skills.

2. WELCOME WEEK

Saint Mary's strongly encourages all first-year students to attend Welcome Week activities such as Student Services Welcome Day (July) and Welcome Week (September). In addition to providing a great overview of university life, these activities provide an opportunity for students to ask questions, meet faculty and staff, get to know each other, and make new friends. Attendance at Welcome Week activities also helps alleviate some of the anxiety that new students experience.

3. THE COUNSELLING CENTRE

Saint Mary's team of professional Psychologists/Clinical Therapists provide assistance, support and counselling with respect to depression, anxiety, relationships, emotional wellness, and self-esteem issues among others. The Counselling Centre also offers Academic & Life Skills Coaching which includes help with stress management, time management, goal-setting, overcoming exam anxiety and much more. All counselling sessions are kept strictly confidential and are free of charge.



SAINT MARY'S IS HERE TO HELP

4. STUDENT SERVICES

Comprised of professionals from areas such as International, Chaplaincy and Student Health, Student Services staff offer a variety of programs to ease the adjustment to university life.

5. CENTRE FOR HOUSING AND RESIDENCE LIFE

Residence staff – along with trained student staff (Residence Assistants) – offer support, information and educational programming to assist first-year students in their personal growth while living in residence.

6. CENTRE FOR NEW STUDENTS

Based out of the Recruitment Office, the Centre Staff (who are students themselves) are available to help with resources on campus and referrals.

7. ACADEMIC ADVISORS

Each Faculty (Arts, Science, and the Sobey School of Business) has their own Advisor. Advisors will help students with course selection and program planning.

8. FRED SMITHERS CENTRE

Support is provided through the Centre to students with disabilities. Note-taking, advocacy support, and exam accommodation are some of the services provided.



A NOTE ON MENTAL HEALTH

It is important to be aware that students can develop mental health concerns such as anxiety and depression while studying at university. Traditionally aged students (17-24) are in the age range when these concerns can present for the first time. Saint Mary's has a number of services that can help students manage some of these mental health issues - all are offered free to our students. These include the following:

1. THE COUNSELLING CENTRE

Students can meet with a Psychologist/Clinical Therapist to develop coping strategies to help with their mental health concerns in order to reach their academic potential.

2. PEER SUPPORTERS

Students with lived mental health concerns are trained to provide on-campus support to other students around stress, coping strategies, and relationship issues.

3. HEALTHY MINDS TEAM

Comprised of student volunteers who help raise awareness of mental health issues, encourage well-being on campus, organize events that promote psychological health, and work towards reducing the stigma that can be linked to mental health concerns.

4. STUDENT HEALTH 101

This monthly health and wellness magazine is free for all Saint Mary's students and will be e-mailed out from Student Services.

5. STUDENT LEADERS

Residence, Athletics and Recreation, and The Counselling Centre all have trained students in mental health to support their fellow students.



For additional information on teen mental health including topics such as sexuality, relationships, and mental health issues, and for contacts regarding support, please refer to the “Transitions” booklet at www.teenmentalhealth.org/toolbox/transitions.

ADVICE FOR THOSE WHO SUPPORT FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS

FOUR WAYS TO EASE YOUR STUDENT'S TRANSITION

Your first-year student will probably experience difficulty with at least some of the transitions mentioned in this booklet. Transitions are tough on everyone, but there are four key things you can do to help make them easier:

ENCOURAGE INVOLVEMENT IN AN EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITY & DEVELOPING A CO-CURRICULAR RECORD

Learning isn't restricted to the classroom or to a textbook. By joining a campus society, participating in an intramural sports team or volunteering, students can learn new skills, improve self-esteem, meet other students with similar interests, develop a more fulfilling, balanced life, and it looks great on their Co-Curricular Record (CCR).

The CCR helps students discover these out-of-class experiences and capture skills on an official document. The CCR experience platform provides over 800 Co-Curricular opportunities for students to develop transferable, employability skills beyond what is recognized on their academic transcript. The CCR can be used to enhance students' graduate program or scholarship applications, or to demonstrate their developed skills to employers.

BECOME AWARE OF AVAILABLE SERVICES AND RESOURCES

When students ask questions or need guidance, you can help set them in the right direction. Reading this booklet is a good start! Encourage them to take advantage of campus resources and to read all of the material that the university sends out.

HAVE REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

Encourage your student to sit down with you and discuss their concerns and expectations before classes begin. Many students and family members find that it is helpful to write down concerns at the outset because it forces them to be specific about issues and provides a starting point for a discussion about how to deal with them.

LEARN TO LET GO

As the transition to university is a challenging one for both students and their family members, you will probably experience a few rocky points along the way. When you do, just try to relax and let your student exercise greater independence and personal responsibility. Make sure they know that you are always there for them if they need your advice or support, but that you are also happy to just listen.

“Reading the booklet gave me an idea of what is normal and what isn't. I now feel prepared to help out.”

ADVICE FOR STUDENTS

THREE WAYS TO EASE THE TRANSITION

Even the most positive life changes can cause a certain amount of anxiety. Keep in mind that when starting classes in September, it is a great opportunity to stay on top of your course work given that the semester can go by very quickly. Below are some tips that can help make the transition period more manageable for you.

HAVE REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

When you've grown up continually hearing that the university years are the "best years of your life", it's easy to assume that things will be wonderful 100% of the time. While you will no doubt find the university experience to be positive and invigorating there will, understandably, be times when everything does not work out as planned. For example, your roommate may not turn out to be the best "fit" and it may take a while before you develop close friendships. Try to give yourself some time to adjust. Remember that relationships take time to develop and that university will be filled with ups and downs just like any other aspect of life.

HELP BEAT HOMESICKNESS

In an effort to demonstrate their independence, some first-year students tend to cut themselves off from friends and family as they enter this new stage of their lives. However, this strategy can actually backfire and make students feel even more homesick. Try to stay in touch with loved ones via phone, e-mail or text messaging – just not to the exclusion of campus activities. It can also be helpful to develop a "comfort zone" in your new surroundings by bringing some family photos or favorite items from home. Of course, it is important to make an effort to connect with people at university and make new friends. Join a campus society, attend events, or look for other opportunities to interact. Something as simple as initiating a casual conversation with a classmate can be the first step toward making a connection.

TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

Symptoms of anxiety or stress can be exacerbated when we fail to take care of our physical well-being. To function at your best, try to adhere to the following guidelines:

Eat balanced, nutritious meals: Your brain requires proper nutrition to function optimally. From an emotional perspective, keep in mind that greasy, sugary foods can trigger negative feelings and can actually make you feel even more anxious and fatigued.

Limit caffeine intake: The effects of too much caffeine can mimic panic attacks, causing heart palpitations, feelings of anxiety, and dizziness.

Get enough sleep: Sleep deprivation can lead to difficulty concentrating as well as irritability and mood swings.

Exercise: Whether you choose to join The Homburg Centre for Health and Wellness, participate in an intramural sport, or simply take a brisk walk around campus, exercise is one of the most effective ways of reducing feelings of anxiety, sadness and stress. As an added bonus, it can be a great way of meeting new friends.



THE STUDENT'S PERSPECTIVE

SIX THINGS THAT FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS WANT THEIR FAMILY/SUPPORTERS TO KNOW

University is not a 9-5 job. Evening and weekend study is required.

Enormous amounts of time are demanded by university course work.

Administrative processes take time and may not be completed within a single visit.

A significant amount of stress can result from the change from high school to university.

Students feel a great deal of academic pressure in the first year of university.

There are other expenses in addition to tuition.



WHAT STUDENTS SAY ABOUT HOW OTHERS CAN OFFER SUPPORT

- » Support and encourage good study habits.
- » Give freedom to succeed or fail, and to take responsibility for our education.
- » Give freedom to learn how to cope with the new environment.
- » Offer encouragement and support to keep trying and to do well.
- » Relieve us from responsibility of some of the time-consuming tasks around the house.
- » Offer support to make our own decisions.
- » Let us try something new or radically different from previous interests.
- » Limit strong negative reactions and judgments.

COMMON FEARS AND SOURCES OF ANXIETY FOR FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS

- » I will not have enough money to do all of the things I want.
- » I will not be able to manage my time effectively.
- » I will have difficulty making friends and/or will lose my old friends from high school.
- » I will have difficulty in relationships.
- » I will become depressed.
- » University will be too difficult for me.
- » I will receive low grades and disappoint others.
- » I will have trouble getting along with my roommate.
- » I will get lost on campus.
- » I will have difficulty choosing a major.
- » I will choose a major that is not suited to my skills or interests.
- » I won't be able to develop proper study habits and this will affect my grades.
- » I will have trouble understanding the professor and this will affect my grades.
- » I will be too shy to express my true feelings to others.
- » I will not fit in.

WHAT FAMILY/SUPPORTERS NEED TO KNOW

FROM THE UNIVERSITY'S PERSPECTIVE

- » The university environment encourages independence.
- » The university views the student as an adult and will deal directly with the student and not others. Family/supporters, however, are always welcome to contact staff to discuss any concerns.
- » Don't be overly concerned by changes in clothing and hairstyle. Change in appearance is one way that students may begin to assert their individuality and try to fit into a new environment. However, if there is an extreme change in appearance and behaviour, this may signal a need for discussion or counselling.

- » Not reading the Academic Calendar and understanding regulations
- » Lack of motivation
- » Procrastination/poor time management skills
- » Lack of perseverance
- » Inability to translate thought into action
- » Inability to complete tasks
- » Fear of failure
- » Excessive dependency
- » Spreading oneself too thin (e.g., too many social or volunteer activities)
- » Too little or too much self-confidence
- » Lack of self-discipline
- » Lack of balance between critical, analytical and creative thinking
- » Assuming university will be similar to high school



“Everyone at The Counselling Centre was very helpful – from making an appointment to showing me new tools to deal with my problems.”

THE SUPPORTIVE PERSON'S ROLE

HOW TO HELP YOUR STUDENT SUCCEED

BEFORE CLASSES BEGIN

As your student ventures into this new stage of life, they will benefit from some wisdom from others. Below are some suggested topics for discussion:

- » Budgeting/financial management skills (including a talk on the type of financial contribution that you may be able to make towards their education)
- » Interpersonal skills to help deal with roommate and other relationship issues
- » Time management strategies
- » Safety measures on- and off-campus
- » The importance of leading a balanced life
- » Respect for the body's need for nutrition and sufficient rest
- » Stress management techniques including exercise
- » Responsible alcohol use
- » Sexual consent

WHILE THEY ARE AT UNIVERSITY

- » Be a good listener
- » Show interest in their studies and personal growth
- » Keep an open mind as they begin to exert their independence
- » Don't set unrealistic expectations
- » Stay in touch. Agree to times for connecting and send care packages.

RED FLAGS: WHEN YOU SHOULD BECOME MORE INVOLVED

- » When tearful conversations outnumber others
- » Unexplained weight loss
- » Frequent illness
- » Excessive fatigue
- » Absenteeism/failure to complete assignments
- » Significant money problems/debt
- » Talk of hopelessness/lack of purpose
- » Abrupt mood swings/major changes in behaviour or appearance



THE SUPPORTIVE PERSON'S TRANSITION

WHAT YOU CAN DO FOR YOURSELF

Learn about resources available on campus.

Expect changes as your student begins this new phase of life.

Don't take it personally if your student doesn't seem to "need" you anymore. They are simply exerting their independence.

Share your feelings with other family/supporters.

Seek out information (books or credible websites) on the first-year experience.

Talk to the staff at The Counselling Centre.

INFORMATION FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS & THEIR FAMILY MEMBERS/SUPPORTERS

WHAT STUDENTS NEED TO KNOW

- » Arriving late at university can be disastrous. The term is very short and missing a few days of class can put you far behind.
- » Read everything that is sent by the University. Read the Academic Calendar online.
- » You are responsible for making your own decisions and ensuring that fees are paid, deadlines are met, etc.
- » Carry all important documents on you when you travel. Do not put important papers and money in your checked luggage.
- » Eat well and exercise regularly.
- » If you smoke, try to quit as Saint Mary's is tobacco-free.
- » Student medical coverage does not extend to travel outside Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island. Arrange for travel insurance.

WHAT FAMILY/SUPPORTERS NEED TO KNOW

Sometimes jobs will not provide enough money for tuition or all of the living expenses. It is difficult to find jobs right away and the hours are limited.

All student records maintained by Saint Mary's University are confidential and will not be released to anyone but the student.

Ensure that your student has a complete eye exam and dental exam before coming to Canada. Glasses and dental work are very expensive in Canada.

Know the time difference between your home and Halifax. Try not to make calls to students when it is the middle of the night in Canada, especially if they are living with roommates in residence.

Where possible, transfer tuition funds directly to the Saint Mary's account but transfer pocket money to the student's bank account. When the student travels to Canada, they should bring some pocket money in the case of an emergency.

University tuition is continually increasing each year by a small percentage. Be sure to account for this and the high cost of textbooks when budgeting for fees.

Read and know the Academic Calendar. Encourage your student to seek the assistance of the International Student Centre and Student Services.

RESOURCES

FOR STUDENTS:

Becoming a Master Student, 15th edition, Dave Ellis, 2014

FOR FAMILY/SUPPORTERS:

Letting go: A Parent's Guide to Understanding the College Years, 5th edition Karen Levin Coburn & Madge Lawrence Treeger, 2009



**“Being new, I didn't know
what to ask. This helped.”**

Quotes throughout the booklet are from past Saint Mary's students and family members/supporters.

KEY PHONE NUMBERS

The Counselling Centre	902-420-5615
Student Services	902-420-5761
Student Health.....	902-420-5611
Nurse/Manager (24 hours).....	902-471-8129
Centre for Housing & Residence Life	902-420-5598
Bookstore.....	902-420-5562
University Security (Non-emergency)	902-420-5577
(Emergency).....	902-420-5000
Career Services	902-420-5761
Chaplaincy.....	902-420-5502
International Student Centre.....	902-420-5525
Centre for New Students.....	902-491-8691
SMU Students' Association (SMUSA)	902-496-8700

www.smu.ca/counselling



“My son is the first one to attend university in our family. I feel I have a way to help him reach his goals.”

The Counselling Centre
4th Floor Student Centre
902-420-5615
counselling@smu.ca

www.smu.ca/counselling
www.smu.ca/mentalhealth