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Parents of college students influence the transition experiences of their sons and daughters, and they also experience significant transitions of their own.

From Helicopter Parent to Valued Partner: Shaping the Parental Relationship for Student Success

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I start with a confession: I have been one. A helicopter parent, so named for hovering over a college student—my college student, my daughter—when the college professionals thought it would be better to leave her problems to them.

Now the defense. My daughter asked me to intervene with her college when a squirrel was scampering, day and night, in the wall of her room. No, I said, and I gave her some tips on how to get it taken care of. The college came right out and sealed the hole in the exterior wall—with an increasingly frantic squirrel trapped inside. THEN I started making calls, knowing that an “embrace the bureaucracy” lesson could be pursued another day. Did I do the right thing? Can’t say.

But plenty of professionals in student affairs would say no. They decry the involvement of parents, which is happening at levels of intensity and in matters of minutiae they say they have never before witnessed. They tell “can-you-top-this” stories in person and in print about moms who call the college president seeking redress of an unfairly given grade of B, and dads who rail red-faced about never giving the institution another dime if the dean does not report to him on Junior’s suspected nightlife and resulting absence from 8:00 A.M. biology classes (Strauss, 2006; Colavecchio-Van Sickler, 2006).

But I know another story, told to me by a colleague who works at a small community college in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia. Many people there

are poor and not formally schooled past very basic levels. My friend had witnessed a new student, a young woman, who came to school one day with younger siblings, parents, and grandparents in tow. They wanted to witness and celebrate a momentous family occasion: the young lady registering for classes for the first time, the first such toe in college waters by any member of the family ever. There were smiles and tears over an event that the more jaded among us consider just another bureaucratic hassle of institutional life.

Where is the truth of parental involvement and concern in these extremes? Is parental involvement a problem to be monitored like a communicable disease, something about which we can share funny stories and strategies for containment? Or is it the manifestation of deep emotions—love, hope, fear—that we have both an opportunity and an obligation to address? The short answer is yes.

The fact is that parents are not a monolithic crowd. They are neither overbearing second-guessers who will not let their children grow and mature, nor a purely benevolent but naive set of bystanders, waiting to be called on before they make any interventions and leaving it to the professionals. Parents are rational and emotional, informed and misinformed, deeply interested and distressingly distant, seeking solutions to and being part of various problems.

We can say, however, that the environment in which students and parents find themselves as they enter college in the early twenty-first century is very different than it was even a few years ago. These are some elements of those differences.

The law regulating the complex relationships of parents, students, and institutions is shifting, murky, and challenging.

The ideal for many parents of *in loco parentis*—the college acting in place of parents in the monitoring and regulation of student behavior in and out of the classroom—is dead. It has been weakened by various statutes and legal decisions going back more than a century, but the independence of students from institutional control has accelerated in recent decades (Bickel and Lake, 1999).

The foment of campus politics during the 1960s empowered student independence and assertion of rights. The constitutional amendment giving eighteen year olds the right to vote led a shift in the general legal environment toward regarding the age of eighteen, rather than twenty-one, as the threshold of legal majority. The federal Buckley Amendment, later evolving into today's Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), prohibited the sharing of individual student information with virtually anyone, including the student's parents. While modifications have been included to allow institutional communication with parents in the cases of a student's physical and mental well-being and for some circumstances of drug and alcohol use, FERPA still prohibits in large the ability of colleges to communicate with parents about attendance,

grades, or other matters once clearly within the domain of *in loco parentis* (Bowden, 2007; Henning, 2007; Bickel and Lake, 1999).

The shifts in legal environment have occurred when, ironically, campuses have been held accountable to new laws and regulations about the environments they provide for students. The Cleary Act of 1990, named for a campus murder victim, held campuses responsible by federal law for the uniform compilation, and reporting to both the government and the public, of campus crime statistics. Legal actions and suits, sometimes successful, have been leveled against institutions for an asserted failure to act and share information in a timely fashion about students who exhibit self-destructive behaviors. Of increasing concern to campus officials, students, and parents is the presence on college campuses of students with diagnosed mental problems that could lead (and have led) to highly violent behavior toward others. In retrospect, which is how case law is made, decisions and their wisdom are sometimes clearer. In real time, the conflicting assertions of student privacy, parental interests, and even such laws as the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act, which is steadfast in the protection of patient privacy, put all parties in positions that can seem no-win and legally perilous regardless of action.

It is no wonder, then, that parents assert rights that they may or may not have when laws are conflicting and basic circumstances so different from those of the parents' college days. Even seasoned campus officials often have to talk to the campus lawyer before acting in complex circumstances.

Communications are ubiquitous and continuous.

The 1970s and 1980s, when many of today's parents were in college, were times when communications with parents in a distant city were restricted to visits home, actual put-a-stamp-on-it mail, and maybe a weekly call on the residence hall's pay phone. Today most colleges have quickly made the transition from putting phones in every residence hall room to removing them, since "everyone" has a cell phone or prefers to communicate by e-mail, instant messaging, or text messaging.

A class exercise for my graduate students who are preparing for careers in student affairs professions is a schedule of structured interviews with first-year students about their lifestyles and time management. Some questions relate to communications with parents. Five phone calls home a day to parents or siblings in a distant city is on the higher end of staying-in-touch patterns but not particularly unusual. Some students do not own alarm clocks or use their cell phones as substitute alarms, but instead get the same daily rousing by telephone from their parents that they got back in high school. Dad and Mom still help with homework, but while daughter or son is walking with friends to the coffee shop.

Are these circumstances of a failure to let go and grow up, or a tool of keeping families connected in supportive ways that contribute to student success? As with most other complex circumstances, it depends.

Expectations of the college-going environment are affected by consumerism.

Rankings from *U.S. News & World Report*, *Money Magazine*, and a dozen other sources encourage us to look at college education as a commodity that can be compared by using about the same number of metrics one might use to decide among new cars. Tuition rates that have risen more steadily than general inflation for decade after decade, no matter the justifications, have resulted in price tags that can make a college education the most costly expenditure of a lifetime. The cumulative national debt from student loans, as the country has moved from governmental grants to individual responsibility for college finance, combined with bankruptcy laws that now make it virtually impossible to discharge the burdens due to hardship, have led some to speculate that even more serious economic troubles are on the way.

When students and parents cannot count on much help to pay for college and when the sticker price is indeed shocking, it is little wonder that values shift from college education as a societal good to college education as a personal investment and possession. With that values system comes assertion of “property” rights: expectations of services on demands, even if not offered by the college; rights to know how money is used, both generally and on behalf of an individual; and a general assumption by some parents that the customer is always right.

Parents come to college with a gamut of personal knowledge about college and how it works.

A premier condition of American higher education has been the trend since World War II of democratization and massification, that is, a general interest in seeing both that everyone has a chance to go to college and that society benefits from high levels of advanced education. With postsecondary participation rates by eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds of nearly 50 percent, and more among some demographic sectors, the United States enjoys one of the world’s highest rates of inclusion (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005).

Yet it is sometimes easy to forget that if half of our potential students are in attendance, half are not. If we do our jobs well and continue to make advances in rates of participation, particularly among historically under-represented populations, we will see lots of first-generation college students for a long time to come.

Parents come to colleges and universities with variable levels of college understanding. Some hold graduate degrees, have attended four or five institutions, have put several children through college before, and can easily and comfortably speak to a professor. For others, this is uncharted territory, and even the jargon is opaque. I recall a friend who was just short of a college degree discussing the circumstances with her father who had never himself attended. “How much more do you have to do?” he asked. “Three hours,” she replied. “Three hours? Aren’t you off work on Friday? Just go

over and take care of it.” And in a world where a three-hour responsibility can be discharged before lunch, that is a completely reasonable suggestion.

The challenge for educators is providing information that assists, comforts, educates, and enlists parents as educational partners, but does all of this across the range of knowledge and background that parents present. Efforts aimed exclusively at one or the other end of this range will, by definition, leave out about half of all parents.

Love is all around us.

The most rewarding, vexing, or infuriating of parental interactions with colleges tend to share a common factor: heavy emotional context, be it anger, fear, or joy. And these originate in the reality of parent and child love, something we can too easily forget. If parents sometimes seem irrational, it might be worth asking if our own closest relationships always run smoothly and logically. Often situations are best handled or substantially improved simply by lowering the temperature of the emotional environment, expressing real empathy, and explicitly committing to work through the issue.

What Colleges Can Do

Colleges and universities can take a number of intentional steps to work more collaboratively with parents. These actions will increase parental understanding of the collegiate environment and build connections that support student success.

The Partnership Relationship. An underlying philosophy that strengthens most institutional-parental contexts is the deliberate effort to establish a partnership relationship with parents. This offsets the adversarial relationship that can emerge in the absence of an effort to shape interactions.

Many institutions find the idea of familial relationships to be an even stronger and more cohesive conceptual framework. Family relationships involve deep emotional connections, rights to speak and be considered in decisions, an evolving maturity and focus based on time, and commitments to stick with one another through thick and thin. For most institutions, that kind of relationship with parents, although fairly “high maintenance,” is more productive than the contractual, consumerist one that it displaces.

Orientation as an Event and as a Process. Many institutions now have orientation sessions for parents that parallel the orientation sessions they hold for students (Mullendore and Banahan, 2005). These are typically one-day, sometimes two-day, events on campus, often held while students themselves are participating in conventional orientation activities. Content frequently includes extensive information about what students will be doing in coming days and weeks, expectations of students, a review of relevant law (particularly FERPA), the college social environment and how students will be encouraged to handle and balance it, the changes in students that parents are likely to witness, and how parents can support students’ successful transition.

It is important that educators seize such opportunities to pull parents into the partnership that supports student success. Partnership involves not only rights but responsibilities. Educators should be forthright not only about the behaviors and approaches that contribute to students' accepting responsibility, but also about behaviors that inhibit independence and the acceptance of personal responsibility. Discussions that involve parents and upper-level student leaders are one mechanism to deal with specific issues. By avoiding direct reference to the potential problems that can be caused by "incoming" parents, situations can be worked through hypothetically and will be easier to deal with when encountered in real life.

It is also helpful to look at orientation not just as a one-time event but as a continuing process (Mullendore and Banahan, 2005). The need for and interest in information and institutional interaction begins long before formal orientation on campus, and many issues that an orientation session might cover will not be relevant until months into the future. Orientation for parents therefore should ideally begin with the first evidence of interest in the institution and continue well into the first year of college. Some functions that go beyond college orientation, such as the cultivation and solicitation of parents as financial contributors, will go on well beyond orientation. Internet-based communications and e-mail present major low-cost opportunities for just-in-time delivery of key information to parents, but sole dependence on Internet communication will mean that parents without computer access or computer literacy will miss important information.

Handbooks and Similar Print Materials. Just as colleges use handbooks for students, often combined with an appointment and event calendar, so they can use handbooks for parents. The handbook represents not only another communication mechanism, one that virtually everyone can use; it also offers parents an opportunity to take in key information when they have a particular need to know. Very detailed information can be communicated through a handbook in ways that Internet-based or in-person communications do less effectively.

The use of print communications with parents, particularly those that are mailed or otherwise distributed outside a formal, more content-controlled environment such as orientation sessions, raises the possibility of communication overload or overlap from multiple offices. It is even possible that various well-meaning administrators can give conflicting advice and information. It is worthwhile for a person or office with top responsibility for parent communications to act as a clearinghouse for all messages intended for parents. Even the function of smoothing the information delivery schedule, so that five mailings are not received on one day and none for another month, is a service to the institution and parents and increases the chance that each message will be regarded more closely.

Whom to Contact. One of the elements frequently heard in stories about helicopter parents is the petitioning of inappropriate officials at the university about student issues, such as calling the president about a lack

of hot water in a residence hall, visiting the provost about a poor grade, and requesting the dean to monitor a student's getting out of bed and to class on time. Some of that comes from a misplaced concept of getting things done by "going straight to the top," but some of it comes from a lack of information about appropriate channels to bring up issues, regardless of their ultimate importance or appropriateness.

It is preferable for colleges to anticipate parental concerns and to offer clear, readily available recommendations about the individuals whom parents might contact to seek assistance with different problems or questions. Names, telephone numbers, and e-mail addresses are important; giving only general office contacts is impersonal and increases the chances that such offers of assistance will be bypassed to "go to the top."

Knowing What FERPA Prohibits, and What It Does Not. FERPA, in theory, is a sound articulation of student independence and adulthood. In practice, it has sometimes inhibited institutional-parental consultation when that consultation is appropriate to the student's best interests. But the fact is that colleges have tended to be inhibited in their parental communications by believing that FERPA and subsequent modifications prohibit communications that it in fact does not prohibit, according to LeRoy Rooker (2008), an attorney with the U.S. Department of Education.

FERPA gives students the right to inspect and review all educational records including, but not limited to, grade records and to seek amendments to those records. FERPA also gives students some, but not unlimited, control over the disclosure of those records to others. Exceptions to FERPA include records created and maintained by law enforcement agencies; those records are not protected from disclosure beyond the rights extended to any citizen. The Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act is generally very restrictive of disclosure. But FERPA specifically trumps it when a record may fall under both considerations.

Other exceptions to the prohibition on disclosure of a student's records to parents under FERPA include the following:

- Results of a disciplinary hearing if a student is in violation and the violation involves violence
- Violations of drug or alcohol policies if the student is under twenty-one years old
- Disclosure of relevant information that is deemed necessary to protect the health or safety of the student or others
- Disclosure of educational records when the student is a tax dependent

Additional liberalizations of the ability to disclose information were under consideration by the federal government at the time of this writing. For most current and detailed information, consult the Web site of the U.S. Department of Education's Family Policy Compliance Office (<http://www.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/fpco/index.html>).

FERPA rights may be waived by a student who gives informed consent and a signature. Standardized forms are available for waiver of confidentiality. It might be appropriate to use such waivers, for example, as a condition of participation in a special academic recovery or readmission program, as some institutions have done. Such actions create an opportunity to communicate with parents and are part of an intensive, ongoing advising and monitoring program intended to get the student back into good academic standing. The permission to waive FERPA rights would likely expire when the student had regained full academic status. Waivers, however, are themselves subject to particular limitations. They must specify the records that may be disclosed and state the reason for the disclosure. Furthermore, they must identify, by name or status (“my parents”), the individuals to whom disclosure can be made.

Resources for Parents, Students, and Educators

College Parents of America is a national membership organization dedicated to informing parents about key general issues of college attendance and public and legislative advocacy on behalf of those families. A number of colleges and universities are institutional members of the organization.

Several college-related professional organizations are also involved in improving parent-institution relationships. The National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) sponsors a “knowledge community” to consider parent and family relations. A section of the organization’s Web site (www.naspa.org) is dedicated to brief summaries of institutionally submitted best practices in parent programming. *Partnering with the Parents of Today’s College Students*, edited by Kurt Keppler, Richard H. Mullendore, and Anna Carey, was released in 2005 by NASPA. It is topically arranged for use by educators, but also contains an annotated bibliography of resources and some brief descriptions of examples of specific programs.

Other organizations with parental programming and relationship interests include the American College Student Personnel Association, the National Orientation Directors Association, and the National Academic Advising Association. Those organizations’ Web sites can be consulted for more information.

The National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition has published several helpful resources. A new edition of *Empowering Parents of First-Year Students: A Guide for Success*, authored by Richard H. Mullendore and Leslie Banahan, was released in 2007. The 2004 *A Guide for Families of Commuter Students: Supporting Your Student’s Success*, by Cathie Hatch and Tracy L. Skipper, was produced in association with the National Orientation Directors Association, and *A Family Guide to Academic Advising*, released in 2003, is written by Donald C. Smith and Virginia N. Gordon. (The Web site for the National Resource Center is www.sc.edu/fye.)

There are also a few books aimed at assisting parents with understanding and navigating the college process and their own transition. These include *Letting Go: A Parent's Guide to Understanding the College Years*, by Karen Levin Coburn and Madge Lawrence Treeger (2003), and *Bringing Home the Laundry: Effective Parenting for College and Beyond*, by Janis Brody (2001).

Conclusion

There seems to be broad consensus that the institution-parent relationship is changing, and at its most extreme manifestations presents the helicopter parent phenomenon. But it is important that we not lose sight of the fact that this behavior describes a minority of parents and that it may be the result of institutional failure to provide them adequate information and avenues of appropriate relationship with the campus. Much more common are parents who enter the new territory with lots of questions, lots of concerns, and an earnest, heartfelt intention to be supportive of both institution and student during the many transitions that are part of the collegiate experience. Colleges and universities can make important allies of parents by recognizing their concerns, addressing them with information and guidance on a timely basis, and keeping lines of communication open to give personal attention to individual circumstances.

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