

# Meet the Parents: Managing for Student Success

Mark Taylor

Few in higher education will disagree that students' parents are inserting and asserting themselves like never before. The infamous helicopter parent, hovering and occasionally swooping in for the rescue, is now often replaced by the "snowplow" or "bulldozer parent," pushing anticipated obstacles out of their children's way before the children may even be aware of a challenge (Taylor 2006b). While many educators complain that parental involvement in course selection, discipline, and academic work reduces students' opportunities to face meaningful learning and developmental challenges on their own, few deny parents' significance in college selection, student persistence, and financial support.

How can we manage parents' contacts with the school and with their children to facilitate our shared goals of student persistence, learning, change, graduation, and success? Because both colleges and parents want students to succeed and graduate with the skills they will need to be productive citizens, planning and communication will make parents partners in student development.

## Why Are Parents So Involved?

Today's parents have been, can be, need to be, and are called upon by their children to be involved. Students are turning to parents as a primary, safe, tested problem-solving strategy. These parents have always been more involved in their children's lives, especially their academic lives, than were earlier cohorts of parents.

It is irrational to believe that parents will extricate themselves just when the stakes get high, serious money starts changing hands, and their children move away; for many, these are indicators of a need for increased involvement. Parents have every right to monitor the major financial output and investment they are making in their children's education and our schools (Taylor 2006a).

Today's parents can be more involved and in near-constant contact via the digital umbilici of cell phones and other electronic communication devices. No one needs the schools to serve in loco parentis when the parents can be virtually loco themselves.

A litany of criticism suggesting that many colleges are not doing especially well in bringing about learning and developmental outcomes, including workplace readiness, might concern the duly diligent parent. Consumer-oriented parents may have good cause for concern about their significant outlay of dollars (Bok 2006). Parents and students see students as less mature and less capable of self-management, and so more in need of supervision (Howe and Strauss 2000).

## Managing for Student Success

### Improve Outcomes

One obvious solution that might reduce parents' real or perceived need to monitor educational processes is to improve our outcomes in meaningful student learning, workplace readiness, and preparation to take on adult roles. Recognizing that many traditional academic practices, in and out of the classroom, are not working and improving the ability of faculty to move to active pedagogies that leverage available technologies to bring about meaningful change are absolutely necessary. Moving everyone on campus toward a greater application of best practices as they appreciate the fiduciary nature of their relationships with students, their parents, and the public will improve outcomes and should reduce parental intervention, at least in the long run (Taylor 2006b).

### Help with Parents' Transition to College

Everything we have learned about a student's successful transition to college can be applied to parents, who feel the same things the student feels: excitement, confusion, anxiety, apprehension, uncertainty, and disorientation. These feelings might predictably lead to parents' high-energy efforts to seek comfort by collecting more information and demonstrating some control. Programs for parents, like those for entering students, that acknowledge the normalcy of confusing, conflicting, and uncomfortable emotions and offer suggestions for successful affective management can benefit parents, students, and schools.

Separating students and parents on tours and in all or part of new student orientation can make it possible to address each group's concerns, help students recognize their necessary autonomy in college life, and keep parents from overwhelming prospective students (including their own child) with questions (Santovec 2004). The University of Vermont and some other schools have resorted to "parent bouncers," trained students who delicately keep parents away from orientation sessions and sessions with academic advisers (Wills 2005).

### Manage Stress with Information and Support

Traditional parent newsletters are being augmented with Web sites and Web pages for parents, electronic newsletters, Listservs, and blogs. Twittering for parents cannot be far away. Whatever the medium, according to Brian Berry (2008), vice chancellor for student services at the University of Arkansas Community College at Batesville, "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."

### Developmental Parent Education

All parents believe they are doing the best thing for their children when they help or intervene. Developmental education for parents through programs at orientation, at back-to-school weekend, or virtually can help them understand and develop better skills at parenting the late adolescent. Specific program modules might include the following:

- **How to talk issues through instead of offering advice.** Peer counseling skills can help parents help students find solutions instead of fostering dependence.
- **When to rescue and when not to rescue.** Programs can help parents distinguish safety issues, like alcohol or drug situations when they may want to get involved, from developmental, academic, or discipline issues it behooves students to handle alone.
- **When to intervene and when not to intervene.** While changes in financial commitments, like the possibility of an additional semester of study, might suggest parental contact with the business office, student confusion about an assignment is probably not a good time to intervene with an instructor.

### Avoiding Avoidable Problems

Parents report intervening with college personnel when student efforts fail (Shellenbarger 2005). Faculty, administration, and staff should respond to student concerns quickly and alert or follow up with parents when appropriate, especially about fiscal concerns. Tuition, scholarship, financial aid, and loan procedures are complicated. Students and parents want to make sure they are getting everything they are eligible for. Anticipate questions and provide answers during orientation or on frequently asked question pages on the Web site. High costs encourage parents to seek on-time graduation, though this often conflicts with encouragement to "find yourself" or "explore options" especially popular in liberal arts education. Every human effort must be made to help students stay on schedule by means of effective advising and appropriate safeguards against excessive class dropping and schedule and degree plan changes.

### Talk about the Developmental Mandate

When everyone is on the same page in terms of goals and desired outcomes, we are more likely to work cooperatively. Many issues with parents can be averted simply by offering adequate information and guidance about college goals and methods, what to expect from the school, what is expected of parents, and what is appropriate involvement. Making sure students understand the developmental goals of the college and the resources available to them might reduce their enlisting parents to intervene with faculty and staff so frequently.

As a foundation for subsequent guidance on parental involvement with their children's education, colleges need to keep the central mission themes out front, especially in communications with students before they arrive on campus and in all communication with parents. 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 such skills requires personal practice in challenging situations both in and out of the classroom. Parents' "doing for" students prevents students from developing skills.

### Preparing Everyone to Deal with Parents

Everyone on campus needs information on how to deal with parents from the guidelines of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and from the college's strategies. 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.

Whatever the message, it is never appropriate for a campus employee to treat a parent in a rude or disrespectful way that discounts the parent's feelings. Though there are popular anecdotes, possibly campus legends, about high-income parents complaining that their child did not get need-based aid, or about the mother who contacted financial aid to insist that her daughter was independent, most contact is with parents who are concerned and well meaning, though possibly confused about legal and developmentally maximizing boundaries.

Parents should be unfailingly treated with courtesy, dignity, and respect, keeping in mind that they have entrusted us with their children. College personnel might want to pretend, the next time they take a call from an “interfering” parent, that the parent signs their paycheck.

Guidelines for communicating with parents include the following.

- Faculty and staff should be reminded to communicate with parents in a courteous and respectful fashion 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, a good strategy is to encourage the parent to encourage the student to speak to a faculty or staff member directly and to try to manage the situation on his or her own.
- Telling a parent “I’m sorry” does not admit guilt, either personally or for the institution, but can acknowledge in a meaningful way that the parent’s discomfort, distress, or dissatisfaction is understood.
- While college guidelines, probably based on FERPA, generally prohibit speaking about a particular student, case, or situation, these guidelines generally do not prohibit restating college policies or goals. A faculty member 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 get over these kinds of predictable problems and do well in school.

### Consider a Parental Ombudsman Office

Poorly handled contact with parents might cost a school students and might even expose the school 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 designated administrator. Parents who persistently attempt to interfere on behalf of their children or those who attempt to inappropriately influence faculty or staff about grading or procedural events should be directed to an appropriate administrator.

## Conclusion

College should be a time of many challenging experiences for students in and out of the classroom. Successfully, and even unsuccessfully, meeting those challenges contributes to meaningful personal development. Managing the occasional frustration and the rough and tumble of college can be important parts of students’ learning experiences.

This is not the time to evict parents from campuses, but to enlist them as full partners in the development of our students—their children. When parents, our copartners in student development, try to intervene to handle these normal life issues for students, they deprive the students of significant opportunities for meaningful learning. Listening to parents can help us improve our schools. Helping parents better understand our goals and methods of student development in college, and their appropriate boundaries and roles in the student’s development, might best maximize our relationships toward our shared goals.

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