



## LEARNING CURVE

# Back to the dorm but this time with my daughter

There's a new approach to university life and it means me and my girl attend my alma mater

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TORONTO STAR

Some things never change.

On a rainy Saturday last November — open house month at Ontario universities — my daughter Kelly and I are touring the University of Western Ontario, which she has since chosen as her university.

We're scoping out residences, including UWO's behemoth Saugeen-Maitland — a.k.a. Saugeen or "The Zoo" — where I lived during my second year. I'm anxious to show her my old residence room. A next-door neighbour excitedly knocks on the door for us. It swings open to reveal a tipsy male student, followed by a cloud of purple haze. Kelly giggles, I suppress a grin.

While Saugeen's reputation seems intact, communication and involvement in the academic as well as psychological welfare of students — and their families — has evolved at Canadian universities.

Teary-eyed parents used to drop us off into a black hole, not knowing what to expect, devoid of cell-phones and email. Others told me that they got dumped at the door with a "good luck" and a swift exit by parents.

Now boomer, helicopter parents — who hover over our indulged Millennium children — can avail themselves of websites devoted to Mom's and Dad's fears, with online

coaching to handle gut-wrenching goodbyes. Booklets are mailed with acceptance packages advising students and parents how to cope with the transition from high school.

For students, there are university-sanctioned Facebook groups to connect with others in residence and on campus, questionnaires to match them up with a roommate. There are summer orientation sessions for newbies to receive course counselling and register their timetables to save them from the September scramble.

And parents can get some in-house coaching, too.

**IT'S JUNE** and group-therapy time for parents of first-year students. Several of us gather in the dining area of a UWO residence during a Summer Academic Orientation (SAO) session. Upstairs, our teenagers are working alongside advisers to cobble together courses and timetables.

SAO leader Sonja, cheerful and self-assured, tells us not to be too concerned if our teenagers don't call or email regularly. "After all, I didn't contact my parents for two months. My mom got kinda got mad at me and said that the only time she heard from me was when I wanted something from them."

My knee-jerk response wants to lecture her: "Is that anyway to treat your parents? Do you know how much university costs?"

These parents now do, as a "special financial seminar" is delivered across the street. But that's following a talk on "student identity development" during university, and



JANICE BRADBEER PHOTO

"I really want to live in Med-Syd, because it reminds me of Hogwarts," says Kelly, daughter of Star editor Janice Bradbeer, about the UWO residence.

some tests for the grown-ups.

We fill out a "parent expectations" form about whether we expect the university to inform us on potential issues confronting our son or daughter during the academic year. But privacy laws mean it's up to our students to communicate their good, and bad, news.

Let's hope they do.

I'm pleased to learn during the talk — and through my research — that security is tighter than when I attended. Now revellers and those

studying late on campus can get a free, no-questions-asked escort by a foot patrol of student volunteers. And there are the 19 Code Blue Emergency Phones, identified by a blue light, that immediately connects to Campus Community Police with the push of a button.

Residence buildings are locked after 7 p.m., and guests are admitted if accompanied by a resident of that building. Students are forbidden to lend their room keys. Study time is encouraged with designated study

rooms and regular academic workshops.

But the most notable change I've seen is that campus residences are now coed, with men and women living next door to each other but with gender-specific bathrooms. Back in my day, Saugeen-Maitland was the only single-student residence I'd heard of, with men and women in the same building but on separate floors. There was an area where both sexes lived side-by-side, but it was considered risqué. "Coeds, coeds, sleeping in the same beds," was the chant for Saugeen, echoed around campus.

Students can now request "community floors" at selected residences, such as a healthy lifestyle floor or a global village floor, or faculty learning communities where students in the same faculty are grouped together. (Two residences offer an all-female floor and suite-style buildings offer single rooms with shared common areas and the option to cook some of their own meals.)

The food in traditional-style residences is more appetizing, diversified and healthier than I recall. Now students have fresh salad and deli bars, and rotating menus that also cater to vegetarian or special dietary needs. At UWO they also carry flex dollars for convenience items — such as late-night snacks from vending machines, meals around campus (including several Tim Hortons), off-campus restaurants affiliated with the university, or home delivery from Swiss Chalet, Domino's Pizza or Pizza Pizza.

Wow.

**OUR TEENAGERS** trickle in after our parenting session. Kelly is excited that her printed timetable, set up and registered for the fall and winter semester, will allow her to sleep in. But she also is stoked about the clubs she wants to join, including a dance club and a Harry Potter club that hosts a Yule Ball every year. "I really want to live in Med-Syd, because it reminds me of Hogwarts," she says about her top residence choice.

Gratefully, for me, some vestiges of childhood remain.

## COPING STRATEGIES

Some examples of how universities are helping students and parents ease the transition from high school to campus life.

- Websites for parents, covering everything from encouraging good study habits to financial questions to what your student may be experiencing emotionally from month to month while away from home
- E-newsletters for parents, chances to join parent associations and parental guides sent with admission offers
- Booklets mailed and downloaded online outlining what to pack and how to prepare for residence. CDs sent to prospective students previewing life in residence and at university
- Special invitations to high-achieving students to faculty get-acquainted luncheons prior to September. Opportunities to talk one-on-one with an upper-year student
- Summer clinics that prepare students for academic and university life in the fall.
- Parent/student summer orientation sessions; year-round campus tours.
- Alcohol-free student orientation weeks.
- Centres exclusively targeted to the needs of first-year students.
- An ombudsperson for students to address concerns, complaints.
- Accessible residences and special services for students with disabilities.
- Support for LGBT and aboriginal students.

- Student development centres offering academic help and encouraging well-being through workshops on such topics as essay writing, resumé preparation and handling stress.
- Strict rules prohibiting hazing, discrimination and harassment.
- Trained emergency response teams and escorts on campus for students studying or out late.
- Some companies make a business out of helping move-in day run smoothly. Residence Linens (residencelinens.com) is a Canadian company that markets a 21-piece collection that includes six colours/styles of linens to fit a university single bed, a reversible duvet, towels and toiletries. The package will be delivered to the residence room at partnering schools (including Western, Guelph, McMaster, Ryerson and York) before your student's move-in day.
- Students always appreciate care packages from home. UWO offers Cause-U-Care baskets through its Residence Hospitality Services website (www.has.uwo.ca/hospitality/residencedining) which are delivered to the student's residence room. These include a birthday pack, including a cake and disposable camera, a Halloween treat pack and an exam pack, which the website says will "feed the brain and reduce the stress." It includes trans-fat free microwave popcorn, Smarties, an energy bar, trail mix — and ear plugs — for \$17, plus taxes. Janice Bradbeer

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