Sacred Heart UNIVERSITY

COLLEGE... THE _____

FOUR YEARS OF YOUR LIFE: A GUIDE FOR PARENTS WRITTEN BY A MENTAL HEALTH COUNSELOR

WRITTEN BY:

James Geisler, Ph.D., NCC, LPC
Sacred Heart University, Executive Director of Wellness Services

MEET
JAMES GEISLER

James Geisler, Ph.D., NCC, LPC is the executive director of wellness services at Sacred Heart University. James began this role in 2020, but his professional journey in the field began at the SHU counseling center in 2013. During James' time at Sacred Heart, his efforts surrounding mental health support have been centered on the pillars of quality, accessibility and comprehensiveness. James currently serves as the leader of the University's mental health task force, which is working diligently on the recommendations set forth by JED, a nonprofit organization that builds upon universities' support surrounding mental health, substance use and suicide prevention. James also serves on the University's student care team, comprised of staff from departments across campus. His involvement with the counseling center, collegiate recovery program, prevention and health promotion department and health services demonstrates his unwavering commitment to enhancing student wellness at Sacred Heart University.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

"A college degree is not a sign that one is a finished product but an indication a person is prepared for life."
— Edward Malloy

"College, the _____ four years of your life." We all have heard this quote a million times, and any one of us can fill in the blank with society's blanket adjective for our experience away at college. But, parents, think back; was college really the best four years of your life?

Don't misunderstand—the college experience establishes the essential groundwork for life after graduation. Among the various paths students will navigate, college undoubtedly leads them through diverse terrain. While engaging with social justice, global, cultural and interdisciplinary issues, students are compelled to think critically about their studies and their place in the world. This unique learning, originating from the college experience, sparks a lifelong commitment to curiosity and growth, propelling individuals towards personal development and self-discovery.

However, that most anyone can pick up this guide and fill in the blank of this chapter title without hesitation is indicative of how woven this narrative is in the fabric of our society. Let's not forget how much some of us wanted college to be over when it was happening. We had freedom, but we were not excited to continue taking exams, writing papers late at night, surviving on caffeine, forming friendships while losing them at the same time, experiencing rejection and feelings of not fitting in, facing fears of entering the real world, and worrying about what our parents would think of our grades after investing time and money into our education—let alone the crippling fear of what our future would look like. We worried about our parents when we were away, even if they were healthy, which is not always the case, and we worried about whether we were really prepared for what we were up against.

"The best four years of your life"? Really?

With each year that went by since graduating, we took one step closer to glorifying the college experience. There might be some rewatching of classic college films to influence this, but think about all the other moments in your life when you told yourself how amazing it was. However, if you spoke to your former self in that era, the former self would not concur.

Since the college years, we as people have changed in so many ways. From dating to marriage, kids and careers to grief and loss and unimaginable hardship. We have seen it all, especially in the process of doing things differently than our own parents. Through these tribulations of life, we convinced ourselves that college was easy, but only in the context of something much more challenging and demanding.

When we tell our students that college is the best four years of their lives, we create an unrealistic expectation so much so that anything short of "the best" contributes to feelings of doing something wrong. In fact, highlighting this narrative also means that we omit the opportunity to normalize the true challenges students face when they come to school. Let's look at the following real-life challenges students face related to the narrative:

1. A student sees others forming friendships and social bonds. This creates an internal narrative that there is no way for them to begin making friends because everyone has done that already. The student identifies the issue as an institutional one, and concludes they may need to transfer.
2. A student fails their first exam. They were not prepared that the reality of college may include failing grades.
3. They meet their roommate for the first time, who is the opposite of what they expected, but they were always taught that their roommate will become their lifelong friend.
4. The party scene was highlighted as pivotal to the college experience, and yet the student cannot tell you where a party is happening and is not invited to anything remotely social.
5. The student experiences all the struggles above, but because they have not learned to advocate and engage in help-seeking behavior, they do not know where to begin to ask for assistance, let alone call their parents for help for the fear they will worry.

Each of the above is a symptom of "the best four years of your life." As parents, normalizing the challenges students face at college can have a positive impact on their mental health, prevent disappointment and help prepare them for the skills and resources they will need to overcome the obstacles that come their way.

As you read this booklet, we want to remind you there is always a partnership between our parents and Sacred Heart University. While sometimes this partnership may seem invisible, and other times salient, both sides are working through unique approaches—all with an eye to ensuring that students are prepared for life. While faculty and staff may be experts in their field or discipline, we see you as the experts on your students. Though our approaches and styles are different, I hope you always remember that our end goal is shared, and our support is always available.

Essential Tools Contributing to Student Wellness

Emotional Intelligence

Since communication and self-advocacy are essential life skills that become increasingly important upon entering college, emotional intelligence is an essential precursor. Emotional intelligence, a popular concept associated with the work of Daniel Goleman, is defined both by our ability to manage our own emotions and understand the emotions of others. This is more than just being self-aware, which is one essential skill within emotional intelligence. In fact, emotional intelligence includes four additional skills: self-regulation, self-motivation, empathy and social skills. Because emotional intelligence is so closely related to interpersonal relationships, students who struggle with some of the five core skills associated with emotional intelligence routinely run into challenges in communication with roommates, friends, staff, faculty and parents.

Let's look at the five core components of emotional intelligence.

Self-Awareness

Self-awareness is defined as the ability to assess our own emotions, their source and understand the precipitating events that brought these feelings on. Beyond emotions, self-awareness also includes our strengths and weaknesses. You can imagine that to begin to understand the emotions of others would be quite challenging without the self-awareness and curiosity about our own. Students can enhance their self-awareness through the following ways:

- Journaling
- Making intentional time for reflectivity (cell phones aside)
- Reminding themselves that there are no "negative feelings." They are just feelings. Without labeling feelings as positive/negative, students can try to be more curious about where their emotions come from, when they are present vs. when they are not and how they relate to mood, behavior and interactions with others

RESOURCE ALERT!
Sacred Heart University provides students with access to a Buddhist chaplain who conducts three meditation sessions each Wednesday. This initiative fosters an environment conducive to deliberate self-awareness and tranquility.

Self-Regulation

Self-regulation is the ability to regulate emotions and reactions without impulsivity. This can be done through behavioral techniques such as mindfulness or breath work, but also in cognitive ways such as recognizing negative thought patterns and challenging these negative thoughts before they elicit a strong emotional or behavioral response. Self-regulation builds one's resiliency and raises one's tolerance of discomfort when challenged with high stress situations.

Some skills students can try to regulate emotions include:

- Breathing techniques
- Mindfulness
- Body scans
- Cognitive triangle practice and distorted thinking pattern work

DID YOU KNOW...?

Our counselors do more than just counseling! We offer consultations, various workshops, presentations at colloquiums, outreach opportunities, campus-wide programming and even teach sections of our First-Year Experience (FYE) course. All these opportunities are designed for students to develop many of the skills outlined in this guide.

Self-motivation

Self-motivation is defined as the personal drive to accomplish goals, the effort to achieve them and the commitment to stay with them during times of adversity. This also includes seeking out challenges, looking for opportunities to grow and possessing perseverance.

Students can enhance self-motivation by:

- Understanding what they want to achieve with clarity, and knowing when they achieved it
- Knowing the difference between internal motivation and external motivation
- Reflecting on the learning moments within their challenges as opposed to highlighting challenges solely as negative experiences
- Leaning into moments that bring about anxiety or discomfort, instead of avoiding them
- Embracing the process rather than the result

Empathy

Empathy is the ability to understand the thoughts, perspectives and emotions of others. Having empathy gives us the power to step outside ourselves, to truly attempt to experience that of another and be curious through the lens in which the other person experiences a situation. Simply put, empathy challenges us to step outside of ourselves and into the shoes of others.

Students can work on enhancing their empathy through:

- Sharing their own emotions
- Stepping outside their comfort zone and exposing themselves to community causes
- Challenging themselves often to take the perspective of someone else
- Surrounding themselves with others who have had different life experiences

Social Skills

Social skills is a broad term that involves all social interactions including those with friends, roommates, professors, staff and parents. It includes the skills needed to effectively manage emotions in the presence of others. Through this skill development, students can build stronger bonds, relationships and meaningful connections.

Some helpful building blocks to social skills include:

- Active listening skills
- Understanding nonverbal communication (gestures, facial expressions, body language, etc.)
- Listening to understand, not to respond
- Reflecting on the question, “How do you know someone else is truly listening to you?”

RESOURCE ALERT!

Campus ministry provides valuable opportunities for students to connect with a diverse range of life experiences among their peers, thereby fostering empathy and understanding through its wide selection of events and programs.

TRY THIS!

Below are some hypothetical scenarios that a college student may face. As you read them, reflect on which emotional intelligence competencies your specific student may need to work on to manage these situations:

1. Your student's roommate plays music loudly when your student is trying to study for a big exam the next day. As it gets later and your student needs sleep, the roommate invites people over to hang out.
2. During the second week of school, your student was asked to meet up with a group of friends for dinner. When your student arrives at the dining hall, none of them are there, and they won't respond to texts.
3. Your student just found out that they did not pass one of their biggest exams of the semester. There is only one assignment remaining that will determine if they pass the course or not.
4. Your student's roommate makes an insensitive comment about something personal to your student. The roommate knows about your student's experience related to this and does not appear to understand the impact of the comments.

Regardless of their environment or the situations they are placed in, students who take the time to build on these five core skills often feel confident and in control, whatever the external stressors facing them. These essential skills will be necessary upon graduating, and college is the "dress rehearsal" for the emotional intelligence they will need in the workplace.

RESOURCE ALERT!

Students who come to the counseling center with interpersonal challenges can expect to work on social skills through a variety of clinical interventions. In addition, the various groups offered in the center are another way students can practice these skills in the presence of both a counselor and peers experiencing similar challenges.

Boundaries

Boundaries refers broadly to setting limits, parameters and expectations so that we as individuals can function without feeling overwhelmed, overstimulated or controlled by the things around us. Boundaries are fundamental to many aspects outside the classroom. Here are a few examples of issues that fall under the umbrella of boundaries that are most essential to that of a college student.

Assertiveness

Assertiveness can often be misconstrued as rude or aggressive. However, assertiveness is simply communicating one's point of view, thoughts or feeling in a clear and direct way. Those who are assertive do not "talk around things" and, in the process of being clear and direct, are respectful of the person they are communicating with, which is essential to healthy communication. Students who are assertive in their communication also exhibit a level of confidence, especially when advocating for their needs. Some helpful components students can practice for assertiveness include:

- Good eye contact
- Confident body posture
- Planning what to say ahead of time (to ensure it's clear, direct and does not blame the other person)
- Timing of messages

Saying No

From a young age, we have learned that no is disrespectful and challenges authority. While this still can remain true, saying no when it comes to boundary setting is quite helpful for one's mental health and wellness. Saying no requires assertiveness and confidence along with a level of self-awareness. When we say no to the things we believe will impact our workload, we prevent burnout, save emotional and cognitive energy and also feel a greater sense of appreciation and gratitude for the things we have said yes to.

Some helpful ways students can say no as it relates to boundaries include:

- Evaluating where current time and energy goes: when will they need to say no?
- Saying no to the obligation/offer, not the person
- Providing a rationale associated with the no (this can help the other person better understand what your students currently has on their plate and can even lead to an empathetic response)
- Practicing saying no with those they're most comfortable with first

Time Management

Just as we set boundaries in social situations, we need to set boundaries with how we spend our time. In college, time management is not just related to academics, it includes athletics, extracurricular activities and social situations. It also requires a deeper understanding and awareness of how balanced our life is. Lack of balance, in fact, is what brings the majority of students to the counseling center. For some, they study too much and do not take the time to invest in their social life; similarly, the opposite occurs, which directly affects the time dedicated to academics and attending class. Here are some helpful time management tools students should begin experimenting with in preparation for college:

- Complete a "wellness wheel." Many versions and templates can be found on Google, or students can consult with a counselor at college to assist in this assessment. Which areas of their wheel are the most full? Which are the most depleted? How does time management play a role in these? Completing this as a parent can better help you understand the value of this exercise.
- Limit distractions (phones, phones, phones)
- Prioritize tasks (not just doing tasks that are easy)
- Set goals
- Keep a calendar and be intentional about where time goes. Is their schedule reactive or proactive?

RESOURCE ALERT!

The Office of Student Accessibility (OSA) has one of the best online resource pages for students as it relates to learning strategies. On the OSA website, students can learn strategies for notetaking, test preparation, reading, writing and, you guessed it, time management!

Managing Social Media/Technology Usage

Counselors often assess the role social media and technology have in a student's life, because they know how much this affects their mental health. Without boundaries related to how much time students spend scrolling on Instagram or Tik Tok, they begin to sacrifice the aspects of their lives that are fundamental to their wellness (attaining personal goals, social connection, nutrition, exercise and time outdoors). Some of the mental health challenges stemming from social media include negative self-image, social comparison, an ongoing fear of missing out, addiction, procrastination, depression and anxiety, sleep disturbances and a lack of social interaction. As parents, it is important to create conversations for boundaries surrounding social media and challenge students to think about the role it plays in their overall wellness.

Students can help to manage technology usage by:

- Developing an audit of how much they use social media currently and how much they would like to cut this down
- Downloading apps designed to limit screen time
- Hiding social media apps in folders to make them less accessible
- Shutting off their phones during study times to prevent distraction
- Creating off-limit areas in their life where social media is not present, i.e. in bed, during meals, etc.

Respecting the Boundaries of Others

Many students will be sharing personal space with someone for the first time. In the unstructured life of college, you can imagine that downtime spent in a room without clear boundaries and mutual understanding can create challenges for students. Emotional intelligence skills are necessary when it comes to the boundaries of others, especially in the initial days and weeks at the start of the first semester. Students will need to be clear about their needs as they relate to quiet time, personal time and personal space, but they also need to lean into the needs of their roommate(s). Finding compromises that cover everyone's needs with an ongoing commitment to reevaluate how boundaries are being respected is very important. Most interpersonal issues that make their way to the counseling center have a strong foundation in a lack of respect for the boundaries. As parents, it is important to talk to your student about the need to respect the boundaries of others, even when students have "matched" well with their roommate. There may be challenges they did not anticipate. These specific cases often present more challenges, because students were under the false assumption that because they connected well initially, there shouldn't be boundary issues.

Ways students can respect the boundaries of others include:

- Practicing active listening skills
- Engaging in perspective-taking exercises (i.e. reflecting on daily interactions, exposing themselves to diversity, seeking feedback from others or even watching documentaries with intentional attention towards the viewpoints of all characters depicted)
- Responding in conversation with others, especially challenging ones, like they would with their best friend
- Educating themselves on the cultural, personal and social challenges that differ among communities and individuals and practicing the use of compassionate and accepting language towards those of diverse backgrounds

RESOURCE ALERT!
SHU has over 100 resident success assistants (RSAs) trained to help residential students navigate boundary issues that can result in increased empathy.

Setting Personal Limits

As previously mentioned, too much of anything creates an imbalance that often brings students to the counseling center. Creating a healthy balance of activities and structure in one's life involves the need to set personal limits. It is usually high-achieving students who are used to filling their plates with many activities that struggle the most, often because they try to continue these efforts during a time of transition and change. While students are encouraged to engage in extracurricular activities, build social relationships and invest in their academics, they also need to create an ongoing assessment of their own limits in their workload, their time dedicated to social activities and other obligations that create burnout and feeling overwhelmed. Every day is an opportunity for students to reflect on their personal limits.

Some helpful tools that students can use to support personal limits include:

- Creating "milestones" throughout the semester (students can even schedule this in their phones) as a check-in on where they feel they are in their current workload and dedication to nonacademic obligations. Are they too invested in academics without any room for other obligations, or are other obligations taking over their current need to focus on academics? As a parent, you can help facilitate these check-ins and be curious about your students' findings.
- Assessing priorities! Students who practice assessing their priorities can take a step back and look at their time much differently than students who do not take this assessment.
- Creating a schedule and a routine that makes sense and staying true to it. Note that because class times vary each semester, there will be a need to re-evaluate this routine.

RESOURCE ALERT!
All First-Year Experience (FYE) courses are led by both an instructor and a student FYE assistant. Setting personal limits is a component of the FYE curriculum that students will connect with in their first weeks on campus. FYE assistants are a helpful resource in and out of this course, especially if students need additional support with the material. It is not uncommon for students to use their FYE instructor and assistant as a resource even after the course ends!

Help-Seeking Skills

Help-seeking behavior can be defined as a student's intentional actions directed at seeking help from a trusted professional during times of high stress, trouble or confusion. One of the things I love about Sacred Heart is the amount of support and resources available to students. However, these resources cannot be effective if the students do not connect with them. Students will need both academic help-seeking skills and resource help-seeking skills for nonacademic support needs.

Help-seeking on the academic side can include students reaching out for time management support, help with completing projects and deadlines, absorbing information, study techniques and course expectations. I encourage parents to explore the lengthy research on academic help-seeking behavior and its relationship to student success.

Help-seeking on the resource side can include support from health services, the counseling center, residential life, campus ministry, dining, career, the registrar, the office of student success and advising—just to name a few.

Stigmas in our larger society can impede a student's ability to ask for help. It is important that students know about campus resources, how to use them, when to use them and, most of all, practice asking for help when early signs of a struggle begin. Students can also benefit from reflecting on the pros and cons of asking for help to understand that, often, the benefits outweigh the risks.

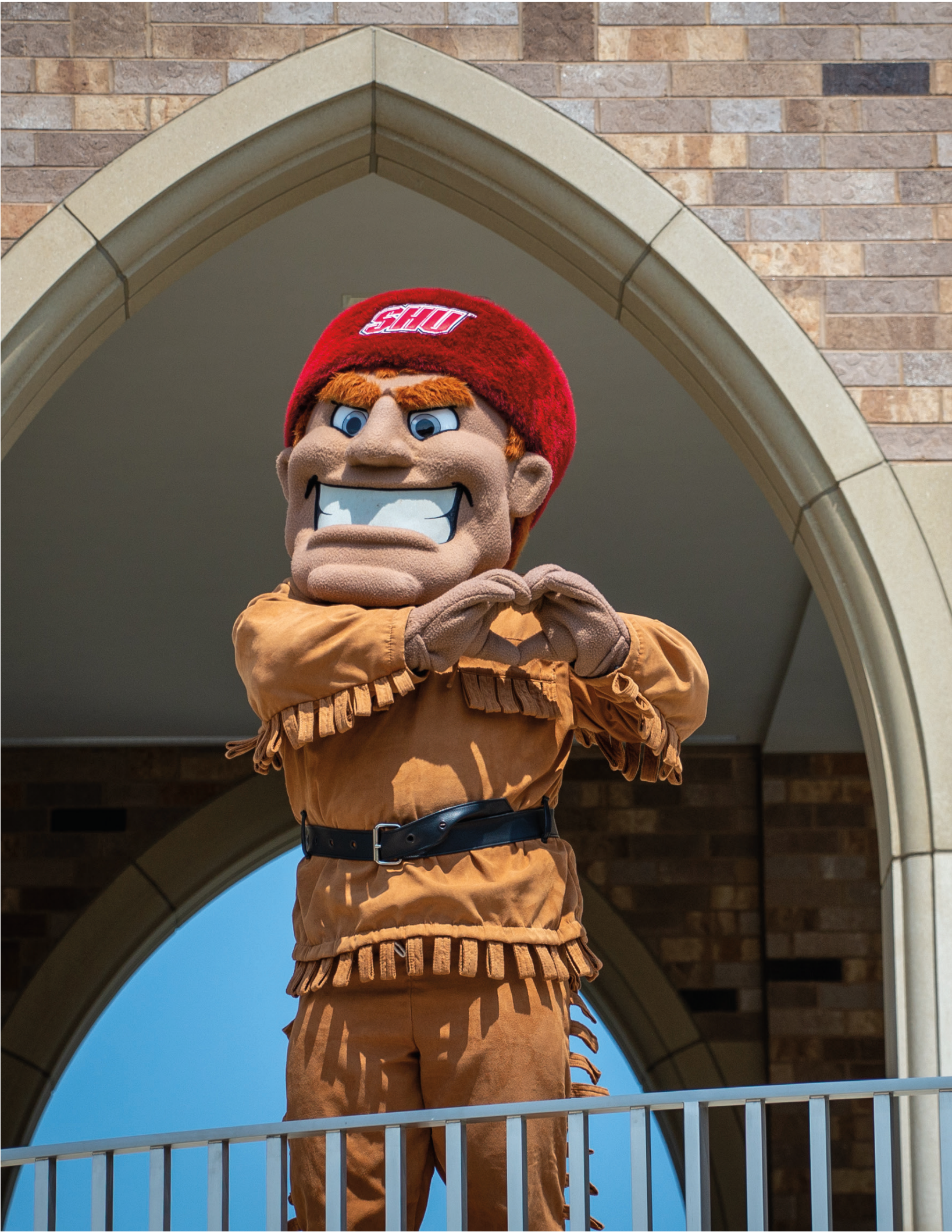
As parents, it's important to listen for challenges in conversations with your student. When you observe them, you should clearly communicate this observation, provide empathy and ask open-ended questions to facilitate their own reflection and problem-solving skills. Below are two examples of what this might sound like:

"I hear the academics are taking their toll on you. This must be hard for you right now. What resources have you considered accessing to alleviate these stressors?"

Or:

"It sounds like your living situation is an ongoing challenge lately. I remember the feeling, and conflict is never comfortable. With so many resources like residential life and the counseling center, I am wondering at what point you feel you will need to bring those resources in for support?"

Before students come to college, I encourage parents to have their student schedule at least several appointments for themselves. Sounds silly, right? If students have never picked up the phone and asked for something they need in a vulnerable way, how can they do it when they are alone at college? Within the first few weeks, their environments will create conditions where asking for what they need is the only option.


SHU

The Three Billboards I Hope Parents Read on the Road to College

In Tim Ferris' book, *Tribe of Mentors*, he asks some of the most successful people in the world the question, "If you could have a gigantic billboard anywhere with anything on it, what would it say and why?"

This question is unique; it challenges someone to think of what messages their experiences have brought them to embrace the most. To put it on a billboard, figuratively, involves a personal buy-in to a quote or concept that they hope reaches a larger audience. With that, here are my top three billboards that have implications for parent support while students are away at college.

1. "You have survived 100% of your worst days."

Every one of us has survived 100% of our worst days. Why might this quote be helpful for college students? It reminds us that our life before college wasn't part of a different book or even a different world; it was a different chapter in the same story of our life. The discomfort that comes with change and growth are not unfamiliar to us, and yet, we stand here today as survivors of those challenging times. When we reflect on this, we remind ourselves of possibilities, not limitations. We embrace our ability to be resilient and remind ourselves of where we came from. As parents, serving as a gentle reminder of this can help students get back on track and find themselves and solutions during times of great adversity.

2. "Sometimes we think we are helping, when we are actually creating greater challenges."

These words are often hard for parents to hear, but knowing I would put it on a billboard tells you that my experience has created the need for a larger audience to hear it. As a parent myself, I know we want to save our children from experiencing pain, discomfort and feeling lost. However, to alleviate these uncomfortable emotions, we tend to remove the obstacles for them. These obstacles, as we know, are a part of life and can never be avoided in the real world. We often forget that these hurdles have created some of the most triumphant and beautiful moments of our life.

Take two examples where parents think they are helping their students, but often are creating greater difficulties:

> *Example 1:* A student is struggling academically with a statistics course and is crying uncontrollably on the phone. They plead with you to tell them what to do. As a parent, you strongly encourage them to drop the course and express that academics shouldn't cause this much distress. The student thanks you and feels immediate relief.
>
> *Repercussion:* The statistics course is a required course for the student's major. Not only will they have to take the course again and experience the same challenges, but they were also not given the opportunity to ask for academic support or solve the problem on their own. In addition, they have likely created a negative association with that course and may see future solutions related to academic stress as dropping the course.
>
> *Example 2:* Your student calls upset and telling you they didn't anticipate that college would be so hard. They tell you they are very anxious, and they need you to come get them right away. You jump in the car and bring them home for several days until they can collect their feelings.
>
> *Repercussion:* Like incident #1, because the uncomfortable feelings were followed by removal from the stressor, this new avoidance creates a larger fear and an association that college is not an emotionally safe place. Most students in this situation are terrified to return, and it is not uncommon for parents to call expressing that they cannot get their student back to school and don't know what to do.

3. "How do you define failure?"

Each year at orientation, the counselors conduct a session with students in which they provide them with a series of statements and have them respond yes or no. When students have responded to all the prompts on the sheet, they give their paper to another student. From here, the counselors read back the statement, and the students, now holding the answers of one of their peers, stand up when the answer to each statement is yes. The goal is to help normalize for students that they are all exhibiting the same thoughts and feelings about the transition to college. Through this exercise, they feel more connected and less alone.

One statement is: "I am afraid to fail." I have been a witness to over 12 of these sessions in a chapel full of students, and every time, over 90% of students stand up and say, "I am afraid to fail."

Your student is afraid to fail. The question becomes: How do they define failure? How do you define failure? What have conversations looked like surrounding failure? And most of all, when conversations surrounding failure have not occurred, how will your student fill in the gap with what they believe failure is?

Many students come to the counseling center with secrets kept from their parents. In many of these situations, they lie to their parents for fear of their reaction. Our job as counselors is to help students realize that facilitating communication with their parents may actually alleviate suffering, but they need the tools to approach you. That's where we come in. These students often fear that they are failing their parents through a variety of ways. The problem is that failure looks very different for each student. I have seen students receive a B and declare this a failure to themselves and their parents. I have seen students feel they have failed their parents when they don't make friends right away. And, I have seen students communicate they will never live up to the expectations of their parents.

Students need you to calm their minds and create an open line of communication when they're struggling or in need of guidance.

The Frequently Asked Questions from Orientation and Beyond

1. I had ongoing communication with my son/daughter's therapist back home; how can I keep this going with their therapist at school?

Unless your student has signed a release of information allowing the University counseling center to have communication with a parent, the counseling center is ethically and legally bound by confidentiality.

I always joke with parents that we have had the same stack of blank releases in our office for 10 years. Often, parents want to have communication with the counselor, but the students do not.

In the same vein, parents must also be familiar with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), a federal law pertaining to the privacy of students' educational records. These records cannot be disclosed without the signed authorization of the student through a FERPA waiver.

2. How can SHU's counseling center see my student in addition to their seeing their counselor back home on a weekly basis?

SHU's counseling center does not engage in duplication of treatment, meaning having two therapists working simultaneously with a student. The student needs to identify their treatment needs and which treatment provider is best suited to address these needs while keeping in mind the frequency and accessibility for sessions. This is different from a therapist who only sees students, say, when they are home for the summer but not while at school. Of course, if your student is in need of an urgent session, and their therapist is unable to meet with them, the counseling center schedules same-day appointments for urgent matters Monday-Friday.

3. I am my son/daughter's health care proxy. How can I access their records in the University counseling center or fax you proof of this?

Because a health care proxy involves making medical decisions on your student's behalf in the event they are not able to on their own, this information would be needed at a local hospital, not a counseling center.

4. Why does the counseling center not offer weekly counseling for students?

Different from the therapy your student may receive from home, counseling centers at universities do not have the capacity to provide weekly therapy to students. These centers are short-term and goal focused, with a high ratio of students to counselors focused on current needs.

5. Why can't my son/daughter's therapist meet with them via telehealth while they are at school?

Every state is different regarding the laws and policies around interstate counseling.

Where the client and the counselor are located could affect the ability for students to have sessions. While there are some providers who may reject the current guidelines, students should not count on it. It is recommended that prior to students transitioning to college, they speak with their provider about what sessions would look like if attending school out of state.

6. I have never wanted my student to be on medication. How can I ensure that they will not schedule an appointment with the campus prescriber?

Every family has their own opinions about medication, and every counseling center should be respectful in responding to these concerns. However, college students are adults who have their own agency to consult with a prescriber for medication. I have found that students whose parents do not condone the use of medication seek it out eventually. However, I have also had the pleasure of working with providers who welcome families into session with the permission of the student. When parents are involved, their concerns are brought forward and addressed to better help everyone feel more comfortable about the options available.

7. Should my student make a counseling appointment in the summer?

Appointments for the fall are scheduled just prior to students physically arriving on campus. Most students who think they will need an appointment are worried that they will not get one, which is never the case. The counseling center has accommodated all student requests for appointments within business hours. In fact, it is not uncommon for many students to think they will need an appointment right away. But instead, they settle in and assess their need for counseling as the semester progresses.

8. If my student needs privacy for a telehealth appointment in their dorm, how should they work this out?

Students should always attempt to communicate to their roommates their need for privacy. While students have found some success approaching their resident hall director to borrow an open office in their residential building, the students who have worked in appointments based on their roommates' schedules, or have communicated their need for time alone, have never needed to seek help from residential life staff.

9. If my student comes to SHU and realizes they need weekly treatment in the community or a specialized treatment, is there someone to assist with referrals?

Yes! The counseling center has a case manager whose role is to connect students to the community if this need is identified. This professional can be reached by calling the main counseling center number.

10. Do you provide group counseling?

Yes! The offerings for group counseling vary each semester based on the needs of the University community. While historically, it has been a challenge to get students to attend, the counseling center staff know the value that these groups provide and have begun to be creative in the offerings. Past groups have included topics such as The Identity of a Nursing Student, Grief and Loss, Therapeutic Art, LGBTQ+ Support and a group for injured athletes.

11. What should I do if I'm worried about the well-being of my student?

First and foremost, communicate to your student the cause for concern. Ask them if they are aware of the on-campus resources they believe will be most helpful for their situation. You can also be direct in asking them if they would consider help from the counseling center, and if they agree, encourage them to contact us via phone or email. If you have an immediate concern, or believe your student is in distress but not in the state to ask for it on their own, you can contact public safety who will coordinate with residential life for a wellness check. Additionally, you can contact the counseling center and request to speak to someone about your concerns during the office's business hours.

12. How can I support/encourage my student to use the available campus resources that can support their mental health?

If you feel your student needs on-campus mental health support, but has not yet contacted this office, it's important to take a nonthreatening approach to understanding the barriers. The more information you have as a parent, the better you can challenge misperceptions or take the fear out of scheduling. For example, if your student tells you they're worried there won't be appointments, you can confirm for them that the counseling center has several options for scheduling, including same-day appointments. Also, if your student verbalizes that they don't feel the need for counseling yet, facilitate a conversation about when they think they might need it.

13. How quickly can my student get an appointment if they are really struggling? I have heard of some schools having long waitlists.

The counseling center at Sacred Heart has not had a waitlist in four years. The structure of services at the counseling center allows for regularly scheduled sessions and same-day appointments for students with an urgent need. Students have never experienced challenges getting an appointment within their desired timeline.

14. What should my student do if they have a psychological crisis situation outside of normal counseling center hours?

You or your student should call public safety at 203-371-7995. If deemed necessary, one of our counselors will be contacted to assess the situation over the phone.

15. Should I invest in tuition insurance?

The choice to purchase tuition insurance varies by family. Look into the policy available and make a determination based on what you believe is the best choice for your family.

Conclusion

I wrote this booklet because of too many conversations with parents who said, “I wish there was a guide about how to support my student through this time” or “Everyone talks about how fun and exciting college is, but I never hear about the challenges students might actually face.”

As a parent myself and someone who oversees a department where students who struggle seek help, I felt an obligation to provide transparency about possible struggles students may face and the tools, resources, reminders and support available to help guide them along this journey.

If your student made the decision to come to Sacred Heart, they couldn’t have chosen a better institution. We hope you have felt and will continue to feel the support that makes our institution a special place.

I strongly believe that every parent is doing what they believe is best at any given moment. If it’s hard, you’re doing it right.

In support and a phone call away,

James Geisler, Ph.D., NCC, LPC
Executive Director of Wellness Services

Sacred Heart
UNIVERSITY