



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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HELICOPTER PARENTS CAN HELP STUDENTS SOAR

"Look! Up in the sky! It's a bird! It's a plane! It's... Mom?...Is that you?"

As students settle into their academic routines, college faculty and administrators bat at a few remaining helicopter parents the same way that King Kong whacked airplanes out of the New York City skyline in the 1930s.

There is a shift in the way that parents deal with their college students. Gone are the days when Dad would slip his son \$20 and expect him to hop a Greyhound bus to freshman orientation. The image of Mom dabbing her eyes as a VW Beetle recedes from view is as outdated as the apron she is wearing. Parents are not only at the college, they are active members in their children's academic experiences. Faculty and administrators may cringe at the idea of having to deal with these "student representatives"; but face it, they are not going anywhere.

Helicopter parenting, a phrase coined a decade ago to explain the increased and sometimes extreme intervention of parents in their children's lives, is not a phenomenon exclusive to the United States; but for us, in this country, it may be rooted in our unique and tragic American experiences—the Columbine High School shooting, the September 11 terrorist attacks, and the 2007 Virginia Tech Massacre.

Today's technology can serve as a digital umbilical cord that enables parents to be aware of their children's whereabouts at all times. This redefines when and how often they communicate, pushing the boundaries of involvement between students and their parents. They want to be involved but possibly are still trying to figure out where the lines are and should be drawn.

Dr. Patricia Somers, Associate Professor of Higher Education, at The University of Texas at Austin, classifies helicopter parents into sub-groups. The "consumer advocate" will approach college with the goal of getting the best education for the least amount of money. The "only want what's best for my child" looks for the

top-shelf experience—best dorms, best professors, best internships, and so on. The "helopats" demand that their college student be treated to the same benefits as every other student. The "vicarious college student" missed out on his or her own college experience and returns through the child for a second go at it. "Blackhawks" will stop at nothing, including questionable practices, to guarantee their child's success.

Helicopter parents are not only an annoyance for college faculty and administrators, they present some liabilities—legal and developmental. A student's academic progress is confidential. The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) protects the privacy of student education records. Only a student has access to information about his grades, regardless of who pays the tuition.

One counselor at our college says that some parents get agitated when they come to a brick wall, erected by an institution complying with FERPA requirements. It is frustrating, but the law is the law. During a parents-only segment of freshmen orientation, she and other administrators advise parents to open the lines of communication about academic standing early so that when problems arise, students feel comfortable discussing them.

More importantly, she suggests that students take responsibility for their own academic careers and be encouraged to speak to their professors or work with tutors at the onset of a problem.

College students and their parents should be made aware of the differences between high school and college. Professors, who are assigned hundreds, sometimes thousands, of students per semester do not track individual student progress using the same methods used by high school teachers. Professors are available to students outside of the lecture hall and will work with those who are in need of assistance, but it is up to the student to make initial contact. And professors know better than to engage in a conversation with a parent unless the student is sitting in the same room and gives his consent.

Parents have been known to pressure institutions to massage the system to their child's benefit. And parents,



who serve as alumni, financial boosters, and advisory council members, can box university administrators into tight spaces. Parents who take on solving the tough situations hinder development of their child's self-confidence and resilience. The result is that the student may not be able to act responsibly later in life.

This swoop-and-rescue parenting style starts at birth and can continue through the child's life. We see this behavior on youth sports fields across the country. The downside to this behavior is twofold—students live with the constant pressure of over-achievement, and they are not prepared emotionally for inevitable failure. Over-achievement breeds enormous amounts of pressure, not only to perform at a high level, but to be perfect. When college students realize, for the first time, that they are not the best at everything, they can be devastated by the news. Failures, even small ones, prepare students to deal with bigger ones to come.

Students who look at failure as a learning opportunity or accept failure as a stepping stone to future success can function competently in college and later in life. Students who cannot take responsibility for their personal failures or are comforted by the knowledge that Mom or Dad will fix it are stunted.

Is there an upside to helicopter parenting? The College Board, a national not-for-profit membership association that administers the SAT and PSAT tests and Advanced Placement Programs, compiled research contrary to archetypes of parents who hover. The College Board devotes a page on its web site to "How Not to Be a Helicopter Parent." The article states that almost 30 percent of high school seniors want their parents to take a more active role in helping them decide on a college, in comparison to six percent of students who wished that their parents would dial back the enthusiasm a little. College Board officials say that only one percent of students report that their parents write their entrance exam essays for them.

In a case where a student has a history of struggling in school, an overly involved parent may be a necessity. Some students thrive in the care of a mentor or advocate, and parents frequently play those roles. Despite research that supports parental involvement, College Board officials advocate a period of stepping back that gives college students room to develop their own problem-solving skills.

College faculty and administrators can take a hard stance against parents and hide behind the FERPA wall, or they can encourage parents to take a less contributory position in their child's higher education. Panel discussions that give parents a forum to share general concerns with professors and administrators help put parents at ease. Events that bring parents to campus

in a neutral setting, such as a homecoming game, help them feel part of the team. A clear policy that is updated to meet today's threats to safety will help parents sleep better at night.

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