What Parents Need to Know about Spring Semester Blues

As an educator, there is a lot to love about the spring semester. First, there?s the weather. It is bound to be sunnier and warmer in May than it was in January. Second, there?s the steadier rhythm of the ups and downs of classes, activities, and special events. It is the time that we celebrate our students and their work and the time that we recognize those who are graduating and moving on. And then there is the flurry of activity to prepare for summer break? (Do educators ever get a break? Do students who spend the summers working, studying, or gaining work experience ever get a break either?).

For many students, the spring semester is not all picnics on the campus lawn. In fact, from my perspective, the spring semester can be a low period for some students, even if they had a pretty good fall semester. Why is that? Honestly, my colleagues and I are not sure why some students struggle a little more in the spring, but we have some ideas. And even more important, I have some ideas for why your student may suffer from the spring semester blues and what you can do about it.

Courses are getting harder. It is not just your student?s imagination, but classes do get harder each semester. If your student is a freshman, they may have taken an easier load in the fall and now are taking on more difficult courses. If your student is a sophomore or junior, they may be experiencing a shift in moving from introductory to discipline-specific courses. The amount of work may not have increased, but the expectations that their work is better and more complex will increase.

What can parents do to support their student? Remind them to seek out and use their academic resources: tutoring, study groups, and professors. You can also remind them that what they are experiencing is a normal part of the learning process. No matter how many semesters they have already finished, they may find that they need a little academic support to get through a hard semester.

Choosing a major can stress them out. Even if your student doesn?t yet have to choose a major, they are thinking about?wondering?and even worrying about it. This is often true of students who have made the decision but then hit a roadblock?a tough class or setback that makes them doubt their decision. This stress is more common than you
may think and can color their whole academic term.

What can parents do to support their student? Encourage them to talk to their advisor about their decision. Advisors are trained to have these conversations and help students work through setbacks. Your student can also talk to a professor about their major and future career pathways. And, of course, your student can use their career services for additional information.

Deciding what to do during the summer can be confusing. Should they work and earn money? Should they go back home or stay on campus? Should they be taking classes to get ahead or catch up? Should they get an internship to get valuable career experience? All these options may have them feeling confused by what to do. It is the ultimate FOMO (fear of missing out), isn’t it? The concern for them is: What is the best way to spend that time that will help me get ahead or stay out in front??

What can parents do to support their student? Start the conversation with them if you feel they are worried about what they should do. If you don’t have strong feelings—or family needs, for example, that they stay close to home for the summer?then ask them what would be in their best interest. Do they need a mental and physical break from courses? If so, it may be best that they return home and work to earn money. Do they need to gain career experience and skills? Then they may want to look for internships. Direct them to use their campus resources for planning—the usual suspects: advisor, professor, and career services.

Graduation is great but also nerve-wracking. Graduation is an exciting time for the whole family. In some ways, you may think that you deserve a degree in successfully supporting a college student. But underneath your student’s broad smile may be a little concern about transitioning from college student to college graduate (aka “grown up?”). Don’t underestimate that your student may have different, sometimes contradictory emotions.

What can parents do to support their student? Acknowledge the emotional rollercoaster they may experience and encourage them to seek out counseling if needed. And be prepared to listen to them when they need to talk or vent. You may also want to check in with your own emotions as you are going through a transition as well.

The spring semester doesn’t have to be challenging, but being aware of what your student may face will help you help them through it.

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