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Thinking of Dropping Out of College?

6 Things that Parents can Do to Help

It might surprise many parents to learn that each year over 6000 Irish students decide to drop-out of college during their first year. That's 1 in 6. What might come as an even bigger surprise is the fact that approximately two-thirds of students admit that they choose the wrong course.

One of the main reasons that students drop out of college is that the course was not what they expected. They may discover that the course content leaves them cold, making it very difficult to motivate themselves. With little or no accountability, it doesn't take long to become overwhelmed. Fear of failing exams starts to loom large in their minds, particularly if they have missed an assignment deadline. This year, COVID 19 and the restrictions that it has imposed, makes settling into first year of college much more challenging.

Traditionally, making friends was a big help in settling into college life but not so easy now. Studying online from the confined of their homes and expected to learn in unfamiliar ways does little to motivate students. Unsurprisingly, thoughts of dropping out of college begin to take hold early in the academic year.

What's one to do? Stay or go?

The big question then is what's the best course of action – drop out or wait and see how things go. I like this quote from Stephen Covey - *'we are free to choose our actions...we are not free to choose the consequences of our actions'*. As with all big decisions it pays to have as much information as possible. While this decision rests with the teenager, it helps a lot to have parents on their side, working with them to figure out what's right for them. It may be that your teenager dislikes the course or perhaps the time is not yet right. They might just need a break from study but would like to return to college over the next few years. Or perhaps there are a lot of little problems that are rectifiable but when taken together feel overwhelming.

Here are my top 6 suggestions on how to support your teenager.

1. Provide emotional support

I'm putting unconditional emotional support as number one because in my experience it strengthens the parent/adolescent bond, setting them up for a more adult relationship. The disappointment of discovering that the course and college life is not as expected can lead to feelings of being overwhelmed and anxious. Expect to notice a change in mood or general demeanour. Missing lectures is one of the main red flags that all is not well. It might take time for your teenager to process what's happening before discussing it openly. However, it cannot be ignored. The sooner it comes up for discussion the better.

Parents are also likely to be experiencing all sorts of emotions such as fear for their teenager's future. Care should be taken not to catastrophise the situation as it is likely to further exacerbates the problem, making the ultimate decision about whether to stay or go more difficult.

2. Help your teenager figure out the real cause of their dissatisfaction

Often, there are so many reasons for dissatisfaction with college jumbled up that the real reason is hidden. Some things can be changed, others can't. For example, if the real cause of the problem is not knowing how the course will lead to a certain career path, then more information is what's called for. In this case, the course leader can help. Many people need to see the bigger picture in order to stay motivated.

Perhaps the problem is more about not yet having made friends. This is acknowledged as particularly important for settling into college. Once again, the course leader may be able to help. Group activities related to the course could be set up with the view to supporting students get to know one another.

So, while some issues can be fixed, this is not always the case. It may be that nothing about the course feels right, in which case it might be time to consider one's options.

3. Encourage your teenager to ask for help

Asking for help is an important skillset. Colleges expect that many first-year students will be struggling and have support systems in place. However, for many reasons, such as not wanting to admit to needing help, students can be reluctant to avail of these supports. The course leader is the go-to person in

the first instance, pointing students towards supports that may help.

Another approach is to have a look at the tips that Spunout provides for college students to help stay motivated in these Covid times <https://spunout.ie/education/article/motivating-yourself-to-do-college-work-at-home>. Spunout, in association with the Union of Students in Ireland (USI) also provides a text messaging support service 24/7 for anyone who is feeling overwhelmed - free-text spunout to 50808.

4. Know the facts about college fees and grants

If the plan is to return to college later, withdrawing from college has consequences for fees and grants. Timing of official withdrawal from the course is important as cut-off dates determine the amount of monies that will need to be repaid to the college on your teenager's return.

A decision to stay in college and switch to another course the following year is costly – between €7000 – 8000, whereas withdrawal before February 1st will cost about €3,500. Official withdrawal before October 31st will incur very little cost.

It is worthwhile understanding who pays what and when. College fees are made up of two parts – annual 'contribution charge' of €3000 made by the student and a 'tuition fee' of €4000 made to the college on behalf of the student by the Higher Education Authority (HEA).

Notification of withdrawal to the college before October 31st will mean that you will not be liable for the €4000 tuition fee, while notification of withdrawal before January 31st will mean that you will be liable to pay €2000. Because colleges can have different cut-off dates regarding the 'contribution charge', it is important to check this out with the college admissions department. November 14th is UCD's cut-off date for example.

The Union of Students of Ireland (USI) provides useful information on the implications of withdrawal on SUZI Grant also

<https://usi.ie/education/when-thinking-of-withdrawing-from-college/>

5. Use it as a learning opportunity, preparing your teenager for adult life

Considering dropping out of college can provide a wonderful learning opportunity, one that can have profound benefits when managing the many career challenges that will inevitably occur at times throughout their lives. Putting the dilemma in perspective, as a hiccup and an opportunity to learn more about themselves, helps move forward. Taking responsibility for making an informed decision and using reliable sources of information becomes an invaluable experience. All too often, teenagers rely on incorrect information generated by friends and social media.

Useful questions to trigger learning can include:

- what have you learned about yourself from this experience, i.e. what did you like and what did you dislike about the course/college?
- what would you do differently next time when choosing a course?
- what information would you regard as crucial?
- how will you source information in future?

6. Explore options

Finally, in order to make a well-informed decision, there should be some exploration of an alternative plan. What might they do instead? How might they use their time well? Are there new skills they could learn, a short course to complete, work experience to be gained? Colleges of Further Education may still have places available and are known to provide a worthwhile bridge for students to successfully managing the higher education experience.

Conclusion

- Look-out for signs that all is not well
- Open conversation in a way that shows that you are sympathetic and keen to help
- Put the experience in perspective and in the context of starting a long and interesting career journey
- Help discover the real cause of the dissatisfaction
- Help your teenager learn from the experience
- Help your teenager take responsibility for making a well-informed decision
- Encourage your teenager to avail of reliable sources of information to make his decision
- Encourage your teenager to explore options
- Respect your teenager's decision, whether you agree with it or not.