

FLYING SOLO — GOING TO COLLEGE FROM OVERSEAS: A GUIDE FOR PARENTS

THE LOGISTICS OF GOING TO COLLEGE FROM OVERSEAS CAN BE A CHALLENGE FOR STUDENTS AND PARENTS ALIKE. HERE ARE SOME THINGS TO CONSIDER.

By REBECCA GRAPPO

Loading up the family car with loot from the local department store and squeezing into it for the long (or short) drive to the college campus is an eagerly anticipated rite of passage for many American students. But for the Foreign Service kid who lives overseas, it is often a completely different scenario. Instead, the reality is probably packing a couple of suitcases — and weighing them carefully — to get ready for the airplane trip back to the States or to another foreign locale. The college-bound Foreign Service student traveling from overseas must first tackle the logistics of getting there.

Getting There

Will the student travel on educational travel orders, the DSSR-280? This benefit allows one round trip per year between post and school with a U.S. government-purchased ticket on a parent's orders. Flying on such a ticket adds some complications. Families must pay close attention to dates of travel (anniversary dates) because each student is allowed only one paid ticket per year. But in return, they enjoy the flexibility to more easily change dates of travel.

Students preparing to go to college on their own may not pay too much attention to the ticket itself. However, they

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need to be aware of whether they are traveling on a paper or an electronic ticket. Though most of the world now uses e-tickets (electronic ticketing), it is wise to check this. I know of one student who showed up at the airport thinking he had an e-ticket, only to find out the hard way he was traveling on a paper ticket: when he couldn't produce it, he was denied boarding. Fortunately, the ticket was U.S. government-issued, and could be rebooked in time for the holidays.

Another consideration is frequent-flyer programs. If this is an available option, and the child is not already enrolled in such a program, the wise family will do so now and start banking a mileage balance that can be traded in for future travel and benefits. The same goes for credit cards that offer miles for dollars spent.

Travel documents are another important consideration, especially diplomatic passports. Check that the name on the passport is the same as the name on the ticket, or the student won't fly. Make sure passports stay in a safe place. A color photocopy of it, stored in another carry-on bag for safekeeping, would not be a bad idea. I know of one Foreign Service student who lost her passport upon landing in Dulles! Whether it fell out of an unzipped bag or was pickpocketed as she left the plane doesn't matter — the passport vanished. And need I mention that the passport should *never* be packed in the checked luggage?

A related issue concerns the difference between traveling on a diplomatic and a tourist passport. Some countries will only allow a tourist passport to be used for non-resident diplomats. Most young people assume their diplomatic passports will allow them to go anywhere. Not true — they should always check if they are going to be doing any side travel.

The idea of a long solo flight may sound like a great adventure to the student, but for the parents who watch their child walk down the ramp alone to jet off into the stratosphere,

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From the June 2007 Schools Supplement

The ABCs of Education Allowances

By Pamela Ward

Employees of government agencies assigned overseas are granted allowances to help defray the cost of an education for their children in kindergarten through 12th grade, one that is equivalent to that provided by public school systems in the United States.

In most cases, posts abroad are served by one or more English-language schools with an American curriculum. The majority of these are nongovernmental, nonprofit, nondenominational, independent schools, usually with a board of directors establishing policy and a superintendent, headmaster or principal as the senior administrator. Even though these schools may be called American, they are not entities of the U.S. government. Some receive government grants for specific purposes, but these grants represent a small percentage of the overall budget. Children of many nationalities attend these schools, including, in most schools, a significant per-

centage of host-country students.

The allowances for a specific post are determined by the fees charged by a school identified as providing a basic U.S.-type education. Parents may use this allowance to send their children to a different school of their choice, say a parochial or foreign-language institution, as long as the cost does not exceed that of the "base" school. If the alternative school is more expensive than the "base" model, the difference would be an out-of-pocket expense for the parent.

An allowance covers only expenses for those services usually available without cost in American public schools, including tuition, transportation and textbooks. Fees for lunches, trips, computers and school uniforms are not covered, even if required by the school.

Parents may also elect to homeschool their children while at post, using a home study program. They *Continued on page 72*

The allowances for a specific post are determined by the fees charged by a school identified as providing a basic U.S.-type education.

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sphere halfway around the world, it is worrisome! We all know that missed flights, cancellations, delays and bad weather can happen en route. Talk over “what if” scenarios before your children leave so they will know who to talk to and what to do. Arming them with a credit card that has international authorization for purchases and ATM withdrawals is an important protection for emergencies — as long as they realize that a great sale in duty-free does not constitute an emergency!

It is also important to provide kids with a way of staying in touch and reaching out if they do need help during their trip. Nearly all kids have cell phones, and many parents have already made sure that these phones have global calling capability. Alternatively, a calling card with an account code that works internationally is handy in an emergency. If the student

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is carrying a laptop, Internet access is also comforting for parents anxiously awaiting word that their child made that critical connection in Paris and all is well. Some students may have wireless cards or Internet service through companies like Vonage; others can purchase time at various airport locations using a credit card.

Before we leave the subject of get-

ting there, it is important to mention getting home again. Many parts of the world are difficult to reach over the holidays, so it is important to book travel over the winter break as early as possible for the best options.

Staying in Touch with Home

Many parents remember their own college days, when the phone call home was often a collect call made on Sunday night. Today's families are used to more instantaneous and continuous communication, no matter where in the world they are. It is a given that a student will have a cell phone, but here are a few things to think about.

Does the family already have a plan with a U.S. service provider? If so, then it may be easy to add another line for as little as \$10 a month. But you want to ensure that the child has enough minutes to talk for a whole

ABCs • Continued from page 71

will receive an allowance to purchase materials and services while posted abroad, but this allowance will not be continued if they are reassigned to the U.S.

If a foreign post does not have a secular, English-language school with an American curriculum, or has such a school that goes only through certain grades, an away-from-post or “boarding school” allowance is provided. A lump sum, varying from post to post, is allotted to cover the estimated cost of tuition, room, board and travel to post during school vacations. Parents are free to choose the boarding school they prefer. There is no special funding for parents or students to visit schools in advance of application or for an interview, even if one is required.

The U.S. government does not provide an allowance for college or other post-secondary education. However, one round trip per year to post is provided for students studying at universities in the U.S. Recent legislation has also provided this allowance for students studying at universities abroad. The Office of Allowances will issue official notification when this becomes effective. Also allowed is the shipment of 250 pounds of unaccompanied air baggage or the equivalent cost in storage for each college or boarding school student.

All funding for education is processed by the financial management officer at the post where the employee is assigned. At

some posts the embassy or consulate works very closely with the school or schools, and the billing is handled directly. In other instances, the employee will pay a school fee, or pay for an airline ticket or storage, and then submit bills to the FMO for reimbursement. Although a student may start school at the beginning of a semester if a parent has been officially assigned to a post, the parent may not be reimbursed for any school expenses until he or she arrives at post.

There are several offices in the Department of State prepared to help you understand how the educational allowances work, and what choices you have for your children. These include the Office of Overseas Schools (www.state.gov/m/a/os), the Office of Allowances (www.state.gov/m/a/als) and the Family Liaison Office (www.state.gov/m/dghr/flo/c1958.htm).

We hope that you will get in touch with us if you have any questions about your situation. Although these offices are part of the Department of State, the same allowances apply to most civilian federal employees under chief-of-mission authority overseas. For information or assistance e-mail FLOAskEducation@state.gov or call (202) 647-1076.

Pamela Ward was the Education and Youth Officer in the State Department's Family Liaison Office.

month without running into surcharges for going over the limit. The same thing is true for text messaging. Kids can and will text their friends for everything. If you give them the capability to send text messages internationally, you may find that you, too, will hear from them more often!

If you are signing up for a new service, you might want to investigate whether there is a carrier with a discount for students. Another important factor is the coverage offered by the various providers. In some rural areas, where many colleges and universities are located, the shortage of repeater towers means frustratingly weak signals. For those with access to an IVG line, calls to (703), (202) and (301) area codes are free, so one might want to consider a cell phone with one of those numbers.

But what *kind* of cell phone should it be? Some kids travel with two



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phones — the international phone from home that accepts a SIM card and a U.S. cell phone. Others have a single instrument with global calling capability, such as the tri-band and unlocked phones (see the thread on *Livelines*, at www.aafsw.org, for more detailed information). Some kids find that simple is good; others opt for Blackberries or iPhones, which have the added advantage of helping them stay organized.

Students should also know what to do in case their cell phone is lost or stolen. The student needs to be named on the account as someone authorized to speak to the service provider so that if the phone is lost or stolen, it can be reported immediately to avoid liability for charges racked up by the finder or thief.

A final note on cell phones: be sure to list an "In Case of Emergency" contact in the address book. Emergency

rescue workers routinely look in the cell phone for an ICE listing. That could be entered in speed dial as ICE, with a name and number that would be easy to dial.

Other ways that kids and parents can stay in touch include Voice Over Internet Protocol through such services as Skype and Vonage (again, see *Livelines* — at www.aafsw.org — for a discussion thread on this topic). Many countries do not allow the software to be downloaded, so it needs to be downloaded on computers in the U.S. or other accommodating countries. These services offer low-cost or free international calls.

Many parents have learned from their kids how popular instant messaging or gchats (gmail's version of IM) are. It is a great way to have a conversation, and often students open up more when talking online than they might otherwise. If you want to see

your child's face as you talk, you can add a webcam.

A word about social networking sites such as *Facebook* and *MySpace*. People all over the world are signing up for these sites as a way of staying in touch with friends and family in far-flung places. Young people today are especially dedicated to keeping the pages updated, and they network with friends and other people of like interests. Students can meet classmates before ever getting to school this way. Colleges themselves often sponsor pages for this purpose, and are actively looking for ways to use the sites for recruiting.

One cautionary note: students should not put any sensitive or private information on their pages. They need to keep personal security issues in mind and be aware that future employers can and do look at these sites.

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Taking Charge of Your Life (Without the Credit Card!)

Personal finance management is one of the big challenges for many college students. Suddenly, they need to learn to be responsible for the funds parents send as well as the money they earn, and they will need to keep the bank account balanced and the bills paid. Both you and your child need to have a clear understanding of how much the student will get, how they will budget it, and what to do if they overdraw their account. Here are a few points that will help you navigate this conversation.

First of all, does your teen understand the difference between checking an online balance and reconciling a checkbook? Anyone can make a simple addition/subtraction error that seems like nothing—until the fees for insufficient funds start to snowball after the first mistake. A student I once worked with made a simple \$2 math error that cost more than \$100 in “bounced check” fees. Make sure your student understands the concept of a hold on a check before the funds are available; the meaning of pending transactions; the hidden fees for ATM withdrawals at machines in other banking networks; and how overdraft protection really works (i.e., the student gets a deposit, but the parent gets a bill that accrues interest daily and has a penalty fee attached, and then the student gets a grumpy phone call from home).

To avoid transaction fees on cash withdrawal, many students open up an account with the bank on campus. Alternately, students can get “cash back” at local supermarkets and pharmacies—but this works only if they write down the transaction and keep track of the new balance.

One way to facilitate the cash flow from faraway parents with slow mail to students with urgent needs is to link a bank account between parent and student within the same bank. This can be a backup for immediate money transfers. Designating the student as a “payee” in your online bill-paying ser-

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The “Folder of Life”

One thing I gave my daughter when she left home was a 12-month filing folder that we call the “Folder of Life.” It has separate sections holding copies of all her critical paperwork (birth certificate, school records, etc.), medical records and insurance information, a small address book with emergency contacts for extended family and friends, travel info and return ticket, a place for her diplomatic passport, banking backup information, and so on. There's also a section with a very small assortment of family photos and some of her own passport photos, in case she needs them. She laughed when I did this, but now she's very protective of it and has used it on more than one occasion!

—A Foreign Service parent

vice is another way to get funds to a student within a few days.

Many campuses have a “good as cash” card that often takes on the name of the school mascot. These cards are pre-loaded with cash and can be used both on and off campus. When kids swipe them, the sum is deducted from the balance. Some universities require these cards for bookstore purchases. (Other universities only accept credit cards; be sure to find out ahead of time.) The cards are financed by parental deposits and can be loaded online using a credit card.

If electronic money is so easy to get, students may tend to forget about the budget. But it's important for them to understand that the money supply is limited, so they will have to apportion out their funds to make them last for books, bills and fun. Talk to them about the need to open their mail, and either pay or send

important bills home as quickly as possible. Parents have told me horror stories of kids getting bills in the mail, only to toss them in the corner unopened. Months later, a letter from a collection agency finally gets the kid's attention.

Students should also be prepared to be inundated with credit card offers from banks, as parental signatures are not required for a card with several thousand dollars of credit. Speak to them about the dangers of these offers, and the consequences of consumer debt that cannot be repaid. They should also be aware of credit-card scams and should know to never, ever give out their account numbers or information to anyone. Recently a student I know received a call that she had won \$25,000 and all she had to do was give her account numbers — scary but true. Fortunately, she knew better.

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Moving In

"Move in" day at the university is always a challenge. Bulging family cars are lined up bumper-to-bumper, ready to unload Junior and all his earthly belongings on the dorm sidewalk! There are several ways this could play out for the Foreign Service student. If at all possible, at least one parent should help the student move in for the first time.

In that case, a car with a large cargo space, a good credit card, a few hours in a linen or other discount store and some dedicated shoppers are all that's needed. A parent who can stick around another day or two to make more runs to the store for food supplies, pharmacy necessities and office supplies is much appreciated. It also feels good to know that your son or daughter has everything in order by the time you leave and will survive in the new surroundings.

Does your teen understand the difference between checking an online balance and reconciling a checkbook?

Hopefully, the student has had a chance to visit campus during the application process, and this is not the first time he or she has been there. In any case, the parent orientation is a valuable investment of time. It will provide an overview of how things

operate at the school and troubleshooting tips.

Not every family can be there for move-in day, however. In that case, perhaps the shopping can be done at post and sent ahead on a United Air Bill for airfreight under DSSR-280, or ordered online and delivered to an on-campus address. Check with the residence life office or the international student office to see if they have arrangements for holding packages that arrive over the summer. Even then, a student will need help getting large, heavy boxes across campus alone. Residence life may have the names of smaller moving companies or services that can help students. Self-storage facilities or the local rental van and truck company are other possibilities.

Making the dorm room a comfortable home-away-from-home is important.

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tant, especially for the student who is far away from home! Most students equip their dorm rooms with mini-fridges, microwaves, televisions, rugs, printers, etc., often dividing up the “must have” list with a roommate. Keep in mind that too much stuff can be a burden: whatever is acquired during the year must be dealt with at the end of the year.

One final note about dorm rooms: every Foreign Service student needs to pay special attention to safeguarding valuables like passports, tickets, credit cards and money throughout the year. It's important for students not to be too trusting of others, and to ensure that there is a secure place for these items.

Settling In

College can be “the best four years” of a person's life, and often is. But the adjustment is usually not as easy as the hype would have one believe. For Global Nomads who have grown up around the world, being in the U.S. for the first time without family can be a lonely and alienating experience. Coping with reverse culture shock without family and friends who understand international living makes the adjustment even tougher.

Recognizing the symptoms of cul-

ture shock can be very important in dealing with it. Some students report feelings of:

- Homesickness
- Alienation from the home culture
- Not fitting in
- Fear they've made the wrong college choice
- Confusion
- Missing old friends
- Loneliness
- Boredom
- A sense of loss

For most, these feelings pass with time as they settle into campus life. They eventually find new friends, clubs, sports and activities, or create the kind of on-campus organization to which they would like to belong. Many find a bond with other international students, who understand automatically that the question “Where are you from?” has both a short and a long answer! The most important thing is for students to draw on the same coping and adjustment skills they have used to adapt to international life.

That means looking for the good in people and situations, and acknowledging and celebrating people for their individual and cultural differences. Seemingly “boring” American students have a culture, too, and it

pays to try to understand where they are coming from, as well. Most students have some challenges adjusting to life at college, but many of them have never moved before and therefore have no experience in coping with change. The Foreign Service student's strength is the resilience they have developed over years of moving around the world.

One of the things I hear a lot about from Foreign Service kids is how hard it is to be so far from home — any home. They long for a sofa to flop on, downtime to relax, a home-cooked meal and some tender loving care. If they can find a relative, family friend or even a professor who will take them home from time to time, it can really help them get through the rough patches.

Some students have an especially difficult time. If things do not go well for an extended period of time, and your child seems to be slipping into apathy, despondency or depression (or you don't hear from them for an extended period), urge them to check in with teachers, advisers, deans or mental health professionals on campus. The worst scenario is for a student to fall into a slump without reaching out for help.

Health and Wellness Concerns

Students also need to be aware that they are in charge of their own physical well-being. Often, young people think they are invincible. But seemingly minor medical issues can quickly become major if they are not taken care of. What seems like “just” a cold, flu or cough can develop into a dangerous secondary infection or even pneumonia. Sore throats and fevers can easily turn into mononucleosis in a dorm setting.

The university health center is a student's first line of defense, and health care personnel can refer a student to local doctors when needed. Students who depend on medication need to remember to refill the prescription before it runs out; also, con-

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Resources:

Love this for students: *Been There, Should've Done That II: More Tips for Making the Most of College*, Suzette Tyler, Front Porch Press, 2001.

Excellent resources for parents:

The Launching Years: Strategies for Parenting from Senior Year to College Life, Laura S. Kastner, PhD., Jennifer Wyatt, Ph.D., Three Rivers Press, 2002.

Don't Tell Me What to Do, Just Send Money: The Essential Parenting Guide to the College Years, Helen E. Johnson and Christine Schelhas-Miller, St. Martin's Griffin, 2000.

A Web site on the transition to college for parents:

www.mnsu.edu/fye/parents/familyguidebook/collegetransition.html

Evergreen books, really good for understanding your young adult:

Ready or Not, Here Life Comes, Dr. Mel Levine, Simon and Shuster, 1995.

Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens Through the Twenties, Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, Oxford University Press, 2006.

To keep our kids safe:

Security on Campus, Inc.: www.securityoncampus.org/

Campus Safety Tips and Evaluation Brochure: www.securityoncampus.org/students/tips.html

To understand who our kids are and what they might be going through:

Third Culture Kids: The Experience of Growing Up Among Worlds, David C. Pollock and Ruth E. Van Reken, Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2001.

—Rebecca Grappo

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tact lenses need to be reordered in a timely fashion.

All students are required to have health insurance on campus, so they need to know how to use their cards, apply for benefits and either pay or forward the bills home.

The best medicine, of course, is prevention. Students need to understand their own responsibilities regarding diet, exercise, and sleep, as well as the dangers of substances such as alcohol, tobacco and drugs, in order to maintain their own health. Parents should also talk to their kids about matters related to sexual health.

Moving Out

Moving out of the dorm at the end of the year is another major undertaking, especially if Mom or Dad is not there to help. The DSSR-280 allowance now allows for the storage of a student's personal effects instead of

***The more we can help
prepare them for what
lies ahead, the smoother
the ride will be.***

shipping them back to post, as long as the cost does not exceed that of air-freight (see the regulation for details).

In the late spring, signs start to appear on many campuses for college moving companies that drop off boxes and packing materials, pick up sealed boxes for storage, and then deliver them again in the fall. But these services need to be booked in advance.

Another option is to look at short-

term storage facilities; many of these businesses know "mom and pop" moving companies that can help out. Some college campuses allow summer storage on campus for international students — call residence life to ask.

The student needs to allow plenty of time for pack-out, as it always takes more time than one expects. And remind them to check *every* drawer for items like passports, eyeglasses and other valuables before leaving for the summer.

College is an exciting time. It means accepting responsibility for one's self — one's well-being as well as personal and intellectual growth. We want our children to have this opportunity, but we want them to travel wisely and stay safe and healthy. As parents, we know there will be bumps in the road, but the more we can help prepare them for what lies ahead, the smoother the ride will be. ■

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