Thanksgiving has come and gone and now most of us are preparing for the celebration of the holidays. When I was preparing for my oldest son to come home for his first winter break from USD, I had visions of family dinners, nights watching television together and just spending time as a family. This was MY vision of break, not my son’s, however. I did not take into account that this was my son's vacation from a very intense and stressful semester and he had his own needs and wants for this five week break.

When he got home, he seemed so unsettled. That was the term I would use for my son when he came home following his first semester at USD. When he walked in the door, I was expecting the same bewildered child I dropped off months before. He was, however, a young adult who was capable of living on his own and taking care of himself! He had kept his own hours with his roommates in Maher Hall and followed his own schedule with classes and football. He was always so busy with school and friends and had been so stressed from finals, that it was hard for him to just decompress and relax for the first few days at home. He had no idea what to do with all his free time. He was finally able to relax into a routine after a week, but for the rest of us at home it really did upset the family dynamic. The following year when my twin daughters followed in their brother's footsteps by attending USD, my family was much better prepared for this transition.

Like my son and daughters, when your freshman student left for USD in August, he or she was entering unfamiliar territory. Skip ahead four months, and your student is now a seasoned college student used to living on their own and keeping their own schedules. Your student has developed a different support system through roommates and classmates and has shared experiences that you have not been a part of. This is an important time in your student’s life as their world has shifted from their home life to their life at school.

Melissa Halter, Ph.D., from the Center for Health and Wellness Promotion at USD shared some thoughts for our families to make their own transitions easier...

When your child returns home, it is after an extremely stressful time. Studying for finals and completing projects, usually with very little sleep, can cause a great deal of strain. While your son or daughter is happy to be home, the last thing they wants is to have an overwhelming schedule of family plans. Your son or daughter truly needs time to de-stress. This may be reflected by their needing alone time to wanting hours of sleep. As a parent, it is hard not to want to spend every moment with your student because he or she has been away, but students need to get their equilibrium back.
Winter break is the first extended amount of time your student will spend at home. Old rules such as curfews, chores, family time all may be challenged. "Be honest with your student about what you expect from them while they are home," Halter stated. "If certain traditions such as family mealtime are important to you, then let your son or daughter know. Realize, however, that you are communicating more on an adult to adult level. Communication is the key to successful family harmony during this 5-week break."

Be prepared for your student to want to spend time with old friends who they haven't seen for a while. If making plans that involve your son or daughter, make sure you consult with them rather than just assuming they are interested in participating. Try to remember that your son or daughter has been working on a different schedule while in school and this may cause a disruption in the family dynamic. Your student has also become more independent and self-sufficient so try not to do everything for them while they are home. Let them continue to embrace their independence.

"This is another milestone in your student's transition to adulthood. Although the change of your parent/child relationship can be difficult, embrace this new relationship”, Halter said. "This is a momentous time in their lives."