

More colleges helping parents stay connected

By Jenna Russell, Globe Staff | November 24, 2004

AMHERST -- For generations of American 18-year-olds, going to college has meant getting away from Mom and Dad.

But increasingly, Mom and Dad aren't so willing to let go, and colleges are moving to accommodate them. In recent years, schools across the country have started a host of programs to help parents get involved and keep tabs on their children: parent orientation programs, websites, and even parent councils that advise administrators.

Until recently, this kind of white-glove treatment could be found only at a handful of private colleges. But now even big public campuses are reaching out to parents. This fall, the University of Massachusetts at Amherst opened an Office of Parent Services, the first on any public campus in the state. Just two months old, the office is already flooded with hundreds of e-mail messages each month from parents worried about students' social lives, housing options, or choice of major.

"These parents have been very involved in their students' experiences, and they want to continue that," said Jeanne Horrigan, director of the New Students Program at UMass. "We want to serve parents better, particularly since we're a large institution that can be intimidating to navigate. They take comfort in being able to make one call and get answers."

Specialists say baby boomer parents, some of whom once stormed administration buildings to demand an end to adult oversight during their own student years, seem much more involved in their children's lives than past generations. They are also savvy consumers who believe that if they pay tuition they have a right to know how students are doing.

"When you've been involved for 13 years on a daily or weekly basis and suddenly you're shut off, there is withdrawal," said Jim Boyle, president of the Virginia-based advocacy group College Parents of America. Since launching a free quarterly newsletter in June, the six-year-old nonprofit group has signed up 16,500 subscribers and doubled its paid membership to 6,300.

But some observers say there's a danger in bringing parents too far into the fold, that it blurs the boundaries for parents and children when young adults need to establish independence.

Helen Johnson, a national consultant who ran a parent-services office for Cornell University, says schools need to set some limits.

"Colleges welcome parents to the university family, and that's an enormous mistake," she said. "It's kind of like your drunk uncle who shows up for Thanksgiving; you wish he would go away."

But in the view of many college leaders, happy parents are worth the effort. They provide positive word-of-mouth about the school, strong school ties that may help keep students enrolled, and maybe even donations down the road.

"The long-term benefit is that parents become great ambassadors for the institution," said Mike Gargano, vice chancellor for student affairs at UMass-Amherst, who came up with the idea for the parents' office. "When they're speaking to other parents, they say, 'You can't believe what my daughter's university does.'"

Jack McKeon -- a retired engineer from Torrington, Conn. -- has e-mailed the parents' office with several questions this fall, once to ask about internship opportunities for his son Connor and again to find out how

the freshman could cash checks on campus. Along with other parents, he received an e-mail before the Red Sox playoffs in October, asking parents to discourage their children from rioting. He said the parents' office has given him "peace of mind" about sending his 18-year-old to such a large university.

"If you ask your children how it's going, they say 'great,'" said McKeon, 60. "I took this as an opportunity to get information."

The UMass parents' office is run by four trained staff members. The staff members, who also run campus orientation programs, send out informational e-mails twice a month, requested by more than 5,000 parents to date, with reminders about upcoming deadlines and events and tips on helping students be successful.

Gargano said the cost of the parents' office has been about \$50,000 so far: to develop a website, design brochures, and hire one staff member. The office is housed in the admissions center, a short drive north of campus, and shares the same staff that plans freshman orientation. Like many parent programs, the UMass office targets parents of first-year students, though no parent with a question is turned away.

Even critics of parental hand-holding say such offices can serve one useful purpose: explaining to mothers and fathers why they can't find out everything they want. A 30-year-old law known as the Buckley Amendment gives students some rights to control their academic records, blocking parents' access to grades and academic warnings. Most colleges today send all grades directly to students, a practice that irritates many tuition-paying parents. Student health records are also generally kept private, although as parents become more assertive, they are pressuring schools to loosen restrictions, especially on reporting students' mental health problems.

At Northeastern University, whose pioneering parent-services office opened its doors in 1994, about 60 percent of parents attend orientation, said Susan Brown, associate director of parent programs.

The parents' office, which hands out magnets to advertise a toll-free help line, started an event last spring, a "mothers' weekend" that drew 500 to campus. But after fathers complained about being left out, she said, the gathering was reconfigured for next year as a "Spring Fling Family Weekend."

"You want to be connected with parents," Brown said. "After students, they're our number one concern."

For students like Connor McKeon at UMass, who "definitely likes being on my own," the parents' office has been a mixed blessing. He wasn't thrilled to have his father kept in the loop about behavior problems during the baseball playoffs, he said. "I didn't expect him to know what's going on up here."

But the freshman also sees the benefits of the new service. "It keeps them from asking me too many questions," he said.

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