

# Muhlenberg College

**Academic Resource Center  
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**Transition Handbook for Parents**

**2009-2010**

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## Introduction

### Purpose of this Transition Handbook

This transition handbook was written for parents of new students who are about to enter Muhlenberg College, their guidance counselors, and 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.

The challenge for students, parents, college managers, and faculty members is to work together while adhering to academic standards, developing the learner's independence, and providing appropriate guidance and support. At Muhlenberg, we build collaborative partnerships that foster independence and provide access to the educational experience. We look forward to those relationships.



## Spring/Summer Preparation



### Readiness

Relationships with parents change dramatically at this transitional juncture. In college, no guarantees of success are in place and, although they are important players in the transition piece, parents are asked to cheer from the sidelines and not to remain "guides at the helm." This is a difficult step for many parents. It may mean that their son/daughter will make mistakes or experience failure, but it ultimately facilitates the partnership and dialogue between the student and his/her professors and administrators at the college.

If a parent has specific expectations regarding academic performance and behaviors, these should be discussed with the student before he/she leaves home at the end of the summer. At that time, consequences should be shared as well. It *is* realistic to assume that the student can receive a passing grade in all courses in the first semester. The college offers many resources to support its students. However, it is not necessarily realistic to expect the student to continue to maintain his/her high school GPA in the first year.

### Self-Advocacy

Advocacy becomes the student's job in college. While it is appropriate for parents to encourage their son/daughter to talk with his/her advisor or faculty member, it is not appropriate for the parent to make the call directly. It is appropriate for the parent to call the Academic Resource Center occasionally, if he/she has concerns or questions. However, although

it is frustrating for parents to watch their son/daughter struggle, it is an important experience for the student. In most classes, students will have face-to-face conversations with their instructors about their particular needs. There are many well-trained staff members at the college to help students in this process, although many students develop these navigational skills *after* the first semester.

**A checklist of responsibilities:**

**Parent(s):**

- ✓ Provide an "ear" for the student's frustrations and disappointments
- ✓ Celebrate successes
- ✓ Help guide the student with his/her finances
- ✓ Purchase necessary equipment or technology/software

**Student:**

- ✓ Make decisions regarding course selection
- ✓ Use appropriate campus resources
- ✓ Manage time wisely
- ✓ Learn good study strategies
- ✓ Maintain a healthy lifestyle

**College Personnel:**

- ✓ Provide a learning environment which is free of discrimination
- ✓ Offer appropriate support services
- ✓ Assist in the navigational and decision-making processes (advising)
- ✓ Provide fair evaluation practices (assessment)
- ✓ Inform students about policies, procedures, and services
- ✓ Provide information on its website



## Getting Ready to Go

### Too soon to go?

For many students, it may be premature to enroll in college the year immediately following high school graduation. In some cases, these students may need time to mature, gain self-confidence, and/or develop independent coping strategies before moving into a residential setting where they become fully in charge of their learning.

Some students have worked long and hard to get into Muhlenberg College and they need a break from study to discover more about themselves. Increasingly more of their peers are deferring enrollment after they have been accepted. They use this time to travel, work, or enroll in part-time coursework at a commuter college for a year or two. These are important considerations that work well for some students.

It is common for parents to believe that a residential college will offer more positive opportunities than staying at home for another year, but this may not be the case. The first semester of college offers many new and difficult challenges. Students have left their caring high school teachers and supportive friends and family. Students need the emotional strength,

resources, and coping strategies to deal with the occasional feelings of loneliness, workload pressure, sleep deprivation, and the many other issues that accompany older adolescents in a group-living situation.

**Suggestions for parents for the summer preceding college:**

- ✓ 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 (grades, attendance, spending, use of drugs or alcohol, etc.)
- ✓ Purchase technology, alarm clocks, etc. and make sure the student has an opportunity to learn any new software well ahead of the first day of classes (especially new cell phones).
- ✓ Discuss your family health care plan and how the student might access confidential health services.
- ✓ Help the student "connect" over the Internet, Facebook, or phone with another new Muhlenberg student.
- ✓ If appropriate, arrange contact with a physician in Allentown to monitor any medication. Remind your son/daughter that selling or distributing controlled substances (i.e., Ritalin) is illegal. 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.
- ✓ Avoid running interference for his/her personal/financial issues over the course of the summer.
- ✓ Review the catalogue and other college materials with the student, highlighting what is important.

- ✓ 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 the policies and procedures on Muhlenberg's Web pages and in the student handbook.

**Suggestions for students for the summer before the first semester:**

- ✓ Set up a bank account and work out all other financial and medical arrangements.
- ✓ Understand your learning strengths and weaknesses
- ✓ Try to connect with another student who will be attending for the first time. This person may be a roommate or a student from your locality.
- ✓ Read through the catalogue to make choices about courses that interest you (remembering to stay generally in the in the 100-200 levels).
- ✓ Purchase available, required reading material ahead and begin to read over the summer.

## Self-Regulated Learning

### Discovery

It is no secret that students learn best when they are motivated and self-directed. They must set their own goals and proceed on a path of their own choosing. They need to have the skills to plan, perform, and evaluate or self-reflect on their learning. In addition, they need individualized support, guidance, and strategic interventions and solutions.

The Academic Resource Center offers professional Learning Specialists, Peer Tutors, and Peer Learning Strategies Instructors. All are trained to help learners identify their strengths and shortcomings in the learning process and to offer strategic help. Students who become actively involved in some combination of these partnerships generally experience more success and satisfaction than their peers who struggle alone.

In addition, the Career Center can help students identify their interests, values, and strengths and lead students toward meaningful internships and network connections.



### Selecting Courses

At Muhlenberg College, every incoming first-year student is invited to register on-campus, during a day in June. This June Advising experience is a wonderful opportunity for families to raise concerns and questions. The student will then independently meet with a trained faculty advisor to select the actual courses. Although it is sometimes difficult to trust first-year students to make their own independent choices, it is imperative that they

feel a sense of control (investment) regarding their selected classes and choice of major.

## General Information

*The College is committed to providing an intellectually rigorous undergraduate education within the context of a supportive, diverse residential community (College Catalog, pg. 1).*

### **What is a liberal education?**

A liberal education is not a credential for a good job; rather, it is the opportunity for a student to become educated about the world, its history, literature, art, languages, philosophy, science, math, and cultures. It offers students the opportunity to stretch their abilities to think critically, read more efficiently, and write more eloquently. In addition, the college encourages and guides students as they seek to discover their values, strengths, interests, and goals.

For some students, the requirement to select courses they otherwise may not choose offers greater intellectual and emotional challenges than they previously faced. Parents often become sounding boards for the student's anxieties and frustrations. Although this can be a painful transition, it can also be an empowering experience for students when they sense the joy of a satisfying accomplishment in a difficult situation.

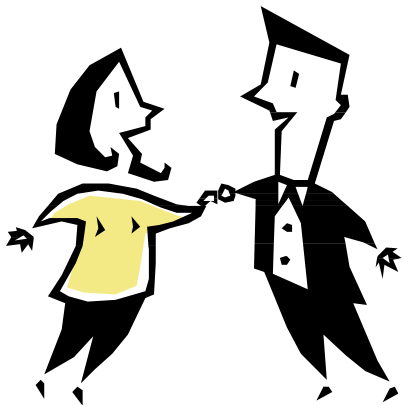
Students should explore different areas of study, recognizing that some will be more of a struggle than others. In college, students should be invited and encouraged to reach forward in order to develop their critical thinking, reading, and communication skills while they develop greater autonomy and independence.

With this in mind, understand that first-year students may become discouraged or frustrated in a particular course, or with a particular professor. Know that we have many resources in place to help them have a positive first-year experience. First, we encourage all students to begin a dialogue with the appropriate faculty member. Faculty members are often a tremendous source of support and assistance. We also recommend Peer Tutoring. Peers are closer in age and much less intimidating for some

students. Tutors can show the student strategies for organizing, memorizing, planning, and performing in a particular course. Finally, we have Master's level Learning Specialists in the Academic Resource Center who are available for one-on-one support.

## Academic Resources

Most of a student's learning time in high school takes place between 7am and 3pm. In college, much of the learning time takes place outside of the classroom through textbook reading, collaborative projects, and research. Therefore, the student's self-regulatory behavior becomes crucial. High school teachers review textbooks in class lectures and generally only test what they have taught. In college, that is not the case. Students are responsible for work not covered in class, but assigned nevertheless. Study time in high school averages 1-2 hours per night and in college that can be 3-4 hours per night. Remember that no one is reminding the student to turn off the TV or computer.



### Mentors

Muhlenberg College offers many opportunities for students to develop mentor relationships. In most First-Year Seminar classes, an upper class Student Advisor and a Writing Assistant help students navigate through the first semester. In addition, first-year faculty advisors are available for support and guidance.

All Muhlenberg College Resident Advisors (students who live with first-year students) are trained to help students during this difficult transition period and they are available most weekends and evenings. Muhlenberg also has a

large tutor pool of over 250+ students who help their younger peers learn efficient study habits and organizational skills. Older peers are a wonderful source of support and guidance. In fact, tutors often help first-year students develop a dialogue with their faculty members because first-year students often feel intimidated by their instructors.

### **Other campus resources**

If a student faces issues that warrant intervention, the following resources are available:

- **Faculty Advisors** will help students choose courses, make schedule changes, balance their coursework, and negotiate the first semester registration process.
- **The Counseling Center staff** will help students with roommate issues, anxiety concerns, social, and emotional issues that face college students.
- **The classroom faculty member** will help students with assignments, test preparation, alternative resources, accommodations in the classroom, and any other academic concerns related to the course.
- **The Trexler Library staff** will help students as they begin to do more advanced research work. This may include teaching them how to use CD Rom, Internet, Interlibrary Loan, journal searches, and how to reference certain materials. Many students make private appointments with the reference librarians.
- **The Writing Center tutors** will assist students who need help with the writing process. This may include interpreting assignments, using references, outlining, developing an argument, grammar, and style.
- **The Academic Resource Center** will help students determine appropriate accommodations for each class, develop organizational and time management skills, request other services, identify learning strengths and weaknesses, and shape strategic learning skills. Students may work with a professional **Learning Specialist** or one of over 250 upper-class students who are trained **Peer Tutors**.

## Typical First-Semester Issues

- 1. Workload is much heavier in college for most students.** Most high school students have not experienced either the work demands or the self-regulation required for college work. Students will be required to do many hours of work outside the class each week. This may include independent reading, research, group meetings, and writing. In the First-Year Seminar, students will be writing several short papers each week and will read the equivalent of several novels over the course of the semester. Classroom participation demands that they keep up. Students should be encouraged to set up regular meetings with a Learning Specialist in the Academic Resource Center if they need guidance and on-going support.
- 2. Time management is a problem for most first-year students.** In high school, most students had curfews or they lived in households where the house was silent late at night. This is not the case in college. At 2am, the dorm is active and noisy. Faculty members do not “keep tabs” on students and course attendance may become a problem. It is best if they balance coursework throughout the day. Certainly, if medication or health issues impact the student's readiness in the early morning, suggest later classes. If time management and organization are problematic, suggest working with a Learning Specialist during the first semester. Encourage the student to balance social, work, and home obligations in that first semester.
- 3. Homesickness is predictable for some.** Actively involved parents and friends have supported many students with disabilities. The transition to a new social system, new resources, new advocates, and new sleep/awake patterns can be very stressful. While it is important for parents to listen to their discomfort and support them in many ways, it is not helpful if parents rescue the student and bring them home at a time in the semester when weekend absenteeism impacts social connections. Parents should visit the campus. If parents become concerned, they should alert the counseling office and suggest to their son/daughter that he/she

should make an appointment to speak with a counselor. Resident Advisors are a good source of support for homesick students as well.

4. **Risk-taking 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 reasonable risk-taking is part of normal development. However, if parents, friends, or relatives notice an increase in this behavior and feel alarmed, they should discuss this concern with the student and alert the Counseling Center or the Student Health Center at once.
5. **Social pressures can be significant.** The pressure to conform and adopt the culture of the college can be stressful during the first semester. The student should be encouraged to connect with upper-class students and vary the members of the groups they "hang with." In addition, faculty advisors, instructors, Resident Advisors, and coaches can provide support for these issues.
6. **Getting to know faculty and administration is difficult.** Most students have not worked closely with professional staff in their high schools. They are often slow to realize that instructors can be a tremendous source of information and assistance. When students get to know the faculty and resource personnel, it is much easier to communicate if a crisis arises later.
7. **Roommate issues are common for all students.** Most students have never lived with another person in his/her room. We offer many resources to help students resolve these issues. There are floor Resident Advisors, Head Advisors, Housing Directors, Counselors, and the Dean of Students Office. Students should be encouraged to handle these situations themselves, unless there are unusual circumstances. Students with disabilities generally gain a great deal by having a roommate the first semester. Roommates can be very helpful with technology, wake-up prompts, medication reminders, social contacts, etc. Unless there are extremely unusual conditions, first-year students are not provided single rooms to accommodate a disability.

8. **Grade expectations can be unrealistic.** Many students have become accustomed to good grades in high school and are expecting to continue their high school *GPA* in college. Such is generally not the case during the first semester at Muhlenberg. Transition issues and adjustment to autonomous monitoring make good grades more difficult to achieve. Some students with disabilities have been insulated from timed exams and comprehensive tests. Muhlenberg does not offer unlimited exam time to students with disabilities, although extended test time is common. Many courses require comprehensive exams that tax students who have memory or anxiety concerns. Students should learn to develop exam preparation strategies and test regulation behaviors.

**Common causes of low first-semester grades**

- Weak background knowledge
- Poor study habits (time management, prioritizing, note-taking, test preparation, critical reading skills, homework habits)
- Demanding outside interests and activities (sports, friends, theatre, instant message, Email, computer games, jobs, television, etc.)
- Drug/alcohol abuse
- Poor sleep habits

## **Warning Signs That Warrant Inquiry and Intervention**

**Failing mid-semester grades** are a red flag for trouble. At Muhlenberg, students receive copies of mid-semester grades during their first year of college. Generally, failing grades in the first semester suggest problems with time-management, class attendance, excessive social activities, risk-taking behaviors, or inadequate entering skill levels. The student should discuss these issues with staff at the appropriate campus resource, starting with his/her advisor. In some cases, the student has chosen not to use support services, despite a history of disability and academic concerns. These students will need encouragement or an incentive to do so at this juncture.

**Depression or significant weight changes** should be discussed with Counseling Services or the Health Center. Many students experience significant emotional difficulties during the first semester of college. Students with disabilities often have greater challenges to face and some are at higher risk to become depressed because of these challenges. This is where the student's connection to faculty and staff is critical. At this point in their lives, students are struggling to move away from parental support into an independent world.

**Daily calls/emails home or frequent visits home** may indicate adjustment problems. Suggest that the student stay on campus every other week and you may come to the college to visit. When students are off campus a great deal during their "down time," they miss out on opportunities to develop a bond with the college and to strengthen their friendships. Encourage the student to talk with his/her RA or visit the Counseling Center.

## **Summary**

This is an exciting time full of new challenges, experiences, relationships, and intellectual adventures. We look forward to working with students with disabilities at Muhlenberg College and we hope you will find this handbook a useful resource.

## Resources

[www.ncset.org](http://www.ncset.org)

National Center on Secondary Education and Transition

[www.pacer.org](http://www.pacer.org)

[www.rfbd.org](http://www.rfbd.org)

Recording for the Blind and Dyslexic

[www.geocities.com/lingram15/](http://www.geocities.com/lingram15/)

Publisher contacts for requesting electronic texts

[www.heath.gwu.edu/SummerPreCollege.htm/](http://www.heath.gwu.edu/SummerPreCollege.htm/)

A guide to pre-college summer programs

[www.ldresources.com](http://www.ldresources.com)

Resources and information for people with learning disabilities

[www.schwablearning.org](http://www.schwablearning.org)

A parent's guide to helping students with learning differences

[www.pageminderinc.com](http://www.pageminderinc.com)

A paging system that helps organize both academic and personal life

[www.frontgate.com](http://www.frontgate.com)

Source for the "Morning Reporter," a talking alarm clock/radio that announces the time, weather, and up to 8 reminders that you pre-record

[www.health.gwu.edu/PDFs/financialaid.pdf](http://www.health.gwu.edu/PDFs/financialaid.pdf)

Creating Options: A resource on financial aid for students with disabilities (2001 edition) Heath Publications

[www.cruise-consulting.bigstep.com/](http://www.cruise-consulting.bigstep.com/)

The Concise Guide to College Success: A Guide to the Transition to College for Students with Disabilities by C.R.U.I.S.E Consulting

[www.landmarkcollege.org](http://www.landmarkcollege.org)

[www.allkindsofminds.org](http://www.allkindsofminds.org)

[www.wheretheyouheaded.com](http://www.wheretheyouheaded.com)

Advice for students and families about high school/college transition and "gap year" (time off opportunities) information

[www.autism-society.org](http://www.autism-society.org)

Autism Society of America

Can purchase brochures in bulk or view them online.

[www.efa.org](http://www.efa.org)

Epilepsy Foundation

No brochures or pamphlets but provides printer-friendly information plus a separate teen website.

# Appendix

## **Academic Resource Center/GENERAL INFORMATION**

**Q: What types of services are available?**

**A:** There are four main types of services offered: peer tutoring, group content workshops (Chemistry, Math, etc.), study skills seminars, and individual academic assistance with a learning specialist.

**Q: Is there a fee for services?**

**A:** No, there is no cost to enrolled students.

**Q: What are the qualifications of the tutors?**

**A:** Muhlenberg's Peer Tutoring Program enjoys a national reputation. We are certified by the College Reading and Learning Association to the Master Tutor level and won the 2002 National Tutoring Association's Four Year Program of the Year Award. Each tutor is nominated by a faculty member, must attend five hours of initial training, and is encouraged to attend additional training sessions as well. Peer tutors offer study strategies, support, encouragement, and content instruction in a way that cannot be matched by a professional.

**Q: Why not professional tutors?**

**A:** The Academic Resource Center believes that peers are powerful agents of change. Most Muhlenberg students can deal with the content but they need help with study strategies, organization, and application of course material. The peer tutor has recently completed the exact course, often with the same instructor. Peers are more accessible and often more credible to the student.

**Q: How can a student be assigned a trained tutor?**

**A:** Tutoring request forms are available in the reception area of the Academic Resource Center until the second week after mid-semester. Both the student and the tutor are notified by mail within one week after returning the request form. The meeting time and place is then determined by mutual agreement between the tutor and the student.

**Q: What are the topics covered in the Study Skills Seminars?**

**A:** Study Skills Seminars cover the following topics: assessing your personal learning style, time management/organization, note taking, test preparation, textbook reading, motivation, and metacognition.

**Q: How can a student receive individual assistance?**

**A:** Any student can make an appointment with a Learning Specialist by calling (484) 664-3433 or coming to the office on the lower level of Seegers Union.

**Q: Is there help for students with disabilities?**

**A:** Yes, the Academic Resource Center coordinates academic assistance for students with disabilities. Students should provide recent documentation in order to receive appropriate support.

## **Peer Support at Muhlenberg College**

### **Student Advisors**

Student Advisors are placed in First Year Seminars to provide guidance and support during orientation and throughout the first semester.

### **Writing Assistants**

Writing Assistants are assigned to first year seminars and work closely with students throughout the semester to assist their transition from high school to college- level writing.

### **Writing Tutors/Writing Mentors**

Walk-in tutorials are available through the Writing Center on a first come, first serve basis. Students can discuss their written work and receive advice for revisions, thesis development, organization, grammar, and citation needs. Individual, ongoing support is available in some cases.

### **Peer Tutors**

Peer Tutors are available for weekly individual or small-group sessions through Academic Resource Center Services. In addition to furthering the tutee's understanding of the specific subject area, the tutor helps to develop appropriate study skills, note taking, time management, and test-taking strategies.

### **Learning Strategy Instructors**

LSIs are peer tutors who have been selected to conduct first-year study skills workshops. These collaborative, interactive workshops cover various topics including time management, memory strategies, note taking, textbook reading, test taking, and exam preparation.

### **Learning Assistants**

Learning Assistants are peer tutors who have taken a course in *Adult Personal and Cognitive Development* and are then placed into classrooms that incorporate workshop-based instruction. LAs help to facilitate the learning process by offering workshops, modeling sound metacognitive practices, and working closely with the faculty member.

### **Resident Advisors**

RAs are available for limited, informal counseling on personal and academic issues. They offer guidance to students who are experiencing difficulties, and make referrals to the appropriate campus professionals when necessary.