



Letting Go

*Important Information for Parents,
Guardians and Family Members of
Westfield State College Residents*

As your student prepares to enter the residence hall community at Westfield State College, we hope you will take a few minutes to read the following information designed to help everyone – you and your student – get off to a good start.



Students have so much to learn during their college years. Though we typically focus on the learning that occurs in students' academic programs, they are having significant educational experiences in other arenas as well. Indeed, most students spend 90% of their time at college **outside** the classroom. Westfield State College considers this a vital part of each student's total learning experience, and we structure our campus activities and services accordingly.

Statistics (both here and nationally) indicate that resident students are more likely to perform well academically and graduate. Why? Greater awareness of, and easier access to, available campus resources and stronger social networks are among the reasons.

Westfield's residence halls are a hub of activity where residents' lives will intersect with roommates, hallmates, visitors and College employees. Residents can make new friends, participate in formal programs and informal gatherings, and get involved in community governance. They'll need to take responsibility for learning about the relevant policies and deadlines within their new community (much like learning about local laws, customs and traditions when moving to a new town). Most importantly, they'll acquire valuable tools for managing all aspects of their lives, like:

- ◆ Leadership, communication and negotiation skills;
- ◆ Problem-solving strategies (including when to tackle a situation on your own and when to get help);
- ◆ Understanding and valuing diversity;
- ◆ Managing time, stress, finances, and competing priorities;
- ◆ Developing and maintaining good interpersonal relationships with other community members;
- ◆ And of course, fundamentals like waking up for class and doing laundry!

These are crucial life skills that all of us use on a daily basis, and college presents wonderful opportunities for students to develop them – if they're expected and encouraged to do so. As a parent or family member, it's natural to want the best for your student. It can also be awkward for family members as students become more self-sufficient and independent. It may seem strange, but helping them **less** now will actually help them **more** later, since it will encourage them to develop essential life skills. So, how can you assist them in being successful and making the most of these opportunities?

Here are five tips:

1. Provide a listening ear - help the student sort out what they're thinking and feeling.
2. Have them describe their options for dealing with an issue and help them develop their plan. Resist jumping in and telling them what to do (no matter how much you're tempted). It may help to think of yourself more as a **coach** ('What are your options?') than a **mechanic** ('I'll fix it').
3. Use the College's website and publications to learn what resources are available. That way, you can reduce the number of steps they need to take to find the answers - without doing everything for them.
4. Remember that sometimes students call home just to vent or talk things through. Once they're done, they often feel better - even if you don't! Best advice: bring it up casually next time you chat - if it's still an issue, they'll let you know, but you're just as likely to learn it's over.
5. Recognize that what **you** want may differ from what **they** want and remind yourself that they're (nearly) adults now!

By doing these things, you affirm your faith in the student's ability to take what they've learned from you and others and find their way in the world. (If you're having doubts, you may want to talk with the student beforehand to make sure everyone is prepared for this major change.) Students constantly surprise us with what they can do if we demonstrate our confidence in their ability to do it and give them some time and space to figure things out. They don't always do things the way we might have done them, but that's not bad - it's just different (sometimes, it's better!).



What if you just can't let go?
Some parents have a really hard time making this transition. In her article "**Are you a Helicopter Parent?**," Barbara Meltz from the *Boston Globe* notes:



"Between cellphones, e-mail, instant messaging and text messaging, it's easy to stay in close contact with your college freshman. But should you?

Sure, it's fun, maybe even comforting, when your daughter calls to say she's on her way to her 9 a.m. class and, yeah, it's raining but, hey, not too hard, and, no, she didn't have breakfast but she promises to grab a bagel later.

Later? *Later?* Do you really want to know that she's going to her \$40,000 classes on no fuel?

"That's being involved to an extreme," says Allison Chase Padula, associate dean of student affairs at Roger Williams College in Bristol, R.I.

To parents who are walking through the day with their students - it's called helicopter parenting because of its hovering quality - she has two words: Back off.

"Whatever happened to personal growth? Isn't that part of what they come to college for?" she asks. Let your child figure out for herself that her brain works better with food in her stomach.

But wait, you protest: My daughter called *me*. That's part of the rub, admits Mary Stuart Hunter, director of the national resource center for the nonprofit First Year Experience. Just because they can be, some freshmen are in touch three, four, or more times a day. This may seem glorious to parents, but it worries Hunter. It's probably taking a student away from fully engaging in campus life.

Padula says, "Sometimes I see a whole string of kids walking by themselves, all of them on the phone, probably to home."

If this is still going on two or three weeks into the semester, wean your student slowly, gently, but firmly, says Hunter. "Refrain from initiating contact yourself. Keep responses polite but brief. Don't always be available. In response to questions, throw it back to him or her, 'What do you think?,' so you're channeling your child outward instead of back to you." And, if necessary, be forthright: 'I love you, I love talking to you, but this much contact isn't in your best interest.'"

For every student who's in contact too much, there's one who doesn't call at all. That may be a sign that he's happy, but it still can be nerve-racking. While it's always better for your student to initiate contact, it's also OK to say, 'We'd like to hear your voice once a week. What's a good time for you?'"



So, we've looked at what students can gain from being at Westfield and at the type of relationship to try to establish while they're here; but what about communication between family members and the College?

OK, you may not like this, but here it is: there are significant legal limitations on what we can say to family members regarding college students. Simply put, you won't be hearing much from us about what or how your student is doing here at the College due to the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, better known as **FERPA**. The notable exceptions are if there is a health and safety emergency (thankfully, these are quite rare); or if a student violates the campus drug and alcohol policies (in which case a letter will be sent home to the parent or guardian).

These legal limitations make it even more important for you to develop and maintain good lines of communication with your student. It's also important to reinforce that they're adults now and will need to be prepared to accept the outcomes of their decisions. That's the same message they'll be receiving from the College and so, while they may get tired of hearing it, it's a big part of becoming a self-sufficient, responsible adult.

Naturally, we welcome getting information from you about your student's progress, perceptions and challenges. We'll gladly follow up if you're concerned about his or her well-being, and we can provide resource information so you can be an effective coach and support system. However, keep in mind that:

- We're unlikely to be able to report anything back to you directly; and
- While we're happy to help you with ideas on how to successfully coach your student, sooner or later we'll need to get to the **student**, not you, having a conversation with us about the situation.



Who and what is Residential Life?

The Residential Life mission statement is:

RESIDENTIAL LIFE PROMOTES PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT.

We design our programs, services, individual interactions and group activities to support and enhance students' academic experiences here. It's our goal to be courteous, caring and responsive when residents come forward with an issue. We try to strike a balance between helping each student explore their options and make sound choices based on their own judgments, values and instincts; and giving a gentle 'nudge' in the right direction when we think it's needed. The staff members providing this support include:

STUDENT STAFF – Over 60 **Resident Assistants** (RAs) and **Community Development Assistants** (CDAs) serve as peer counselors and resources. These full-time students must meet strict academic requirements and demonstrate leadership ability and a sincere interest in helping students and serving the community.

PROFESSIONAL IN-HALL STAFF - Each residential area is managed by a full-time, live-in **Residence Director** (RD) who:

- works with students on personal, academic, roommate, policy and other issues,
- supervises the RAs/CDAs,
- advises hall council, and
- provides evening/weekend duty coverage for the campus.

We *always* have one or more Residence Life professional staff members on duty (24 hours a day, 7 days a week) whenever students are here to respond to situations as needed.

CENTRAL OFFICE - The main Residential Life office is located in Scanlon Hall and includes the Director, Associate Director, Assistant Director, Accountant and Secretary. Our hours are 8am-5pm each weekday.

Best wishes for success during this transition time. Let us know how we can help.