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*A brief description of issues associated with the new consumer mentality prevalent in society and how it affects campus community living is provided. Issues of specific importance to housing administrators in relation to today's students and parents are also examined.*

## Balancing the Role of Parents in the Residential Community

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The residential living experience has changed greatly since most of the parents of today's students attended college. The "dorm" of the past is not the residence hall of today. The idea of *in loco parentis* faded with cinder-block walls and communal hall phones. Gender equity and appreciation of diversity have become the standard rather than the ideal. These and other rapid changes have challenged housing administrators to interact with parents in proactive ways.

Parents of today's students may compare their own college living experience with that of the students. They may remember strict visitation hours (or none at all), single-gender living units, the house or dorm mother, and leaving their I.D. at the front desk. Today, most residence halls and Greek units are not operated the same way. Twenty-four hour visitation and co-ed living arrangements are normal, and rarely is a house or dorm mother part of the residence hall staff. Instead, housing administrators attempt to create policies and procedures that promote the development of individual responsibility.

It is the role of the housing officers to recognize and understand the nuances of community living, and to communicate expectations to the community members and their parents. Parents are no longer viewed as those individuals who drop students off on the first day of new student orientation and disappear until graduation. Many parents take an active role in

their student's education, especially their living arrangements. They expect to be involved and treated as the paying "customers" that many of them are. A closer examination of the consumer mentality that has become increasingly embedded in our society will provide housing administrators with a foundation from which to understand parents' expectations. It will also be beneficial to understand the new challenges of living in today's college community, including more difficult transitions from home to college, the unique aspects of living in the community, and the complexities of greater parental involvement in student life.

### **Consumer Mentality**

As time progresses, so too do people's opinions. Current popular thinking focuses on value. Public opinion of higher education is not exempt from this. When compared to the time when people considered a college degree as a privilege more than a right, today's parents and students are much more savvy in their college selection procedure. At both private and public institutions, the mindset of parents and students has become increasingly consumer-oriented. Privilege and honor have been succeeded by value and entitlement. Parents, and to some extent students, often seem more interested in getting the best value for their money than seeking the best learning opportunity. Colleges and universities today encounter a heightened sense of accountability for their staff and faculty, facilities and services, and the overall educational experience.

The on-campus living environment is not an exception. Parents and students expect university housing options to be competitive with off-campus facilities, with more amenities and services for the same price. Housing administrators must strike a balance between managing a competitive residence hall business and maintaining close philosophical and operational ties to the institution's educational mission. Conforming to state or religious standards, designing architecturally compatible buildings, and responding to student needs can, however, force business and institutional objectives to conflict. Often, parents and students seem to expect less from off-campus housing than they do from that on campus. Frequently their desires are cost-prohibitive to the institution. A significant burden is placed on the residence life staff, who must explain the virtues of on-campus living communities, including accessibility to educational staff and social developmental benefits, while acknowledging off-campus housing amenities that some institutions cannot provide.

As students and parents have increasing access to the Internet and college comparison guides, they possess a great deal of information and can form specific questions that may challenge even the most adept administrator. Housing administrators should expect this challenge and prepare themselves with a barrage of information not only about their living communities but also about prominent off-campus options.

## **Transition from High School to College**

The transition for today's students from high school to college is often more difficult than in the past. The students who enter college have different family backgrounds, personalities, and precollege experiences (Bray, Braxton, and Sullivan, 1999). These characteristics may not have been as different in high school, especially if they went to a school with a relatively homogeneous student body; therefore, first-year students often face the added stress of redefining their identity and finding a new role in a strange community. Compared with secondary school, college also presents a wider array and more complex assortment of influences to students' decision-making ability (Whitman, Spendlove, and Clark, 1984). Feelings are further complicated by the added stress during the transition from living at home to living on campus (Baxter Magolda, 1999). The familiar and emotionally safe environment of home is now replaced by a new, larger, and at times, impersonal one. Relinquishing the consistent support of parental influence can be difficult for some students. Students find themselves in a period of physical transition as well as intense psychological change, especially as they attempt to define their own values rather than maintain those instilled by their parents.

The transition from high school to college can also be very difficult for parents. Some parents continue to expect that they will be involved in all aspects of their students' lives. They often feel considerable stress after separating from their children. Specifically, parents are concerned about the values instilled prior to departure and the identity their child will develop in college (Whitman, Spendlove, and Clark, 1984). Once the student is in college, they may find it difficult to accept the independent choices their son or daughter makes, especially if they conflict with their own values and desires. Parents are capable of shifting from promoting their personal ideals to assisting their student in evaluating choices and making independent decisions, but at times college administrators must help prompt this.

As more students come to college already experiencing a great deal of stress, additional pressure is put on both the students and the staff. Parents may have new concerns for their sons or daughters. Combined, these issues force parents and administrators to establish a paradigm of parental influence on the student living environment. The new paradigm must be one of balance, allowing parents to have enough input to feel secure leaving their sons or daughters at college but also to recognize that overly controlling parents can stifle students' ability to develop a sense of independence and personal responsibility. One challenge for college administrators, especially those in housing, is to create an environment on campus that is safe, secure, and supportive of the individual, as well as inclusive of parents. The atmosphere must allow students and parents to develop independent lives while providing the structure necessary for achievement.

A primary role of campus administrators is to help both parents and students view college as a microcosm of society, including its problems and issues. Just as in society, college communities should be equipped with basic services such as medical and psychological professionals, religious support groups, and counselors to assist students as they function in their new environment. It is the administrator's job to help all students and parents feel assured that they can successfully navigate the transitions. This process should be one of engagement rather than separation.

### **The New Living Community**

Students attending college have a great deal of personal freedom in their living environments. It should be anticipated, therefore, that some students will have difficulty balancing their newly found freedom with greater expectations for individual responsibility. In an attempt to limit the difficulties students may have, professional staff members such as resident directors and area coordinators, and paraprofessionals such as resident assistants and Greek assistants, are trained in the area of student development theory. By providing programs, guidance, and serving as mentors, these staff members assist students through many issues associated with the challenges of today's on-campus living environments and can serve as links to student families.

**Residence Hall Living.** An integral part of the new community environment and a valuable asset to all campus administrators is the front-line residence life staff. This group of individuals may include resident assistants (RAs), who are normally undergraduate students, and, depending on the size of the institution and the complexity of the housing program, resident directors (RDs) or area coordinators (ACs). Resident directors may be undergraduate or graduate students or individuals with a graduate degree, whereas area coordinators are usually master's-level professionals. Because parents often prefer to deal with people they perceive as adults, it is important for university administrators to define whether they expect resident assistants or professional staff members to respond to parents.

These staff members play a significant role in helping students make the transition from high school to college, and they also can assist parents in making adjustments. A unique opportunity exists for these staff members, who are present on the first day of hall opening, to alleviate the students' and parents' fears. Concise, accurate communication can create a clear expectation of what is involved as a member of a living community. Both students and parents will begin to understand the basic nuances of the community they are about to enter when they meet a staff member who is able to answer any questions they might have.

**Greek Unit Living.** In the Greek community, some schools have redesigned the RA position to one known as a Greek assistant (GA). This

position provides a similar type of nurturing and peer leadership as the resident assistant position, but it is fine-tuned to the unique challenges of Greek living. For example, this community potentially fosters a more intimidating lifestyle because of the degree of selectivity involved with placement. Because the possibility of losing one's place in the house exists, some students may be unwilling to voice their feelings or needs. Students may tolerate questionable situations just to be accepted by the group (Astin, 1993). They may also dissuade their parents from interfering on their behalf; or because of the house leadership structure, parents may not be as willing to become involved. Staff members responsible for this style of living community should be hypersensitive to their areas and the needs of the community members. Parents need to know immediate contacts for situations that arise.

**Meal Plans: Camaraderie in Community.** An additional aspect of most residence living programs is the concept of required meal plans. Many administrators are challenged by parents and students to explain the philosophy behind mandatory meal plans. Most often, questions revolve around the quality and variety of the food. Following a student's random call home to complain, parents may contact the university and demand a response. Dining professionals must help the parents and students understand the total dietary program, including the significance of recognized social aspects of community dining. An invitation for individuals to eat in the dining facility will provide firsthand knowledge of the experience and an opportunity to glimpse the camaraderie of students.

**On-Campus Residential Requirements.** Many colleges have requirements that freshmen reside on campus. Research has found that freshmen who live in residence halls are more likely to succeed in college than those who live off campus or at home with parents (Astin, 1993). The findings also indicate that students living in residence halls are more involved in academic and extracurricular activities with other students. They also earn higher grade point averages, even when differences in ability are taken into account (Upcraft, 1989). In simple terms, residential living fosters a sense of connection to the college and to a new community (Blimling and Whitt, 1999).

**Challenges of Community Living.** As personal and social pressures become more complicated, it is to be expected that parents may find it difficult to understand, and at times appreciate, the experiences that college students have on today's campuses. This lack of shared understanding between parents and students necessitates dialogue between the two groups. Housing administrators, acting as the mediators, need to be prepared to help parents and students understand how living on a college campus is different today than it was in the past or how it may differ from one campus to another. Simply highlighting the differences between generations will not suffice; instead, the staff member must be able to articulate why these changes came about and what opportunities they present.

*Roommate Conflict and Community Differences.* During the very tumultuous transition period from home to college, it is important to address student and parent fears regarding roommate assignments quickly and with certainty. Any amount of uncertainty will make parents feel insecure about the stability of the overall housing program. Both parents and students should be able to identify and feel comfortable approaching appropriate staff members if unpleasant roommate situations arise. They should also feel comfortable approaching other members of the housing administration with their questions. Conversations with parents and students during orientation or over the summer provide an opportunity to explain the roommate matching process as well as any other issues that arise. Once on campus, several institutions have developed roommate contracts as a good way to begin the semester. These should be presented as a preemptive attempt to avoid future conflict because they offer an opportunity to discover differences, both significant and insignificant.

“One of the most important adjustments in college is the experience of living on one’s own and learning to appreciate and relate to others who are different” (Dalton, 1999, p. 49). A precarious balance exists between group identity and respect for individual differences. This balance is felt most keenly in the living communities where students spend most of their time. One’s sexual orientation, race, religion, or cultural background often seems the focus of many conflicts. It is, therefore, important to examine these issues and determine what measures exist to alleviate distress in the community.

Issues that current students face are more complex and may create an inordinate amount of stress when compared to those of past cohorts. Research suggests these issues often impact a student’s ability to earn successfully a college degree (Baxter Magolda, 1999). Typical issues that affect the living communities of today’s college student include alcohol and/or drug abuse, physical and emotional disabilities, and differences in sexual orientation, race, culture, and religion. In addition to educative programs on topics such as diversity and date rape, residents require resources for developing skills such as conflict mediation. Students also need information on seeking help for themselves or for their fellow students. It is a necessity for student affairs professionals, especially those in residence living communities, to be educated and possess a good understanding of how to deal with students and sources of their stress (Bray, Braxton, and Sullivan, 1999).

*Sexual Orientation.* The process of coming out, or identifying oneself as lesbian, gay, transgender, or bisexual, is an important developmental step for youth. The campus environment is critical to a student’s willingness to disclose his or her sexual orientation. A comparison study of campus climate conducted by Evans and Broido (1999) found that lesbian, gay, and bisexual students often felt unwelcome and isolated on more conservative, less diverse

campuses. Students who come out report positive effects, such as relief and greater self-esteem, as well as negative effects, such as becoming targets of homophobic harassment. Individuals who live in close proximity to one another share much about their personalities, whether intentionally or not. One's sexual orientation can significantly affect other members of a living community. Clearly, parental support for or parental homophobia toward a student's roommate are likely areas for university contact.

*Cultural, Racial, and Religious Differences.* Racial, cultural, and religious differences between roommates may also cause immediate reactions. It may be difficult for students of different ethnicities or religions to relate. For example, many first-year students are asked their preferences but are not necessarily presented with the fact that their roommate is of a different race or religion until they arrive on campus. Immediately, questions are likely to arise about compatibility, and a parent's prejudices may escalate a student's anxiety. Some students come from a family background of tolerance, but this is not necessarily the same as acceptance. Depending on the personalities of the students, cultural and religious differences may prove to be an educational experience or a roommate disaster.

*Students with Disabilities.* Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 ensure equal opportunity for all individuals regardless of ability; these pieces of legislation have had a profound effect on campus life. It is an institutional responsibility to ascertain whether students with differing abilities have the opportunity to become a viable part of the college community. Many facilities, including residence halls and Greek houses, are retrofitted in order to offer equal access to students with disabilities. A student's abilities may affect the community in which that student lives. Accommodations for special needs, such as specially designed rooms for wheelchair accessibility, strobe lights for hearing-impaired students, or live-in assistants for immobile students, will certainly affect the environment for many students unaccustomed to these features. Because this is a potentially sensitive matter, uncertain residence life staff should direct parents and students with questions or concerns toward the director of disability services or a similar position.

In general, residential life staff members must anticipate several scenarios and be prepared to address the needs of both students and parents. Programs dealing with harassment, hate crimes, and diversity may be novel to some students and elementary to others, depending on their family background. Not all families will espouse the concept of mutual respect; staff members should remember that their primary relationship is with the student.

*Technology: Help or Hindrance.* According to Brazzell and Reisser, "One of the most delicate and challenging tasks in higher education is to retain elements of the past that uniquely define and characterize an institution while boldly embracing new ideas and innovative processes" (1999,

p. 165). Technology has quickly come to the attention of higher education administrators. Recently, multimedia availability consistently ranks among the most important campus features for students and parents. The institution may send recruiting videos along with information packets to prospective students, and parents often use the Internet to explore college Web pages, answer specific questions about an institution, and compare one college with another. It would be beneficial to housing administrators to examine more closely the impact that technology has on students and their families.

Although the extent to which the Internet and media benefit the individual is infinite, some administrators are noticing a decidedly negative effect on community relations. Reisberg (2000) linked "Internet dependence" with missed classes and social isolation. Today's colleges and universities often face the significant emphasis students and parents place on computer and cable access. As a result, concerns about the phenomenon of Internet addiction disorder (IAD) are also on the rise (Davis, Smith, Rodriguez, and Pulvers, 1999). Students with IAD usually have difficulty making connections within their living communities and are often attracted to the Internet as a means to meet and socialize with new individuals. IAD sufferers report they have no intention of curtailing their Internet use, regardless of negative consequences.

The advantages of unlimited access to the Internet must, therefore, be weighed against the potential harm to students. Addressing the issue of "access versus excess," some institutions have begun to limit the amount of time students have access to the Internet each week (Reisberg, 2000). Some families will want control so that students cannot access questionable sites; others will base college choice on the level of campus connectedness. Understanding and taking a proactive approach to parental concerns and student wishes will enable housing officers to strike a balance between the two at-times conflicting viewpoints.

### **Involving Parents: Seeking a Balance**

Wintre and Sugar (2000) suggest that, for student affairs professionals, involving parents in some processes can be more helpful than working with the student alone. Students rather than staff should be encouraged to communicate with their parents and share concerns. Baxter Magolda (1999) highlights that college students should and are capable of developing their own individual identities when given the opportunity. The norms, mores, and culture of the campus will provide guidance in appropriate strategies for them to use. Therefore, the challenge exists for administrators to create an environment that fosters open communication between student and parent as well as provides an opportunity for individual identity formation. Student affairs professionals must take time to evaluate serious situations before determining if parent involvement is necessary.



Professionals in student affairs spend a significant amount of time responding to parental inquiries before the student arrives on campus. Prior to enrollment, parents often share concerns with one another. Although this communication is usually positive, the words of one parent can sometimes exacerbate the concerns of another. Student affairs professionals must anticipate questions that are associated with fears and anxieties. By offering easy paths of communication for parents, such as e-mail listservs, distribution lists, and parent-friendly links on the institution's homepage, colleges and universities can provide successful opportunities for parents to communicate with others and with the university. Such open communication also allows the institution to respond quickly to any concerns that may arise. Parent orientations offer another avenue to facilitate open communication with parents. They offer the opportunity for the institution to explain the community while also providing a forum for parents to express their questions and concerns. Parents may not remember all that is said, but they will remember efforts made to involve them.

An atmosphere that is nurturing for both the parent and the student must be created intentionally. Several strategies are available for housing professionals in promoting this balance.

Most important, make communication clear, accurate, and concise.

*Be proactive, not reactive.* Begin to foster a relationship with parents before they arrive on campus. The rights and responsibilities of students and parents should be established early on. Unnecessary anxiety can be easily avoided if information is presented in a timely fashion. Residence life staff should continually reevaluate the literature sent to parents and students. Are the on-campus community expectations clear? Does the material describe both the physical and demographic community? What philosophical messages are offered about the housing community?

*Ensure that residence life staff possesses information and skills necessary to provide parents and students with a positive experience.* Front-line staff members should feel comfortable interacting in person and in written communications. It is necessary that they understand and articulate information applicable to residents and families. When they do not know the answer, they should be able to identify which person or office could provide assistance.

*Ask the question, "Are we acting in the best interest of the student or fulfilling our own individual needs?"* Treating the "customer" (the students and their families) with fairness and respect is the best method to avoid conflict. Students and parents realize that college cannot meet everyone's needs, but they do expect an operating philosophy that is supportive, caring, and open in nature. Also, listening to an individual, whether he or she is complaining or requesting information, is a basic sign of respect that is often ignored. The right to be heard is expected, but complete satisfaction is not.

*Reflect on and learn from interactions with parents and students.* Doing this will enable professionals to recognize and better assist individuals with

similar issues in the future. Take a step back and view interactions objectively. Could statements have been misinterpreted? Was there any room for miscommunication? Could the situation have been handled better, more efficiently, or with a greater sense of customer service? Are personal feelings affecting job performance?

*Recognize when the effectiveness of a policy has passed.* When a policy meets the needs of only a small portion of the campus, change may be needed. Seeking input from the “customer” is crucial to satisfaction.

## Conclusion

Building a residential community on a college campus, whether in a Greek unit or residence hall, takes time, effort, and collaboration. Campus community may be different from what parents and students remember or expect. A residential community should incorporate different styles and cultures for different types of people. Two key factors that will assist the housing professional in nurturing community are respect and trust. Housing staff must show respect for students and their parents by building a sense of trust with them. The process should be one of engagement and collaboration rather than separation.

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