



# Organizing a Ground Crew for Today's Helicopter Parents



*The relationship between college students and their parents is far closer than it was when most of today's educators were in school.*

*Tapping into the upside and managing the potential drawbacks of highly involved parents is taking on great importance on an increasing number of campuses.*

BY KAREN LEVIN COBURN

LAST YEAR, after delivering a talk called “Letting Go” to parents at Skidmore College’s parent orientation, I spoke with a *New York Times* reporter who was covering the event. The column about leaving for college that he subsequently wrote was typical of those that fill the press each fall during the annual migration of first-year students and their retinue of parents and siblings. His column included a reference to the popular new moniker *helicopter parents*—the baby boomer generation of parents who hover. I was pleased to note his passing mention of a three-day family orientation program at my own university, Washington University in St. Louis.

Like so many of us involved in programs for parents and families, I had grown rather proud of our campuswide collaborative effort to welcome families to

campus and encourage them to become partners in their new college student’s education. So it was with a bit of a shock that I opened and read a strongly worded, disapproving letter from a professor of political science at a large midwestern university who had seen the recent column in *The New York Times*. He was appalled that I—or anyone else—would plan such an extensive program for parents of new students. As he put it, “Do these helicopter parents really have that kind of time and is this time really needed?” I wanted to tell him that we actually spend only two days, not three, but that, of course, would have been more than a little defensive on my part, and it was beside the point.

What truly upset the professor was what he saw as the mutual clinging of parents and students and his belief that we—and our counterparts involved in par-

ent or family programs—were interfering with the maturing process and academic engagement of our students.

He went on to give examples that troubled him and that sounded all too familiar to me, echoing conversations I've had with colleagues with increasing frequency over the past few years. It's not unusual for us to sit around the table and tell "Can you top this one?" stories, laced with gallows humor, about the father who calls at 11 P.M. to report a mouse in his daughter's room; the mother who calls to report a burned-out lightbulb; the parental complaints about the roommate who snores, the professor who speaks with an accent, the noise from the construction site next door, or the disappointing grade on a paper that "my son worked so hard on."

My peers and I bristle at the unconscious use of the word *we* by a growing number of parents: "We're worried that if *we* don't register early *we* won't get into the courses *we* want."

"Just who is going to college?" I'm tempted to respond, when asked by a parent, "Can *we* still study abroad if *we're* going to be pre-med?" Of course, I don't say that. I try to focus instead on the underlying motivation for all this parental involvement.

It's a given that most parents want the best for their children. They want them to grow up—to learn to solve problems, to become successful and independent. Parents who intervene inappropriately usually do so out of their own anxiety, with little or no awareness that they might be impeding their child's development.

The more successful we are in helping parents understand the normal stages of late adolescent development, the less anxious they are likely to be about their own child's behavior. The less anxious they are, the more likely they are to support their child's growth in appropriate and meaningful ways—and the less likely they are to intervene inappropriately. Students—and all of us who work with students—reap the benefits when this happens.

### A CHANGING RELATIONSHIP: BOOMER PARENTS AND THEIR MILLENNIAL OFFSPRING

I HAVE DAILY REMINDERS that times and interactions have changed not just between my university and parents but also between parents and students. Previous generations, more prone to sharing intimacies with their peers than their parents, lined up on Sunday nights for access to the hallway phone and the ritualized weekly call home. Today, however, when I walk across campus, I regularly overhear snatches of

conversations as students on cell phones ask parents for advice or unload their problems during their five-minute walk between classes. Colleagues complain about students who take out their cell phones in the middle of advising sessions to call or text message a parent for input on course selection. It's no longer unusual for students to tell me that they talk to their parents several times a week. And the popular press reinforces my individual experience with article after article about what are known as *millennial students* and helicopter parents.

So, though taken aback by the unexpected letter from the political science professor and his criticism of the increased attention colleges and universities are paying to parents, I had to admit to myself that I share some of his concerns. I worry that too many of our students don't know what to do or how to cope when faced with a problem. I'm concerned that many of their parents are too quick to jump in for the rescue. I wonder how these students will learn to deal with failure—or even disappointment—if their parents continue to intervene and make every effort to protect them.

This generation of parents has had a hands-on approach to their children's education from preschool through high school. Most middle-class parents have spent countless hours arranging schedules and taking their children to sports practices and music lessons, to tutoring sessions and enrichment classes. They have been actively involved in the college admissions marathon, reviewing college Web sites and viewbooks and accompanying their children on campus visits. Renee Barnett Terry and her colleagues, in their chapter "Changing Demographics and Diversity in Higher Education" in the collection *Partnering with the Parents of Today's College Students*, highlight the need to be attentive to the ethnic and racial differences among parents of today's students, but they also point out certain themes that appear to cut across differences in culture. Today's parents have high expectations of their children and of the college. In addition to top-notch instruction, they expect first-rate facilities and service and quick responses to their questions. Almost all are concerned about finances—about financial aid, tuition bills, and other expenses. In this era of skyrocketing costs for both public and private education, they often talk in terms of the investment they are making,—and naturally, they want to get their money's worth.

Today's students arrive on campus facing a different set of challenges and opportunities than their parents could have imagined when they were eighteen. They are racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse. A significant number come from divorced, blended, single-parent, or same-sex families. Many come

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to us with special needs. Thanks to the enhancement in psychopharmaceuticals, students who are being treated for depression and bipolar disorders and learning disabilities are now able to thrive in even the most selective of colleges. In a recent *About Campus* article, Lee Burdette Williams notes that experts at Appalachian State University inform educators that “at least 10 percent of new students entering college are taking medication to manage depression, anxiety, or attention deficit and hyperactivity disorders” (p. 27). Many parents of these students have been their child's advocate throughout his or her childhood and are likely to have been more involved and protective than other parents, resulting in additional challenges in navigating the transition when their child goes off to school. For example, Williams notes that difficulties may arise when students eager to assert their independence decide to reduce their medication or stop taking it altogether.

The common mantra of today's students is “I'm so stressed out,” and in face-to-face conversation and on national surveys, they often describe themselves as overwhelmed. When they arrive on campus, they have more choices than any previous generation: courses and academic majors that didn't exist twenty years ago, opportunities for interdisciplinary study, and internships and research projects. Declaring a double or triple major is not uncommon. On most campuses, students can choose to affiliate with others from a similar racial, ethnic, or religious background or to broaden their horizons and move outside their comfort zone. They can eat at multiple food stations at all hours of the day and night, making it easier to find edible food and more challenging to find community. There are dozens—or in some schools, hundreds—of student groups and activities, and the lure of the Web and the iPod compete for their attention. Along with all these choices, both important and inconsequential, they feel pressure to make the “right” selection—and having had so much of their lives structured by their parents in the past, they often turn back to them with the tap of a computer key or speed dial on their cell phone.

All indicators point to the likelihood that today's parents will continue to be actively involved in their sons' and daughters' lives throughout the college years. Most students and parents will continue to be connected emotionally and electronically via rapidly expanding technological options.

The challenge for us in higher education is not whether to involve parents. The challenge is to figure out how to enlist these already involved parents in our mutual goal of helping students become engaged learners, competent and creative problem solvers, and responsible and effective citizens—in essence, helping students grow up.

## EDUCATING PARENTS ABOUT STUDENT DEVELOPMENT AND THEIR ROLE IN SUPPORTING STUDENT SUCCESS

**M**OST INSTITUTIONS with programs for parents use multiple approaches to teach parents about college student development. Some provide written materials with brief explanations of stages of development in parent handbooks and on Web sites. Some recommend articles or provide parents with books that address the topic.

The dean of students at Skidmore College has written a letter to parents, posted on the parents' Web site under the heading “Our Values,” in which he uses the term *emerging adults* to describe entering college students and Skidmore's approach to their growth. The rest of the Web site, which is filled with typical information about campus resources such as the advising system, campus safety, and health services, reinforces the basic principles of emerging adulthood and college student development; each entry illuminates how these principles set expectations for students and the changing student-parent relationship as well.

Parent orientation sessions and programs during family weekends give parents an opportunity not only to hear lectures but also to participate in the give-and-take of question-and-answer sessions. In the annual par-

ent orientation session at Washington University, I give an address that provides parents with a framework, explaining some basics of college student development, with a special focus on issues of identity and independence. I also emphasize parents' role in coaching students to use the resources on campus, thus supporting their success and promoting their independence. In addition to this overview, two of our upper-division students illustrate the material with a humorous skit that they create, drawing on their own experience and the experience of their friends. Playing to a full house of parents and families, they act out a series of telephone calls home over the first semester. This skit is always extremely funny ("What do you mean, have I washed my sheets? I didn't know you were supposed to wash them") as well as poignant ("I don't know if I can make it in engineering. Everyone else here is so smart. Maybe the admissions office made a mistake").

Parents respond enthusiastically to the students' scenarios and often make reference to the skit when they contact me or one of my colleagues with a concern, saying, "I got one of those phone calls and am not sure if it's just one of those developmental things or if my kid is in trouble."

Many institutions send a series of letters home to parents over the course of the student's first year, letting them know what is happening on campus and including some information in each letter that speaks to the challenges students are likely to be grappling with, such as recovery from the first set of midterm grades, onset of homesickness when the weather turns cold, or the uncertainty that accompanies a decision to change majors. Acknowledging that they can't cover everything during orientation, North Carolina State University offers webcasts to parents throughout the academic year. Likewise, Central Washington University's parent Web site includes a monthly calendar of predictable changes that students go through as they navigate the developmental tasks of the first year. Miami University is one of many institutions that offer parents the option of signing up for an online newsletter.

Parents who understand the basic principles of student development have an easier time appreciating our reluctance to notify them or to intervene in situations that we think students should handle themselves. Implicit in all of this information is the message that

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parents' role is to support their child's development and growing independence. College and university administrators on campuses throughout the country are encouraging this generation of involved parents to be a sounding board for their son or daughter, to ask open-ended questions rather than provide simple answers, and to know the resources on campus and coach their kid to use them instead of jumping in and trying to solve dilemmas for him or her.

In addition to providing parents with information about the basic stages of normal college student development, many schools also help parents recognize danger signs and times that call for parental or institutional intervention. Here, too, a combination of written materials and presentations can give parents access to this information as well as to the resources available to them and their children. Some schools call on their psychology faculty or members of the student counseling service to write for handbook or Web articles that help parents recognize signs of depression, eating disorders, or substance abuse. The University of Minnesota offers "Mental Health and the College Student: Online Workshops for Parents." These video and audio presentations by university faculty and mental health professionals address some of the most common mental health concerns of college-age students.

Occasionally, students who are troubled confide only in their parents, using instant messaging or e-mail to reveal struggles that they manage to hide from their peers and the adults on campus. Parents may be the only ones who know about their son's depression and sense of hopelessness or about their daughter's despair over the breakup of a relationship or about their child's severe anxiety disorder. When parental attempts to get their son or daughter to use campus resources go unheeded, it's time for parents to take action and intervene on their child's behalf. And at times like these, a designated contact for parents can make all the difference in supporting that student's needs in a timely manner.

## TRENDS IN PARENT-UNIVERSITY RELATIONS

**O**VER THE PAST DECADE, more and more colleges and universities have been paying increased attention to their relationship with parents. Today's student affairs conference schedules include a growing number of presentations on parent programs and parent relations. The topic has become a minor industry, complete with Podcasts and webcasts, DVDs and books for higher education administrators, and even customized e-mail newsletters for

parents to which institutions can subscribe.

Parent offices, services, and programs have proliferated. I interviewed Susan Brown, director of parent programs at Northeastern University in Boston, who created a new organization in 1997 called Administrators Promoting Parental Involvement (APPI). “At that time,” said Brown, “there wasn’t as much of an emphasis on the parental role in admissions and orientation. As director of the newly created parent programs office, I had few resources to turn to, and I needed to connect with others.” APPI took off as an organization, with a small but active membership. The annual conference now attracts participants from some eighty institutions, and the heavily used listserv provides easy exchange of information.

Marjorie Savage, a leader in the field of parent relations and director of parent programs at the University of Minnesota, has conducted three surveys of parent programs over the past several years. In my interview with her, she noted that the parent program offices she surveyed provide multiple services and are housed in areas of the university ranging from student affairs to enrollment management to development and alumni offices. While some offices (usually housed in student affairs divisions) focus on supporting student success, others (usually housed in university development offices) are focused on fundraising and parent relations as an institutional support system. But as parents and their expectations have changed, Savage has noticed some blurring of the lines. She sees a growing trend of student affairs-based offices requesting donations from parents, as well as development-based offices providing information and responding to requests for help with student development and adjustment.

Though Savage has been unable to determine exactly how many institutions have parent relations personnel, she reports growth in the scope and number of programs and services offered. Among institutions with parent programs, the percentage that offer parent orientations, parent weekend programs, parent Web sites, and parent e-newsletters has grown dramatically over the past six years.

Susan Brown sees the use of technology as one of

the biggest challenges—and one of the biggest opportunities—for parent relations today. At Northeastern University, she has been using “e-mail blasts” to communicate with parents throughout the academic year, providing parents with timely information about financial aid, academic deadlines, and resources on campus. Recently, she started a parent chat room, which she and members of her staff monitored. She found out from her first experience that such easy access to communication via a chat room can turn into a Pandora’s box. A chat room that was supposed to focus on the topic “Understanding Your Student’s Holiday Stress” turned into a forum for parents to talk about their own issues. It was difficult to monitor and keep on track. In the future, Brown and her colleagues plan to have more focused chats—such as a chat room for housing issues and questions, monitored by staff from the housing office. However, with the proliferation of blogs and the increasing percentage of technology-savvy parents, parent communication is bound to take on more free-flowing dimensions.

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF CLEAR MESSAGES AND COORDINATION

**A**LL THIS ATTENTION to parents, however, can send mixed messages and can backfire unless it is coordinated and based on an articulated campuswide philosophy. If faculty members or administrators on most campuses were asked about the institution’s articulated philosophy regarding relationships with parents, they would probably shrug their shoulders, or maybe they would say something like “Well, I know we don’t send grades to them.”

Some campuses even have two separate parent relations offices—one in the development area and one in student affairs or enrollment management. Without coordination and clear communication between them, this can be confusing to parents and campus partners alike. How does a parent know which office to call? What happens to the information when a parent does call one of the offices? Who is coordinating the mailings and electronic communications from each office?

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What messages are being conveyed, and are they congruent?

A review of parent Web sites yields a wide variety of mission statements and goals, ranging from those that emphatically invite parental involvement, using language such as “partnership” and “membership in the university family,” to those that emphasize the privacy rights of students and limit their content to basic institutional facts. Almost all include in their mission some variation of the phrase *to support student success*.

The University of Minnesota’s parent Web site clearly spells out the desired outcomes for parent involvement: “The University Parent Program works with offices and departments throughout campus to help parents understand the student experience, support student learning, and empower students to take personal responsibility for their social and academic choices.” Minnesota’s program is one of the most comprehensive, and the messages on the Web site give parents specific information and suggestions for contributing to the success of their students. Links from the parent page take viewers to information about the university’s goals for student learning outcomes, resources for students on campus, and information about when to “step in and help their student and when to empower their student to take responsibility” (<http://www.parent.umn.edu/>).

Stanford University spells out expectations for parents and explains the developmental approach Stanford takes in dealing with students. While stressing that the university’s relationship with students “is based on a philosophy that recognizes their status as young adults,” the parent handbook states that the student’s first year is a time of transition and that the university will often choose to contact parents of first-year students who are having serious difficulty. The text continues with discussion of parental notification for alcohol infractions and other specific issues of concern.

Even when a campus has a clearly articulated institutional philosophy and goals for parent relations, it takes

an ongoing commitment and focus to develop awareness among all constituencies and to promote discussion and coordination among faculty and administrators who interact with students. Susan Brown said that she and her colleagues at Northeastern University were incredulous when they sat down together to look at the diverse mailings they each sent out to parents. It became clear that only through collaboration could they possibly produce a coherent set of messages to parents.

At Washington University, we hold parent summit meetings a few times a semester. Representatives from the development office, student services, admissions, the international office, residential life, academic deans’ offices, and others who are directly involved with parents discuss current initiatives and issues of concern. In between meetings, we attempt to keep each other informed. The parent handbook is a joint effort, with contributions from administrators and staff throughout the university. Parent orientation and Parents Weekend are university-wide events, and the parents’ Web page includes policies and resources that are relevant to the entire university. Still, with five undergraduate schools, each with its own dean and its own set of policies and cultural norms, it is a challenge to communicate with a collective voice.

## ONE UNIVERSITY’S INTEGRATED APPROACH

**G**ETTING BUY-IN for a university-wide approach to parent-institution relations is a challenge for most colleges and universities. West Virginia University is a prime example of what’s possible when the initiative and support come from the top and a strong parent-university relationship is an institutional goal. In 1995, when David C. Hardesty Jr. became president of West Virginia University (WVU), he created the Mountaineer Parents Club as part of his initiative to transform the university into a student-

centered learning community. His conviction that parental involvement is key to supporting student success is reflected in the organization's mission statement: "The purpose of the Mountaineer Parents Club is to involve parents and other family members in programs and activities that result in continuous improvement of the student experience at West Virginia University."

From the beginning, the focus was clear. This was not to be a fundraising venture; there was no fee to join. It was to be based in the students' hometown communities as well as at the university's Morgantown campus. The organization started out with local chapters in areas of West Virginia that were heavily populated with families of WVU students. Now, a little over ten years later, there are 14,000 families in sixty-five local clubs all over the East Coast and fifteen state chairs across the United States, as well as international chairs in Canada and Germany.

Susan Hardesty, wife of WVU's president—and, as he, an alumnus of WVU—has communicated with me on multiple occasions about WVU's approach. Along with faculty, administrators, and staff she visits local clubs and brings the club officers to campus for

annual Parent University weekends, which feature a combination of education and information sessions, problem-solving and planning meetings, spirit boosting, and networking. An enthusiastic leader and chair of the Mountaineer Parents Club, Susan Hardesty describes it as a major asset to students and their families as well as to the university: "Families are involved in university activities both on campus and in their hometowns. Faculty, administrators, and staff from WVU attend summer send-off picnics as well as winter activities organized by local clubs. Because WVU families all over the East Coast meet several times a year in their hometowns, they share information, support each other (especially if there is a family crisis), and plan activities to support their students."

In response to parents who said they wanted a specific contact whom they could call when they needed help, the university hired a parent advocate and set up a toll-free parent help line. Over the past ten years, more than 30,000 calls have come over that line. Susan Hardesty considers this service one of the most valuable parts of their program: "Many issues are resolved before they explode. Our advocate is able to comfort anxious par-

## Considerations When Designing and Assessing Your Institution's Relationship with Parents

- Assess your parent population. Who are they? What do they expect? What do they need? What are the most effective ways to communicate with them? What populations of parents—for example, parents of internationals or parents of first-generation students—might benefit from special attention?
- Develop an institutional philosophy and goals for parent involvement and clearly communicate these to parents and the university community. Examine the language you are using. Do you consider parents members of the university community? If so, what does that mean? If not, don't send them a mixed message. Is your focus on helping parents help their children emerge as adults?
- Develop and communicate consistent messages to parents about specific issues, such as FERPA (the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act) and HIPAA (the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act), which deal with the confidentiality of educational and medical records, respectively; parental notification (for example, in emergencies); housing selection; community expectations and student codes of conduct; and financial aid.
- Develop a coordinated approach to parent communication. Involve all major offices that write to or produce publications for parents. Check for consistency of messages and expectations.
- Educate parents about college student development and parents' role in supporting that development.
- Educate parents about appropriate and inappropriate involvement. Give them specific examples and a forum for questions.
- Educate staff about today's parents and best practices in interacting with them.
- Set programmatic priorities—for example, family orientation programs, family weekends, or regional gatherings.
- Create an easy access point for parents who wish to express concerns or ask questions.
- Develop and publicize emergency contact plans and procedures.
- Involve parents in ongoing assessment of programs and services.

ents, explain university procedures and policies, and offer support and advice."The parent advocate often advises parents about how to help their students resolve their own issues, emphasizing the need to let go when that is appropriate.

These WVU parents are involved and informed. Hardesty considers this involvement clearly beneficial for the students and for the institution: "Before the Mountaineer Parents Club, parents had no clear or easy path to find answers to questions and often went to legislators to address their problems at the university. Now they work through the parents club structure and have become great advocates for West Virginia University."

## CONCLUSION

**W**HETHER we call them *helicopter parents* or *boomers*, this generation of parents has been and will continue to be involved in their children's education. With this article, I offer several items to consider when designing and assessing an institution's relationship with these parents. Colleges and universities throughout the country are taking creative steps to enlist today's involved parents in ways that promote—rather than thwart—student development and engaged learning.

Parent links on college and university Web sites reveal a wide variety of approaches to parent programs and services. Though there is much to learn from sister schools, each college or university needs to develop its own institutional philosophy and goals that will enhance the learning and continued growth of its cohort of students.

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## NOTES

- Terry, R. B., Dukes, C. M., Valdez, L. E., and Wilson, A. "Changing Demographics and Diversity in Higher Education." In K. Keppler, R. H. Mullendore, and A. Carey (eds.), *Partnering with the Parents of Today's College Students*. Washington, D.C.: National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 2005.
- Williams, L. B. "My Medicated Students." *About Campus*, 2005, 10(1), 27–29.

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## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### Books

- Coburn, K. L., and Treeger, M. L. *Letting Go: A Parents' Guide to Understanding the College Years*. New York: Harper-Collins, 2003.
- Daniel, B. V., and Scott, B. R. *Consumers, Adversaries and Partners: Working with Families of Undergraduates*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001.
- Howe, N., and Strauss, W. *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation*. New York: Vintage Books, 2000.
- Kadison, R. *College of the Overwhelmed*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004.
- Keppler, K., Mullendore, R. H., and Carey, A. *Partnering with the Parents of Today's College Students*. Washington, D.C.: National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 2005.
- Savage, M. *You're On Your Own (But I'm Here If You Need Me): Mentoring Your Child During the College Years*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003.

### Web Sites

- Arizona State University, [www.asuparentsassociation.com](http://www.asuparentsassociation.com)
- Skidmore College, [www.skidmore.edu/homepage03/parent-friends/index.htm](http://www.skidmore.edu/homepage03/parent-friends/index.htm)
- University of Minnesota, [www.parent.umn.edu](http://www.parent.umn.edu)
- University of Southern California, [www.usc.edu/student-affairs/parent](http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/parent)
- West Virginia University, [www.wvu.edu/~parents](http://www.wvu.edu/~parents)



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