

# Causes and Implications of Parental Involvement in the Advising Process

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## Introduction

It is a well documented fact that parental involvement has increased on college campuses across the nation. This increase has been observed by many higher education professionals, such as: admissions officers, student services professionals, new student orientation staff, professors, residence life staff, and academic advisors. Many articles have appeared in newspapers across the country and in popular magazines describing the phenomena of over-involved parents who are often referred to as “Helicopter Parents”. This article will focus on some possible reasons for increased parental involvement and what types of involvement are taking place on campus as well as the problems over-involved parents may cause. Strategies to assist advisors in dealing with parents effectively will also be provided.

Not only is the frequency of parental contact increasing, but the reasons parents are getting involved are shifting. “The parents of today’s students interact with college staff and faculty much more frequently and for different reasons than previous generations” (Kepler et al., 2005). In the past, parents may have handled the financial aspects of college for their children, and little else. Today, parents are getting involved in every aspect of their children’s academic lives, from what classes they choose, to where they will live, to disputing the grades they received. Sharon Blansett, assistant director of housing at UF has noticed this trend. She said, “In the past, if a student had a roommate issue or other problem, we would see the student first, . . . and 9 times out of 10 it would be resolved with the student. Now we’re often seeing the initial call coming from the parents instead of the student” (Arndorfer, 2005). It is not unusual for parents to try to take care of routine transactions and problems that students encounter on a daily basis. Basically, parents are no longer getting involved in only the big issues, they are getting involved in every little detail or bump in the road their student experiences.

## Reasons For Increased Parental Involvement

Much has been written about the characteristics of today’s college students who are mostly categorized as the “Millennial Generation”. These students present unique challenges to higher education professionals, and one of these challenges is often their parents. The Baby Boomer parents who are now sending their children to college have many common characteristics including:

- They demand a large amount of involvement in their children’s lives.
- They have managed most aspects of their children’s lives since birth and have trouble letting go.
- They have “hovered” over their children and attempted to protect them from stressful experiences (which creates students who are vulnerable to anxiety and dependent on their parents).
- Many of today’s parents are having fewer children, waiting longer to have children, and are more affluent. This often allows for more time to be devoted to the children’s every whim.
- Parents often feel that their child is “too busy” to handle the bureaucracy of college so they must do it for them.
- Some parents believe their child is not capable of handling tough situations themselves and they require the assistance of an “adult”.
- They are intelligent and demanding. Today’s parents are college educated and savvy customers.

Realizing that parents have been involved in the education of their children since grade school, it isn’t surprising that their involvement continues into the college admission process. Often the involvement

does not stop there, it logically carries over into the college years. Below are some examples of parental involvement in the college admission process:

- Parents have been known to heavily edit or even fill out college admission applications and essays for their children.
- Parents (instead of the student applying) will often call admissions offices for the decision, or to appeal the decision if the student was denied.
- The increased competition for admission to colleges and universities has led parents to believe they must take a greater role in the process.
- Parents now have option of hiring “admissions consultants” to provide professional assistance in applying to colleges.

In addition to helping their children with the admission process, parents often get involved in other on campus activities. Parents have been known to:

- Attend orientation with their children
- Accompany student into advising session
- Make phone calls and appointments on campus for their child
- Make appointments for themselves to handle their child’s “problems”
- E-mail or call offices on campus pretending to be the child.

Other Reasons for Parental Involvement:

- Parents are paying high tuition so they feel like they have a right to know every detail about their children’s performance and academic record.
- Parents expect a certain level of service commensurate with the tuition they are paying.
- Realizing the desire of parents to be more involved in the education of their children, many colleges and universities are providing information and offering services specifically for parents. The availability of specialized parent services consequently encourages even more parents to get involved. Examples of specialized parent services include:

- Separate orientation sessions for parents
- Offices devoted to serving parent needs
- 1-800 numbers for parents
- Parental notification for violations of alcohol and substance abuse
- Fundraising targeted to parents
- Web sites directed to parent needs/questions
- Family weekends

Parental involvement is not necessarily unhealthy or unacceptable. There are many benefits in including parents and families in the college experience. Having parents feel like legitimate partners in their children’s education can be a great benefit to both the student and the institution. Training parents on acceptable and appropriate ways to be involved should be encouraged. In fact, years ago many higher education professionals were looking for ways to get more parents involved in the education of their children. But now, the pendulum has swung so far to the other direction that the over-involvement of some parents often interferes with the mission of many institutions of higher education.

Some problems identified by over-involvement of parents are:

- Less interaction with the student

- Every minute spent with a parent is taking away a minute you could be spending with the student.
- Ineffective use of advisor's time
  - Often times advisors must take time out of their busy day to explain things to a parent that have already been explained to the student. The parent should have talked to the student directly instead of having the advisor repeat the information to them.
- FERPA Concerns
  - Demanding parents often get frustrated with FERPA rules and may believe that the advisor is stonewalling them.
- Disconnect between student and parent
  - If the parent is seeking information from an advisor, it may indicate that communication problems exist between the student and parent.
- Teaches both student and parent that it is acceptable to have the parent take care of the student's problem(s)
  - If you allow a parent to get involved once, you have reinforced the exact behavior you may be trying to avoid. It will be even tougher to say "no" to the parent the next time and you have shown the student that they don't need to confront their own issues and problems.

### **Things to Consider When Talking to a Parent**

- Your office should have established guidelines about how to handle parents
  - Does your office have waivers for release of academic information? If so how do they work? How long are they valid for? Where are they kept? What is your policy for a parent who comes in with a copy of their tax forms listing the student as a dependant? Do you allow students to restrict directory information to third parties?
  - How does your office interpret FERPA and what information can you legally release? Has your office developed guidelines about how to verify the identity of people who call or e-mail your office? Do you have established guidelines for what type of information you can or can not release over the phone, through e-mail, or in person to third parties?
  - Does your office have any information readily available to give to parents? A handout explaining what services you can and can not provide to parents could be handed out by your front desk staff and posted to your web site.
- If you must talk to a parent, try to have the student there as well. If the parent is calling, ask to have the student get on the line or arrange a conference call including the student.
- Fight the urge to be either "too nice" or "too dismissive" with parents. Being "too nice" may invite further unnecessary interactions, and being "too dismissive" may give the impression that you do not care or even prompt a complaint to your supervisor.
- Use interaction as a "teaching moment". Encourage the parent to try to communicate directly with their child. If there is a problem that must be resolved, encourage the parent to have the child try to resolve the issue on his/her own.

Many advisors report that parents often show up with their student for an advising session. If you find yourself advising a student along with the parents, there are a few simple strategies to keep in mind:

- Ask the student at the beginning of the session if they mind having their parent(s) join them in the advising session. The student has a right to say "No".
- Consider the placement of the student and parent(s) in your office.
- Direct questions toward student and maintain eye contact with the student.
- If the parent(s) asks or answers a question, redirect the issue back to the student to get his/her input.

- Always let the student know that he/she can return to see you if they wish to continue the discussion one-on-one.

The role of advisor has changed over the years. We are sometimes forced to serve as family counselors and assist parents with their issues as well as advise students. Many advisors were not trained or prepared to handle such interactions. The best way to handle family advising sessions is often to teach the parent and student how to communicate and feel comfortable with their roles of parent, child (now an adult), and student. Some of the lessons we can try to teach parents include:

- How to let go. You won't be able to do this in 15 minutes, but try to have a list of resources available.
- Let the parent(s) know that the best way to obtain academic information about the student is by asking the student to provide such information.
- The importance of allowing the student the opportunity to take care of his/her own problems. Problem solving skills are a valuable part of the college experience. When a parent tries to "fix" their student's problems in college, they are cheating the student out of the chance to practice a valuable skill that they will need later in life.

Parental involvement has become a fact of life for almost every higher education professional. Academic Advisors, specifically, are having more contact with parents than ever before. Realizing the reasons for the increased parental contact and preparing for such interactions can help advisors effectively deal with this population. Understanding the mission of the institution and guidelines of the office in which one works will help dictate the direction and extent of parental contact. While providing additional programs and resources for parents may be a natural response to the demand, it is also an open invitation and may encourage even more parental involvement. If parents can be educated on what is healthy and appropriate involvement, students will benefit by being allowed to handle the day to day challenges they face on their own. After all, problem solving skills and conflict resolution are important lessons most institutions wish to impart to their students.

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