

## **How to help: Information for parents and families**

The Counseling Service welcomes you and your student to Vassar College! The transition to college is an exciting and, at times, stressful event for many families. The staff at Vassar's Counseling Service is available to help your student during this stage of life. The following list contains a number of strategies parents can use to support a child in college.

### **Supporting your student from a distance**

- Communicate regularly and with loving support. Even though your child may be experimenting with increased independence, it's important to stay in touch. Talk about feelings, concerns, differences of opinion, etc.
- Be an active listener. Ask clarifying questions and offer reflective statements. Try to see situations from your child's perspective.
- Show that you can tolerate conflict and change.
- Understand that your student may not be readily available at all times. Vassar College is an academically challenging institution. When students tell you they can't talk because they are studying, it's likely that they are.
- Expect, normalize, and acknowledge conflicting emotions, changes, and feelings related to the transition to college.
- Expect changes in your relationship with your child. Change is inevitable during this important developmental stage in your child's life. It's usually better to try to accept this and work to facilitate positive changes in the relationship rather than attempt to prevent change from occurring.
- Encourage use of resources available to students at Vassar (e.g., counseling, academic or career advising, LGBTQ Center, Alana Center).
- Be alert to signs of stress. Stress is a normal part of student life in college. However, increased stress that persists over time may interfere with students' academic or social functioning.

### **Helping your struggling child**

Many parents are in regular contact with their students at Vassar and may be the first to notice changes in behavior. Of course, changes are normal while students adjust to life in college. However, if your child is struggling, you may notice some of the following signs:

- A change in appearance (e.g., dress, hygiene, weight)
- A drop in GPA or academic performance from the previous semester
- Increased irritability or agitation
- Consistent reports that they are "having a hard time," or "miserable"
- Consistent inappropriate, illogical, or unrelated questions
- Distracted or preoccupied thoughts
- Social withdrawal
- Frequent absences from classes or meetings
- Expressions of loneliness
- Trauma, loss, or crisis (e.g., relationship breakup, death of a friend or family member, physical illness, sexual assault)

- Expressions of hopelessness (e.g., “there’s no point in trying” or “things will never get better”)
- Indirect statements about death or suicide (e.g., “I just want to disappear”)
- More direct suicidal statements (e.g., “I’ve had thoughts about hurting myself”)
- Cutting, burning, or other self-harm behaviors
- Alcohol or drug abuse
- Changes in eating or sleeping patterns
- Exaggerated emotional response

You may choose to discuss your concerns with your child directly. Here are some tips for addressing the issue effectively:

**Talk to your child when they are alone and it seems like an appropriate time.** This may help minimize embarrassment and defensiveness.

**Be HONEST and SPECIFIC about your concerns.** Explain why you want to talk. Example: "I am really worried how you are doing. It seems like you might be depressed and I want to try to understand what is going on for you."

**Describe your OBSERVATIONS in a non-judgmental way.** Example: "For the past few weeks, I’ve noticed that you are often in bed during the day when I call, you don’t seem to enjoy spending time with anyone, and your grades have dropped since last semester.”

**Express your FEELINGS.** Example: "I care about you and I am really worried seeing you like this."

**Offer your RECOMMENDATIONS.** Example: "I think it would be helpful for you to talk to someone, like a counselor or an advisor. I can help you get in contact with someone if you’d like.”

**ANTICIPATE** concerns and fears about seeking counseling. Be prepared to discuss them.

**TIP!** Leave the option open (except in emergency situations) for your child to accept or refuse counseling. If your child is skeptical or reluctant, simply express your acceptance of those feelings so that your own helping relationship is not jeopardized. Give your child an opportunity to consider alternatives and suggest taking time to think it over. If your child directly says “no,” then respect that decision but leave the option open for possible reconsideration at a later time. Later on, follow up to find out what actions have been taken. Even if your child did not accept your recommendation, it will show your continued interest.

**Contacting the Counseling Service**  
Have your child call 845.437.5700 or stop by Metcalf House to make an appointment with the next available counselor. If it is an urgent situation, encourage your child to speak with the Counselor-on-call.

### **You don't have to do it alone!**

If you believe that your child is in distress, you are welcome to consult with one of our counselors at the Counseling Service. To reach our Counselor-on-call during business hours, call our office at 845.437.5700 and a counselor will get back to you soon. The counselor will ask for specific information about the situation in order to help you determine how to proceed. In doing so, the counselor is still required to maintain the confidentiality of any student seen by the Counseling Service (e.g., the counselor may not confirm or deny that the student has been seen at the Counseling Service). Depending on the nature of the situation, the counselor may suggest that you inform someone (e.g., an administrator or security officer) who can take action to directly address the problem and help the student in need. In emergency situations (i.e., when a student may be in immediate danger) the counselor may alert specific people to protect the student's safety. Consultations at the Counseling Service are free and confidential.

### **In an emergency**

Our 24-hour/day Counselor-on-call can be reached by calling the Campus Response Center at 845.437.7333 is available outside of normal business hours for emergency consultation. Our Counselor-on-call service is only available during the academic year when residence houses are open to all students. Please see our 'Need Help?' page on our website to determine the appropriate contact person/department/agency in urgent situations.

### **Quick Facts about the Counseling Service**

- There is no charge for our services.
- Services are confidential (see the "A Note to Our Clients" on our website for an explanation of our policies) and records are NOT part of students' academic records.
- The Counseling Service uses a brief counseling model.
- 20-25% of current students use the Counseling Service each year.
- About half of the graduating seniors have contact with the Counseling Service some time in their years at Vassar College.
- We are in Metcalf House M-F 8:30 AM to 5:00 PM.
- Our 24-hour/day Counselor-on-call service is available after normal business hours for emergency consultation. Our Counselor-on-call service is only available during the academic year when residence houses are open to all students. Please see our 'Need Help?' page on our website to determine the appropriate person/department/agency to contact in urgent situations.

### **Supporting yourself**

Your child's transition to college is a transition for you as well. This transition can be stressful, especially if your child hasn't lived away from home before. The following tips may guide you in supporting yourself while your child is away at college:

- Attend to your own emotional needs. Recognize that feelings of ambivalence, anxiety, and excitement about your child leaving home are normal. Allow yourself to have emotions.
- Pay attention to your physical and mental health. During stressful times, it helps to get plenty of sleep, eat healthy meals, and exercise regularly. When you feel good, you are more likely to have the energy to support your student in the most helpful ways.
- Find a new creative outlet for yourself. Many parents find that taking on a new challenge is an excellent way to manage and channel their energy and feelings. Consider traveling, volunteering, writing, painting, or taking up a new sport.
- Be patient with the transition. Students don't always know how much independence from their families is appropriate during college or how much support they will actually need. Try to be patient and understand that it will likely take some time for everyone to figure this out.