

Why Parents of Undergraduates Matter to Higher Education

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This sourcebook provides readers with a rationale and a strategy for working with parents of college students. Several themes emerge. This chapter identifies some of these themes and suggests titles for further research, many of which were already noted in the individual chapters.

Changing Demographics of Families and Students

Several chapters highlight the changing demographics of the undergraduate student population as well as the changing dynamics of their families. Institutions must pay attention to the institution-student-parent relationship to assure accuracy and consistency of messages, policies, and programs. In addition, institutions must assess how well they provide for the needs of students with various backgrounds, needs, and experiences. On many campuses, today's students do not look like the students of the past. Likewise, families are dramatically different. Although this sourcebook emphasizes the challenges associated with this increasing diversity, institutions must assess how successfully policies and programs support the academic experience of all students. This singular focus on academic success should transcend the differences inherent in today's student populations.

Two especially salient books provide insights for practitioners seeking to learn more about the changing nature of student demographics and values.

When Hope and Fear Collide: A Portrait of Today's College Student (Levine and Cureton, 1998) provides readers with research from students and administrators of various institutional types. This work not only provides descriptive data but also a contextual framework in which today's college students have formed their values. It concludes by suggesting strategies for improving programs, services, and curricula. Although not written specifically for higher education professionals, *Ties That Stress: The New Family Imbalance* (Elkind, 1994) offers insights into the changing family dynamics in American society. In particular, Elkind addresses some of the challenges that parents and adolescents contend with in a postmodern society.

Familial Involvement in Higher Education

From the changing dynamics of families emerges the growing phenomenon of parental involvement in the college student's experience. Although institutions may resist, the parents of today's college students clearly expect to exercise that prerogative. Their expectation results from a combination of factors, including high cost of attendance, changing role of higher education in society, and their own regard for their students as children rather than adults. It is helpful for institutions to develop these relationships proactively; if not, they may develop based on implicit messages or misinformation. To take a proactive approach to parental involvement requires significant collaboration and assessment of institutional ethos. But how institutions implement policies and programs for parents will be as unique as the individual campuses.

Programs and services for families may range from handbooks to Web sites, from orientation programs to newsletters. Assigning responsibility for these functions will depend on the size and mission of the institution as well as the philosophical approach to parental involvement. For some institutions, a freestanding family office may be necessary. On some campuses, this office might report to student affairs; on other campuses alumni and development would work more effectively. The latter might be a better choice for institutions with significant populations of children of alumni. In either case, representatives from both student affairs and institutional advancement should collaborate on goal setting, job responsibilities, and philosophical approaches.

The size of the institution may also affect how family programs are assigned. Although some campuses may choose to staff an office with an entry-level or middle manager, other campuses may create a committee of staff from various offices to accomplish the goal of appropriate messages and programs. On especially large campuses, more complex or pressing issues may displace the objectives of this sourcebook. In these settings, a staff member who champions the cause of familial involvement may choose to gather institutional data on familial expectations and demographics before proceeding with budget and staff requests.

The intent of this sourcebook is in part to provide strategies and tools to develop campus-specific policies with regard to engaging families. Practitioners should consult the institutional researchers on their campus for specific information about the institution's parent population and expectations. The following professional associations may provide additional resources for practitioners:

American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO)

1 Dupont Circle N.W., Suite 330
Washington, DC 20036
(202) 293-9161
www.aacrao.com

American College Personnel Association (ACPA)

1 Dupont Circle N.W., Suite 300
Washington, DC 20036
(202) 835-2272
www.acpa.nche.edu

Association of College and University Housing Officers—International (ACUHO-I)

Riverwatch Tower
364 West Lane Avenue, Suite C
Columbus, OH 43201
(614) 292-0099
www.acuho.ohio-state.edu

National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA)

1920 L Street N.W., Suite 200
Washington, DC 20036
(202) 785-0453
www.nasfaa.org

National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA)

1875 Connecticut Avenue N.W., Suite 418
Washington, DC 20009
(202) 265-7500
www.naspa.org

National Orientation Director's Association (NODA)

Washington State University
Office of New Student Programs
P.O. Box 641070
Pullman, WA 99164
(509) 335-6459

Campus Ethos

Another prominent theme in this sourcebook is the importance of a positive institutional ethos. With instant access to policies, news, and campus representatives, colleges and universities should assess how their campus is perceived. Too often, campuses only think they know how they are perceived. In making strides toward a desired culture, senior leadership plays an integral role in articulating goals and setting positive examples for all university constituents. Word of mouth travels fast among parents. The feeling on campus matters in today's consumer-driven higher education market. For institutions that are tuition-driven, the messages communicated to parents may be especially relevant to achieving and maintaining enrollments. Insights into the extent of parental involvement in both the admissions and financial aid processes and their expectations for engagement after enrollment will guide practitioners in developing or modifying levels of interaction.

Again, the office of institutional research should be able to provide information in this regard or assist in collecting data on institutional climate and culture. Two books speak specifically to the undergraduate student experience and address some of the issues of community on today's college campus. *Involving Colleges: Successful Approaches to Fostering Student Learning and Personal Development Outside the Classroom* (Kuh and others, 1991) helps practitioners understand the unique dynamics of campus culture and offers examples of campuses that embody the written and spoken institutional values. *What Matters in College? Four Critical Years Revisited* (Astin, 1993) offers longitudinal research that highlights trends in student values and behavior. This book may provide useful benchmarks for institutions to compare their own students as well as suggest areas for future institutional research.

Dynamic Environment of Higher Education

The one certainty for higher education in the new millennium is change. In the future higher education will be more expensive, more complex, more competitive, and more fragmented (Pattenauude, 2000). Although higher education traditionally reacted to change with years of committee work, proposals, and study, in the current climate institutions must respond more efficiently and effectively. Higher education can no longer hide behind the ivy in terms of policies and activities. With swift changes in technology, the media, and societal expectations for higher education, campuses are more accessible than ever. Past pronouncements about valuing independence and self-sufficiency must be reframed in the reality of society. It is more than just semantics. In a postmodern world, interdependence must be valued over independence. With parents asserting themselves in their student's college

experiences, they need to understand the goals of the institution. Their expectations and understanding may or may not be consistent with the values espoused by the institution. The challenges of managing information in a time of rapid change include consistency and accuracy.

Management in Higher Education. Corporations such as Walt Disney, McDonald's, and Coca-Cola are known for embodying their company values in words, performance, and culture. Although colleges and universities rewrote mission statements en masse during the 1980s to articulate institutional values, achieving a positively consistent ethos was not so easy. Because higher education organizations are complex, reward systems vary across the campus.

For example, research holds that interaction with faculty members represents one of the most powerful indicators of student satisfaction and predicted retention (Astin, 1993; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991). Yet reward systems for most faculty members relate directly to research, publishing, and grant writing. Only sometimes does effective teaching matter. As a result, faculty loyalty often rests with the discipline, rather than with the institution.

Although student affairs professionals create points of collaboration with faculty through committee work and programs such as orientation, engaging faculty as active members of a college community requires executive management's input. The chief executive or the chief academic affairs officer must recognize the motivations that attract academicians to the academy: a love of learning, a desire to advance knowledge, enjoyment of teaching, and a concern for the intellectual rigor of our society (Pattenaude, 2000). Higher education administrators should introduce the familial impact (for example, enrollment decisions, support for and hindrance of academic pursuits) to faculty members who may possess little perspective on the students they teach. In contrast, some faculty members may possess a great deal of information and ideas that will emanate from such dialogue.

Importance of Executive Message. Whether intentional or not, the chief executive on campus creates an ethos for members of the campus community. Presidents must craft intentionally the values of the institution, resisting the notion to be all things to all people. Ironically, constituents both inside and outside the university need to be confident that there is a clear direction (Pattenaude, 2000). Values and atmosphere are felt and are real issues, no matter the catalogue rhetoric. With dialogue among various departments and constituents, chief executives can benchmark how the message is interpreted, how it can be enhanced, and how it can be measured for effectiveness.

In exploring these issues, professionals may look to two books that offer insights into how American higher education is changing and the implications for faculty and administration. *Higher Education in Transition: The Challenges of the New Millennium* (Losco and Fife, 2000) examines the impact of

issues such as diversity, technology, policy arena, and the changing role of faculty on the future of American higher education. Another helpful resource in this regard, *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate* (Boyer, 1990), looks more specifically at the changing role of faculty, the impetus for the change, and what these dynamics mean for academe.

Relevance to Retention

A focus on the academic success of students in developing consistent messages and programs for parents enables institutions to gain support for retention efforts. When student affairs professionals take a systems approach to parental involvement rather than approach it separately in functional areas or a single office, the impact on student success can be more intentional.

In a complex setting such as higher education, a focus on collaboration with the parents of undergraduates may appear undeserving to many administrators and faculty members. Parents, however, represent either a positive or a negative support system for students. Effective relationships can promote the former. In today's environment, parents expect to be involved in their student's college experience. They do not abdicate their control to the institution as readily as in the past. Thus, partnering with parents affects much more than resolving isolated issues presented by families.

With the changing demographics of students, retention efforts must focus on various subcultures. In identifying the needs of these subcultures, some institutions will find that families represent a significant influence in their college experience. Dissecting the subtleties that may exist about various subcultures will challenge a traditional cookie-cutter approach to programming and policy formulation that caters to the majority student. This level of intentional research will not only yield higher retention rates but also improve services for these students.

For student affairs professionals seeking a beginning point for research on student subcultures, *College Students: The Evolving Nature of Research* (Stage and others, 1996) provides a sound beginning. The chapters examine issues related to college selection, campus environments, and student development, but approach these topics with a "transformational view of college student research" (p. xi). In other words, the chapters include not only more traditional approaches to college student research but also studies that focus on "populations that are just now beginning to receive attention in college student research" (p. xi).

Conclusion

Readers of this sourcebook may be dismayed by the lack of clear answers about how to work with the families of today's undergraduates. In a post-modern society, however, the challenge for social institutions such as higher education communities is to develop a consistent message that is applicable to many but specific to none. The risk is that potential parents and stu-

dents may choose not to matriculate because of a certain message. However, the risks associated with trying to be all things to all people (especially all parents) likely outweigh these risks. In the face of the diverse race, ethnicity, age, and experience of the student body today, college leaders should articulate the school's values and mission, boldly proclaim them, and create points of accountability with both external and internal constituencies in achieving their goals.

Student affairs professionals may assume the responsibilities of parental involvement because of organizational structures and the notion that parent programs are simply another "service" for students. The institution-student-parent relationship presents an opportunity for SA practitioners to collaborate with other administrative departments and with faculty on new levels of institutional purpose, goals, and accountability.

Parents of today's undergraduates do matter to higher education because of changing family dynamics and the fact that parents expect to be involved, costs continue to increase, and student issues today can sometimes be life-threatening. This environment requires leadership that can process and manage information appropriately and create a message that is consistent with the needs of the community and understood by all campus constituents, including the parents of undergraduates.

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