

A Parent's and Supporter's Guide to the First Year of University



Making the **Transition**



**Saint Mary's
University**



A Parent's & Supporter's Guide
to the First Year of University

Introduction 4

Adjusting to University..... 5

Month by Month..... 8

Helping to Ease the Transition 12

Supporting Your Student..... 14

Supporter Transition 15

International Supporters 16

Student Privacy..... 17

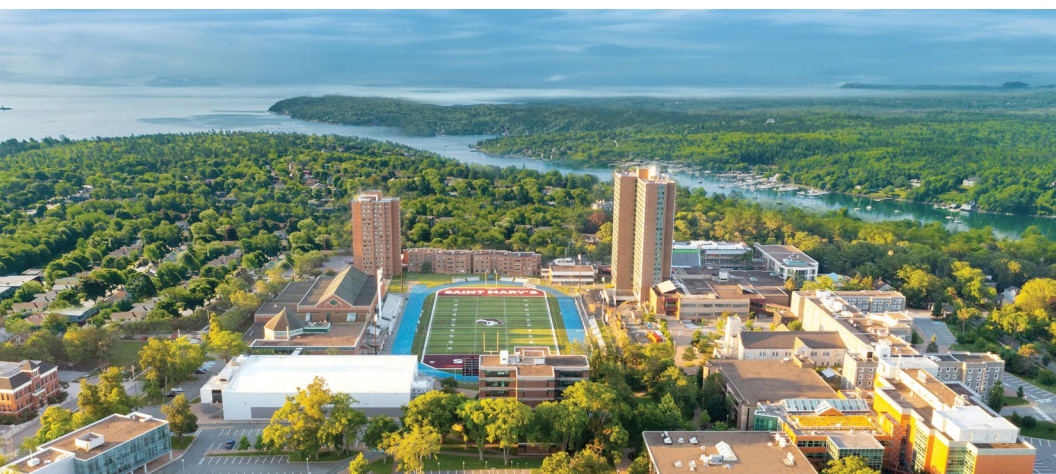
Saint Mary's is Here to Help 18

Congratulations!

If you are reading this guide, chances are someone you know is preparing to embark on a new and exciting stage of life – their university experience. The transition to university can be an exhilarating yet anxious time for the first-year student. As a supporter, you play a vital role in helping your student adjust to a new environment and the increased freedom and responsibility that comes with it. At the same time, you will no doubt be experiencing mixed emotions of your own, ranging from pride and excitement, to worry.

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

Please remember: there are many people on campus who are happy to help and answer any question you may have. A list of key resources and telephone numbers is located on page 18 of this booklet. Do not hesitate to contact us!



Adjusting to University

All first-year students require a period of adjustment during their transition into university. Every student is unique and may adapt differently than others. Below are some of the areas your student may experience adjustment.

New Environment

One of the most exciting parts of university is the fresh learning environment that it brings for students. There are many adjustments including new styles of instruction compared to the traditional classroom instruction they may have previously been familiar with. Also, students will have much more freedom and must maintain their own discipline to stay connected with online aspects of their course work. Here at SMU, every effort is made to keep classes small; however, some first-year courses have more than 100 students. As your student progresses through their degree their class sizes will get smaller as students 'specialize' and settle into their chosen majors.

Time Management and Learning Strategies

The demands of university require that students must spend more time on their studies, even if "homework" is not given. As a general rule, students should spend three hours studying for every hour that is spent in the classroom, whether it is working on assignments or keeping up-to-date on readings. Some students do not learn the needed study skills in high school and consequently can struggle. The first year is about learning to adapt to new academic demands and learning to manage their time effectively. Coaching and resources are available through the Student Success Centre to help students build and improve their skills for academic success.

Increased Freedom and Flexibility

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





Change in Social Support Systems

It is not uncommon for first year students to know very few people when they first begin their studies. Even students whose friends do come to the same university usually find that few, if any of these friends end up in their classes. Making new friends can be difficult at first and students may feel isolated and alone until they are able to do so. We encourage students to attend Welcome Weeks events and activities to meet people in the SMU community.

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

Struggle with Independence

By the age of 17 or 18, young adults begin dealing with the challenges involved in becoming independent and autonomous. At this time in their lives, they are defining their own identities, challenging existing values and beliefs, and finding what works for them. This process of separation and self-discovery can be exciting and difficult for young adults and their supporters.

Month by Month

What they may be experiencing

How you can help

SEPTEMBER

- Excitement/anxiety over meeting new friends and starting a new chapter
- Disorientation due to a sudden change in culture and physical space
- Testing new-found freedom
- Financial pressure to pay tuition and buy school supplies
- Frequent calls and/or visits home
- Homesickness and loneliness
- Anxiety about roommates, professors and classes

- Decide on an appropriate schedule for you to contact your student if they are living away from home.
- Offer support by listening in a non-judgmental manner.
- Encourage your student to meet new people, participate in University activities and events and ask them about their experiences.

OCTOBER

- Roommate problems may begin to arise
- Initial excitement of university begins to wear off
- Students question "do I fit in here?"
- First mid-term exams
- Excitement and/or anxiety regarding going home or not for Thanksgiving
- Relationship issues with pre-university friends and significant others
- Students start to look for ways to get involved

- If your student is living away from home, this is a great time to send a care package.
- This can be a time of academic difficulty as your student begins midterm exams. Be understanding of these challenges and encourage them to seek additional academic supports.
- Encourage them to find a SMUSA Society at smusa.ca or volunteer activity at career360.smu.ca to be involved with.

NOVEMBER

- Mid-term grades returned
- Realization that old study habits may no longer be effective
- Many papers are due as the workload increases
- Cold and flu season; students can visit the Student Health Clinic on-campus
- Anxiety over preparations for final exams; what will they be like?
- Procrastination and working all night
- Financial stress

- Be understanding about their availability to communicate with you at this point. This is a very busy time in the semester.
- Support your student by listening when they need you.
- Help to arrange plans for fall break and the holiday break upcoming in December.

DECEMBER

- Excitement and/or anxiety regarding going home (or not) for the holidays; need to express new self at home; "I've changed mentality"
- Sadness about leaving new friendships
- Shorter days, less sunlight may have an effect on mental health
- Anxiety over final exams

- Understand that your student has developed more independence over the last few months. If they are home for the holiday break, allow them to have the space they need.
- Consider inviting a friend or roommate to your home for the holidays if that individual won't be travelling to their own home.
- Understand that receiving first semester grades can be stressful. Be supportive and suggest SMU resources for next semester if the student isn't pleased with their academic performance.

Month by Month

What they may be experiencing

How you can help

JANUARY

- "Fresh start" mentality sets in
- Difficulty getting back into the study groove again
- Satisfaction and/or disappointment with 1st semester grades
- Homesickness
- Changing courses, majors or even programs
- Loneliness for relationships back home

- There are other involvement opportunities that arise in January. Encourage your student to participate in university activities.
- Encourage student to set goals based on their experience in first semester.
- Returning to studies after the holiday break can be difficult. Ask your student if there is anything you can do to support them.
- Encourage exploration if students are considering academic changes. Ensure they seek advice from Academic Advisors when making these considerations.

FEBRUARY

- Feeling of isolation and possible seasonal affective disorder (SAD)
- Mid-terms and papers due
- Potential increase in alcohol and other substance use due to stress
- Excitement and/or disappointment regarding spring break plans, deciding between studying or having fun

- Encourage your student to make meaningful use of their spring break time.
- Encourage exercise and a balanced diet. This is another great time to send a care package.

Certain times of the year tend to be challenging for students in different ways. Supporters who understand the ups and downs of the academic year are better able to support their students as they make the transition to university. Listed here are some (but not all) of the typical emotions and behaviours that students experience throughout the first year.

MARCH	• Anxiety regarding finding a roommate for next year • Academic stress is high • Midterm exam stress • Concern over summer employment	• Try not to ask for too much of their time as this is a very busy period.
APRIL	• Excitement with arrival of spring and end of 1st year • Concern over declaring a major • Final exam anxiety • Apprehension about returning home (or not) for the summer • Sadness over leaving new friendships • Realization of how university performance can influence life and career decisions	• Offer them congratulations on completing their first-year of studies. • Encourage them to take a moment and write down some goals for their second year so they can look back on them in September.

Remember: these are common emotions for students to experience, but every student experiences their first year differently. Try not to assume that your student is experiencing these emotions but make sure to keep informed on how they are doing.

Helping to Ease the Transition

Your student may experience some difficulty with at least some of the transitions mentioned in this booklet. Here are four key things you can do to help make them easier:

Become Aware of the Available Services and Resources

When students ask questions or need guidance, you can help set them in the right direction. Encourage them to take advantage of campus resources and to read all of the material that the university has available.

Have Realistic Expectations

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

Encourage Involvement in an Extracurricular Activity

Learning is not restricted to the classroom or to a textbook. By joining a campus society, participating in an intramural sports team or volunteering, students learn new skills, improve self-esteem, meet other students with similar interests, and develop a more fulfilling, balanced student life.

Learn to Let Go

With big transitions comes challenges. Your student is beginning to find their independence which may result in disagreements. When this happens, try and take a step back and let your student exercise greater autonomy and personal responsibility. Reassure them that you are always there for them if they need your advice or support, and that you are also happy to listen.

Student Perspective

What We Want You to Know

- University is not a 9-5 job. Evening and weekend study is required.
- Administrative processes take time and may not be completed within a single visit.
- Some new stress can occur in the transition from high school to university.
- Students feel academic pressure in the first year of university.
- There are other expenses in addition to tuition fees.

How You Can Support Your Student

- Support and encourage good study habits, but try not to be overbearing.
- Give freedom to succeed or fail and to take responsibility for their own education.
- Give freedom to learn how to cope with the new environment.
- Give encouragement and support to keep trying and to do well.
- Relieve them from the responsibility of some of the time-consuming tasks around the house.
- Let them try something new or different from previous interests.
- Limit strong negative reactions and judgements.



Supporting Your Student

Every student will have different needs during their transition. Here are a few ways you can help during the transition period:

Before classes begin:

- Teach them budgeting/financial management skills.
- Teach them interpersonal skills to deal with a roommate.
- Offer time management advice.
- Educate on the importance of leading a balanced lifestyle, and the body's need for nutrition and sufficient rest (youth between ages 18-25 should get 8 hours of sleep a night).
- Help them develop stress management techniques and inform them of the importance of exercise and healthy eating.

While they are at university:

- Be a good listener.
- Show interest in their studies and personal growth.
- Keep an open mind as they begin to demonstrate their independence.
- Don't set unrealistic expectations.
- Stay in touch. Agree to a weekly time for phone calls and send care packages when possible.
- Ask open-ended questions - "how is your work going?" is different than "is your week going well?"

Red Flags - When you should become more involved:

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

Supporter Transition

What You Can do for Yourself:

- Learn about resources available at Saint Mary's.
- Expect changes as your student begins this phase of life.
- Do not take it personally if your student does not seem to need you anymore. They are simply demonstrating their independence.
- Share your feelings with other student supporters.
- Seek out information (books or credible websites) on the first-year experience.



International Supporters

What You Need to Know

- Know the time difference between your home and Halifax. Set up a time to talk to your student so they know when to expect a call.
- Sometimes student jobs will not provide enough money to cover tuition fees or all of the living expenses. It is difficult to find jobs right away and the hours are limited (students doing full course loads are recommended to work no more than 15-17 hours a week).
- Ensure that your student has a complete eye exam and dental exam before coming to Canada. Glasses and dental work can be very expensive in Canada.
- Where possible, transfer tuition funds directly to their SMU account but but also transfer spending money for day-to-day expenses to the student's bank account. When the student travels to Canada, they should bring some extra money in case of an emergency or delay along the way.
- University tuition fees are increasing each year by a small percentage. Be sure to account for this and the high cost of textbooks when budgeting for fees.



Student Privacy

While we understand that you have a keen interest in your student's progress and accomplishments at university, much of the information you might seek from SMU is restricted due to the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act.

The information protected by this Act includes, but is not limited to: grades and transcripts, medical information, financial information, daily schedule and locations of classes and other personal information.

This information is only accessible when there is written consent from the student or if their emergency contact needs to be reached.

If you have further concerns about your student's well-being, have open conversations with them to stay connected and better able to discuss important issues.



Supports for Students

Need help but unsure where to go?

We've chosen some starting points of support for you:

Academic Supports

Connect with your Academic Advisor!

Contact information for Advisors in each faculty can be found online at smu.ca/academics/academic-advising

Learning Skills support-studentsuccess@smu.ca

Writing Centre-studio@smu.ca

Patrick Power Library-Access@smu.ca

Services for Students

Black Student Advisor-blackstudent.advisor@smu.ca

Indigenous Student Advisor-indigenous.advisor@smu.ca

International Student Centre-
international.centre@smu.ca • smu.ca/isc

Career & Experiential Learning-cel@smu.ca • smu.ca/cel

Fred Smithers Centre for Student Accessibility-
fredsmithers.centre@smu.ca • smu.ca/fsc

Housing & Residence-residence.housing@smu.ca •
smu.ca/student-life/residences-and-housing

Student Success Centre-studentsuccess@smu.ca •
smu.ca/studentsuccess

Health and Wellness

Counselling Centre-counselling@smu.ca • smu.ca/counselling

Student Health Services-smu.ca/healthclinic

Student Health Plan Office-
healthplan.smusa@smu.ca • studentvip.ca/smusa



Saint Mary's University Students' Association (SMUSA)

karla.hodge@smu.ca • smusa.ca

Financial

Service Centre—smu.ca/servicecentre • Service.Centre@smu.ca

Financial Aid & Awards—smu.ca/faa • financial.aid@smu.ca

Available 24 hours per day, 7 days per week by phone

Saint Mary's Security—902-420-5577

Housing and Residence Desk—902-420-5591

Good2Talk confidential helpline • good2talk.ca • 1-833-292-3698

In Halifax:

Mental Health Mobile Crisis Team—902-429-8167

Halifax Regional Police—902-490-5016



Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada • smu.ca
student.services@smu.ca



**Saint Mary's
University**