

The Happiest Kid On Campus: A Parent's Guide to the Very Best College Experience (for You and Your Child)

by Harlan Cohen

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The Happiest Kid on Campus: A Parent's Guide to the Very Best College Experience (for You and Your Child) is the latest in the line of college help books by bestselling author and advice columnist, Harlan Cohen. The book's content is extensive and detailed. This publication is based on the author's own college experience, his experience speaking with thousands of students, questions from his advice column and website, national research, and stories and advice from professionals in the field of higher education and student affairs. Throughout this publication Harlan uses testimonials to illustrate the content. Although there are 600 pages in this book, Harlan's use of examples, analogies, and humor makes it an easy and enjoyable read.

The book consists of two parts. In part I, the author theorizes that by knowing what today's college environment consists of, parents can be supportive of their student. This support should eventually result in the goal of empowering their student to take charge of his or her life. According to the author, the best way to be prepared for what will come up in college is to know what their child will be facing and be ready to help him or her when needed. The author speaks directly to parents with statements like, "Being a new college parent who is so plugged in means you need to know so much more than any parent before you. You need to understand what is normal, to be expected so you can put yourself at ease (p.6)." He also tells them that today's technology (text messaging, e-mail, Internet, video chats) pulls parents more into the college experience than ever before.

The author defines several concepts in this book including the *10% Rule*, *Universal Rejection Truth (URT)*, and *24 Hour Rule*. Some background information provided to the reader includes an introduction to the categorical labels given to parents in the 21st century, such as Helicopter and Blackhawk parent. He also explains the characteristics of today's students referred to as the "Net Gen" generation and the governmental changes that affect both students and parents such as FERPA and HIPAA.

Part I introduces the reader to the *10% Rule*: life is 90% amazing and 10%

difficult. According to the author, it is the 10% that can take up 100% of a student or parent's time. In relation to college, the 10% rule can refer to a roommate situation, low grade on a test, or inability to find good friends in the first few months of a new college experience. Any of these situations can consume the life of a new college student. A parent who is comfortable with the 10% can help minimize the drama and provide some perspective on the situation for the child. In contrast, a parent who is uncomfortable with the 10% may increase the drama, blow things out of proportion, and get too involved when something goes wrong in the life of his or her new college student.

The theme that permeates the text is to *get comfortable with the uncomfortable*. Uncomfortable moments in college are a normal part of life. The author emphasizes the importance of students taking risks in college and how that leads to their personal growth. College is filled with uncomfortable moments. First-year students take many risks, such as leaving home to move to campus, living with a stranger, eating in the dining hall with unfamiliar people, and asking someone they do not know well to go to an event. In addition, first-year students are not trained to take risks and many times will resort back to what makes them comfortable. College is a risk-taking training ground where students take on new challenges, try new things, make mistakes, and learn from those mistakes. New college students need to know that this is a normal pattern of behavior.

The author defines the Universal Rejection Truth (URT) which he terms a "powerful and unavoidable force of nature and part of life in college." This truth says that "not everyone we would like to appreciate, include, and desire us will always appreciate, include and desire us (p.137)." He gives several examples: URT of Roommates – Not all roommates will get along; URT of Life Inside the Classroom – Not all students will get A's; URT of College Friendships – Not all people on campus will be friends; URT of Dating and Relationships – Not everyone your child wants to date will want to date your child. The *Universal Rejection Truth* can prepare both the student and parent for what may happen in college and help dispel misconceptions, such as the student will continue to get those high school A's in all subjects. According to the author, too many students come to college with big expectations and unrealistic timelines.

Part I of the book asks parents: what level of parent involvement in a child's college education is appropriate, healthy, and helpful? Or, how can a parent participate in the college experience and empower a student without overpowering that student? When parents solve their student's college problem, it sends the message that their student is not capable of fixing it himself or herself. Here, the author defines the "24 Hour Rule," which means that most problems clear up in 24 hours. He advises parents to wait 24 hours before intervening to help solve their student's problems.

In terms of helping their student navigate the ups and downs of a new college life, the author recommends that parents tap into the flow of information on campus. They can do this by visiting the college website to learn more about specific areas including student life, academics, support services, counseling services, health services, events calendar, and other links. The author also

recommends that they walk the campus, attend orientation to feel more secure and informed, explore parent groups on campus or on the Internet, or plug into the college through Facebook or Twitter. By doing this, parents can become familiar with the information they may need in order to “coach” their student when he or she calls home with a problem. The author views the parent as a coach, guiding the student and empowering him or her to take care of the situation at hand. Parents do not have to “let go” anymore. Due to cell phones, e-mail, the Internet, and video chats, they just have to loosen their grip.

The author also gives parents advice in the form of five things to keep in mind when guiding their student through college: 1) Finding their place takes planning, 2) Finding their place takes patience, 3) Finding their place takes accepting the truth (URT), 4) Finding their place takes training, 5) Finding their place takes having the right people in their corner.

Finally, parents need to understand the college experience so they can calmly help their child:

- get comfortable with the uncomfortable,
- exercise patience,
- map out a path, and
- identify people who can help.

Part II of the book is designed to give parents an in-depth look at college life in order to find the best approach for their student in the specific area discussed. This part consists of 25 tips on different college topics. The first tip provides the foundation for the ones that follow. It includes instructing parents on preparing their student for the experience of college by creating expectations. The author poses five questions that should be addressed during the summer before students leaves for college:

1. What would their perfect first year in college be like? (This is a time to discuss friends, academics, dating, alcohol, sex/no sex, visits home, social life, religion, activities, and experiences outside the classroom.)
2. What is their plan on making the perfect first year in college happen?
3. Who are some people on campus that can help them make their perfect first year happen? (They should think of five people whom he or she can turn to for advice and help along the way.)
4. How much time do students give themselves to make it all happen?
5. What can parents do to help support their student to make this happen?

Having the new college student think about the answers to the first four questions formulates a plan for the student once he or she gets on campus. Having the parent think about question number five can help formulate a strategy to prepare for their student’s college experience. The remaining 24 suggestions that follow include tips on academic life, choosing a major, and dealing with the emotional and physical impact of move-in day and homesickness. A tip that I found particularly insightful is advice on how a parent can prepare a community college student for success on a new college campus. Throughout this book, the

author encourages parents and students to contact him at his website if they still have any questions or concerns.

I enjoyed this reading and can envision orientation, retention, and transition professionals using this text in a variety of ways. This text would be a useful tool in training orientation staff. It contains solid information applicable to staff members working with both students and parents. In terms of preparing staff for family orientation, the book gives some inside information on what parents worry about when their student goes away to college. It also provides useful solutions, information, and insight that can answer some of the questions staff members hear during a parent orientation program, such as, "How often should I call my son?" or "What are some words of advice you can give to me as a parent?"

For orientation staff working with new students, this book provides some tools in helping students navigate through the first year of college. The four questions that the author uses to set college expectations (tip one) would be an excellent discussion tool for orientation leaders who are working with first-year students. Using these questions as a discussion guide can also provide time to introduce the support services on campus and disseminate other pertinent information. In addition, learning to be *comfortable with the uncomfortable* and being aware of the *10% Rule* can put the college experience in perspective for new students.

Orientation professionals working with parents will also find useful information on parental concerns and alternative ways to address these concerns. As an orientation professional in the field for over 20 years, I found in this book helpful tools, such as setting expectations, that can be incorporated into a parent orientation program. The student testimonials are particularly informative on student concerns and needs.

In terms of limitations, some parents, especially first-time college parents, may find the size of the book to be overwhelming or intimidating. Orientation professionals may not find this to be a problem in their own reading because we have an overall familiarity with the general topics, such as financial aid, residence life, and academic life, and can skim through these sections. For those uninitiated into college terminology, the reading may be more laborious.

Another limitation is the lack of a reference section. Although the National Survey of Student Engagement and the Cooperative Institute Research Program are mentioned in text, the reader cannot easily learn more about these agencies without a reference page. Finally, while the tone of the book is generally light-hearted, the author's use of slang terms may be off-putting to some readers.

Finally, I appreciated the humor in this book. For those of us who work with parents on a daily basis, sometimes we need a good laugh. *The Happiest Kid on Campus – A Parent's Guide to the Very Best College Experience (for You and Your Child)* is a good read and a useful resource for parents, students, and orientation staff.