TRANSITION HANDBOOK
A Guide for New Students
and Their Parents

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PURPOSE OF THIS TRANSITION HANDBOOK

This transition handbook was written for new students who are about to enter Muhlenberg College and their parents. The purpose of this handbook is to help ease the transition from high school to college, thereby increasing the likelihood for success in the first year and beyond.

A LIBERAL EDUCATION

According to the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AACU):

Liberal Education is an approach to learning that empowers individuals and prepares them to deal with complexity, diversity, and change. It provides students with broad knowledge of the wider world (e.g. science, culture, and society) as well as in-depth study in a specific area of interest. A liberal education helps students develop a sense of social responsibility, as well as strong and transferable intellectual and practical skills such as communication, analytical and problem-solving skills, and a demonstrated ability to apply knowledge and skills in real-world settings.

As such, a liberal education is not merely a credential required to secure future earnings; rather, it is an opportunity for students to develop the skills, knowledge, competencies, and approaches necessary for long-term success in their discipline; in becoming active, contributing members of society; and in making ethical decisions grounded in a deep understanding of the world around them.

From a personal perspective, a liberal education offers students a wide range of opportunities to stretch and grow socially, intellectually, and professionally; to reflect on and come to a better understanding of their interests, values, strengths, vision and goals; and to develop an appreciation for diverse ways of being and seeing. While these new and challenging experiences can provoke anxiety and frustration on the part of both parents and students alike, there is a profound sense of joy and accomplishment that comes with greater independence, understanding, and competency.

MISSION OF THE COLLEGE

Muhlenberg College aims to develop independent critical thinkers who are intellectually agile, characterized by a zest for reasoned and civil debate, committed to understanding the diversity of the human experience, able to express ideas with clarity and grace, committed to life-long learning, equipped with ethical and civic values, and prepared for lives of leadership and service. The College is committed to providing an intellectually rigorous undergraduate education within the context of an inclusive and diverse campus; we strongly believe that diversity is essential to learning and to our success as a pluralistic community. Our curriculum integrates the traditional liberal arts with selected pre-professional studies. Our
faculty are passionate about teaching, value close relationships with students, and are committed to the pedagogical and intellectual importance of research. All members of our community are committed to educating the whole person through experiences within and beyond the classroom. Honoring its historical heritage from the Lutheran Church and its continuing connection with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Muhlenberg encourages, welcomes, and celebrates a variety of faith traditions and spiritual perspectives.

VALUES OF THE COMMUNITY

Muhlenberg has much to offer a student who is committed to becoming an active, contributing member of the College community. As such, it is important for all students to know and understand our values.

✓ Community, collegiality, and character
✓ Intellectual curiosity, engagement, and interdisciplinary connections
✓ Global competency, multicultural awareness, and an appreciation for diversity

While there are many ways to be a “Mule,” our top students are engaged outside of class in co-curricular and extra-curricular activities, have a double major or at least one minor, seriously consider studying abroad, read within and beyond their discipline, and are part of a diverse community of learners who support one another’s growth and development. In the end, each student decides for themselves what is an appropriate path while honoring their commitment to the core principle of excellence.

ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE

Every student knows that college is different from high school. Yet, most students come to college believing with just a little more effort they will be able to realize similar levels of academic achievement. While there is no hard and fast rule for what it takes to be successful in college, there are some general trends of which both parents and students should be aware.

Most of a student’s learning time in high school takes place between 7:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m. In college, much of the learning time takes place outside of the classroom through textbook reading, collaborative projects, and research. Therefore, self-management becomes a crucial skill for all college students. High school teachers review homework, including readings, and generally only test on what they have covered in class. In college, students are responsible for understanding assigned material, whether or not it was covered in class by the instructor. Study time in high school averages 1-2 hours per night; while in college, it is likely more than 4 hours per day. In high school, instructors will frequently remind students of upcoming assignments, tests, and deadlines; this rarely happens in college.

In college, the most successful students are the ones who are engaged in their studies and with course faculty, have found their passion within one of many possible academic disci-
plines, have found a place socially and academically within the College community, and actively leverage the extensive network of supports which exists to promote their growth and development. Students who are least successful are more likely to fall asleep in or skip class, prioritize memorization over conceptual mastery, isolate themselves socially, and avoid seeking help because they view it as a sign of weakness.

CHECKLIST OF RESPONSIBILITIES FOR PARENTS

✓ Be a point of connection and encouragement
✓ Provide a sympathetic ear for frustrations and disappointments
✓ Be a cheerleader and celebrate successes
✓ Provide validation and reassurance
✓ Serve as a sounding board for new ideas and problem-solving
✓ Provide support for student decision-making
✓ Reinforce the importance of seeking out advice and guidance from faculty advisor and actively engaging with other campus resources
✓ Encourage students to advocate for themselves and establish independence
✓ Do not help students with their assignments, monitor student email, or speak on their behalf

CHECKLIST OF RESPONSIBILITIES FOR STUDENTS

✓ Take an active role in your own learning and development
✓ Put in the appropriate amount of time required for the desired level of achievement
✓ Be open to experience and demonstrate initiative
✓ Develop a tolerance to frustration as it is an early sign of growth
✓ Maintain realistic expectations and learn from mistakes
✓ Change your approaches and adapt to the needs of each situation
✓ Move beyond memorization and master foundational concepts
✓ Find your place within the College and develop social supports
✓ Manage to priorities and make decisions that favor achievement of long-term goals over immediate gratification
✓ Establish independence and learn to advocate for yourself
✓ Attend class, do your homework, read, talk to your faculty, attend study sessions, and seek support in its many forms throughout your time at Muhlenberg
✓ Maintain a healthy lifestyle

MAKING THE TRANSITION

The relationship between the student and their parents changes significantly at this transitional juncture. While the important role that parents play as a point of connection and moral support continues from high school, parents are asked to cheer from the sidelines rather than actively participate in the game. Letting go can be difficult for many parents. It
may mean their student will make mistakes or even experience failure. They must trust in the capacity of their student to navigate this new environment, work hard, and make good decisions on their own. While letting go may be difficult for parents, for students, making good decisions in the context of their newfound freedom can be difficult. It may mean making tough choices between often conflicting priorities such as balancing academic life and extracurricular activities. Students themselves must trust in their own agency in making the most of their college experience. In the end, both students and parents will adjust to and become comfortable in their respective roles. For the student, this means significant gains in maturity, a sense of personal stake in their own education, and an authentic connection to their discipline that will transform and enlighten their future opportunities within a global community.

**SUGGESTIONS FOR PARENTS PRIOR TO THE START OF FALL CLASSES**

- Eliminate or adjust curfew to allow the student time to adjust to this new freedom
- Set up a bank account that has limited funds and instruct the student on how to use it
- Discuss mutual expectations for the first semester (e.g., grades, spending, drug/alcohol use)
- Purchase technology, alarm clocks, and other school supplies and make sure the student has an opportunity to learn any new software well ahead of the first day of classes
- Discuss your family health care plan and how the student might access confidential health services
- Encourage the student to connect on Facebook, Twitter, or by texting with another new Muhlenberg student before arriving on campus in August
- We do not encourage students to move in with more than a 30-day supply of medication; it is best to work with local pharmacists or the Student Health Center
- Remind your son/daughter that selling or distributing controlled substances (e.g., Ritalin) is illegal
- Put together a list with names and numbers of possible resources, both on-campus and off-campus, for the student to contact should issues arise
- Explore with the student Muhlenberg’s online Student Policy and Resource Guide available on the Dean of Students website

**SUGGESTIONS FOR STUDENTS PRIOR TO THE START OF FALL CLASSES**

- Set up a bank account and work out all other financial and medical arrangements
- Understand your strengths and weaknesses and how they might be a help or hindrance in college
- Try to connect with another student who will be attending for the first time, such as
First-Semester Challenges

1. Workload is heavier in college for the majority of students and faculty expectations are both greater and different. Most high school students have experienced neither the level of effort nor autonomy required for college-level work. Students are expected to work many more hours outside of the classroom each week. This may include independent reading, writing, problem-based learning, research, or teamwork. Additionally, Muhlenberg’s curriculum is writing intensive regardless of your major. For example, in the First-Year Seminar, students will write multiple papers and read the equivalent of several novels over the course of the semester. Finally, faculty expectations with respect to classroom participation and engagement require students to keep up with assigned readings and come to class prepared for discussion. For these reasons, students must prioritize their studies and use all of the resources available to them in reaching their desired level of academic achievement.

2. Time management is a problem for most first-year students. In high school, many students have curfews and live in households which are quiet in the late evenings. This is not the case in college. At 2:00 a.m., a dormitory may be active and noisy. Faculty members do not keep tabs on students and course attendance may become a problem. It is best if students chip away at coursework throughout the day. Certainly, if medication or health issues impact the student’s productivity and/or schedule, it may be important to schedule classes where possible around these needs. If time management, organization, or planning is an area of weakness, we suggest working with a learning strategist in the Academic Resource Center during the first semester. Encourage students to set priorities and plan their time accordingly.

3. Homesickness is expected for some students. The transition to a new environment with new expectations can be stressful. While it is important for parents to listen to and normalize the student’s experience, we strongly discourage students from going home on weekends as it will only further exacerbate the issue by creating obstacles to the formation of mutually supportive friendships and the exploration of interests. Parents are welcome to visit campus and take their student to lunch or dinner. Resident Advisors are a good source of support for homesick students, especially as they explore their interests and the many clubs and activities that the College has to offer. Parents concerned with the wellbeing of their student, should alert the Counseling Center and suggest that the student make an appointment to speak with a professional counselor.

4. Experimentation is common. All students experiment in the first years of college when they are out from under the watchful eye of their parents or dorm supervisors at prep schools. Some level of experimentation and risk-taking is part of the normal development of
a student in college. However, if parents or friends notice a marked increase in this behavior or if the student’s behavior begins to have a negative impact on their performance or well-being, we recommend discussing these concerns with the student and making a referral to the Counseling Center.

5. Social pressures can be significant. The pressure to conform and adapt to the culture of the College can be stressful during the first semester. Students should be encouraged to connect with upper-class students and seek out friendships with individuals who are a positive influence. Joining affinity groups is a productive way to make friends with likeminded individuals who share similar interests.

6. Getting to know faculty and administration is difficult. Most students have not worked in the same way with faculty and professional staff in their high schools. They are often slow to realize that course instructors and college administrators can be a tremendous source of information, guidance, and support. When students make themselves known and establish open lines of communication with faculty and staff, they are much more likely to seek moral or operational support when the need presents.

7. Roommate issues are common for all students. Most students have not had to live in a shared space with a complete stranger. The College offers a number of resources to help students resolve roommate issues as they arise. There are floor Resident Advisors, professional housing staff, the Counseling Center, and the Office of the Dean of Students. Students should be encouraged to handle these situations themselves unless there are unusually complex or nuanced circumstances that would benefit from more active support. Students generally have a positive residential experience. Roommates can be very helpful with technology, wake-up prompts, medication reminders, social contacts, etc. Typically, first-year students are not provided with single rooms except under special circumstances based on documented need.

8. Grade expectations can be unrealistic. Most students have become accustomed to good grades in high school and are expecting to continue that level of performance in college. Students must understand that they are no longer competing against the students in their high school. Students at Muhlenberg are among the top in the nation. In many ways, students need to understand they are now competing against themselves. Applying similar strategies from high school to college-level study may not yield comparable results.

COMMON CAUSES OF ACADEMIC UNDERPERFORMANCE IN FIRST SEMESTER

- Significant gaps in pre-requisite knowledge
- Ineffective learning strategies or inadequate organization and planning
- Demanding extracurricular interests and activities
- Irregular sleeping habits
• Anxiety, depression or drug/alcohol abuse

**WARNING SIGNS THAT MAY WARRANT INTERVENTION**

1. **Low exam grades, frequent absences, missing or late assignments.** Lower than expected midterm grades are often the first tangible sign of trouble. At Muhlenberg, students receive mid-semester grades during their first year of college. Generally, lower than expected grades in the first semester suggest problems with work effort, drive, discipline, requisite knowledge, or maturity. Students are encouraged to discuss these issues (i.e., time management, prioritization, motivation, planning and organization, and learning strategies) with a learning strategist in the Academic Resource Center or their faculty advisor.

2. **Frequent calls, emails, or visits home.** Frequent calls, emails, or visits home may indicate adjustment problems. An overreliance on parental involvement delays the development of student independence and maturity. While there is nothing inherently wrong with maintaining important familial relations, students should be encouraged to develop mutually supportive friendships and social networks at the College and utilize on-campus resources. When a student calls home crying or angry, it is difficult for parents to maintain the distance needed to be an impartial source of guidance and support. Our knee-jerk reaction is to step in and fix things. This approach does not encourage students to take ownership over their education and learn to navigate the complex problems they will encounter throughout college and later in their professional careers. That being said, parents continue to have a role in the development of their student. As students work to establish independence, they may benefit from guidance and support in understanding the consequences of their own decision-making.

3. **Social withdrawal, marked changes in mood or personality, high levels of irritability, dramatic weight loss or weight gain, or an otherwise unusual decline in behavior.** Some students experience significant emotional difficulties during the first semester of college. It is important to recognize the signs and symptoms of a student in distress and contact the Counseling Center for support and guidance.
CAMPUS RESOURCES

There are a variety of campus resources which exist to promote social and academic transition, involvement, integration, support, and development.

Resident advisors can help students develop independent living skills, learn to negotiate conflicts, and find their place within the Muhlenberg community.

Classroom instructors can help students navigate course expectations and develop skills necessary for success in the discipline. Most faculty post their office hours on the syllabus.

Faculty advisors can help students in their course selection, navigate the registration process, make schedule changes, understand the requirements of the curriculum, and explore their major of interest.

Learning strategists in the Academic Resource Center can help students to better understand their own academic needs; establish and track progress towards self-determined goals; hone and refine their approaches to learning; improve their organization and planning skills; and scaffold student decision-making.

Learning assistants are embedded within critical gateway courses, organize weekly study sessions, and help students build the habits of mind that enable their long-term academic success.

Writing assistants are embedded within all First-Year Seminars and support the development of students’ written expression.

The Academic Resource Center provides support for students’ academic transition, engagement, integration, growth and achievement through a holistic, community-based approach. Services include transition workshops for first-year students, course-specific study sessions, individual peer tutors, and academic coaching with professional learning strategists. The Academic Resource Center is also one of the largest employers of students on campus, helping to promote leadership development.

The Writing Center can help students improve their writing across the curriculum. This may include the interpretation of assignments, development of a thesis statement, and organization of written assignments.

The Trexler Library can help students as they navigate an extensive array of physical and electronic resources that support their learning, research activities, and ongoing education.

The Career Center can help students clarify their values and interests, explore their long-term aspirations, and find opportunities that will contribute to their professional develop-
The Health Center provides a variety of health and wellness services including clinical exams and laboratory services.

Counseling Services provides brief therapeutic support in addressing a variety of mental health concerns which could impact academic performance and overall wellbeing. From common social and emotional concerns that all students face to conditions such as anxiety and depression, Counseling Services can help students build self-awareness and agency.

The Chaplain's Office provides students from all religious faiths and beliefs with confidential counsel on a variety of religious and personal concerns.

The Office of Disability Services provides disability determination and accommodation planning to ensure a safe and accessible campus and learning environment.

For links to these services and more, visit the Academic Resource Center website: muhlenberg.edu/arc.