Congratulations! You have survived (along with your student) the first half of their first year in college. While for most of you it was relatively smooth sailing and for others a seemingly bumpy ride all the way to the end, in the final analysis with you in the background (and sometimes foreground) you made it through. They are returning home, totally exhausted (intellectually, psychologically and emotionally) from the inherent challenges and stress of the last 14 weeks all culminating in Final Exams. Therefore, at the point they arrive home, your primary task is to feed them their favorite home cooked meal and Please! Please! allow them to fall into a deep slumber until they run out of dreams to have. It is likely that there is little you can do that is more important than that and that even includes a mad holiday shopping mall dash. Their body is in desperate need of restorative sleep. It is probably to the family’s advantage that they sleep otherwise you may have to contend with a “short fuse” and highly irritable person.

- Did you ask “What are your grades?” Most likely one of your top priorities is to find out the academic outcome—namely their final grades. Hopefully you curbed the urge to purge it out of them if they did not voluntarily share their final grades with you immediately. Give them some time and wait it out. After all, what are you going to do if the grades are not to your satisfaction? Why spoil the family climate as soon as they get home or in the car drive home from being picked up or holiday atmosphere? Those who did well—passed all their classes with C and above may be more inclined to disclose than those who were less successful.

Resist the need to interrogate and remember to exercise utmost patience and understanding when discussing final grades. Instead, remain non-judgmental and ask open-ended questions and praise/acknowledge their efforts and their strengths. This approach will go a long way for you and you will get more information from them as well as insight into what was going on with them. For example, “Taylor/Jamie, it looks like you did well in some of your classes but really struggled others… What do you think happened?” A typical response from your student to this question may be, “…I don’t know.” Your response then would be, “…well, Taylor/Jamie, I know you were trying hard to balance all types of demands and I am proud of you for hanging in there… it will be helpful for you to think about that in case it happens again … at least, knowing that will help you manage whatever it was that made it difficult for you to get the grades that I am sure you wanted.” Be a good listener. Remember the first year (especially the first semester) in college can be very overwhelming even for the student who did exceptionally well in high school. Again remember just about everyone here at New Paltz did exceptionally well in high school, too. The performance bars are significantly higher now in addition to the complex social and cultural environment they have to simultaneously navigate.

- Did say, “What do you mean I will do better next time?” It’s always good to minimize the opportunity of a big fight over grades. A long drawn out lecture about their performance is not going to accomplish anything after they seemingly just barely survived thirteen/fourteen weeks of four to five classes of lectures and sleepless night of completing or trying to catch up on assignments. Also, they are probably feeling both guilt and shame about their performance. They would simply respond either passively or angrily to you. Therefore, stating your concern and letting it go for the time being is amongst the best approach. Sometime toward the end of the break and just before they return to school for the second semester, revisit the performance issue with them by again acknowledging their apparent efforts and empathizing with their struggle. Example, “…Taylor/Jamie, I know you are concerned about your performance, I/we are too…I/we are proud of you and your hard work and hanging in there…I/we hope you have given some thought to the reasons for your performance and that you have a plan of how to manage the difficulties…I/we hope you will speak to your advisor, Orientation Leader (OL) or peer mentor about how to get the assistance that will help you to be much more successful in the Spring semester.” Again, speak your peace and keep it brief. Curb the urge to give a long lecture involving threats to pull them out of school or instilling guilt about the sacrifice being made or the bite of the family budget that tuition is eating up. All these and more can become weight bearing and another psychological block added to their psychological “worry plate.”
Responding to changes: You may have noticed a lot of changes in them. Some subtle and some very overt. Change in attitudes, belief, behavior, values and lifestyles. You may even find yourself questioning whether this is really the same person you dropped off to college just about five months ago. Well, if this is true for you, then consider that as evidence that your student is experiencing the challenges and benefits of the overall college experience. And, most importantly your financial investment is yielding huge dividend. Caution, be careful of your response. If whatever it is about them seems far-out or a bit over the top to you, then simply look them straight in the eye and say “…uhmm, Taylor/Jamie that is really interesting.” The goal here is to avoid being unnecessarily critical. Remember some of these changes may be temporary and they will modify and adjust as they go through their developmental processes.

Say what? Asking vs. Telling: Excuse them if they seem not to be as respectful as they were before. Remember they have not had to answer to the tune of “yes/no mom/dad.” For the past five months they have been living primarily in the company of their peers and have developed various special communication patterns. In their newly found independence they have not had to ask for permission or approval to do most things. They have grown used to telling rather than asking and doing just about anything they want to do. Therefore, you will need to talk about how to communicate in a way that is respectful and validating of each other. Example, when Taylor/Jamie approaches you and says, “…mom/dad I need the car keys I am going out.” Then you can begin a dialogue by saying, “…Taylor/Jamie let’s find time to talk about how we can communicate about our expectations and needs from each other especially when you are home…” If you had a curfew before, then when they visit your home, consider renegotiating the time with them.

What do you mean you are not sure you want to be back at New Paltz? Confusion and ambivalence about returning to school or being away from home: By mid-January, most students start feeling eager to return to campus. They miss being in the company of their roommates and other friends. Most of all, they miss the sense of autonomy and personal freedom. Parents, family and friends, should try not to take this personally. It is not about you, it is about “Them.” Oftentimes, being home feels like compromising their newly found sense of self. College allows them to explore their horizon and express themselves in a validating way.

While the prospect of returning to campus seems exciting for most students, there are some students that struggle with the thought of returning. You may have long suspected that your student has been less than enthusiastic about New Paltz from the start and may want to transfer or take time out from college. These students are dredging the end of the break. Some are able to express such thoughts/feelings while others are fearful or even unable to do so. A typical response when you ask why they do not want to return is “…I don’t know, or I feel like I just don’t fit in…or… New Paltz is just not for me…” Most students in this category have done reasonably well academically but struggled with a combination of emotional, psychological and social/interpersonal challenges. If this is true for you and your student, it is important that you talk to them about it. Validate their concerns by saying “…Taylor/Jamie, you have kind of hinted about not wanting to return to school/New Paltz, I do not think I get the big picture or understand your reason for not wanting to return to New Paltz, can you help me/us understand from your perspective? It may be overwhelming to talk about for all of you involved, especially if it is happening just before you are ready to head back to school. Take a deep breath, don’t panic. Say to them, “…Taylor/Jamie…I hear what you are saying and I get it…so I will tell you what, let’s go back as planned and let’s arrange to talk with your resident hall director and someone from the counseling center and come up with a plan… if you follow through with the plan through late February and you are still feeling strongly about not wanting to be there, then we can talk more specifically about returning home…” It is important that you remain clear about your expectations regarding adherence to the mutually agreed plan. You may also contact the Counseling Center and/or Academic Advising office for further consultation.

Enjoy your time with your now “Emerging Adult” Take pride and solace in their new and developing sense of personhood. Be supportive. Your response to that change can either make them or break them. Empower them to go forward and achieve their BEST SELVES.

Sincerely,
Dr. Gweneth M. Lloyd, Director, Psychological Counseling Center