

Preparing for Campus Life

By Michele Torner

For a young adult about to embark on a new phase in his or her life, entering college is like taking a journey into the vast unknown. It's a time for new beginnings, an opportunity to meet all sorts of people, and a chance to gain long-desired independence. However, it may be the first time a young person will be away from home, and that, coupled with all of the horror stories about adjusting to life in a college residence hall, can result in some anxiety. That's why DeAnn Stone, director of student life at UW-Parkside and her staff are there: to help ease students through the adjustment into their new lives as college students.

Before students move into UW-Parkside's Ranger Hall or University Apartments, they attend an orientation geared toward easing both students' and parents' apprehensions about campus life. The staff talks with parents about the transitional issues new students commonly face such as living away from home for the first time and learning responsibility in a less structured environment. Students and parents watch a video, "Start Right: Lessons in Living on Campus." The video highlights older students talking about the struggles they faced as freshmen and their tips on how to deal with some of these issues.

Fitting in and getting along with your roommate are common struggles for many new students. Stone said this can stem from having idealistic expectations when first coming to live on campus. Once settled in, students are shocked to realize that it's not all fun and games. Many are not used to sharing their rooms or personal possessions, let alone personal space. They will need to learn how to compromise and accommodate habits that might be different than their own, such as their roommates sleeping patterns, study habits, and social life.

According to the older students featured in the "Start Right" video, when meeting a new roommate, it's important not to make any rash judgements. It takes time to develop a relationship, and while some roommates may never be the best of friends, they still need to learn to cooperate. As long as roommates learn from the

start what things are important to one another, and learn to discuss any problems right away, chances are they will develop a satisfactory relationship.

Stone thinks her resident advisors (RAs) are the key for making new students feel comfortable in their new homes. The RAs are each responsible for 24 students. RAs will also mediate conflicts, enforce any required disciplinary action, assist in emergencies, and act as a referral source, able to direct students to any resource they might need. Along with an RA, each hall has a director – a professional staff person to assist both students and RAs with any situation. Students are always encouraged to come forward at hall meetings with complaints and concerns. The staff also likes to suggest coming up with "contracts" regarding issues such as quiet hours (generally 10 p.m. on weeknights) and use of personals. This reinforces the concept that communication can be the key to a conflict-free environment.

Other than the obvious essentials—linens, towels, clothes, and toiletries, Stone said a good rule of thumb is to "Bring what you think will make your room comfortable." Things such as pictures, posters, and decorations are all a reflection of individual personality. Since students are given information on their roommate, they are encouraged to contact them prior to moving. This gives them the opportunity to discuss who will bring certain larger items, such as a mini-refrigerator, television, or stereo. Students who will be living in the apartments should wait and see who has what in terms of pots, pans, and dishes so help avoid an overload of items. All residences provide cable and Internet access for students, making life a bit easier. Things to leave at home would be the obvious large appliances, as well as candles, incense, and halogen lamps, all of which are considered fire hazards. Stone admits that some students have tried to bring their pets along. Her mantra for this is: "If it can not live under water, it can not live at the residence halls!"

Stone said that during the crucial first year, it's common for students to go through a period of adjustment. During



high school, students were used to more structure; if they had a free period between classes, it was usually utilized. With all of the spaces between classes in college, students may struggle with how to use their time. Students in the "Start Right" video said they had to learn how to prioritize. It was important to them to find a healthy balance between studying, socializing, and personal time. While issues such as these are relatively normal for college freshmen, some students might have more trouble than others in dealing with these transitions. Students need to remember that help is always available. "The RAs will help you with anything," Stone said. "You just need to be comfortable to ask." And if an RA can not help, they will know who can.

Most students admit to going through a big period of transition their freshman year. They discover that going away to college is more than an opportunity to get away from curfews and rules. Students often emerge knowing where their personal boundaries between freedom and responsibility lie. For many, it is a chance to discover who they really are. As Stone said, "Many students come to college because it is something they feel they have to do." By the end of freshman year, many students will have made the choice to go to college "their own." That choice will allow them to be in control of a future that only they can create.