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Guiding Future Practices: A Review of Parent and Family Services

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Article

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Working with college students often includes working with their parents and families. Higher education institutions have addressed this cultural shift with the creation of parent and family services. As research illustrates continued strong bonding relationships between students and their parents while in college, student affairs practitioners should address the role parents play in their students' lives. This article reviews current practices of parent and family services to assist student affairs professionals in being proactive when considering the relationships between students, families, and the institution. Best practice for parent and family services are presented.

Today's student affairs practitioners address a culturally different generation of students than their predecessors. With this new generation of students comes an even more diverse collection of parents and families. Parents of today's college students are more involved in the lives of their children than ever before. In a *New York Times* article, Gabriel (2010) describes situations in which parents remain on campus long after moving their child into their college residence hall. He noted that some parents attend the first day of classes with their child, some visit the campus registrar's office to change their child's class schedule, and others have had to be invited to depart campus via special invitation at orientation. Houston Dougharty, Vice President of Student Affairs at Grinnell College noted,

A good deal of it has to do with the evolution of overinvolvement in our students' lives.

These are the baby-on-board parents, highly invested in their students' success. They do a lot of living vicariously, and this [remaining with the student] is one manifestation of that. (as quoted in Gabriel, 2010, p. 2)

Surprisingly, students are increasingly supportive of this involvement (Roarty, 2007). There is little doubt that new innovations in technology have made a continued relationship between students and parents even easier. Junco and Mastrodicasa (2007) found that students spoke with their parents an average of 1.5 times per day, and 57.6% of the time it was the student who initiated the call. With terms such as helicopter, stealth bomber, and most recently Velcro parents, Generation X parents have far exceeded any previous generation in their involvement in student's lives (Coburn, 2006; Gabriel, 2010).

Savage and Wartman (2008) focused on five key factors that may influence parental involvement in higher education: generation, cost of college, use of technology, changes in parenting, and demographics. Their report mentioned that while student traits can be generalized (to a certain extent) based on the year they were born and when their parents were born, important details lie within the subgroups of each generation (Savage & Wartman, 2008). The cost of college influences parents, as more are taking out loans to pay for their student's education, and while the price of education is continually increasing, so are parents' expectations of a more visible return on their investment (Geiger, 2004). As students are using technology to communicate more frequently with their parents, changes in parenting for this generation have led to students who were over-involved in their youth (Sax, Ceja, & Teranishi, 2001). Finally, Astin and Oseguera (2004) found that more students are coming to college campuses with parents who have attended college, leading to better informed, experienced parents in college life.

With an increase in parental involvement comes an even greater need for institutions to provide parental services. Savage and Wartman (2008) note:

The relationship between college students and parents involves a key third player that cannot be ignored--the institution. Just as the relationship between parents and their students in college has changed over time, so too has the relationship between students and institutions and between parents and institutions. (p. 31)

Donovan and McKelfresh (2008) proposed that a relationship between the institution and students' families is important as the result is beneficial to the students' success, as well as to the culture of the university. Often the term helicopter parent is used as a negative expression, when parents may be trying to support their student in the best way they know how. Sorokuo and Weissbrod (2005) illustrate that, "During times of separation, individuation can be most effectively attained through a balance between adolescent-parent connectedness and separateness" (p. 222). To support a student's transition into adulthood, institutions may find collaboration with parents to be a factor in accomplishing this goal. Similarly, Donovan and McKelfresh (2008) encourage a more positive outlook on parental and family involvement in higher education and caution administrators to be mindful of the variety of diverse family systems. This is supported through the findings of Wintre and Yaffe (2000), who reported that conversations about college issues within parent-student relationships have an effect on student adjustment. This synopsis implies that a supportive collaboration between family and on-campus resources may benefit students.

Coburn (2006) stresses the importance of educating parents about student development and their role in supporting student success, stating that this will be beneficial not only to the parent and institution, but also to the student. Educating and building this relationship through collaboration demonstrates a change in the culture of student affairs. This fundamental concept, including parents to advance student learning, is a cornerstone of parent and family services

today. To understand how institutions came to this conclusion, a brief review of the history of parent and family services is needed.

A Brief History of Parent and Family Services

The providing of institutional parent and family services dates back to the 1920s when the University of Illinois (2010) had both a Mothers and a Fathers Association. Wells College in Aurora, New York, started a Parents Club in 1951 and this club most closely resembles today's offices of parent and family services. In fact, the first service the Wells College Parents Club officially offered was a Parents Weekend, an event offered on many college campuses today (Savage & Wartman, 2008).

Beginning in colonial times and leading up to the late 1960s, *in loco parentis* played an essential role in dictating the relationship between student and institution (Bowden, 2007). An institution's authority as the substitute parent was not significantly challenged until the late 1960s. The 1960s and early 1970s brought a wave of student uprising as students fought to be treated as independent adults. *Dixon v. Alabama Board of Education* (1961) marked the beginning of the end for *in loco parentis*. As students demanded more independence, parents became less involved on college campuses, and this eventually led to the closing of many parent and family service programs around the nation (Henning, 2007). Nevertheless, parental involvement would not be suppressed for long.

The demand for parent and family services began to resurface. Cutbacks in federal funding led many students to become more dependent on their parents to pay tuition and this placed the parent back in the picture (Savage & Wartman, 2008). With the demise of *in loco parentis*, parents gradually reclaimed their role in developing a relationship with the university. This shift in relationship did not completely alleviate the university. The increasing need for

parents to be kept both informed and involved became evident. “Parents often turned to administrators to learn what was going on. In response to this need, in 1972 Syracuse University established an office just for parents, one of the first of its kind in the country” (Severino, 1989, p. 69). This marked the formal recognition of a new relationship between the institution, student, and parent.

Since the creation of the Syracuse University Office of Parent and Family Services much has changed and student affairs professionals may be less familiar with the latest model of parental involvement. Henning suggests student affairs professionals are now involved *in consortio cum parentibus*, or “in partnership with parents” (2007, p. 538). This model shifts responsibility and power back to the university as it was in the days of *in loco parentis*, but retains the involvement and power of the parent. As universities continue to develop parent and family services to meet the needs of parents and families, a stronger working relationship between these entities will be forged as both groups partner to provide the best services for students.

Parent and family services, a once relatively unknown service on college campuses, has now become a thriving part of many institutions. Gwendolyn Dungy, Executive Director of the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), noted the continued growth and future magnitude of parent and family services through her comment, “This is a whole new career field” (as quoted in Lum, 2006, p. 1). In light of the historical progress of parent and family services, it is essential that student affairs professionals seek innovative ways to engage the budding future of this area of student affairs practice. In order to guide future practice of parent and family services, a review of current practices is presented.

Current Practices in Parent and Family Services

With an understanding of the complex relationship between students, parents, and institutions, it is easy to recognize the emerging need for parent services. Forty-five percent of today's parent and family service offices opened their doors between 2000 and 2007 (Savage & Wartman, 2008). As parent and family service offices are becoming more common, determining a blueprint for office guidelines has become a more difficult task. A consistent theme for all parent and family service employees is to be a liaison between students, parents, and the institution. It can be a challenge to determine exactly what to include in the offices of parent and family services. Former Mississippi State University (MSU) Parent Services Director and current Parent Services Director at Auburn University, Lady Cox states:

Understanding what the specific institution you are working for needs and the type of parent/student relationship you encounter can be one of the most challenging parts of being a Director of Parent Services. It is after you have that understanding where you start to feel productive in your job. (personal communication, October 6, 2010)

Thus, organizing parent and family service offices can be challenging as each population of students and their families will have unique characteristics, and each institution will have its own method and style in cultivating these relationships.

Even though each institution has its own approach to providing services to parents and families, reviewing the offerings of several offices of parent and family services suggests there are common trends throughout a majority of higher education institutions. Some of these trends include: offering parent and family orientations in conjunction with freshman orientation sessions; providing a common place for parents and families to post concerns, questions, and to seek advice; forming parent and family service offices as the central hub for parental questions

concerning students; and incorporating technology in innovative ways to make parents and families feel included and informed (Auburn University, 2010; Mississippi State University, 2010a; Northwestern University, 2010).

Coordinators of parent and family services should continually update their services as student needs are always changing. While it may seem like an added responsibility for student affairs professionals to accommodate the need for parent and family services, Dennis, Phinney, and Chuateco (2005) emphasize the importance of recognizing parents and families as team players in the development of college students: “Support from parents remains an important predictor of adjustment in late adolescence” (p. 225). Accordingly, the future for parent and family service offices and how practitioners are preparing for this ever-changing work environment needs to be reviewed.

Communication and Technology

A recent change in parent and family services involves communication (Savage & Wartman, 2008). Communication was initially provided through orientation programs and newsletters to parents. This is important as communication “keeps parents/families connected to the University with advice on parenting a college student, important event/date information, and brief articles written specifically for parents from key campus offices” (Savage & Wartman, 2008, p. 81). Institutions are now mainstreaming parent and family services in the form of websites, e-mail, blogs, live video chats, Facebook, and other media outlets.

King, Savage, Watkins, and Watson (2010) discussed several trends of parent and family services in a NASPA presentation entitled *Best Practices in Parent and Family Programs*, including the major role technology plays in reaching out to these partners. NASPA’s Parent and Family Relations Knowledge Community (PFR KC) is a valuable resource that helps bridge the

gap between institutions and parents as we move into the future. This website offers a bibliography of books, journal and media articles, as well as current topics, issues, and trends related to parents and families. An institutional example comes from Northeastern University (2010), which provides their technologically savvy parents with an online chat room, called the Parents Corner Message Board, that not only provides parents a place to leave questions for parent and family service administrators, but also provides a way for them to contact each other so they can network.

Savage and Wartman note, “The use of technology, in particular cellular phones, the Internet, e-mail, text messaging, and instant messaging, has risen. Students use all of these technologies, most of them for communicating with parents” (2008, p. 13). Every month the University of Michigan (2010) posts an online survey for *M Parents*, the parent’s website. The November 2010 survey of the month asked for information regarding the mode of technology parents most often use to communicate with their students. The survey results illustrated that texts (57%), phone calls (27%), and e-mail messages (6%) included 80% of the ways in which parents reach their children. These numbers highlight that the University of Michigan parents who responded to the survey are more than twice as likely to text their child than to call them. This information supports the idea that parents are adapting to a more technological form of communication with their students. This may also indicate that parents may be more willing to communicate with institutions in this manner.

If the results from the University of Michigan (2010) survey are reflected on other campuses, e-mail may not be the best way to contact students and parents. Contacting students via their cell phone may be effective, especially when the information released is critical. Mississippi State University (2010b) realizes how crucial every second of a campus emergency

can be and have adopted the Maroon Alert system. This system releases emergency information through a variety of technological means including MSU's official Facebook page, Twitter account, campus radio station, university website/e-mail. When activated, this system releases a text message to the phone of any university student or employee who requests it. The Maroon Alert system is activated in times of any campus threat – whether that be severe weather or a security issue (Mississippi State University, 2010b).

Borrowing the concept of the Maroon Alert system, student affairs practitioners may find it useful to engage parents in the same manner. Parent and family service offices could contact their constituents about important campus dates and events such as parent welcome weekends, scholarship deadlines, and the starting and ending dates of each semester. While recognizing that text messaging is a popular communication link between students and their families, it may not be a desired method of communication between institutions and families. Therefore, institutions may look to expand services to offer a variety of technological resources, such as parent help hotlines or online instant messaging services. Such programs could be optional services that parents could sign up for during student orientation visits or through the institution's website. These technological services could provide opportunities to connect parents to the institution, and aid them in becoming more knowledgeable about the happenings in their children's lives.

There is also a need for effective collaboration between parent and family service offices and other departments on campus, as the majority of information provided to parents comes from a variety of departmental sources. Some of the most critical potential partners include offices of admissions and scholarships, student health, housing and residence life, study abroad, counseling services, financial aid, dean of students, and academic advising, as these are areas where parents

often become, or want to become, involved in their students' college experience. Kezar (2003) states, "The major strategy for creating a seamless environment has been collaboration between academic and student affairs" (p. 137). One of the most successful ways to connect these two areas of the institution has been through living-learning communities, where students with similar interests or majors live together. Building on this idea, parent and family services practitioners could create virtual living-learning communities for parents.

Virtual learning communities for parents and families could incorporate a variety of themes including communities directed at parents who have similar questions, come from similar backgrounds, or have students in similar majors. Providing parents with access to one another could inspire significant conversations about issues that both parents and students face, as well as possibly uncover serious concerns that student affairs practitioners could address. Further, administrators could virtually check-in to discuss student issues. This could be similar to the online chat rooms and message boards created for parents, with the exception that it could be personalized for each parent. The living-learning community that each parent is assigned could be determined by a short survey (distributed during orientation) that encompasses parental demographics and concerns. As practitioners move forward in the expansion of parent and family services, it is creativity, innovation, and collaboration that will guide future practice.

Looking Toward the Future

In considering the future of parent services one change may be noted in the title of the office itself. Many institutions with parent services offices are changing to offices of Parent and Family Services. In so doing, it may be noted that these institutions are making an effort to be more inclusive through acknowledgement of the additional members of a student's familial network. Linked to the office name change may also be the way many higher education

institutions recognize the importance of the role of parents and families in the lives of their students. Savage and Wartman (2008) explain that many parents are now “included in the discussion as schools address significant campus issues such as student drinking, physical and mental health, finances, career development, campus safety, and preparation for off-campus living” (p. 2). The University of Minnesota (2010) even offers online courses for parents that cover information on the topics of college drinking and student financial management. As King et al. (2010) state, “Collectively, we need to be aware that our parents’ experiences are not limited to our institution” (p. 15). Therefore, student affairs professionals should recognize that parents have the ability to explore their options and evaluate institutions based on the services provided, as well as their academic reputation. Parents play a key role in influencing where their student eventually enrolls. This signifies a unique opportunity for institutions to revisit the ways they perceive the parents of their students.

Another future change may be rooted in the ways higher education institutions reach out to unique populations of parents. This includes the parents of a group of students who have not been the recent focus – the parents of homeschooled students. Homeschooling has become increasingly popular and is considered to be one of the fastest growing means of education in the United States (Cogan, 2010). The number of homeschooled students has increased by 29% in five years, from 850,000 in 1999 to 1.1 million in 2003 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2006). Sorey and Duggan (2008) argue that although homeschooled students are rapidly gaining interest in pursuing higher education, there is little being done to address the inclusion of these students (and their parents). Accordingly, parent and family services offices of the future will need to address the unique challenges faced by the parents of homeschooled students. This may include topics such as how parents can assist their homeschooled students

with the changes they will experience due to a new social atmosphere and unique methods of teaching pedagogy.

In the future institutions should also consider the expectations parents have in terms of the ways in which institutions meet the needs of their child. One way to gauge this may be to survey parents and learn to understand these expectations. For example, the University of Minnesota distributed a National Survey of College and University Parent Services collected data from parents representing 261 American and Canadian institutions (Savage & Petree, 2009). They compared the percentage of institutions that utilized seven specific parent services. These parent services include parent/family weekends, parent orientation, newsletters, parents council, fundraising, welcome week/move in, and a parent handbook. Although technology has proven to be increasingly important to parents and their students, it is events such as parent orientations (97.1%), welcome weeks (73%), and parent/family weekends (89.8%) that seem to be the most popular at higher education institutions (Savage & Petree, 2009, p. 14). Parent orientation has consistently been the most popular parent service offered by institutions across the nation. This illustrates the importance student affairs practitioners have in assisting parents in feeling welcome and prepared from the very beginning of their student's college career.

Future parent orientation sessions will need to include more creative methods in order to address the distinct needs of parents. For example, a seemingly obvious but often unacknowledged phenomenon is that parents and family members love their college students (as illustrated by the tears shed on move-in day). Recognizing these feelings, MSU's Office of Parent Services recently added a Blues Breakfast to their parent orientation (Mississippi State University, 2010a). The breakfast occurs the morning after move-in and provides parents with an opportunity to visit, reminisce, and network with one another as their students begin their

collegiate experience. Other pieces being added to parent orientations include offering parent socials and receptions (Emerson College, 2011; Pomona College, 2011); providing parent lounges and hospitality rooms complete with campus information, knowledgeable staff, and light snacks (Colorado College, 2011; Reed College, 2011); hosting “what to expect” or “academic support resources for students with special needs” discussions (Emory University, 2010), and even taking a generational photo with parents and family members (Reed College, 2011) to name a few. Other campuses, including Tulane University (2011) invite their Parent Partners to plan their own events during parent orientation and throughout the year; giving parents an even greater voice in what they would like to experience when they come to campus.

Regardless of the events included in parent orientation, student affairs practitioners need to ensure parents are included by inviting them to campus. Parents, much like their students, want to feel like they are a part of the campus community. Practitioners should continue to include parents in future planning and practice in order to best address their ever-changing needs.

Conclusion

It is clear that the average parent of a college student has an increased knowledge of technology and that this tool can be used to make great strides in quick and effective communication to both students, parents, and their families. At the same time, a common goal among student affairs professionals includes reaching out to a diverse population of students’ parents and families, which requires assorted techniques and programs. While many parents have taken on the titles of helicopter and Velcro parents, institutions also have parents and families who take less active roles. Although this may come as a relief to many administrators, it also becomes a challenge in learning how to collaborate with the less involved, but still critically important partners. At the other end of the spectrum, administrators must be prepared for parents and families who will become even more involved in their student’s college experience, creating

the new wave of umbilical parents. Outlined in this article are current techniques used in engaging college students' parents and families, and the importance of fostering this engagement.

Student affairs practitioners need to reexamine the approach they take when addressing the parents and families of students. Often, parents and families are seen as obstacles in the way of completing certain tasks. Instead, practitioners must begin to recognize the parents and families of students as allies in the goal of developing the holistic student. When parents and families are seen as collaborative partners in the eyes of administrators, only then will parent and family services evolve into proactive outreach centers. Student affairs professionals must communicate effectively on all fronts to educate parents and families, while still allowing their students independence and freedom. In so doing, they make the college experience more enjoyable for all partners involved. More research about parent and family services must be conducted in order for student affairs practitioners to meet the ever-changing needs of tomorrow's students.

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