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The Case for Parental Involvement during the College Years

Many higher education administrators, professors, and student affairs practitioners blanch at the thought of parents calling or showing up on campus, asking questions about a student's grades, roommates, or behavior. If they studied student development or personal development as part of their own education, they probably were taught that the college years were a time for young adults to begin the separation from family and to establish a unique identity. Late adolescence, after all, is supposed to correlate with the emergence of a sense of self, and students are expected to take on the daily responsibilities of self-care (Mattanah, Brand, and Hancock, 2004). Erikson identified individuation as the central task of adolescence (1968). Chickering and Reisser theorized that a key step for college students was learning to function independently, without constant reassurance or approval, and that step begins with separation from family (1993).

Much of the basic research supporting those individuation and autonomy theories, however, stemmed from studies of mostly white, male college students, mostly during the 1960s and 70s. When other theories are examined and other time periods are included, the picture shifts. Attachment theory, for example, suggests that when college students leave home, the security of a home base and supportive family enhances, rather than interferes with, development of competence and autonomy (Kenny and Donaldson, 1992). Indeed, secure attachment allows students to better handle stressful experiences and challenging transitions (Kenny, 1987).

Factors other than life stage also play into family involvement; in other words, all late adolescents are not alike. Gender, social class and social capital, race and ethnicity, disability or health conditions, and parents' educational experience may suggest different levels of parental involvement. Even the type of institution the student attends is likely to affect the family relationship. What would be viewed as high involvement for a student at a residential college, for example, may be just typical family dynamics for a commuter student. A parent who makes a phone call every morning to wake his on-campus student would be accused of over involvement; a parent who wakes the commuter student sleeping in the next room might just be managing the family's bathroom schedule. Meanwhile, though, that same commuter student may be learning autonomy and independence by navigating rush hour traffic, seeking out hard-to-find parking, and transporting class projects every day.

Why parent-student relations seem to have changed

It is natural to use our own experience as the basis for what's "normal." Our own college experience, then, is seen as the norm for all college students. When we look at the profile of a typical tenured professor or higher education administrator, however, we probably see someone much different from our students. While the majority of college students nationally live at home with their family, commuting may be an unfamiliar concept for their instructors. Those whose adult, professional lives are based in academia probably lived on or adjacent to campus and held academics as their single major responsibility during the college years. For many of our students, the college years mean daily negotiation on time spent with family, classes, and work, and college is not their top priority. They live in three very separate worlds, all with different expectations, demands, and cultures, and academics are not the be-all and end-all for them.

Parents are their children's first support system, emotionally and financially, and that does not change just because a student starts college. When many of us went to college, we may have been able to work part-time and pay for our education, but today's parents are major contributors to their children's college funds. The cost of higher education has risen dramatically in the past 10 years with an average increase of 2.9 percent annually at private institutions; an average of 4.4 percent annually at public colleges and universities (College Board, 2007). If a student applies for financial aid through the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) process, parents are expected to contribute to their education. With estimated annual costs averaging more than $13,000 for a public school and more than $25,000 at a private school (College Board, 2007), parents see their student's education as a family investment, and they believe they have a responsibility to receive information and provide input about that investment.

Technology also plays a big part in the change in parent-student relations. Every student has an e-mail account, most have laptops they carry with them throughout the day, and there is a cell phone in every handbag or backpack. Long-distance calling minutes are free or very inexpensive. Text messages are short, quick, and easy. There is an expectation that everyone is instantly available, and an unanswered message becomes a reason for concern. In addition, it is no longer unthinkable to call parents during the work day, and much of the parent-student contact is initiated not by parents, but by students.

Today's students do not necessarily regard their classmates as their best source of information and support. In a highly competitive society, with high school students vying for a place in the best colleges, college students seeking enrollment in the most demanding majors, and graduates competing for the best jobs, peers are rivals. Students turn to their parents for guidance and support, and they consider their parents as their best advisers. In a study conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute,

most students indicated their parents' involvement was "just right" (2008), and a Student Health 101 survey found that 83 percent of respondents felt their parents are "involved just the right amount" (Roarty, 2007).

When viewing our own experience as the norm, it may be most important to consider how little in today's educational realm is the same as it was five, ten, or twenty years ago. Teaching methods have changed; faculty-student communication has evolved to include Web sites, class portals, e-mail, voice mail, and texting; the way students do assignments, pay bills, and conduct research has changed. If we can accept that the media, financial institutions, health care, and nearly everything else has evolved during our lifetime, why would we believe that family relationships have not also changed?

Implications

Since parents are, indeed, involved in their college students' lives, and students both accept and expect that involvement, colleges and universities are wise to plan intentionally for parental involvement, defining that involvement for the benefit of students, parents, and the institution. Parents can be a positive element in higher education when they

- Understand the student experience and are aware of the resources available on campus
- Understand and support the institution's goals for student development and learning
- Know when to step in to help their student and when to empower their student to take responsibility
- Develop an affinity for the institution, participate in campus events, help other parents understand the student experience, and support higher education and the institution.

Parents can play a valuable role in their student's success when they understand and reinforce the messages we give students. They add value to our messages when they deliver information on an as-needed basis and when they relate information to their student's personal or family history. For example, the parent who notices his student seems depressed can suggest on-campus counseling and can remind the student of a family history of depression.

The most common, and often the easiest, argument against family involvement is FERPA (Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act), which grants authority over student records at the college level to the student. While FERPA does restrict unfettered access to a student's records, it also provides ways for students to release information and allows exceptions in health and safety circumstances. Different colleges and universities address FERPA differently; the critical point is that an institution must clarify how it views FERPA, how students can release information to parents, and how the school handles health and safety notifications. By spelling out FERPA policies early and often, negative responses from parents are likely to be mitigated. An example of how to address FERPA with parents can

be found at http://www.parent.umn.edu/downloads/FERPA_for_Parents.pdf

The payoff for intentional parent-student-college relations

Parents play a role in the college application process, in many cases setting the outer limits. "You can go to any school you want," they may tell their child, "but we cannot afford more than $12,000 a year." Or they may restrict their student to an in-state college or one no more than a four-hour drive from home. They certainly have opinions about what school would be a good fit for their "serious student" or the special needs their child requires for a disability. Their opinion will count in the final choice of which school to attend, and if they believe the college or university values the "whole student," including the family relationship, it's a checkmark in the plus column.

Parents talk amongst themselves. Recruitment efforts are bolstered when their students' family members talk with friends, neighbors, co-workers, or relatives about the positive experience their students—and the parents—have had with a college or university.

Even more importantly, parents play a role in retention. When students call home with a complaint (and every student will have complaints during four years of college), the parent with doubts about the institution may advise their student to "Finish the semester and move back home. You can go to the community college here in town." On the other hand, if the parent knows the resources, has faith in the institution, and understands that problem solving is part of student development, he is more likely to encourage persistence.

Many colleges and universities are discovering that parents can be a critical component of fundraising efforts, either by identifying foundations to contribute to the institution or by donating funds themselves. The University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minn., has constructed at least one building on the donation of a parent who did not attend the school himself but was pleased with his child's educational experience. Other institutions report annual donations from parents ranging from "enough to pay for the parent program" to millions of dollars to support student scholarships or emergency funds.

From a public relations standpoint, parents meet the description of a "key secondary audience," or those people who exert influence over a primary audience. The cost of parent relations are generally minimal (Savage, 2007), but the benefits include recruitment, retention, and student success, along with the potential for financial returns.❖

The University of Minnesota has established a set of Desired Parent Outcomes, similar to its Student Development Outcomes, to guide college-parent relations.

Desired Outcomes for Parent Involvement

The University Parent Program, in collaboration with offices and departments throughout campus, works with parents to help them understand the student experience, support student learning, and empower students to take personal responsibility for their social and academic choices.

Families contribute to student success by

- Understanding the student experience and knowing about resources available at the University of Minnesota.
    - Be aware of the unique challenges and opportunities facing today's college students, including the academic and non-academic expectations for students at the college level
    - Learn about student support services and understand how students can access services; encourage student to identify and obtain support from appropriate resources (see "U Resources" at **http://onestop.umn.edu/onestop/**)

- Supporting the University's goals for student learning and development outcomes (**www.osa.umn.edu/outcomes/index.html**)
    - Challenge student to identify, define, and solve problems independently
    - Encourage student to set and achieve personal goals and make responsible decisions related to academics, career planning, social interactions, and community engagement
    - Understand and support the University's commitment to academic excellence and integrity, ethical behavior, diversity, and civility
    - Empower student to examine personal values; encourage student to learn about and respect the values and beliefs of others
    - Support student as he/she faces conditions of uncertainty and learns to perform in complex environments and challenging situations
    - Allow student to accept consequences of his/her actions and accept responsibility for personal errors; urge student to examine disappointments and unexpected experiences in order to assess what caused them, what can be done about them, and how to avoid them in the future

- Knowing when to step in to help their student and when to empower their student to take responsibility
    - Understand the role parents play as mentors to their student
    - Know and understand limitations to access student records, as delineated by federal requirements outlined in FERPA (**www.parent.umn.edu/ferpa.html**) and HIPAA (**www.ahc.umn.edu/privacy/hipaa/home.html**)
    - Promote self-advocacy by allowing student to make decisions independently

- Be alert to signs that student is under significant stress, is taking unhealthy risks, or is ill; discuss concerns openly with student and assist student in developing a plan to address the problem

- If student's physical or mental health is endangered, contact appropriate campus or community authorities (**www.osa.umn.edu/resources/stress.html**)

- Developing an affinity for the University of Minnesota

  - Understand that parents are part of the University community as prime supporters of their students

  - Participate in campus events; support and encourage all students as they learn, perform, lead, or serve through campus and community activities

  - Assist other parents in understanding the student experience

  - Promote goodwill on behalf of higher education at the state and federal level

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