Navigating the Transition to College
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This year, thousands of students will begin their freshman year of college with that stomach-churning mix of fear and excitement born of entering a completely foreign environment. But this year’s freshmen will be armed with a potentially dangerous weapon that wasn’t readily available to students who entered college even 10 years ago — the cell phone.

How parents handle that sort of instant access can do a lot to shape students’ experiences, said Brian Macdonald, associate director of Boise State University’s New Student and Family Programs. Macdonald and his colleagues spend their time trying to make the first year of college easier for both students and their parents, and an essential part of that is helping students strike out on their own.

“Parents have been way more involved over the past 10 years,” Macdonald said, which can lead to “helicopter parenting” — parents who “hover” around their college-age children and continue planning their lives for them, including their class schedules.

“Resist!” he says. “If they call you and have a complaint, have them figure it out.”

Universities such as Boise State devote a lot of time and effort to helping students avoid the common pitfalls of their first year — everything from calling mom and dad with every problem to the dreaded freshmen 15 to figuring out how to balance work and school to navigating the end of high school relationships and the beginning of new ones.

At any school, the road to college independence begins with orientation.

Macdonald said that at orientation, students learn about three things: “Stuff that you know that you know, stuff you don’t know and stuff you don’t know you don’t know,” he said. A student knows that she will have to regularly attend class, but might not know how to register for classes. And she might not have any clue that she will have to pay for a parking pass if she wants to find a parking spot close to class.

“If you don’t go (to orientation), you’re going to get caught off guard once school starts,” he said.

Macdonald has tips to help make the transition easier for students:

- Start building relationships. “You can have a 4.5 grade point average, but if you’re not connected you won’t do well,” Macdonald said. Talking to classmates and fellow residence hall members can help students make connections that will give them a safety net should they face a difficult situation.
• Take advantage of student resources. Students have access to academic advising, health and wellness services, study groups and more — all provided by the university.

• Realize that freedom can be overwhelming. During the first few weeks of school, students are more at risk for alcohol poisoning and sexual assaults as well as homesickness and loneliness, Macdonald said. “This is where so much self-discovery goes on,” he said. Many orientation programs — including Boise State’s — now include non-academic components that deal with those problems, as well as counseling for when times get really tough.

• Be responsible about work and money. Many students have to work to pay the ever-increasing costs of higher education, and it’s difficult to keep work and school balanced. In addition, freshmen are often approached about applying for their first credit cards. “Figuring out a budget, learning about credit, loans and rent can really affect them,” Macdonald said. Make a budget and stick to it — the aftereffects of not doing so can linger longer than four years.

• Talk to professors. “Professors have office hours,” Macdonald said. Popping in during those hours can help students immensely, he said. “If you develop a relationship with someone you don’t become just a person who failed a test or whatever the problem is,” and the professor will be more willing to help a student get the most out of the class.

It’s important for students to confront any challenges head-on, Macdonald said, and New Student and Family Programs tries to help students do just that.

“We try to get them to the point where they’re ready,” Macdonald said. “Fear and anxiety inhibit learning.”