

# First Years Away from Home:

Letting Go and Staying Connected  
With Your WSU Student

*A Parent/Caregiver Handbook*



**WASHINGTON STATE**  
UNIVERSITY



WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY  
**Office of the Provost**

July 1, 2025

Dear WSU Parent or Family Member,

Welcome to the Washington State University (WSU) family! Fall semester will soon be here, and you are getting ready for your student's first year at WSU.

WSU supports students' academic success and is keenly focused on their overall well-being. One way we promote a successful transition to WSU is through programming specifically designed for first-year students. These programs address issues such as safety, substance use, and campus organizations and resources. All first-year WSU students participate in these programs as part of their orientation to life at WSU.

We also know that students are only part of the equation to a successful transition to WSU. You – WSU families – play a vital role. We share this handbook, *First Years Away from Home: Letting Go and Staying Connected*, to provide parents and families an opportunity to partner with us in helping your student transition to WSU.

The handbook contains conversation starters, activities, and important information about college students. The content is based on our experience with first-year students and on scientific studies (including research on the handbook done here at WSU!) about student success, safety, and connectedness. We hope the handbook provides an opportunity to reflect on important issues that may emerge in your student's first year of college and to discuss them with your WSU student. And we hope you enjoy it, too.

We are eager to welcome your students to campus and delighted to welcome you into the extended Cougar family!

With warm regards,

T. Chris Riley-Tillman  
Provost and Executive Vice President  
WSU System

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### Activities

*There are several recommended activities in the handbook. Some of them are on separate worksheets included with your handbook. You can find instructions for activities on these pages:*

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## Introduction

**Congratulations! Welcome to the Cougar family! Your child has been accepted at a premier educational institution: Washington State University (WSU). This represents the culmination of their efforts and your support through their adolescence.**

The first year of college marks a special crossroads for your family as your student prepares to embark on this stage of life. It is an important transition for both you and your student, one that often involves some combination of excitement and anticipation – mixed with worry and apprehension. You are likely anticipating both the possibilities and challenges of new roles, more independence, exciting experiences, and redefining relationships.





Parents often worry about their new college students living on their own for the first time, being in charge of everything from how often (and if!) they study to doing laundry, from what they will do on the weekends to choosing a major. Living on your own for the first time is a big challenge!

We developed this handbook to provide parents an opportunity to partner with WSU faculty and staff to support their students during this transition to WSU. Think of it as a toolkit of suggestions and principles that have worked for many parents. Because all families are different, some of the tools we provide here will likely be more helpful for your family than others.

We refer to “parents,” “families,” and “caregivers” interchangeably in this handbook – we recognize that our entering first-year students come from a variety of different family structures, and this handbook is for anyone who is in a caregiving role for an entering first-year student.

We recommend that you and your incoming student set up some time together to talk through the important information provided here.


Throughout the handbook, we have indicated 4 special categories of information with icons: Activities, Conversations, Questions, and Facts.

	Activities you can try, on your own or with your student
	Conversation starters
	Questions and things to think about
	Interesting facts and research findings

## Imagine...

It is 4 or 5 years from now. Your student is ready to graduate from WSU, and there is a party to celebrate the occasion. Your young adult child gets up to speak and begins with some words about you and the ways in which you have supported them through their college years.

Relax, close your eyes, and take a few minutes to think about this question:

 *What would you \*most like\* for your child to say about you at that reception?*

In this handbook, we provide information about young adult development and parenting strategies that will help you be that parent.

## The Young Adult Brain

*Different parts of the body develop at different rates. At what age do you think brain development is complete? Age 6, 15, 18, 21, 25, 30...?*

The late teen years are a period of rapid growth and development in multiple areas: physical, emotional, cognitive, and social. Recent studies show that the human brain still grows well past puberty and up through young adulthood. There is actually no age at which brain

development is complete, and its development is especially active from birth through the mid-20s.

## How Continuing Brain Development Can Affect Your Student

One part of the brain that typically develops later is the *prefrontal cortex*, the region that is responsible for functions such as:

- self-control
- judgment
- emotions
- organization

In other words, parts of your student’s brain still function more like a teen brain than an “adult” brain. That means they are more prone to:

- making decisions based on feelings and emotions, rather than a calculation of risk and benefit.
- underestimating the possible risks associated with their behaviors.

## Vulnerabilities of the Developing Brain

Another reality of later brain development is that alcohol, marijuana/cannabis, and other substance use further impairs decision making and can lead to a variety of problems. Neurological systems that are already predisposed to over-value emotional rewards are especially vulnerable to the temporary “high” when under the influence of substances.



*Recent evidence shows that substance use among teens and young adults:*

- *may lead to permanent deficits in memory and recall.*
- *may mean a higher risk of addiction.*

## There are Strategies to Help Protect and Nurture that Brain!

The good news is that these tendencies for emotional decision making and impulsive behavior don’t always result in an avalanche of poor decisions for students. Plus, you can help! Remembering the realities of young adult brain development will provide some important context as you use this handbook.

## Moving from Adolescence to Adulthood

The journey to adulthood isn’t simple, and we don’t necessarily become adults just because we head off to college. In one recent study, researchers asked people whether they saw themselves as an adult – and only about 35% of 18- to 25-year-olds identified as an adult. Your student is legally an adult at 18 – but it’s likely that they don’t perceive themselves that way. Each family relationship is unique, but again, that reality means that *the door is open for your influence*: they want and need guidance from you as they move through the late teen years and figure out what it means to become an adult.

Take a minute to think about these questions:



- *When did you first feel like an adult?*
- *How did you know you had reached adulthood?*

Now talk together about this question:



*What do you think it means to be an adult?*

In the next section we discuss one of the hallmarks of adulthood – using values to guide decisions and actions – and some strategies you can use to help your student be the kind of student, friend, and WSU citizen they want to be.

## From Values to Committed Action

*“The greatest thing in this world is not so much where we stand as in what direction we are going.”* Oliver Wendell Holmes

## Values and Visions

Let’s get specific now with ways that parents can make a difference in the lives of their college-aged students. You can have a major impact in helping your student identify and clarify their values. A value is a guiding principle in your life. It may be a core ethical idea, like honesty or generosity;

it may also reflect a passion such as making music, environmental awareness, or caring for animals.



*Our research shows that students who strongly identify with their values are less likely to drink alcohol to excess (“binge” drink).*

In many ways, college success can hinge on the ability of students to identify their values and to put those values into action in their daily lives. Parents can help with this! Once your student starts college, you will likely hear about some of the interesting and challenging realities they are faced with: Choosing a major, interacting with a roommate, managing a difficult class or a demanding instructor, navigating a new social scene. When faced with these and other important issues, students benefit from parents' reminders to think about their priorities and values.

One way to think about values is that they give direction to our actions. When we can identify, name, and buy into our values, we can then determine goals – that is, specific desired outcomes.



*Our research shows that about 70% of parents are only moderately aware of what their students' values are, and only about 20% of students are reasonably accurate about their parents' values.*

The next activity will help you share what you think is important and help you hear what your student thinks is important.



*On the colored sheets included with this handbook, you will find a **Values Card Sort** activity for you to do as a family. The yellow sheet is for you and the blue for your student. The card sort can also be useful for students later, when they have important decisions to make. For now, the point of the activity is for you to talk together about what you learn.*

- Each person alone sorts the cards into 4 piles:
  - Extremely Important to Me
  - Important to Me
  - A Little Important to Me
  - Not Very Important to Me

- Now compare. This is an opportunity to share what you and your student care most about!
  - How similar are your values?
  - In what areas are you and your student different?
- Your student's most important values might be different from yours. This information can help you support your student to grow in valued directions.
- Talk together about how these values relate to the college experiences that they are likely to face over the next few years. There may be values missing for you in this activity... if so, what are they?

## Goals and Committed Actions

Once you have identified core values, the next steps for your student are:

- to identify specific, reachable goals that align with those values.
- to come up with “committed actions”: behaviors that will move them closer to their goals and values.

Here's an example: if a student identifies “academic achievement” as a core value, they may set a goal of getting A's or B's in all of their classes. They now have the opportunity to identify behaviors – committed actions – that will help them reach their goal. Their committed actions might be daily (review class notes, complete readings), weekly (attend lab meetings, meet with the professor during office hours), and/or monthly (organize a group exam study session).



It's never too early or too late to begin talking with your student about values and commitment; over the next few weeks, talk with your student about goals across several different aspects of college life (finding a major, grades, relationships with friends and family, etc.). Coaching your student to identify goals that align with their core values will help them build a solid foundation for a successful college transition.

This Values → Goals → Committed Actions framework can provide structure and context for your conversations with

your student, now and throughout their time at WSU. When faced with difficult decisions or circumstances, your student may need some gentle reminders. Asking questions like “What’s important to you in this situation?”, “What’s your priority?”, or “What would help you move closer to the things that you value?” allows you to provide support and nurturing while also making sure that the decision is ultimately your student’s. Developing this habit of pausing and thinking about their values when faced with new decisions can also help your student minimize the tendency to make decisions in the moment, based solely on emotions.

### Moving from Values to Committed Action



*This activity, **Moving from Values to Committed Action**, illustrates a process that your student can use over and over again, in many different situations.*

- Help your student choose one value that is especially important to them. For that value, guide them in identifying a concrete, reachable goal. It’s best to start with a goal that is something they can achieve in a semester or less.
- Once they have the value, and the goal, they will need to identify **daily, weekly, or semester-long** committed actions that will move them towards that goal and value.
- See the example on this page, and give your student the blank worksheet called “Committed Actions Worksheet” (page 21). Ask them to complete the process, following the example, for an issue that is important to them.
- Remember, young adults’ brains are still developing. At this age, they are still prone to making decisions based on feelings and emotions, rather than a calculation of risk and benefit, and they are prone to underestimating risks.

### Values → Committed Action Exercise


STEP	USEFUL STATEMENT/QUESTIONS	EXAMPLE
<b>1. Issue</b>	<i>I want to...</i> OR <i>I am having trouble with...</i> OR <i>I don't understand...</i>	<i>I want to do well in this class, but I don't understand what we're doing.</i>
<b>2. Values and Vision</b>	<i>I stand for...</i> OR <i>I am committed to the value or importance of...</i> OR <i>What's my priority here?</i>	<i>I am committed to striving for excellence in my academic studies.</i>
<b>3. Goals</b>	<i>What specifically do I want to accomplish?</i>	<i>I want to get an A or B in this class.</i>
<b>4. Action Steps</b>	<i>What will help me move closer to my priorities?</i>  AND <i>What are some specific steps I need to take this week to help me accomplish my goal?</i>  AND <i>What steps do I need to take during the semester?</i>	<b>Action 1:</b> <i>Starting this week, I will do 1/2 hour of studying for the class at 7 pm on Sunday-Thursday.</i>  <b>Action 2:</b> <i>I will make an appointment to see the instructor this week and ask for help.</i>  <b>Action 3:</b> <i>I will organize a study group and meet before every exam.</i>
<b>5. Barriers and Competing Commitments</b>	<i>Things I am uncomfortable with/worried about/afraid of</i>  OR <i>Circumstances that might make it hard to do this</i>	<b>Barrier 1:</b> <i>I'd rather be going out with friends in the evenings.</i>  <b>Barrier 2:</b> <i>I am embarrassed to let the instructor know how behind I am.</i>
<b>6. Committed Action</b>	<i>I am willing to _____ in order to support my value in row 2 and achieve my goal.</i>	<i>I am willing to go out only two times a week, and I am willing to feel temporarily uncomfortable around the instructor, to support my value of striving for excellence.</i>

## How Parents Help

### Importance of Parents During the Transition to Adulthood

You may have heard the term “helicopter parent” to refer to parents who are overly involved in managing their student’s experiences. Although in some cases parents can be inappropriately intrusive (such as calling their student’s professor to complain about a grade), the research on this topic shows that some parental involvement can be helpful, rather than harmful.

Also, many parents underestimate how much their students want – and even expect – them to be involved in their lives. In our work with students, first-year students report that their parents contacted them less often than they want.

 *Our research shows that many students wish their parents had talked with them more about their questions, concerns, and experiences during their first year.*

What does healthy parental involvement look like during college? One of the many challenges in parenting college students is finding a balance between nurturing involvement and connection on one hand and supporting autonomy and independence on the other hand. The transition to adulthood and living away from home is a process; your student will probably need more support and assistance from you during the first year than they will later in their college career.

A possible strategy for successfully navigating the balancing act between freedom and support is to think about your values as a parent and how they fit with your student’s needs and values.

For example, if you strongly value nurturance, support, and closeness in your role as a parent, you may need to work harder to provide room for your student’s growing need for autonomy and decision-making.

Alternatively, if your values have led you to prioritize independence and self-sufficiency in your student, you may

want to focus on making sure that your student’s needs for connection and support are also being met.

### Three Different Parent Roles

Another way to think about your involvement in your WSU student’s life is to recognize the changing nature of your parental role as your student leaves home.

The research suggests that helpful parent roles at this stage fall into three broad categories:

#### Coach

- Observe and listen
- Guide and assist decision making
- Communicate clear expectations
- Support autonomy


#### Cheerleader

- Recognize strengths
- Acknowledge challenges
- Celebrate accomplishments
- Encourage
- Provide emotional support
- Stay connected

#### Safety Monitor

- Ask questions
- Be clear about consequences
- Learn more about resources for students

You may find that one of these roles is more natural for you – and that realization might serve as a reminder to focus on the other important roles in addition to the one that you naturally gravitate to.

 *To determine your strengths and challenges in both *Letting Go* and *Staying Connected*, complete the **Parent Readiness Checkup** (page 17).*

Here's a little more information on these roles:

## Coach

During your student's first year of college, one of your most important parenting roles is similar to that of a coach. Coaching involves more than just giving advice – it means that you also listen and guide and are ready to provide assistance when it is needed and appropriate, while at the same time making sure your student has the opportunity to develop autonomy. As we discussed earlier, focusing on your student's values is a very important coaching task during the college years.

Here are some guidelines for coaching your student that you may find helpful:

### *Observe and Listen*

- Be available. Ask about interests, activities, and any problems they might be experiencing.
- Listen to your student. Be aware of their reasoning processes.

### *Guide and Assist Decision Making*

- Recognize that conversations about how things are going are prime opportunities to help your student identify and clarify their values.
- Ask open-ended questions about any gaps in your student's reasoning. Conversation starters such as "Tell me more about this" often allow the dialogue between you and your student to continue in a healthy manner.
- Help them use their values to make decisions.
- Ask: *What can I do to be helpful in this situation?*

### *Communicate Clear Expectations*

Some expectations seem so obvious that parents don't even think to talk about them. In other areas, parents may not be completely clear about what they expect, or about what the consequences are if their students do not meet stated expectations. In either case, misunderstandings about basic expectations can be a source of conflict when students move into their young adult lives.

Potential areas of conflict include:

- **Financial:** Who is paying for what?

- **Academic:** What are acceptable grades? How much should your student study?
- **Substance Use:** What are the rules? What happens if your student breaks them?



Use the **Expectation Card Sort Activity** to see how closely your student's understanding matches your actual expectations and related consequences. This activity is fun and can stimulate interesting discussions. Instructions are on page 14 of this handbook, and the cards are on the orange and green perforated sheets.

### *Support Autonomy*

Help your student consider multiple options but give advice only when asked for or when you get their permission. Students often want guidance but reject it when it's offered as advice. Other times, students may want you to solve their problems for them, when it would be more helpful for them to learn to handle the issue themselves.



**Autonomy Support:** Some phrases that help young adults learn to think through problems on their own:

- *What do you think would be some possible options in this situation?*
- *It sounds like you've been doing \_\_\_\_\_. How is that working for you?*
- *How are you planning to resolve that?*

Two important areas where you can support students' increasing autonomy are *Financial Independence* and *Life Skills*.

### *Financial Independence*

Some students this age are completely independent and financing their own education through work and loans. Others have less experience managing their own finances. This is also an area where conflict can occur if expectations aren't clear.



Sit down together to review the **Financial Expectations Worksheet** (page 18) and discuss your

expectations about who will pay for what in the post high school years. Decisions about money change over time, so you may want to review the list periodically and make changes as needed. It's helpful to review this at the beginning of every year in college, at graduation, when living situations change, when your student has a new job, or summers.

### Life Skills

Most late teens/young adults have some well-developed life skills, and some that they haven't yet mastered. Some students this age may do their own laundry, have excellent study skills, be responsible and reliable at a part-time job, but still have no idea how to manage their money! You can support your student's growing autonomy by identifying areas that require new skills to be developed.



**Student Readiness Activity.** The "Student Independence Readiness Checkup" (page 19) contains a list of life skills in 10 different areas, including Money Management, Personal Self-Care, Problem Solving, Avoiding Trouble, and others. Students are asked to rate themselves and add up their scores in each area to learn where they already have strengths and where they might need some additional knowledge, training, or support to gain independence.

The **Student Readiness Activity** is meant to be completed by the student alone and reviewed together with you. Some questions you could ask:

- What did you learn about your life skills?
- What do you feel most confident about?
- What are the skills that you could improve that might affect your life in a positive way?

### Cheerleader

In this role, one thing you can do to stay connected to your student is to help them see their strengths and how those strengths might inform their values.

Along with this, you can acknowledge their challenges, making sure they know you support and believe in them.

#### **Recognize Strengths and Acknowledge Challenges**

You've undoubtedly been doing this for many years already, but it is especially important now. Here's an exercise with some conversation starters that touch on both strengths and challenges.



**Student Strengths:** Sit down together and discuss the following questions with your student. Listen for your student's thoughts about strengths and challenges and share your thoughts as well.

- What do friends, parents, and other people tell you you're good at?
- What do you see as important contributions that you make to our family?
- What are you most interested in when you read, listen to podcasts, scroll social media, or watch TV?
- When have you felt the most successful in life?
- If you could imagine doing your favorite thing for the rest of your life, what would that be?
- When are you most challenged?

#### **Celebrate Accomplishments**


Another important duty of a cheerleader is to celebrate accomplishments. Many families have traditions and rituals for birthdays and holidays. Now that your student will be away from home, it can be helpful to create new family rituals to celebrate accomplishments when they come home for school breaks.




Something to talk about: **Celebrations and Rituals.** What kind of ritual or activity to recognize accomplishments would your student find meaningful, fun, or rewarding? Make plans now for a celebration during the next school break.

### ***Provide Emotional Support and Stay Connected***

Finally, your student's growing autonomy doesn't have to mean that they don't need you, or that you will become less connected:

 *Research shows that students who perceive more autonomy support from their parents also feel closer to their parents than other students.*

Nowadays, there are so many ways to communicate with your student, and even very long-distance communication is cheap or free. How often should you contact your student? This is a good time to have conversations about that topic. Be ready to listen to your student's expectations and how they fit with yours. Remember, students often tell us they wish they had more communication with their parents, not less. Some topics for discussion include:

 *How often does your student think it's important to communicate with you – Every day? Once a week? What are your expectations?*

*Does your student prefer to talk, text, email, video call, or write letters? What would you prefer?*

*Who will initiate conversations – you, or your student?*

### **Safety Monitor**

Doing everything possible to ensure your child's safety has been an important parenting role for you for many years. As your child went through transitions in the past – learning to walk, going to school, learning to drive, beginning to date, and many others – new safety concerns emerged.

Similarly, the college transition means that there are new safety issues, and it is complicated by the reality that your student is no longer living at home.

How can parents help? The role of “safety monitor” continues to be a crucial one for you over the next few months and years, even though it looks different now that your student is living away from home.

Here are some areas that are important for parents to check in with their students about:

### ***Sleep***

It's very common for college students to fall behind on their sleep – our data show that 70% of students regularly don't get enough sleep. Providing reminders about the importance of sleep may be an important way for you to support your student's transition to living away from home.

### ***Physical and Emotional Health***


Unhealthy eating habits and infrequent exercise are common realities for students. Questions like “*How are you doing at taking care of yourself?*” provide an avenue for conversations about health. In addition, those types of questions may help you and your student see patterns of withdrawal or disengagement (such as not attending class or spending hours and hours online/on video games) that may be signs of emotional health concerns.


### ***Alcohol and Other Substance Use***


Another important aspect of being a safety monitor is to know the facts and talk with your student about alcohol and substance use.


*Washington State Laws, WSU Policies, Consequences*

Here are some important facts to share with your student:

 *Use of alcohol and cannabis in any form is illegal for those under 21.*

 *Despite legalization in Washington State, use or possession of cannabis in any form is not permitted on campus even for those who are 21 or over, as it remains prohibited by federal law.*


 *Unauthorized use of another person's prescription medication (for example, Adderall, Ritalin, or prescription painkillers) is illegal for anyone, regardless of age.*


 *There are several consequences for students who are caught violating state law or WSU policy regarding substance*

use or possession. WSU will uphold state and federal laws pertaining to alcohol and other drug use, and on-campus sanctions may apply (for example: fines, student conduct procedures, suspension, or expulsion). Off campus, the student may also face legal action, depending on the seriousness of the offense, in addition to the WSU on-campus sanctions.

### **Statistics from Our College Student Research**

- It is common for students to believe that almost all other students use alcohol or other substances, and that perception makes them more likely to try substances themselves, even if they are ambivalent about it. In fact, the reality is much different from students' perceptions:


 32% of recent first-year students chose not to use alcohol at all.

 54% of recent first-year students had never used marijuana/cannabis and chose not to use it in college.

- Make sure your student knows these facts. Knowing that our research showed that 1 in 3 first-year students choose not to drink might help your student make good choices.


### **First-Year Students and Alcohol-Related Harm**

- Use of alcohol is especially dangerous, especially early in the first year when students are less knowledgeable about their new environment. Many harms occur during the first 6 weeks of school. Now is a very important time to have conversations with your student about drinking.


 51% of the first-year students who used alcohol in recent years reported experiencing alcohol-related harm, including sexual assault, injury, unsafe sex, academic consequences, blackouts, and regretting behaviors.


### **Parents as Models**

Your own behaviors might communicate acceptance of alcohol use.

 Do your stories of your own young adulthood glorify unsafe alcohol use?


If so, you may want to clarify the distinction between your own substance use history and your own current values when having conversations on this topic with your student.


 Does your behavior when you come to visit WSU communicate acceptance of students' illegal use of alcohol?


 Research shows that when parents allow their underage teens to drink, even if it is in order to keep them safe or simply to model healthy drinking behaviors, those children are more likely to develop substance abuse problems. A "zero-tolerance" message from parents appears to be protective for teens and young adults.

### **Protective Strategies**

A few more important topics for conversation in this area:

 **Substance Use and Values:** Have a conversation with your student about how impairment due to alcohol, cannabis/marijuana, or other substance use can make it much harder to adhere to their values/goals/committed actions.

 **Alternatives to Partyng:** Talk with your student about the wide range of student activities that don't involve drinking. Make sure they know about resources like the Student Engagement Services website and activities sponsored by University Recreation (UREC; see back cover for more resources).

 **Positive Consequences for Not Using Substances:** Ask your student's thoughts about the possible positive

consequences of choosing not to use substances.



### ***New Social Groups and Greek***

***Organizations:*** All groups will have some kind of new member education where students learn about the organization or team and its history. They will always have meetings and activities to attend, so ask about them! Ask them some questions:

- How was your new member meeting? What did you learn?

Even for Greek student organizations, this information is not secret! If your student tells you they are not allowed to share anything about student group meetings, that is a red flag.



***General Involvement:*** To understand if your student is getting involved, making new friends, or just hanging out in the residence hall, you can ask some general questions about some simple day-to-day activities. Some information you gather might help you assess your student's mental health as well.

- Have you met anyone new in your residence hall or in class?
- I am trying to picture you on campus... Where do you hang out?

## PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER: Parent Role Scenarios

In this section, you'll find some common situations students face in six different areas: Academics, Peers, Substance Use, Life Skills, Mental Health, and Feeling Different. For each scenario, think about what your primary role should be – Coach, Cheerleader, or Safety Monitor? What questions could you ask your student that would be consistent with that role?

For the first scenario, we provide an example to illustrate the process.

### **Academics**

*Sooner or later, every student experiences some difficulty with the high academic expectations of college. It might be time management leading to incomplete assignments; failing a test; or deciding on a major. Here is one common scenario:*

#### **Scenario #1: Grades**

It's the end of the first semester and your student has just received their final grades. Their GPA for the semester is a 2.75, much below their high school GPA of a 3.5. They try to explain to you that the classes were much harder than in high school so you shouldn't expect them to get the same grades they did in high school. Plus, they originally thought they wanted to major in Engineering, but after taking those math classes last semester they think that might not be the best idea. They say they're considering changing majors to Psychology instead. They have heard that those classes are much easier and say not to worry – they will definitely get higher grades next semester.

#### **What is your role?**

Issues surrounding classes and choosing a major are excellent opportunities for you to be both cheerleader and coach. From a cheerleader perspective, emphasizing that you believe in your student, and that you recognize their strengths, can be very beneficial. You can also coach your student by helping them focus on problem-solving, giving advice when appropriate, and asking questions to help your student clarify their reasoning.

#### **What questions should you ask?**

“What do you like about psychology, besides the “easy” classes?” “What are some of the reasons why your math classes were so hard for you?” “What other reasons do you have to give up on Engineering in addition to the hard math classes?”

*Other academic scenarios to think through (consider what role is appropriate and what questions you might ask):*

- Your student is having trouble deciding on a major/classes
- Your student says they want to drop out of college
- Your student failed an exam/project
- Your student did well on an exam/project

## Conversations About Peers

*There are some key times when your student might be vulnerable to peer pressure, and you can ask some simple questions to check in and see how they are doing.*

### Scenario #2: Roommate Troubles

Imagine your student calls you to complain about their new roommate. They explain that they had been getting along ok, but recently the roommate has been getting on their nerves. Your student says that they had agreed to try and keep the room clean and organized, but the roommate's side of the room is a disaster – with clothes and dirty dishes all over the place. They also explain how the roommate had invited their partner to spend the night in their room on several occasions, which made your student very uncomfortable.

**What is your role?** In situations like this, your student may need you to take on the role of coach. Listening to their concerns, giving advice when appropriate, helping your student clarify their values and priorities – all of these are coaching strategies that can be of assistance.

**What questions should you ask?** When your student has a list of concerns, help them see that sometimes it's helpful to consider each concern separately, as different values may come into play. In this scenario, your student is dealing with two different values: their preference for cleanliness, and their discomfort with the roommate's romantic partner sleeping over. You could encourage your student to prioritize by asking questions like the following: "Which of these issues is most at odds with your core values?" "How highly do you value your relationship with your roommate?" "Are there others in the residence hall (like your residential advisor) that might have some insight?"

*Other peer relationship scenarios to think through:*

- Your student tells you they have a new romantic partner, and they want to move out of the residence hall and into their apartment.
- Your student didn't get into the student organization of their choice.
- Your student's partner broke up with them.

- You get the impression that your student's friends are partying a lot.

## Substance Use

*As we noted above, first-year students are most likely to experience alcohol-related harm during the early part of their first semester. Your input in this area is critically important!*

### Scenario #3: The Big Game

During a conversation about what your student plans to do this weekend, they mention that there is a big football game on Thursday – it is a night game, and it also happens to be Halloween the very same night! All their friends are planning to get together before the game to put on costumes and "pre-party." They explain that it is a big deal because the game is going to be televised on ESPN. Classes have even been canceled Thursday afternoon in preparation for the crowds that are anticipated for Thursday night.

**What is your role?** In situations like this, your primary role needs to be that of safety monitor, helping your student think through the potential risks of what they're describing.

**What questions should you ask?** First, remind your student of the potential academic and legal consequences for underage drinking, as well as consequences for violations of your own expectations. Some questions you could ask: "Is this plan consistent with your semester priorities?", "What are your priorities for the evening?", "Tell me more about the friends you'll be with", "What are some ways that you and your friends will be safe?"

*Other common substance use scenarios to think through:*

- You get a call notifying you that your student has been cited for minor in possession of alcohol. Before school started, you communicated clearly your expectation that they would not use alcohol until age 21.
- You are an WSU alum attending a home game this fall. Up to now, you've enjoyed some fun tailgate parties with friends, drinking and chatting till late in the night. This year your student will be with you.
- Your student comes home to visit for the first time since moving away. There is a party for their cousin's 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, and there will be alcohol there.

## Life Skills

*Many young adults simply don't have the experience to know yet how to manage time, finances, work-life-study balance, and physical health. Especially now, as they take on many new*

*responsibilities at once, they will need your guidance figuring it all out.*

#### **Scenario #4: Extra Work**

Your student has decided to get a part-time job working at a coffee stand in the CUB. They've been working there for six months and excitedly call to tell you that they have been promoted to manager. They explain that it will require them to work 5 more hours a week than they are currently working, and it will probably be a bit more stressful since they have to create all of the schedules and manage the other employees. They seem excited to take the new position but also a little worried about how it might affect their schoolwork.

**What is your role?** This is a great example of a situation that calls for both cheerleading and coaching. Celebrating their promotion and the increased responsibility is very appropriate – as is helping them problem-solve and prioritize so that their new time commitments do not impede their ability to meet the goals they have set for themselves.

**What questions should you ask?** “How do you feel about the promotion?”, “What do you think you will like about the new position?”, “What are some ways you will know if the new responsibilities are getting in the way of your academic priorities? How can we help you figure that out?”

#### ***Other common life skills scenarios to think through:***

- Your student got fired from their part-time job for showing up late.
- Your student is having trouble managing time – they are playing too many video games and skipping classes.
- Your student isn't taking care of themselves – they aren't eating well, are working out too much, or not getting enough sleep.

## **Mental Health**

*The transition to college can be a challenging time for students as they deal with new responsibilities, pressures, and expectations. Here is one possible scenario:*

#### **Scenario #5: Just Not Feeling Okay**

Over the past few weeks, you've noticed that something doesn't seem right with your student. They're not as talkative as they normally are, and don't seem to be initiating contact with you. They're sleeping more than usual and not attending classes regularly. They are also reporting to you that they're not really doing much with friends. At one point, your student says that they “just don't feel okay.”

**What is your role?** In situations like this, your student may need you to respond both as a safety monitor and as a coach. Your role as safety monitor involves paying attention to your student's emotional well-being and helping them view emotional health as a top priority. Coaching may involve helping them think through strategies for accessing help and identifying some possible next steps.

**What questions should you ask?** From a safety monitor perspective, it may be important to remind your student about some things that can promote emotional well-being: eating well, getting fresh air or exercising, maintaining social connections, practicing mindfulness, and talking with a counselor or therapist. Complement these reminders with some coaching by giving your student strategies to make decisions and take action. Here are some possible questions in your role as coach: “Are you aware of the people or groups on campus who can support you?”, “How can I help you?”, “Do you want to talk about how to know when it's time to talk with a therapist?”

## **Feeling Different**

*Meeting new people from a variety of backgrounds and experiences can be both exciting and challenging for new college students. While new peer groups can be welcoming and supportive, it's also the case that some students can feel different from others in ways that promote anxiety and uncertainty.*

#### **Scenario #6: I Don't Fit In**

Your student's new roommate comes from a cultural background that is different from your family's. The roommate seems to have a group of friends who are all from that same cultural group, and your student has a difficult time connecting with them and sometimes feels excluded. Your student comments to you that they don't feel like they fit in with the roommate and their friends, and sometimes they feel like they have no friends at all.

**What is your role?** Helping students navigate situations such as this one can be a good time to prioritize both your coach and cheerleader roles. In this case, you might want to coach your student to reflect on goals and values and identify some actions that align with their values. As a cheerleader, you could support your student by reminding them of the qualities and characteristics that make others view them as a valued friend.

**What questions should you ask?** As you emphasize the role of coach, you want to support your student as they identify strategies for next steps. Some important coaching questions might be: “What kind of roommate do you want to be?”, “What are some ways you can make connections with other people

who could become friends?”, “What are some of your values that can help you in this situation?”, “What’s important to you in a friend?”, and “How can I best support you?” As a cheerleader, you might offer encouragement by pointing out what you see in them that makes them a good friend.

*Other related scenarios to think through:*

- *Encountering students with different religious backgrounds.*
- *Encountering students with different political views.*
- *Encountering racism, sexism, ableism, or other forms of discrimination or exclusion.*

## Letting Go and Staying Connected

Congratulations! You and your student have reached an important milestone of adult development, and they will be attending an outstanding educational institution. We know that you both worked hard to get to this point. The next steps together are also critical for a successful launch into young adulthood. It's important to continue the partnership that got you to this point. We hope this handbook and the conversations it will produce between you and your student will provide a platform for success for your changing partnership! Keep in touch through the resources listed on the back page of this handbook.

## Expectation Card Sort Activity

Now that your student is about to enter college, you will encounter new opportunities that can cause changes in your family’s expectations. Talking about your expectations ahead of time can reduce any conflict that may result when your expectations differ from one another.

The Expectations cards (Participating in family activities, using alcohol, etc.) on the orange and green perforated sheets that came with your handbook represent areas that are often the targets of conflict in families as young people move towards independence. You can use this card sort now, and at times when new opportunities cause expectations to change – like at their 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, before the first visit home, before coming home for summer, etc.

Here are the directions for this activity:

- Separate the cards along the perforations. Keep one set and give one set to your student. Both of you can separately sort your cards into 3 piles to reflect how you think things currently are regarding each expectation:
  1. Clear Expectations: These are clear – we don’t need to talk further.
  2. Unclear Expectations - These are not yet clear – we need to talk further.
  3. Non-issue: These aren’t issues for our family currently – we don’t need to talk about it.
- Where do you agree? Where do you disagree?
- For those things that are clear (where your cards agreed), talk about the consequences – both positive and negative.
- For those that are unclear (where your cards disagreed), talk about what you might expect, and identify possible consequences – both positive and negative.
- For those things that are non-issues, explore why these are non-issues and whether they could emerge as issues once the student leaves for college.

## Notes Page

## Notes Page

# PARENT READINESS CHECK-UP

The items below describe a variety of parenting practices.

For each item, decide which score best describes you: 1 (I *almost never* do this), 2 (I *sometimes* do this), 3 (I *frequently* do this), or 4 (I *almost always* do this).

Coach	Score
I talk with my teen about nutrition, exercise, stress, and other behaviors and habits that contribute to their physical and emotional well-being.	
I provide support to my teen when they face challenges in the process of becoming more independent.	
I know when to get involved in my teen's problems and when a problem is their responsibility to solve.	
I provide opportunities for my teen to learn independent living skills such as cooking, doing laundry, managing a bank account, making appointments (e.g. dental, medical), etc.	
I talk with my teen about what's right and fair and how to care about those who are less fortunate.	
I talk with my teen about the qualities of good friends and relationships.	
I talk with my teen about what they want to do with their life and how to go about accomplishing goals.	
I ask my teen about their interests, activities, and any problems they might be having.	
Cheerleader	
I get along well with my teen.	
I apologize to my teen when my actions are hurtful.	
I respect my teen's lifestyle and attitudes even when they are different from my own.	
I acknowledge the contributions my teen makes to our family.	
I celebrate my teen's accomplishments through activities/rituals that are meaningful, fun, and/or rewarding for them.	
I communicate and check-in regularly with my teen.	
Safety Monitor	
I know when to let my teen make decisions independently and when to set limits for them.	
When I negotiate with my teen, we each express our needs and reach a compromise.	
I consider my teen's perspective and allow them to feel more understood, even if I don't give permission for what they are asking to do.	
I talk with my teen about our expectations regarding using drugs and/or alcohol.	
I talk to my teen about the consequences of their behavior.	
I give advice, criticism, and/or correction to my teen in ways that do not make them feel defensive.	
I live my life in a way that provides a good role model for my teen.	
When I suspect my teen is involved in dangerous and/or illegal behavior, I directly ask my teen about it.	
When I am concerned about my teen's behavior, I seek out resources from friends, family, and my community that might help me address the problem.	
Personal Goals	
Aside from parenting, I am satisfied and happily engaged in some kind of work or activity.	
I can identify the positive aspects of launching my teen.	
I look forward to the changing relationship I will have with my teen when they become an adult.	

## PARENT READINESS SCORES

After you complete the checklist, look at your scores in each of the parenting sections: Coach, Cheerleader, and Safety Monitor.

- Are there sections where you score mostly 3s or 4s? These roles are probably the most natural for you and represent parenting strengths.
- On which sections do you score mostly 1s and 2s? These roles are important for parents of young adults and represent areas of growth for you.

We also include a section on Personal Goals. These are important as your relationship with your young adult child shifts and grows.

*(See pages 6-9 in the handbook for descriptions and examples of different roles for parents of young adults.)*

## FINANCIAL EXPECTATIONS WORKSHEET

This worksheet contains many of the expenses that your student will eventually take on. Which ones are they responsible for now, this first year at college, and which ones will you be responsible for? Will your student's responsibilities change over the next couple years? Complete this sheet with your student. *(See page 7 in the handbook for other information on this activity.)*

Financial Issues	Specifics	Parent Pays	Student Pays
Clothes	Everyday clothes Dress-up clothes Winter coat Shoes		
Transportation	Car Insurance Gas Car maintenance Repairs Tickets Accidents Bus fare		
Food/meals	Groceries Eating out Meal plan		
Recreation/entertainment	Movies Netflix/streaming and/or rentals CDs/music downloads Activities Other		
Accommodation	Utilities (electricity, gas, phone, water/sewer, garbage, internet connection, etc.) Data plan Cell phone Housing Other		
Healthcare	Medical expenses (prescriptions, co-pays, etc.) Glasses/contacts Dentist Medical insurance		
School	Tuition Books Supplies Fees		
Vacations	Travel costs (airfare, bus, shuttle, etc.) Gas Food (groceries, eating out) Accommodations		
Personal care	Toiletries (soap, toothpaste, etc.) Haircuts/personal grooming		

## STUDENT INDEPENDENCE READINESS CHECK-UP ACTIVITY

These questions ask about some common life skills you will probably need at some point in your life in college and afterward. There are no right or wrong answers! This is just an exercise for you to take stock of your areas of strength and areas for growth.

For each item, decide which score best describes you: 1 (I *almost never* do this), 2 (I *sometimes* do this), 3 (I *frequently* do this), or 4 (I *almost always* do this). Then add up the score in each category.

	Score
<b>MONEY MANAGEMENT</b>	
1. Develop and follow a monthly “budget” for spending and saving.	
2. Make deposits and ATM transactions, check your balance before you use a debit card.	
3. Understand the pros and cons of buying on credit.	
4. Make wise decisions about how to spend my money.	
5. Put money away in savings or investments for later use.	
TOTAL	
<b>DAILY LIVING TASKS</b>	
1. Do my own laundry.	
2. Make simple repairs to my clothes like sewing on a button.	
3. Plan and fix simple meals.	
4. Shop for groceries and other household or personal needs.	
5. Use the library, internet or other resources for finding things I need.	
TOTAL	
<b>PERSONAL SELF-CARE</b>	
1. Talk over important things with at least one friend or adult in my life.	
2. Manage my life to minimize stress.	
3. Ask for help when I need it.	
4. Maintain a healthy diet and exercise level.	
5. Negotiate effectively so I can get what I need.	
TOTAL	
<b>SOCIAL SKILLS</b>	
1. Show appreciation for things that others do for me.	
2. Accept compliments graciously.	
3. Respect other people’s ways of looking at things, their lifestyles, and their attitudes. Use active listening skills.	
4. Ask questions to make sure I understand the whole situation.	
5. Speak up when there’s a problem or when I don’t think things are fair.	
TOTAL	
<b>AVOIDING TROUBLE</b>	
1. Set appropriate limits for myself around using drugs and/or alcohol.	
2. Engage in safe sex practices.	
3. Find things to do that don’t get me into trouble during my free time.	
4. Say “no” when I am faced with a decision to do something that is unsafe or I know I should not do – even in difficult situations.	
5. Consider safety as a high priority when driving or riding in a car.	
TOTAL	

SCHOOL SKILLS	
1. Look over my work for mistakes.	
2. Make a time management plan and finish my work on time.	
3. Express myself clearly in writing.	
4. Communicate with my teachers when I'm having a problem with an assignment, a test, or a situation in class.	
5. Prepare adequately for exams and presentations.	
	TOTAL
EMOTION MANAGEMENT	
1. Identify how I am feeling (i.e. angry, happy, sad, worried).	
2. Identify and use alternatives to losing my temper.	
3. Use positive self-talk to get me through a difficult situation.	
4. Consider advice or criticism without acting overly angry, sad, or defensive.	
5. Find a compromise when I disagree with someone.	
	TOTAL
PROBLEM SOLVING	
1. Ask my friends or family for ideas when I'm not sure about how to solve a problem.	
2. Deal with problems without using violence, alcohol or drugs.	
3. Consider more than one solution before choosing how to solve a problem.	
4. Manage my time effectively to avoid creating problems.	
5. Learn something when I've made a poor decision, so I don't do the same thing again.	
	TOTAL
WORK SKILLS	
1. Get to work on time and attend regularly.	
2. Ask questions when I am unclear about what's expected of me.	
3. Accept correction from my supervisor without getting defensive.	
4. Get my work done on schedule.	
5. Demonstrate a positive and respectful attitude at work.	
	TOTAL
RELATIONSHIP SKILLS	
1. Get along with the people I live with.	
2. Maintain friendships and make new friends.	
3. Communicate effectively to get along with the other people in my life.	
4. Choose friends who are good for me.	
5. Apologize for my hurtful actions and accept the apologies of others.	
	TOTAL

### INDEPENDENCE READINESS SCORES

For each category, add up your score. See where your strengths and challenges are:

#### 17-20: Smooth Sailing!

This is an area where you feel confident and skilled. You can find ways to build on and use your strengths.

#### 11-16: Rough Waters

Some parts of this area are challenging for you. Which specific skills could you work on to improve?

#### 1-10: Stormy Seas

Most parts of this area are challenging for you, and this could pose some problems. This might be an area to work on.

### Student Personal Feedback Report

What can you do to overcome the difficulties you might face once you're on your own? Which skills could you improve that might affect your life in a positive way? Identify up to 3 areas you think would most improve your readiness for independence and write your goals in the space provided on the "Moving from Values to Committed Activity" worksheet. Remember, you are more likely to do something if you can see how it will benefit you.

# COMMITTED ACTIONS WORKSHEET

The steps outlined on this worksheet can help you think through difficult decisions, identify priorities, set goals, and commit to a series of actions that will help you to live your values and achieve your goals. Page 5 of the Parent Handbook we sent to your parent or caregiver has an example of how to fill this out.

STEP	USEFUL STATEMENT/QUESTIONS	YOUR INPUT HERE
Issue	<i>I want to...</i> OR <i>I am having trouble with...</i> OR <i>I can't stand...</i>	
Values and Vision	<i>I stand for...</i> OR <i>I am committed to the value or importance of...</i> OR <i>What's my priority here?</i>	
Goals	<i>What specifically do I want to accomplish?</i>	
Action Steps	<i>What will help me move closer to my priorities?</i> AND <i>What are some specific steps I need to take this week to help me accomplish my goal?</i> AND <i>What steps do I need to take during the semester?</i>	
Barriers and Competing Commitments	<i>Things I am uncomfortable with/worried about/afraid of</i> OR <i>Circumstances that might make it hard to do this</i>	
Committed Actions	<i>I am willing to _____ in order to support my value in row 2 and achieve my goal.</i>	

# COMMITTED ACTIONS WORKSHEET

The steps outlined on this worksheet can help you think through difficult decisions, identify priorities, set goals, and commit to a series of actions that will help you to live your values and achieve your goals. Page 5 of the Parent Handbook we sent to your parent or caregiver has an example of how to fill this out.

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Action Steps	<i>What will help me move closer to my priorities?</i> AND <i>What are some specific steps I need to take this week to help me accomplish my goal?</i> AND <i>What steps do I need to take during the semester?</i>	
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Committed Actions	<i>I am willing to _____ in order to support my value in row 2 and achieve my goal.</i>	

# EXPECTATIONS

Participating in family activities

Using alcohol

Attending religious services/  
observing religion

Getting around — car rides, etc.

Grades and academic performance

Using cannabis

Using other drugs — like stimulants  
to study

Helping around the house  
when home

Spending time with friends who use  
drugs or alcohol

Choosing a career or major

Checking in — letting parents know  
where you're going and what  
you're doing

Working at a job  
(minimum/maximum number of  
hours, schedule, etc.)

Smoking cigarettes

Responsible sleep  
(going to bed, getting up in the  
morning, etc.)

Taking care of clothes — mending,  
laundry, etc.

Dating and romantic relationships  
(sexual activity, cohabiting,  
respect, etc.)

What parents/student will pay for

Tattoos, piercing

Healthy eating, exercise

Communication with parents

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# VALUES

Open-Mindedness

Fun

Prestige/Social Status

Excitement

Religion/Spirituality

Stability

Belonging to a Group

Purity

Fairness

Safety

Learning/Knowledge

Hard Work

Caring About the Earth

Accepting Others

Academic  
Achievement

Loyalty

Healthy Lifestyle

Cultural Practices/  
Maintaining Tradition

Career Achievements

Love

Altruism/  
Caring for Others

Experiencing  
New Things

Independence

Respect for Authority

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Maintaining Tradition

Career Achievements

Love

Altruism/  
Caring for Others

Experiencing  
New Things

Independence

Respect for Authority

# Online resources at WSU for you and your student

## Access Center

The Access Center provides accommodations and services to students with temporary, chronic, or permanent disabilities, including physical, health, learning, sensory, or psychological conditions. [accesscenter.wsu.edu](https://accesscenter.wsu.edu)

## Center for Community Standards

Helps students understand conduct standards, policies, and reporting procedures, including incidents related to drugs and alcohol, hazing, and academic integrity. [communitystandards.wsu.edu](https://communitystandards.wsu.edu)

## Center for Student Organizations and Leadership

Find a community from hundreds of student organizations to suit interests and passions, as well as leadership opportunities to help strengthen skills and resumes. [studentinvolvement.wsu.edu](https://studentinvolvement.wsu.edu)

## Cougar Health Services (CHS)

CHS provides primary health care, vision care, mental health care, pharmacy, and specialty care services. [cougarhealth.wsu.edu](https://cougarhealth.wsu.edu)

## Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS)

As part of their student health fee, students can access one-on-one counseling, group therapy, psychiatric services, and an after-hours crisis line. [cougarhealth.wsu.edu/counseling](https://cougarhealth.wsu.edu/counseling)

## Office of the Dean of Students

The Office of the Dean of Students is here to help students navigate life at WSU, support them through challenging times, and connect them with a wealth of information and resources. [deanofstudents.wsu.edu](https://deanofstudents.wsu.edu)

## Health Education

Provides training and workshops that support individual and community well-being, including enhancing mental wellness, reducing violence, and addressing substance use. [deanofstudents.wsu.edu/health-education](https://deanofstudents.wsu.edu/health-education)

## New Coug Orientation/Office of New Student Programs

The Family & Supporter Orientation has virtual and in-person experiences, and webinars are available at [orientation.wsu.edu/family-and-supporter-orientation](https://orientation.wsu.edu/family-and-supporter-orientation)

## Student Care Network

Are you concerned about a student? Submit a student care referral. The Student Care Team provides information and referrals for support related to academics, financial/food/housing insecurity, interpersonal conflict(s), navigating/accessing university resources, post-hospitalization, recent personal tragedy, or other problems. Always call 911 in case of emergency. [studentcare.wsu.edu](https://studentcare.wsu.edu)

## Student Centers

We have eleven student centers on campus, with mentors, tutors, and events that help celebrate the culture and identities important to a student's life. [communities.wsu.edu](https://communities.wsu.edu)

## WSU Family Webpage

The family webpage has links to resources, key dates, the CougParents Grant program, and Family weekend events. [family.wsu.edu](https://family.wsu.edu)

## WSU Pullman Parents Facebook Page

Join the official Facebook Group for parents and primary supporters of admitted and current WSU Pullman students. This group helps build community and share information about WSU Pullman and campus life. [Facebook.com/groups/WSUParent.Family](https://Facebook.com/groups/WSUParent.Family)



The "First Years Away from Home" parent handbook was developed collaboratively by researchers at Washington State University and the University of Washington. Funding to adapt and distribute the handbook comes from the Washington State Health Care Authority Division of Behavioral Health and Recovery and from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration. For questions, please contact Clara Hill at [clara.hill@wsu.edu](mailto:clara.hill@wsu.edu). Washington State University owns the copyright for this material. Please contact before reproducing.