

“Helicopter Parents” and Other Factors Impacting the Development of College
Student Independence

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Abstract

Parents of college students who are attending college today are more involved in various aspects of their children's lives than ever before. Changes in the economy, the look of the average American family, and in technology have led to changes in parenting styles. New emphasis has been placed on being involved in the child's life, on keeping abreast of all that the child is involved in and helping with these activities (coaching, classroom parents, scout leaders, etc...), and on maintaining a close relationship with the child that has many more similarities to a friendship rather than what has traditionally been perceived as the parent to child relationship. These new parenting styles have led to a student in college who is less independent at the start of their college career, and who does not experience as much growth during college as students of previous years.

Studies on student independence and surveys of college student self-ranking of independence have been examined and compared to past data. Results of these studies show that there has been a definite shift to higher levels of narcissism and lower levels of independence as related to college students of the 1990's when compared to earlier decades. It is important to examine this research and determine what the course of action for college administrators should be, and how these trends will have an impact on the future of society.

Introduction

College students today depend on their parents for much more than college tuition. Students today have had parents who were much more involved in their heavily scheduled lives before college, and this connection to their parents is being carried into the residence halls and lecture rooms (Howe and Strauss, 2001). Cell phones and instant messaging capabilities are just two forms of current technology that are making it easier for students to be in constant contact with their parents. Parents are much more involved today in the everyday choices their student makes, from choosing the college that the child will attend to deciding on what option to have for lunch.

I believe that this dependence on parents is leading to a group of college students who have fewer skills that demonstrate independence than there have been in the past decades. Students are missing the opportunity to learn skills that they need to develop for life, such as how to instigate a good confrontation and how to have a constructive conversation with someone when you disagree on a topic. As a professional in the field of Student Affairs at two four-year colleges, I have experienced many instances where a parent will call me to inform me of an issue that their child is having, and yet the student in question has never once asked for help or spoken about this supposed issue to anyone outside of their parents. The parent then wants me or my staff to “fix” this problem, all without the student having to initiate the process. In my opinion this leads to a student who has not learned how to deal with situations in which the student is not getting the results

that they want, they depend on their parent to make everything go the way that the student wants.

Research on parent child relationships has shown that there has been a definite trend for a more involved relationship than ever before (Howe and Strauss, 2001). This involved relationship is leading parents to continue to hover over their children once they have reached the traditional age at which the child is considered to be an adult, eighteen and/or attending college. This means that the parent is also becoming more cognizant of what services a college is providing for their student; colleges are learning that they must learn to deal with this new incarnation of parent who wants to know a lot of information about not only the university, but also information pertaining to their student in particular that may be protected under FERPA laws. Activism on college campuses during the civil rights era led to the decline of the idea of *in loco parentis* (Gaston-Gayles et. al., 2005), but this new relationship between parents and students is reminiscent of that idea in that the parents expect the college to know what is happening with their student at all times, and be prepared to share that information with the parent.

Students seem to feel that it is normal for their parents to have a highly involved style of parenting, and that when the student is in college it is alright for the parent to continue to monitor what the student is doing, help the student to make decisions, and step in when the student has conflicts that are difficult to handle (e.g. roommates, grades, billing, etc...). "Legislative initiatives, public policy and educational invitation during the K-12 experience have shaped both a students' and parents expectations for oversight and involvement prior to college." (Petschauer

and Wallace, 2005, 180). This new style of parenting is less like the small dictatorships that were experienced by the Baby Boomers as they grew up, and more one in which parents “have become instead oppressors whose rules is based on the illusion that we and our children are peers... and the illusion is so strong, that our children are fooled into not claiming the birthright that we claimed at their age: personal autonomy” (Klosko, 2006, 1). I believe that this style of parenting and relationship between child and parent can have far reaching negative consequences upon the development of the individual as they move farther away from a dependent status into a self-sufficient adult in society.

Research Question

I hope to look at the available research and discern if there is a difference between the levels of independence attained by college students today versus that attained by college students in previous generations. Further, I would like to explore whether or not there are any factors that are contributing to this change that are readily observable within the available data. There is currently research being done that looks at the differences of several generations of college students in regards to many factors, as well as studies that look at the issue of success in college. I hope that by reviewing this and other information that is available, I will be able to find some indicators on factors that may be affecting the development of college students today, particularly in the area of independence.

I believe that I will find that student independence development during the college years is not developing as it has in the past. Some of the factors I believe I will find that are impacting this development will include family dynamics, societal norms, technology, and teaching practices. I believe that a large part of the development of independence is learning to be accountable for your own actions. This is an area that I believe will play a large role in any differences with regards to the levels of independence attained by college students.

To be able to look at the factor of independence of college students, there needs to be a set definition to work from. Independence is defined as “free from the influence, guidance, or control of others; self-reliant” by The American Heritage Dictionary (1992). This can be observed in college students in many ways, including their ability to do certain things such as make important decisions on their own with only minimal input by elders, to handle financial concerns in a responsible manner, admitting to and taking responsibility for their actions, and also simple daily life skills tasks such as laundry and shopping.

Literature Review and Analysis

In Loco Parentis

Translated the phrase *in loco parentis* means “in the place of a parent” (Black 1990). In 1913 the Kentucky Supreme Court gave the first verbalization of

in loco parentis within American higher education in the court case of Gott v. Berea College. The ruling stated:

College authorities stand in loco parentis concerning the physical and moral welfare and mental training of the pupils, and we are unable to see why, to that end, they may not make any rule or regulation for the betterment of their pupils that a parent could for the same purpose. Whether the rules or regulations are wise or their aims worthy is matter left solely to the discretion of the authorities or parents...and, in the exercise of that discretion, the courts are not disposed to interfere, unless the rules and aims are unlawful or against public policy (supra at p. 379).

This ruling set the stage for a good part of the early twentieth century, and how the relationship was to be defined between the college and its students (Edwards, 1994, 2-4). As long as the institution's decisions seemed to be of a reasonable nature, the courts would not interfere.

The original doctrine of "in loco parentis assumed a consensus of values. Little consensus exists in contemporary society, and as campuses make strides in multiculturalism and diversity, even less consensus is found in higher education" (Edwards, 1994, 13). The doctrine of *in loco parentis* was done away with during the civil rights era of the 1960's, with the focus of this change on the decision by the Fifth Circuit in the case of *Dixon v. Alabama State Board of Education*. This court decision stated that students were guaranteed constitutional rights, and that these rights are included when they were dealing with a university (Walton, 1992). The parents of today's college students were part of the Baby Boomer generation

and they led this fight for freedom and independence in all aspects of their lives. This change in students – their taking control and speaking up about what they would and would not do, and with what standards of treatment they would find acceptable – helped to also lead to a re-consideration of the concept of *in loco parentis*.

This same generation of Baby Boomers now seems to be asking for the system of higher education to reinstate this doctrine of *in loco parentis* (Klosko, 2006). One interesting quote that in a way sums up much of the discussion about this current generation’s style of over parenting is “For 25 years, we asked our teenagers to raise themselves, and they didn’t do a very good job of it. ...the adults are back” - Jack Levin (Howe and Strauss, 2000).

An example of how this principle may be reviving is shown in a case from 2002 in the United States District Court for the Western District of Virginia, Roanoke Division. In *Schieszler v. Ferrum College* a legal guardian sued the college because the student (Frentzel) committed suicide. The facts of this case stated that there were college authorities who were aware of the state of mind of the young man, and that they did nothing to protect him from harming himself. The court’s decision in this case was that there were grounds for a wrongful death case, as the court felt that the negligent breach of duty of the school was a proximate cause for Frentzel’s death. Here, as in decades past, the institution of higher education is being asked to safeguard the welfare of a student in a manner far beyond that of simply providing a basic education and allowing the student to make all of their own decisions.

Student Development and Theory

Chickering's theory of student development states that the most important developmental issue during the college years is the development of one's identity (Evans, 2003). An important piece to developing an individual identity is to assert and demonstrate independence from others, particularly those who were once responsible for the individual's wellbeing. This development that students experience fits nicely into Chickering and Reisser's vector of "moving through autonomy toward interdependence" where it states that to do so students must "develop increased emotional independence, self-direction, problem-solving ability..." (Evans, 2003, 181). I like a lot of what this theory has to offer, including the fact that the researchers believe that students can go back and re-examine issues and vectors, and that students can also experience growth in more than one vector at a time (Evans, 2003). This theory allows for students to have an ongoing and individual development throughout their years in college, and the theory also remarks on the importance of the influence of student affairs activities and programs within the student's development. Student's must learn to self-motivate and handle predicaments on their own, with minimal guidance from others. Yet, the students of college today have grown up in a world where their parents feel that they must monitor every aspect of their child's life.

Many parents believe that the only way to keep their child from becoming involved in illicit or dangerous activities is to regulate and monitor their child's choices, behavior, activities, and friends in a very dictatorial manner. This type of parenting demonstrates the belief that the parents and how they rear their children is

the causal factor in whether or not those children are productive citizens (Kerr & Stattin, 2003). It is important that parents have a good relationship with their children, but it is also just as important for parents to remember that some conflict in their relationships with their children can be a good thing. Conflict that involves good communication and that does not include alienation is healthy for young adults (Schwartz & Buboltz, 2004). It is imperative that children grow up and develop a sense of individuation that is separate from that of their family and parents, as this has a crucial impact on their health and functioning as an adult (Lawson & Brossart, 2004). Although children must learn to become individuals separate from their families, it is important to note that families still play a large role in this development. Research indicates that the development of an individual experiences much influence from the family they have interacted with and by how those family members interact with and relate to one another. It is important for families to be aware of this influence and for them to attempt to convey as positive a message as possible to their younger members (Necessary & Parish, 1996).

When considering the role of parent involvement, it is very interesting to that a 2001 study by Gonzalez, Greenwood, and Wenhsu on different types of parenting and how they affected student success found that the overall effect of parental involvement did not predict whether or not the child would be academically successful. This is in marked contrast to the general belief and previous research that indicates that the more parents are involved with their children's lives, the more successful that they will be. This study was on the different types of parenting styles (authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive), so it is possible that the type of

parenting style in general has more impact on the child's success than the factor of involvement alone. Now, consider this in relation to the study by Smith, English, and Vasek which stated that in parents of college freshmen 38% were continuing to help their student select academic courses, and 39% were participating in the choice of school activities (2002).

Technology

One factor that is affecting how students today interact with one another is the rapidly growing and changing field of technology. For today's college students, communication has been made into a mechanical function, less about the face to face interaction and more about instant communication over distances. This realm of telecommunication is evolving very rapidly, and seemingly every week there is a new version being published of instant messaging tools like AOL Instant Messenger (AIM) and Windows Messenger (Duderstadt & Womack, 2004).

Parents of today's youth are utilizing these forms of instant communication to stay in much closer contact with their children than ever before throughout the college years. My students often are on cell phones as they walk through the halls of their residence, chatting not just with their friends, but with their parents. Parents are learning to use AIM and other instant messaging tools to speak with their college age students on a daily basis. Cell phone companies market "family plans" that allow parents to send their child to college with a cell phone, with unlimited free minutes to speak to their parents with. This easily available and transportable

technology has made it easier for parents to stay involved in their college student's life; parents of past generations had to rely on land-line telephone calls, or even regular letters sent through the post office to stay in contact with their children.

I have had many experiences that involved college students and parents on cell phones. I spoke with one student for several minutes regarding a policy violation (more than one refrigerator in the room at a time). The student did not understand why she had to follow the policy this year, because she had been a resident of the building for several years, and had managed to get away with multiple refrigerators in the room under the previous director of the building. After a conversation spanning ten minutes, the resident took her cell phone out of her bag and proceeded to call her mother. She began to yell about the situation to her mother and ask her advice, all while standing in my office. I was then handed the cell phone by the student and asked to explain to her mother why I was singling this resident out to harass her about something that she felt was not a real issue. This is one of many examples that I can relate regarding the cell phone and other forms of communication students use to stay in constant contact with parents and others.

Societal Influences

The idea of self-esteem in children as a concept that must be promoted above all else has had a large impact on the development of many of these new parent/child relationships. Children today are taught from the cradle that they need to feel good about themselves, and that how *they* feel and what makes *them* happy is

the most important thing they can do. This focus on the individual is also affecting students' ability to relate and form relationships with their peers and others in the university setting. Rarely are children taught that they should consider the feelings of others, or that their actions affect others and must be tempered for this reason. Many students do not understand that they are not the only person that counts in the university setting, that there are hundreds or thousands of other individuals that must also be considered when it comes to universal decisions and policy making. Students must understand that by making an exception for one student, the university must consider if they then have to make this same exception for many other students. Everywhere from popular songs and movies to discussions in classrooms this idea that making yourself happy must come above and before everything else is being advocated.

This dogma of self-love before all else is having an extreme impact on today's youth. Dr. Jean Twenge has been evaluating data that looks at the levels of narcissism (defined as being very focused on the self and unable to relate to others feelings) in college students comparatively from the 1960's and the 1980's. She has found that there has been an increase of almost seven times the rate of students who answer that they are important over this twenty-year span (2006, 69). This extreme focus on the self is causing the youth of today to feel that they alone are important and that their wants or wishes need to come before any other person's. This belief in the self is also affecting the ambitions of students, as their belief in what they will be able to accomplish in life has also been 'upgraded'. In 1999 many teens in Twenge's studies predicted that they would be earning an average of around

\$75,000 a year at age thirty, when the actual national earning average is only \$27,000 for this age bracket (2006, 79).

This over optimistic view of their future is bringing many young adults a lot of disappointment and often bringing them into a level of depression as they hit a wall of realism once they have entered the working world. They find that there are so many other people with the same great expectations as they have and that they are competing with. From 1987 to 1997 the cases of depression being treated has more than tripled, going from 1.8 to 6.3 million (Twenge, 200, 106). There are even books being written about this phenomenon of young adults in their twenties facing depression and life challenges, including the book “Quarterlife Crisis” and the sequel “Conquering Your Quarterlife Crisis”. After years of indoctrination into believing you can do anything if you only try hard enough, these young adults must learn to cope with the reality that some things are just not going to happen no matter how hard you try. One of the chapters in the book “Conquering Your Quarterlife Crisis” is titled *How to Find Your Passion* (Robbins, 2004), again essentially telling young people that you must be passionate about what you do, not just work at a job to make ends meet, but to actually love what you are doing for its sake alone. In generations past many adults would work at jobs that they may not have felt any passion for, but that would provide for their families. These adults would then indulge in their passions as hobbies and escapes from everyday life.

It would be very interesting to continue to study the variations in generations in the next several decades, and see if these rises in percentages continue to increase, or if there is a reversal. Every generation takes with it something from the

previous generations, and then builds its own culture as well. It may not be a change in values as much as a change in societal norms which is bringing about such marked differences in this new generation of students (Martin et al, 2004).

Case Study

As a Student Affairs professional for the last five years working in residence halls at two different campuses I have seen a marked increase in the number of phone calls and in the types of requests of parents for myself and my staff. Many parents want me to remain in daily close contact, and in many ways set limits and rules for their children as they themselves might have done if the child were still living at home. It has been hard at times to explain to parents that their child is now an adult, and as such must learn to set boundaries and limits for him/herself. I have had to explain to parents that although they may be paying a large amount towards the student's bills, this does not automatically entitle them to access to information on areas such as the student's discipline history or billing. The student must choose to share this information, or give a signed consent form for me to share it on their behalf. Parents are very much used to the K-12 school system practice of sharing all information with the parents in order to help the student in every way. Parents at times seem quite surprised that at age eighteen I (and the university) expect the student to be able to make decisions for themselves, such as choosing their own classes or where to room for the next semester.

One student that I worked with had a very hard time understanding that her own actions and behaviors would have consequences. This student would cause disturbances at late hours on residence hall floors, leading other students on the floor to call an RA to come in and deal with the situation. Once the RA arrived and handled the disturbance (generally shooing this young woman back to her own room with the admonishment that she was violating University quiet hours, and that she needed to monitor herself), I would receive a report on my desk. As I would have conversations with this student, I would attempt to address the issues of her behavior and the consequences for her choice to act in this manner. The student would spend much of the meeting asking to confront whoever had called the RA, because the issue was obviously theirs, completely missing the point that although she would admit to being loud and disorderly, it was her behavior that violated the policy. This student continued to focus on the fact that it was another student who alerted building staff to her behavior, and so obviously it was that student's issue and problem, that her own actions did not matter because we would not necessarily have known of the policy violation if someone else had not alerted the staff. This attitude of self-righteousness is very difficult to deal with in the University residence halls. This student and I had several conversations throughout the course of the year on how her actions affected the greater community in which she lived, and that she needed to be responsible for her own behavior at all times.

It is very hard in this type of situation to help students understand that their actions have consequences, and that society (not just University residence halls) has rules of conduct that all members must follow. If you break one of these rules, you

must then accept the penalty, not accept that you broke the rules and then expect to place the blame on that to someone else. My belief is that many of the students who exhibit this type of thinking and relating to others have had parents who would forgive an action with no consequences as long as the child admitted to the action. This is an unrealistic expectation of how society works, and is doing the child a disservice in the long run when it comes to relating and living on their own.

Between the years of 1960 and 2002, there was a clear change in how college students view their control on the world. Eighty percent of college students in 2002 believed that they had little control over events in their lives, believing that their lives were more influenced by outside forces than by their own energies. This is a stunning change from the 1960's, where only around 30% of college students felt this way (Twenge, 2006). This illustrates my point that young people today do not recognize the power that they have in their own lives, nor do they take responsibility for the results of their actions.

Conclusions and Recommendations

I believe that college officials need to be aware of the trends within current student populations, and actively seek to understand the reasons for them and how to best work with these populations while they are attending the college. Universities need to understand that parents and students have been conditioned to a more involved relationship, and that this is not necessarily a bad thing. There are

many universities and colleges that are implementing parent orientation for their student's parents, and also setting up websites and booklets that are specifically geared toward this population. Appalachian State University has constructed a Parent's Orientation, which occurs concurrently with their Phase I Orientation for incoming freshmen (Petschauer & Wallace, 2005). It is a comprehensive look at the college, and explains what the student will be going through. This orientation also explains that a large part of the college experience involves parents letting go of their child and letting the child begin to handle some of their experiences on their own.

Helping parents to understand the experiences that their child will have at college, while also encouraging parents to let go and let their child become independent is of great importance. If parents believe that their child is someplace where they will have plenty of support and guidance if they need it, and the parents know and trust this, then the parent may be more likely to step back from the child's life in many ways. This would then lead to the student having the ability to become more independent.

It is also important to consider the consequences if the issue of parental over-involvement is not addressed. A recent article in the Wall Street Journal (3/16/06, p. D1) spoke about the new trend of parents interfering in their child's career. Parents have been calling potential employers to endorse their child and speak about how they would be perfect for a specific position. Other parents are calling and attempting to negotiate salaries, raises, and time off on behalf of their children (Pavella, 2006). Parents and young adults need to learn that there is a line, and that

every individual who is mentally capable must, at some point, take responsibility for their own life. Pavella makes a very profound statement by saying “Whatever the motivation, the end result is the same: young adults are kept in an artificial state of immaturity and dependency” (2006, 2).

There are many areas of research that I feel need to be continued that will lead to a greater understanding of the issue of college student independence. Researchers need to look into the areas of family dynamics and relationships in the current culture. Having a better understanding of the make-up and functioning of today’s family systems will help researchers (and thus those that read the research results) develop better programs in response. It is imperative that the administrators and other college officials begin to look into this area. Colleges cannot continue to treat students and parents like they have done since the revolutions of the 1960’s; this is a new generation and culture.

Researchers should also continue to compare data from college students currently attending school to that of students of decades this past. This comparison can show the trends of each generation of students in greater detail, as it highlights where differences have grown or shrunk in specific areas. Narcissism in particular is an area to monitor, as this factor of an individual’s personality can have a large impact on their ability to function successfully in society as they age.

Another area that I believe should be researched more fully is the great belief society currently holds in building high self-esteem in today’s youth. As Twenge noted, there has been a marked increase in narcissism along with this increase in teaching and building high self-esteem. Universities and colleges that educate the

teachers should be especially concerned with this area. Teachers need to have a good understanding of the research that either supports or discredits the theories that they are teaching to children. Teaching colleges should look at what skills they consider the most important to teach youth, and should focus on these.

As for the concept of *in loco parentis*, perhaps we at the University level need to re-evaluate what the true meaning of this phrase is; does it apply only to student discipline, or can we use it to help guide our practices when it comes to student life and their wellbeing? Students today are used to having an elder who participates in/or makes most of the decisions in their life. If we are asking our student's parents to step back, who can they turn to? This is a role that may traditionally fit best upon the practitioners in the student affairs departments – the Residence Hall Directors and Resident Assistants who live and work with our students on a daily basis. However, this role may also be filled by college faculty, who have such a large role in guiding and shaping the future of our students as they plan for their careers. Obviously, this is a topic that could be more fully researched and evaluated.

As I have looked at studies and reports in the writing of this paper, I believe that my original conclusions are correct. There is a marked decrease in the levels of independence being obtained or developed by students today than in decades past. This decrease can be attributed to many factors, including parenting styles, concepts taught throughout the K-12 education, and also in how society views children generally today (a choice, not a duty). There is the possibility that there are many other factors that can contribute to this decline that have not been investigated as of

yet. This issue is of importance, as the students who are in college today will be our society's leaders in a few short years, and the more understanding we have of the issues they are facing, the better we will be able to prepare them to become more successful in life later on.

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