





HELICOPTERS, SNOWPLOWS, AND BULLDOZERS: MANAGING STUDENTS' PARENTS

BY MARK TAYLOR

MENTION PARENTS TO ADMINISTRATORS, STAFF, OR FACULTY AT MOST COLLEGES TODAY, AND YOU WILL YEAR A LITANY OF COMPLAINTS ABOUT MONITORING, INTERFERENCE, AND DOWNRIGHT INTRUSION IN THEIR WORK WITH STUDENTS. FROM ADMISSION AND HOUSING THROUGH COURSE SELECTION, TO EMPLOYMENT AND STUDENT ORGANIZATION INVOLVEMENT, PARENTS ARE INSERTING AND ASSERTING THEMSELVES LIKE NEVER BEFORE.

ASSOCIATION OF COLLEGE UNIONS INTERNATIONAL

Along with this new cohort of postmodern, consumer-oriented students has come a new variety of adult, “parentus inter-fers.” The infamous “helicopter parents,” hovering and swooping in for the rescue, are now often replaced by the “snowplow” or “bulldozer” parents, pushing anticipated obstacles out of their child’s way before the child may even be aware that a challenge exists. What factors are contributing to this trend? How can colleges manage parents’ involvement (and potential for overinvolvement)? Because colleges and parents each want students to excel in college and graduate with the skills to become productive citizens, both can be more successful when working together. Through planning and communication, parents can be partners in students’ development.

The new parent-student-educator relationship

When the “Baby Boomlet” started around 1984, the age of the precious, protected, and monitored children began. Over were the days of Generation X when many children were seen as impediments to the continued self-development of their Boomer parents, and in was the fashionable “Baby on Board” as a manifestation of their parents’ growth and achievement.

Throughout their youth, the lives of these children became increasingly supervised and programmed. The unstructured, self-directed “go play outside” childhoods of previous generations was replaced by the “Three S’s” of structure, supervision, and safety. Parents went to painful lengths to ensure that their children had every developmental opportunity, planning activities such as play dates, music lessons, and sports. However, such structure and direction may have actually prevented the children from experiencing those most critical developmental opportunities that come from making personal decisions (with personal consequences), truly creative play, and meaningful opportunities from an early age to solve per-

sonal and interpersonal problems on their own. Marano (2004) goes so far as to suggest well-intentioned parental hyperconcern and micromanagement of their children’s lives have the unintended effect of actually making their kids more fragile and less able to handle the vicissitudes and challenges of life.

Ironically, as these children went to daycare, their parents tried to monitor them there, rather than keeping them home where they could really watch them. Elementary and secondary schools opened their doors, inviting and encouraging parents to come, watch, and be involved. Students began carrying cell phones, instant messaging, and e-mailing to stay connected to parents even during the school day.

Why would anyone think this would end when these children came to college? Descriptions of the current cohort of traditionally aged students, whether “Millennials” (Howe & Strauss, 2000) or “NeXters” (Taylor, 2003) includes the characteristic “close to parents.”

This trend continues in college, allowing parents almost constant contact and monitoring from any distance. A recent study of student-parent e-mail communication indicates that the median number of contacts was six times in five days via e-mail alone (Trice, 2002). College Parents of America (2006), a U.S. parents’ advocacy group, conducted its own voluntary survey of current college students’ parents. Results from that survey indicated that 74 percent of parents communicate with their college student children at least “two to three times a week,” with 34 percent communicating on at least a daily basis (College Parents of America, 2006). When those students ask their parents for advice, it is primarily with regard to finances (35 percent) or academics (19 percent).

Parents are certainly in more constant communication and more involved in the college lives of their children than previous generations

(Rainey, 2006; White, 2005). College Parents of America (2006) reports that, when asked to compare their level of involvement in their college students’ lives with that of their parents’, 74 percent of respondents said they are “much more” or “more involved.”

According to Donovan (2003), “The shift in parental involvement expectations may signal a pendulum swing back to the doctrine of *in loco parentis*” (§ 21) While not as strict as the dress codes and curfews that Baby Boomers successfully eradicated, it is ironic that those same individuals, now parents, look to the academy to play the role of “protector” and “nurturer” of their children (Donovan, 2003).

And these parents do consider today’s college students to be “children” (Donovan, 2003). Gone are the “Old enough to fight, old enough to vote” mantras among the 18-and-over crowd. It might be noted that the horror stories of “parents behaving badly” in elementary and secondary schools are breathtaking in comparison to college reports (Gibbs, 2005). However, as their children go to college, parents continue to hover above. Anecdotes abound of times that parents have felt the need to intervene with college faculty and administrators on behalf of their children, and have done so successfully (Shellenbarger, 2005b). Colavecchio-Van Sickler (2006) reports: “The worst of them—those who do unethical things, like write their kid’s term papers—are branded ‘Black Hawks,’ a nod to the souped-up military helicopters” (§ 6). Unfortunately it is not just the extreme cases that cause headaches for campus administrators. According to “a recent online survey, ‘Helicopter Poll,’ by the career services provider Experience Inc., 38 percent of more than 400 college students admitted their parents participate in meetings with academic advisors” (Colavecchio-Van Sickler, 2006, § 39).

Throughout history, parents have exhibited characteristics of nurturing and protecting, but what has changed to make this trend so prevalent? Perhaps many factors.

Parents have been privy to a litany of criticism suggesting that many colleges are not doing especially well in bringing about developmental outcomes, in academic and workplace readiness. The Spellings Report of the Commission on the Future of Higher Education (2006) states flatly that “many students who do earn degrees have not mastered the reading, writing, and thinking skills we expect of college graduates” and that “over the past decade, literacy among college graduates has actually declined” (p. 2). Derek Bok (2005) makes his position clear in his title “Our Underachieving Colleges,” as does the PBS special, “Declining by Degrees” (Hersch & Merrow, 2005).

There also has been mainstream discussion about graduates’ “worklife unreadiness,” as they appear unable to think long term, handle details, and delay gratification (Levine, 2005). *Time* magazine dubbed this the “Failure to Launch” syndrome among “Twixters” of young adults who move back home after college and are reluctant and slow to make meaningful transitions to adult and work life (Grossman, 2005). Donovan (2003) reports:

In a recent study, Arnett (2000) found that individuals in their early 20s did not identify themselves as adults because they did not believe they could be characterized as “taking responsibility for one’s self, making independent decisions, and becoming financially independent” (p. 474). These characteristics mark the transition to adulthood, according to those individuals studied. This new category of individuals, aged 18 to 25, has been coined “emerging adulthood” (p. 469). (¶ 44)

The increasing accountability of higher education in the face of evidence of less than excellent outcomes is becoming public knowledge. Why should parents not try to monitor their children, given these widely publicized poor outcomes?

Then there’s the bottom line. Parents today are supporting student spending across the campus and community, and at higher levels than ever before (Grannis & Davis, 2006; Timberlake, 2006). As Donovan (2003) reports:

Utilizing current rates, the tuition for a Millennial student’s four-year degree may be second only to the family’s investment in their home (Oluwasanmi, 2000). A consumer mentality has led to increased accountability for higher education professionals to deliver on the expectations of not only the enrolled students, but their families’ as well (Scott & Daniel, 2001). (¶ 45)

Shellenberger (2005a) attributes the trend to parents’ concerns about campus safety “amid growing media coverage of campus murders and deaths, mounting mental-health problems, and rising alcohol and drug arrests at

HOW DO YOU KNOW IF YOU ARE A HELICOPTER PARENT?

This mini quiz is a great tool for parent orientation and for posting on parent informational Web pages.

1. Are you in constant contact with your child?

If you are calling your child every day or multiple times a day, or if your child calls you at any sign of trouble, then you are hovering too much.

2. Are you in constant contact with school administration?

If you always contact school officials to resolve your child’s problems, then you are overmanaging. One goal of college is for your child to become an independent adult who direct his/her own life. Overcoming challenges on his/her own is one step toward independence.

3. Are you making your child’s academic decisions?

Giving advice to help your child make choices about his/her college career is acceptable; however, making decisions for your child is unacceptable. If you are choosing courses, majors, or a career path for your child, then you are overly involved.

4. Do you feel bad about yourself if your child does not do well?

College is not an experience involving parent and child equally. Therefore, you should not base your own self-worth on your child’s success; and if you are, then you are hovering.

SOURCE: www.collegeboard.com/parents/plan/getting-ready/50129.html



SEVEN TIPS FOR SOON-TO-BE COLLEGE PARENTS

Include this short list in parents' orientation materials and in parent newsletters prior to move-in day.

1. Expect the unexpected.

When first going to college, a child will be torn between many emotions. Excited about new opportunities but saddened by leaving home, often a child will alternate between wanting to be close to a parent and pushing that same parent away.

2. Encourage independence, but offer support.

Unsure about making real decisions, a child may often ask for advice concerning topics related to college. A parent should encourage the student to make his/her own decision or to contact the appropriate office instead of telling the child exactly what to do. A college student needs to become responsible, and this can only happen with good communication.

3. Form an informal support group.

Talk to other parents who also have children in college. Doing so will allow parents to be reassured they are not alone and share ideas on how to deal with different situations.

4. Help your child say goodbye.

The summer before leaving for college, parents should encourage children to visit family and friends to say goodbye. Parents should also be there when their child comes home from saying goodbye, as this could be an emotional time.

5. Make plans for communication.

Deciding on ways and times to communicate can be easier on both the parent and child. Discuss how many times a week that phone calls are appropriate or if it would be easier or more preferable to keep contact through e-mail and limit calls. Parents should not be surprised if, as students become more involved in school work and activities, communication changes.

6. Plan the big day.

Parents should discuss with children the expectations for moving day. Some student may want their parents' company, while others do not. If parents do accompany their child, they should be flexible. Parents should pay attention to the child's behavior to sense when they are ready to be set free.

7. Give yourself time.

Parents should realize ahead of time that not having their child at home will be a big adjustment and prepare for a grieving period. Also, if there are other children in the house, parents need to realize that they will be adjusting as well.

SOURCE: www.nacacnet.org/memberportal/news/stepsnewsletter/college+tips+for+parents.htm

colleges and universities" (§ 10). Parents naturally want their children to be protected from such threats.

Another simple reason colleges are having so much contact with parents is that students are often turning to parents as a first, safe, problem-solving strategy. Students are accustomed to being watched, directed, and feeling good about themselves, and when these students go to college, they carry with them their parents' hopes, dreams, and significant financial investments. It is natural, then, that today's students are not going to be immediately independent and that parents are still going to be involved. This can be a positive characteristic. However, some parents' desire to be involved in students' lives can become extreme, beginning to "stunt student development and test the patience of college officials" (Colavecchio-Van Sickler, 2006, § 9).

Maintaining appropriate involvement

These are important and transitional times on many campuses as schools try to respond in meaningful ways to the legitimate concerns expressed in and outside the academy, increasing accountability and expectations for "productivity" in the face of limiting finances. As student affairs professionals, we need all the help we can get, and parents represent a virtual army. Though they might often be seen as waging guerilla actions against us, it should be possible to enlist them and channel their efforts for our shared goal of student development.

Parents and colleges both want to develop students' independence, so efforts to manage parental involvement should begin with the assumption that institutions are partners with parents and their children in helping students reach their developmental goals. Parents are not the enemy; they are allies in working toward student development. Student affairs educators can play an active role in building that partnership where everyone works collaboratively for students' success.

RECOGNIZE WHY PARENTS GET INVOLVED

To address parents' concerns, institutions must first identify and understand them. Recognizing the reasons that parents may feel the need to intervene/interfere on their child's behalf is an important first step in working through any challenges that might arise. For example, students might get homesick or lonely during their transition to college life. Seeking comfort and familiarity, they might turn to parents despite that personally managing this transition is central to their developmental success. Acknowledging this potential challenge during communication with parents—as well as that the college anticipates and plans to ameliorate this discomfort through activities, counseling, etc.—might avoid some anxious parent phone calls and improve student retention.

When student affairs professionals do hear from parents about their concerns, simply listening to the reasons for parental (over)involvement might offer clues for how

to manage future situations, and even for how to enlist parents' support toward our shared goals. College is not just a transitional time for students; it is for parents too. Therefore, parents may feel the same things students feel, such as excitement, anxiety, apprehension, uncertainty, and disorientation. These feelings might predictably lead to high-energy efforts to collect more information.

Reasons commonly offered for why parents intervene with college faculty and staff on behalf of their children include:

- **Protection/fairness.** "We just want to make sure Mary gets what she deserves and is treated fairly."
- **Students are busy.** "David had to work so I am calling for him."
- **Parents have better skills.** "This form is not clear and I am better at this than Jane is."
- **Specific expertise regarding the child.** "I know my child better than you do!"
- **Consumerism expectations.** "Since I am paying, I think I deserve some answers."
- **Cynicism/memory.** "I remember when I was in college in the '70s and lots of people made mistakes that I don't want my child to make."
- **Student lack of skills or judgment.** "Will someone make sure she gets to class?"
- **Codependence.** "We have always done his schoolwork together."
- **Student discomfort.** "Jason is homesick and ought to be having fun at college."
- **Lack of awareness of student support programs.** "Who will help her if I don't?"

Higher education institutions award students adult challenges and responsibilities, making the college experience fundamentally different from secondary and elementary school. But parents might not view the educational shift as so dramatic. As a result, a ma-

ajor reason for parental involvement in college might simply be "because we have always been involved."

START AT THE BEGINNING

Just as institutions have for years sent information to prospective students long before they begin college, many now send marketing pieces to parents. The impact of parents on students' selection of a college has never been greater (Pryor, Hurtado, Sanez, Lindholm, Korn, & Mahoney, 2005). Unfortunately, many recruitment efforts that acknowledge the importance of parents in school choice (and so direct marketing efforts to them) might also communicate an invitation for them to stay involved after the students are admitted and the bills are paid. It is increasingly critical for schools to "manage" these parents in ways that acknowledge their importance and do not alienate them.

Students are the ones who will be attending the institution, and it is important to reinforce this distinction to parents beginning with orientation. Ensuring students understand the developmental goals of the college and the resources available to them instead of turning automatically to parents might reduce their enlisting parents to intervene with faculty and staff so frequently.

Separating students and parents on tours and in all or part of new student orientation can help students recognize their necessary autonomy in college life, and keep parents from overwhelming prospective students (including their own child) with questions (Santovec, 2004). Scheduling parent sessions during new student activities, allows students unsupervised time to meet with advisors or schedule for classes. Some schools, like the University of Vermont, have resorted to "parent bouncers"—trained students who delicately keep parents away from orientation sessions and sessions with academic advisors (Wills, 2005).

Orientation sessions with parents are a good time to identify potential challenges students will experience as

well as what the institution offers to help students successfully cope with those challenges. Institutions can also recommend that parents develop an informal plan for communication with students. A Calvin College (2004) parents newsletter states:

During these early weeks of college, try to find a balance in the frequency and nature of contacts with your student. It's possible to initiate too many contacts; it's also possible to have too little communication with your student. ... Don't expect a like reply from every communication you initiate. College students do not necessarily follow the "you-contact-him/her" then "he/she-contacts-you" sequence, but be assured that regular contact with your student is valued. (¶ 1)

Before a student starts college, student affairs staff should go through institutional policies, procedures, and expectations, so there are no surprises. For example, some parents might not be aware of FERPA, the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974, a federal statute that limits what schools can disclose to anyone, including parents, without the student's consent. Additionally, college is different today than when many students' parents were in school, and while those differences might be common knowledge to institutional staff, they should be covered in detail with parents (Donovan, 2003).

KEEP CORE MESSAGES OUT IN FRONT

When everyone is on the same page in terms of goals and desired outcomes, they are more likely to work cooperatively. This includes administrators, faculty, staff, students, and parents. Colleges need to keep the central mission out in front, especially in communications with students before they arrive on campus and in all communications with parents as a foundation for subsequent guidance on parental involvement with their child's education.

One central goal of college is moving children from their parents' worlds into their own worlds. College is about helping students develop meaningful skills in mature critical thinking, problem solving, relationships, citizenship, and personal responsibility, as well as appropriate work skills and attitudes. Developing skills requires personal practice in often challenging situations, both in and out of the classroom. "Doing for" students prevents them from developing skills.

Being able to refer back to these core goals may be helpful in managing parent contact, especially when it is interfering with college operation or student development. Institutions might also attempt to keep parents from successfully managing for their children's school affairs if they are choices the student should handle on their own. The good intentions of parents can interfere with the "teachable moments" made possible in college when students can assume responsibility for their behavior and academic and social progress (White, 2005).

It should be noted that when colleges advertise that these are developmental goals, they must "walk the talk" and offer meaningful programming for student development. Lasting, mature development will not just happen as an unintended byproduct of attending classes and accumulating credits (Bok, 2006). If institutions know that students might have had limited opportunities to practice personal conflict resolution or practical conflict management, it is incumbent on them to offer programming to help these develop these important life skills.

OFFERING ADEQUATE, CLEAR INFORMATION

Many issues with parents can be averted simply by offering adequate information about college goals (as previously discussed), methods, what to expect from the institution, and guidance on what is expected of them is parents. Fortunately, many, many avenues for communicating with parents are available before and after their chil-

dren start school. Unfortunately, there is not a "one size fits all" approach that will reach or influence all parents.

The kinds of information offered will vary by institution, but should include the "core messages," as well as procedural information about college processes. Institutions have the tendency to suffer from "the error of familiarity." That is, the assumption that the systems of higher education are public knowledge and so people do not need to be given such "basic" information. Nearly all of the structures and systems of colleges are different than the structures and systems of the educational institutions (high schools) with which students and parents are familiar. For example, "retention" in college is prized and many efforts are made to retain students. In high school, being "retained" means you were held back and forced to repeat a grade, and is certainly something to which students and parents would not aspire. Similarly, in high school, parental involvement (often intense) is allowed and encouraged. Why would students or parents automatically understand the appropriate level of parental involvement during college?

These situations can be even further complicated if the institution does not consider the diversity of its parents. First-generation families may not have any experience with how higher education institutions operate. Further, "Ensuring institutional publications and forms are translated into families' first language, as well as avoiding educational jargon, supports their need for information and ultimately leads to the admission and retention of first-generation students" (Donovan, 2003, ¶ 57). And communications should be written to acknowledge that families might include stepparents, extended families, single parents, unmarried parents, guardians, and gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered parents.

ESTABLISHING COMMUNICATION AVENUES

Everyone on campus needs information on how to work with parents, from policy guidelines to the college's

strategies. Certainly everyone could benefit from knowing what information is given to parents. The more everyone on campus uses the fewest words and the same words, the more likely parents are to get the messages about boundaries and the advantages of students' self-managing.

Currently efforts to communicate with parents are wildly uneven between and even within campuses. More traditional parent orientations and newsletters are being augmented with Web sites and Web pages for parents, e-newsletters, listserves, and blogs. Panelists of "experienced" parents can be especially effective at parent orientations and could be used in other communication channels. Whatever the medium, according to Brian Berry, dean of students at Southern Arkansas University, "It is important to educate parents about reasonable boundaries of their involvement in their student's college experience while providing opportunities for them to stay involved in a positive and not too intrusive manner" (personal communication, August 18, 2006).

Institutions can offer constructive opportunities for parents to feel involved through clear forums for discussing concerns, helpful resources, policy descriptions, and contact information. College Parents of America (2006) reports that 61 percent of parents use an institution's "parent-oriented Web site." They want information about their primary areas of concern, namely "academics," "finances," "career planning," and "health and safety."

Further, as our culture becomes more consumer-oriented, educators need to acknowledge that poorly handled contact with parents might expose the institution to litigation around privacy or fiduciary issues. Serious parental concerns and issues, especially those that might expose the college, should be referred to an ombudsman or administrator. Parents who persistently attempt to interfere on their child's behalf, or who attempt to inappropriately

influence faculty or staff in grading or procedural events, should be directed to an appropriate administrator.

A few brief guidelines for communicating with parents might include the following:

- Faculty and staff should be reminded to communicate with parents in a courteous and respectful fashion. Whatever the message is, it is never appropriate for any campus employee to treat parents in a rude or disrespectful way that discounts their feelings.
- Staff should act within strictly defined legal and procedural parameters, and to refer all other questions and concerns to an appropriate administrative or ombudsman office.
- As a rule, conversations can be proactive partnerships with student development at their core. During these discussions, educators can urge the use of a promising strategy: The parent can encourage the student to manage the situation on their own by speaking to a faculty or staff person directly.
- Educators should also acknowledge in a meaningful way that the parents' discomfort, distress, or dissatisfaction is understood. This can be done by a simple "I understand" or "I apologize."
- While college guidelines, probably based on FERPA, generally prohibit speaking about a particular student, case, or situation, these guidelines usually do not prohibit restating college policies or goals. Faculty should not talk about how a student was graded, but can describe grading rubrics.
- Most of the student problems that parents describe are normal, developmental issues it would behoove students to manage themselves, and most students do get over these kinds of predictable problems. It is still helpful to reiterate this during conversations with parents.

Staff members also need internal communication avenues. Listening to parental concerns can help staff improve college programs in general and approaches to parents specifically. Trainings, workshops, and roundtables sharing the kinds of issues staff members are having with parents, may avoid having to spend time in damage control later.

Reaching our goals

College should be a time of many challenging experiences for students in and out of the classroom. Managing the occasional frustration and overcoming challenges can be important parts of students' growth in college. When parents, our partners in student development, try to intervene to handle these normal life issues for students they deprive students of significant opportunities for meaningful learning. Helping parents better understand our goals and methods of student development in college, and their appropriate boundaries and roles in their student's development, might best maximize our relationship and help in achieving our shared goals.

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