

**I** *The changing expectations of the families of today's college students may clash with institutions' traditional philosophies of parental involvement. This chapter examines familial expectations and recommends strategies for developing appropriate channels for involvement.*

## Understanding Family Involvement in the College Experience Today

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College is no longer the kind of place where parents send students to learn from experts while readily abdicating their control. Just as society once followed clearly delineated roles and mores, so too did higher education once have clear parameters for engaging, or choosing not to engage, families. Today, however, many parents participate in the student's college choice process (Toor, 2000), pay tens of thousands of dollars for the student's education (*Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac*, 2000), provide a support system for the student, and perhaps even invoke their prerogative to terminate a campus relationship should things go awry. Although fewer than one in six of today's undergraduates fits the traditional stereotype of the American college student—full-time student, age eighteen to twenty-two, living on campus (Levine and Cureton, 1998)—a societal trend toward extended adolescence permits parents to become involved in increasingly overt ways. The reality for higher education in this new era is that many parents of undergraduates are active participants in their student's college experiences.

At the same time, America today is a multicultural, multilingual, and multifaceted place where the nuclear family is no longer the norm. Accordingly, the traditional campus has shifted its role to accommodate an ever-evolving constituency. Higher education's commitment to diversity in type, scope, mission, and target audience mimics the priorities of society. Yet this

same commitment to accommodate multiple viewpoints also muddles the role of the family versus the role of the campus in undergraduate education. "For today's college students, this world of change dominates their lives. The cycles of community and individualism have given way to a world of unceasing, unknowable change" (Levine and Cureton, 1998, p. 154). Students are not alone in their confusion. Higher education institutions can, and often do, unintentionally perpetuate a parental identity crisis. Murky guidelines for family involvement lead to inconsistent interactions from campus to campus and, more alarmingly, from office to office on the same campus. Parents learn quickly to capitalize on institutional chaos and contact a different administrator when they do not achieve their desired outcome at the first point of contact.

Institutions must reassess their historical approach to familial relationships and define appropriate roles for parents. At the dawn of the new millennium, it is imperative to create relationships between family and institution that foster the successful development and education of the student.

## The Families

The current generation of college students grew up with a less rigid definition of family than did their predecessors. The role of women changed as employment rates and educational opportunities rose and social mores relaxed. "Between 1975 and 1992 the percentage of births to unmarried women more than doubled from 14 percent to 30 percent" (Levine and Cureton, 1998, p. 15). At the same time, in more families both parents were in the workforce. The number of working mothers who left the home with younger children almost doubled between 1975 and 1994. The role of men changed as well, as acceptability for stay-at-home fathers grew. Gender awareness, gender appreciation, and gender justice have challenged a male-dominated world during the lives of today's students.

**Educational Attainment of Parents.** A review of Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) data provides insights into what these parents know or think they know about the college experience compared with parents of past generations. An individual's personal college experience usually colors his or her perception of another's experience. There are striking differences in the levels of educational attainment among mothers and fathers since 1969 (see Tables 1.1 and 1.2). The percentage of fathers who had a graduate degree represents the largest gain. In 1969, 8.8 percent had a graduate degree, as opposed to 18.3 percent thirty years later.

The mothers of today's college students have also made educational advances. The percentage of mothers who had an undergraduate degree increased from 14 percent in 1969 to 26.3 percent in 1999. Similarly, mothers with graduate degrees increased from 2.8 percent in 1969 to 13.6 percent in 1999.

**Table 1.1 Educational Attainment of Fathers of Incoming Freshmen (Percentage of Respondents)**

<i>Education Completed</i>	1969	1979	1989	1999
Grammar school or less	10.0	6.2	3.4	3.1
Some high school	16.7	12.1	7.5	5.5
High school graduate	30.2	28.0	27.7	26.0
Postsecondary school other than college	—	4.3	5.1	4.0
Some college	17.6	13.4	14.6	16.1
College degree	16.8	19.4	21.7	25.1
Some graduate school	—	2.4	2.5	1.9
Graduate degree	8.8	14.2	17.6	18.3

*Source:* Cooperative Institutional Research Program, data from 1969, 1979, 1989, and 1999 CIRP Freshman Surveys. Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, University of California. Reprinted with permission.

**Table 1.2. Educational Attainment of Mothers of Incoming Freshmen (Percentage of Respondents)**

<i>Education Completed</i>	1969	1979	1989	1999
Grammar school or less	6.4	4.3	2.7	2.6
Some high school	14.4	10.3	5.7	4.1
High school graduate	43.7	41.0	34.8	28.0
Postsecondary school other than college	—	6.7	8.0	4.9
Some college	18.7	14.4	16.7	18.1
College degree	14.0	15.2	19.6	26.3
Some graduate school	—	2.2	2.9	2.4
Graduate degree	2.8	5.8	9.7	13.6

*Source:* Cooperative Institutional Research Program; data from 1969, 1979, 1989, and 1999 CIRP Freshman Surveys. Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, University of California. Reprinted with permission.

**Divorce Rates Among Parents.** Parental divorce has an impact on the college experience (Levine and Cureton, 1998). The dysfunctional nature of many of the families of undergraduates today hampers what could be a positive support system. Data from incoming freshmen reflect increasing divorce rates in America (see Table 1.3). In 1972, 8.7 percent of freshmen reported both parents alive but divorced or separated; in 1999, 25.4 percent did. As would be expected, single-parent households increased over the same time period. In 1995, three out of every ten children lived with neither parent or only one parent (Levine and Cureton, 1998).

**Family Composition.** The number of siblings in the home decreased significantly between 1978 and 1997 according to the CIRP (see Table 1.4). In 1978, 67.2 percent of incoming freshmen reported that their homes

**Table 1.3. Marital Status of Parents of Incoming Freshmen  
(Percentage of Respondents)**

<i>Status</i>	1972	1989	1999
Both alive and living with each other	83.1	72.3	70.7
Both alive, divorced or separated	8.7	22.6	25.4
One or both deceased	8.2	5.1	3.9

*Source:* Cooperative Institutional Research Program; data from 1972, 1989, and 1999 CIRP Freshman Surveys. Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, University of California. Reprinted with permission.

**Table 1.4. Number of Siblings (Including Student-Respondent) in  
Homes of Incoming Freshmen (Percentage of Respondents)**

<i>Siblings in Family</i>	1978	1987	1997
One	5.0	9.2	10.5
Two	8.5	17.4	18.1
Three	19.2	22.6	22.2
Four	25.6	26.9	27.3
Five	22.5	15.4	14.3
Six or more	19.1	8.4	7.6

*Source:* Cooperative Institutional Research Program; data from 1978, 1987, and 1997 CIRP Freshman Surveys. Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, University of California. Reprinted with permission.

included four or more siblings. By 1997, only 49.2 percent reported this number, almost one-fifth reported having only one sibling, and one in every ten reported no brothers or sisters at all. Smaller family units live in larger homes and share less. Conflict resolution, therefore, once a skill learned in the home environment with multiple siblings, is not easy for many of today's students.

**Family Constellations.** Today, family constellations may include unmarried partners, stepparents, grandparents, legal guardians, and multiple combinations of all of these. Acceptance of the redefined family is a relatively new societal phenomenon. The baby boom generation (the parents of today's students) generally followed a traditional script: they graduated from college, obtained a job, married, and started a family (Kingsmill and Schlesinger, 1998). Returning home after college or remaining financially dependent on their parents was antithetical to prevailing social norms. Recent research, however, shows that at least 15 percent of all families in 1997 included one or more children age eighteen or older living at home (Brunner, 1999).

Kingsmill and Schlesinger (1998) note that rather than the "empty nest syndrome," some parents face a "cluttered nest"—including, perhaps, responsibility for aging parents, grandparents, and adult children who choose to remain at home. It is logical that these parents should seek to exercise control because they are the decision makers in many of their envi-

ronments. This trait may become obvious in college students' experience when the parents still feel responsible for them and want quick answers to their questions.

## The Students

The characteristics of college students themselves also defy a singular description and are complicated by combinations of socioeconomic backgrounds, ethnicity, and family dynamics.

**Changing Complexion.** In 1997, 71 percent of all college students were white, 10 percent black, 8 percent Hispanic, 5 percent Asian, .98 percent American Indian, and 3 percent non-U.S. citizens (*Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac*, 2000). But although students live in a more multicultural world than ever before, the issue of diversity remains a difficult concept for them to discuss and personalize (Levine and Cureton, 1998). If colleges have an awareness of family norms in various cultures, it will affect how they interact with these students and their support systems.

**Extended Versus Disrupted Adolescence.** Although childhood, adolescence, and adulthood never have been discrete (Elkind, 1994), our post-modern world includes disparate assumptions about the individual rights and responsibilities of college students. Parents who regard college-age students as children rather than adults will become more involved in students' lives. For example, some students come to campus never having interacted with the university personnel. Their parents scheduled their campus visits, dominated the interactions while there, outlined or even wrote major parts of their college application, and decided whether the students would attend prematriculation orientations. These are the parents who will telephone faculty members or deans when students tell them about inattention or perceived injustices.

Although many students come to college today with few worries and responsibilities, the opposite is also true. Many students arrive on the campus with significant life experience (Elkind, 1994). They helped raise younger siblings, prepared meals in the absence of one or both parents, and made decisions for which they were accountable. The families of these kinds of students may approach educational issues in less overt ways.

## Campus Response to Changing Families

A postmodern view of families challenges historical systems on the college campus intended to serve families. Multiple realities and experiences necessitate multiple points of communication on the campus. Today's campuses should expand their approaches to family involvement as the definition of family expands. At the same time, colleges and universities need to focus on the student, without paying significantly more attention to situations involving families. Administrators must create policies and procedures that assure equity in the developmental experience of students, regardless of

their family's presence on the campus. Campuses ought to support and reward Elkind's view of a postmodern, vital family that emphasizes development over the life span of both the child and the parent (Elkind, 1994). A common focus on student development should result in positive outcomes for the student, family, and institution.

**Dealing with Familial Involvement.** Today's parents have become increasingly involved in K–12 educational politics (Salomone, 2000). A natural progression suggests that colleges and universities currently or soon will experience even more parental involvement. Parents' familiarity with the postsecondary educational experience creates an interesting oxymoron in their relationships with colleges today. On the one hand, today's educated parents are more likely to prioritize education and be knowledgeable about the college experience (for example, the nomenclature, academic expectations). On the other hand, today's parents experienced a college environment that no longer exists. Curfews, bed checks, and an all-knowing dean have given way to twenty-four-hour visitation, card scanners for building access, and a different dean for each different need. Colleges must work to enlighten today's parents so they will not expect to relive their experiences vicariously through students.

**Dealing with Consumerism.** In a society where businesses guarantee 100 percent satisfaction and operators stand by at 800 toll-free numbers twenty-four hours a day, parents and students alike approach higher education with a new sense of entitlement. From admissions through graduation, parents and students expect a certain amount of pomp and circumstance. Many flaunt their income levels with expensive sport utility vehicles, designer clothes, and grand vacations while at the same time being assertive in their quest for better value for their money. On the front lines of the college selection process, admissions offices probably have felt this consumer attitude most keenly. For instance, admissions counselors and public relations officers recognize the value that many students and families place on the annual college rankings that appear in certain magazines. They intermittently gloat about status in good years and dismiss the criteria for selection when their institution does not make the list. This frenzied existence is somewhat understandable because of the increased levels of competitiveness in college admissions.

Since 1967, the proportion of freshmen who apply to three or more colleges has increased approximately 20 percent, and the proportion who send out six or more applications has increased fourfold (Cress and Sax, 1998). Cress and Sax (1998) also note that students are taking more college preparatory courses and that, with accusations of grade inflation, students report higher scores and better grades. Yet, adding to the frenetic effects of consumerism, data indicate that today's college students are not involved with their studies (Astin, Parrott, Korn, and Sax, 1997). With more demands on their time, undergraduates tend to regard attending class as just one of many activities. Levine and Cureton (1998) postulate that this new stu-

dent attitude deserves analysis by colleges, especially as they define their evolving relationship with students.

Particularly troubling is the observation that this consumerism is causing a different environment from that of the 1970s. Because students spend less time on campus, they feel less a part of a community and more like mere consumers of a product (Levine and Cureton, 1998). Just as many units of the campus (for example, residence life, Greek life) change their messages, policies, and services to include family members, research indicates that the consumer mentality can create unrealistic expectations among students (Schuh and Upcraft, 2000), sometimes causing the institutions to fall short of their goals.

When changing demographics merge with the new consumerism, fallout is to be expected. Parents cannot focus on the academic-developmental success of students until they are satisfied that much more basic concerns have been adequately addressed. Increased media scrutiny of colleges and universities when it comes to crime on campus, binge drinking, and date rape causes parental concern at a base level. Likewise, concern about eating disorders, sex crimes, money management, alcohol and other drug abuse, hazing, and similar issues may prevent families from focusing on developmental issues that higher education institutions attempt to prioritize. Parents may not understand or care about the philosophy of a living-learning residence hall if they perceive that a student's room is located in an unsafe part of campus. Judicial policies that assume a student-development approach to responsibility, justice, and community may be lost on parents who perceive that a student's rights have been somehow violated. A myopic concern to meet their own child's need as opposed to the needs of the larger community creates a dissonance among the parents that often is repeated in the actions of the students. It therefore is necessary for colleges and universities to assess the environment and create a plan to connect with families intentionally, rather than let random situations set the course for their interactions.

## **A Philosophy for Familial Involvement**

The 1960s represented more than the antiwar movement and the drug culture for institutions of higher education. Because of legislation and financial aid, the decade opened the doors of higher education to more minority and female students. The needs of an increasingly diverse student body, and a general call for individual rights, challenged the traditional relationship between the institution and the student. The lasting effect on campuses was the collective abandonment of *in loco parentis* by faculty (Altbach, 1994) and administrators (Boyer, 1990). Many institutions replaced the legal doctrine with a philosophy of student development or by teaching concomitant rights and responsibilities. The students with whom this new philosophy was initiated are the parents of today's college students. Therefore, when

they interact with colleges they remember, and may assume, the continued existence of a campus that handled affairs internally. Some baby boomer parents may retain their own sense of individual rights, forgetting that they are not the students this time around. Others may automatically assume that students should be awarded the same liberties that they gained during their own student years. Still others may view the relationship in a very finite manner. For example, they may perceive that paying tuition bills guarantees their right to know everything about a student. Some attitudes exhibited by families in their interaction with institutions result in a consumeristic rather than an educational orientation.

**Maintaining Consistent Interactions.** Enrollment management offers an entry point in developing a philosophy of family involvement on the campus. Enrollment management, in brief, means that institutions use a systems approach to their enrollments (Hossler, 1984). Central to this idea is the notion of consistency in message about core institutional values with all constituents. This strategy should include plans for interactions with families. Parents interact with multiple contact points on the college campus, from the admissions offices to residential life and from institutional advancement to judicial affairs. The message to families from every point of contact should center around an overarching concern for student success.

Dey and Hurtado (1994) call for colleges and universities to reconsider the role of students in defining the role of higher education in society. Challenging some traditional philosophies that consider students as inputs or outputs, the authors stress the importance of recognizing the students' influence. In other words, schools should regard students as "sources of institutional change" (p. 249). This reciprocal and dynamic perspective acknowledges that students actively shape their collegiate and social environments. Because students comprehend and are affected by their family's interaction with the college, it is logical that institutional consistency in parental interactions ultimately will benefit the students.

**Uniting Multiple Perspectives.** With over four thousand institutions of higher education across the country, it is improbable if not impossible to define a single college-student family relationship. Boyer (1990) challenges professors to avoid the isolation typical of many campuses and work "toward a *shared* vision of intellectual social possibilities—a community of scholars—that the four dimensions of academic endeavor should lead" (p. 80). A successful college experience should be for administrators the common point on which to build appropriate communications and interactions with families.

The increasing diversity of college students requires a comprehensive or holistic approach to the educational experience. Institutions should research their students to know who they are (demographics, geographies) and what their needs are as individuals (when practical to do so), especially as members of subgroups. Gender, sexual orientation, and ethnicity obviously should be looked into; however, culture, heritage, and familial expe-



rience are less tangible factors that also directly play into the student's probability of success on campus. Admissions office personnel should not give promises to individual families that their colleagues cannot fulfill. Administrators must assess the influence of different family backgrounds on campus involvement, retention, and student satisfaction.

**Dealing with Direct Campus Connections.** The proliferation of programs, communiqués, and parent organizations offer proof of the growing familial involvement in the campus ethos. Increasing numbers of institutions rely on handbooks, orientation programs, Web sites, parent councils, help lines, and parent offices to define their relationship with families. As recently as the late 1990s, a national conference sponsored by Administrators Promoting Parent Involvement was initiated to serve as a resource for university staff who work with parents, both from a student affairs perspective and for fundraising endeavors that target parents. Topics at the annual meetings include the how-to's of implementing orientation programs, creating effective parent funds, and organizing family associations (Brown, 2000).

**Setting Boundaries.** Administrators must balance their quest for parental involvement with the need for appropriate boundaries. Institutions must communicate with parents, and often remind them that their sons and daughters, and not the parents themselves, are enrolled. An educational approach in connecting with parents—one that is deliberate, systematic, and consistent throughout the student's college career—will limit special interests in one area from setting an unrealistic tone in another. For example, when residence life grants a room change to a student whose parents are particularly aggressive, they create an unwanted standard for other areas of the university in dealing with that particular family. Clearly delineated agreements should set the boundaries for interactions.

This notion of setting boundaries for parents can pose a difficult challenge in today's world of instant information, access, and gratification. When information is just one click away, parents are less likely to accept the idea that it could turn out to be developmentally beneficial for their son or daughter to live with a roommate he or she does not like in the present. The institution should articulate a common concern for the success of the student rather than take a top-down approach and imply that it can better define what is in the student's best interest. Institutions must communicate explicitly the boundaries of the relationships among three stakeholders: institution and student, student and family, institution and family. Triangulating any interactions will eventually lead to harsh feelings because, even on a macro level, people are dealing with people.

Clinchy (1999) reports on the work of Poplin and Weeres (1992), who note the importance of purposeful and positive relationships in today's effective educational setting. Institutional leadership must manage population demands at an increasing rate of change while attempting not to lose its original purpose among unnecessary and inappropriate parental prods.

## Changing Face of Higher Education

Weber (1999) notes that two compelling forces affecting higher education in the new millennium are globalization and the information technology revolution. He proposes that the development of a knowledge industry will “profoundly change the educational system as the ability to move information more quickly and economically becomes greater and more widespread” (p. 5). To survive and thrive in this highly competitive environment, colleges and universities will need to reconceptualize students as clients and structure programs and services to meet their needs. Although some educators bristle at the use of business terms in academia, others appreciate this more intentional approach to interactions with students and families. As institutions diversify to meet the needs of changing populations, the growing ethos of consumerism should not compromise their values. New institutions, such as those that specialize in corporate education, must pay particular attention to this goal (Pattenaude, 2000).

The plethora of constituents and values challenges institutions to be all things to all people. “Gaining an intellectual, budgetary, and administrative alignment of these forces will be critical if the institution is to evolve in positive ways, respond to institutional and social needs, and use its resources effectively” (Pattenaude, 2000, p. 166). Recognizing the effects of the familial constituency will undoubtedly be a significant factor in the success of today’s higher education institutions.

## Conclusion

Because parents increasingly are pivotal players on the college campus, administrators must define a methodology for working with what Ernest Boyer (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1990) calls the *post-in loco parentis* era. Instituting plans for interdependence, or mutual dependence, among all constituents to focus on the student’s success should be the viable goal for all interchanges between college and family.

Consistent interactions are critical. For example, orientation leaders should not prioritize involvement with especially enjoyable or prestigious families while ignoring the presence of others. Nor should financial aid officers acquiesce to one particularly vocal family in a manner that gives false expectations for their future interactions with other institutional offices. Institutions must make consistent such competing messages.

The following chapters discuss ideas and ideals for working with families of college students in specific areas, including admissions, financial aid, orientation, residence life, legal issues (with specific regard to FERPA), institutional advancement, and ultimately offer the presidential perspective as well. Experts in each of these areas describe current research and application in meaningful ways. These chapters offer strategies for attaining the one goal that is common to all higher education institutions: the academic and developmental success of students.

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