

Parents as Partners: Engaging Parents to Support Student Success

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“Coming together is a beginning. Keeping together is progress. Working together is success.”- Henry Ford

Introduction

Exploratory studies, is the advising program located in the Department of Academic Enrichment and Learning at a regionally accredited, comprehensive and state owned university in (the university). This advising program has often been asked to develop and deliver special programs to students and their families. In 2016, there was a discussion of how to use FERPA to the university’s advantage, due to the adversarial position parents were taking with university personnel. These parents were termed “helicopter parents.”

A “helicopter parent” is a parent who takes an “overprotective or excessive interest in the life of their child or children (Swalboski, 2018). In higher education, university personnel perceive helicopter parents as academically intrusive. “Helicopter parents pay extremely close attention to a child’s or children’s experiences and problems, particularly at educational institutions; like helicopters,

they "hover overhead", overseeing every aspect of their child's life constantly (Auerbach, 2019). Helicopter parents attempt to "ensure their children are on a path to success by paving it for them" (Westfall, 2020). The rise of helicopter parenting coincided with two social shifts. The first was the comparatively booming economy of the 1990s, with low unemployment and higher disposable income. The second was the public perception of increased child endangerment, a perception which free-range parenting advocate Lenore Skenazy described as "rooted in paranoia" (Skenazy 2014, as cited in Kendzior, 2016). "It is about too much presence, but it's also about the wrong kind of presence. In fact, it can be reasonably read by children as absence, as not caring about what is really going on with them ... it is the confusion of over involvement with stability (Skenazy, 2009)." Similarly, helicopter parenting is not the product of "bad or pathetic people with deranged values ... It is not necessarily a sign of parents who are ridiculous or unhappy or nastily controlling. It can be a product of good intentions gone awry, the play of culture on natural parental fears (Rolphie, 2012)." The inherent problem with the proverbial parent/child attachment is that college students are not ready to make tough decisions (Kennedy, 2020). Colleges and universities fatigued by intrusive parental meddling as well as the university's need to produce independent career-ready students and operate efficiently seek resolution.

Given the reported influx of demanding parents/guardians seeking information about students, in 2016 the division of enrollment management at the University, began planning strategies to limit parent/guardian inquiry of student records through clever interpretation of The Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). According to the FERPA act, schools must have written permission from the parent or eligible student in order to release any information from a student's education record. Therefore, the goal of enrollment services was to limit conversations with parents as much as possible.

Coincidentally, at the same university a department that houses academic success services for students noted that the support parents offer may complement university retention efforts if channeled appropriately. The department rallied against the planning strategies of enrollment management and worked collaboratively with Student Orientation to develop a “Parents as Partners” orientation program presented to parents at summer orientation. The presentation familiarized parents with campus support systems and encouraged an alliance between the service providers on campus and parents in support of student success.

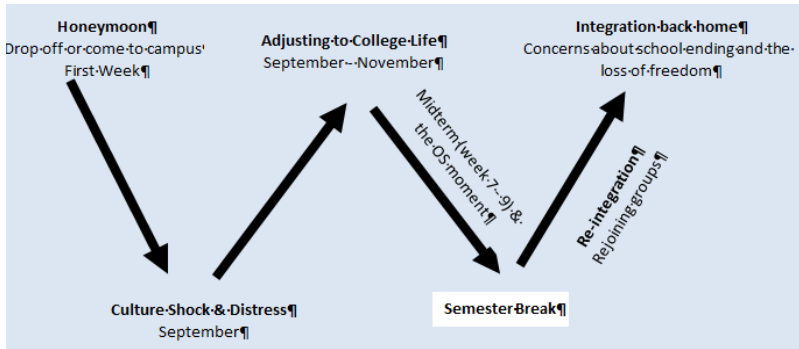
Methods

A proposal was presented to the vice president for enrollment management as well as the director of orientation. The proposal included a designated timeslot for parents to attend the proposed presentation during summer orientation. The presentation was aimed at leveraging parents/guardians to advocate campus student success services to their student. During the presentation parents were provided an understanding of their role as advocates to student academic success. Additionally, all campus constituents agreed to deliver the “parents as partners” message throughout orientation to both students and parents/guardians.

A second objective of the presentation included familiarizing parents with the college student first year experience. The university recognized that parents do not understand the first-year adjustment and growth concerned when their student faces typical first year hindrances. The university began to realize that the more awareness shared on the first year adjustment and the more parents/guardians addressed their concerns on the front end the more supported they would feel by the university, therefore reducing intrusive behavior.

To effectively communicate to parents/guardians the first-year adjustment, a modified version of the “W-curve” was used as a support model Zeller and Mosier (1993).

Figure 1.



According to Zeller and Mosier (1993), the “W curve” is a predictable lifestyle adjustment pattern that occurs when a person experiences culture shock. Typically, culture shock is attributed to individuals visiting other countries and experiencing new cultures. However, culture shock also applies to the new academic community/culture experienced by first-year college students. For purposes of our “parents as partners” objective, the original model from Zeller and Mosier (1993), was modified relevant to the first-year college experience. Jennifer Wickham, licensed professional counselor at the Mayo Clinic Health System in Eau Claire, says, “The W-Curve is something that a lot of students and parents aren’t aware of when it comes to leaving for college. Accordingly, change is difficult and is especially so for young adults who are leaving home for the first time to attend college.

The first phase in the “W curve” is called the “honeymoon” phase. The honeymoon phase begins before school even begins when students beam with anticipation and excitement for the

freedom and opportunity of college life. Students arrive on campus eager to meet new friends and live new experiences. Accompanying the excitement is also a feeling of anticipatory anxiety, the two feelings combine creating an overwhelming rush of emotion.

According to Zeller and Mosier, 1993 (19-23), "... as students arrive on campus there generally is a strong sense of welcoming from the campus community. Other students become friends, returning students become mentors, and staff / faculty can assist them move in and work through a variety of first week transitions."

As the semester settles and the permanence of the college lifestyle phases in, the honeymoon transitions into the distress that defines college culture shock. Tasks that are routine in nature become an issues. Some routine tasks, which can create feelings of frustration can include activities of daily life, such as going shopping or getting a haircut (Zeller and Mosier). During this phase, homesickness may increase, and some students go home on weekends and reestablishing relationships (Zeller and Mosier). Developmental life cycle tasks are also continuing such as becoming self-sufficient, establishing identity, and accepting responsibility for their actions. In summary, the college freshman has many personal issues to deal with in addition to focusing on the critical issue of academics: reworking relationships with parents, establishing interdependence with peers, dealing with separation and its resultant anxiety and dealing with conflicting values. Attempting

to synthesize these personal challenges into some formal structure requires a great investment of energy. It is important to understand that this is a period of great potentially positive change, but it is also a period of more intense personal conflict and anxiety" (Zeller and Mosier). Fortunately, once students emerge from the "culture shock" phase of the "w-curve" they typically transition into a more positive college experience (Zeller and Mosier).

At this point of the "parents with partners" orientation presentation, the presentation focuses on how the campus assists students through culture shock and guides parents on how they can best assist their student. Ultimately, "the best way out is through". Reduced visits to home will invite more campus engagement, fostering transition to the "Adjustment" phase of the first-year W-curve.

Adjustment happens during the first half of the first semester. During the adjustment phase, students understand accountability for decisions and make a stronger commitment to academic obligations. As a result, students find a method of routine and adjust into campus life and learn to be college students.

With adjustment comes realization. Realization is the opposite of denial. At mid-semester students experience the second downward slope of the W-curve as midterm examination stress triggers what is coined as the "Oh-Sh" moment. The "Oh-Sh" moment is the

recognition that bad habits and decisions from the beginning of the semester result in less than stellar mid-term grades.

The upside of the “Oh-Sh” moment is the formation or reinforcement of new study habits, and a dedication to understanding better ways to learn through the help of academic support services. Students seek out their professors gaining better understanding of content and inquire about how to succeed in their classroom. They set aside study time and seek academic coaching and tutoring as needed. At the bottom of this downward slope, studies regain footing and enter the second half of their freshman year more prepared.

As the semester winds down, students leave campus for winter break. Students, in need of a respite from new college rigors, look forward to reconnection with family and friends in their former environment. In many cases, students embrace the familiarity that these connections bring and may feel apprehensive returning to campus for the second semester. At this time, they may begin to entertain thoughts of transferring either to be closer to home or to a college their friends may attend. “Strong feelings of homesickness begin to arise or re-arise for students and they often feel as though they are caught between two worlds. College life is still not as comfortable as home and home is now not as familiar as it once was (Univeristy of Wisconsin-Superior Parent and Family Program,

2020).” Emotions and experiences during this stage may include (2020):

- Shock over changes that happened at home in their absence
- Feeling of homesickness for a home environment that may feel different
- Doubts regarding choice in college, major, career and other decisions begin to surface
- Begin to challenge belief and value systems and they may be inconsistent with values of the university culture
- Larger roommate issues surface and students tend to sit alone in their room or find outlets to escape their housing situation
- Cliques may form and students may feel that getting to know others is harder than before

According to Mayo Health Clinic, there is a developmental aspect to this stage where students may not have been taught skills necessary to be successful. Wickham says, “Parents may have selected or directed areas of study for their child, which results in students not knowing themselves or having a lack of confidence. Parents also may feel uncomfortable and not let go, which may interfere with students looking to be more independent (2017).”

During this point in the “parents with partners” orientation presentation, it is suggested parents practice autonomy supportive behavior with their college freshman; listen to their student’s concerns while allowing them to consider and voice their own

solutions. Encouraging their student to consider alternatives while delaying decision making until their freshman year commences will provide the student a sense of control and independence.

According to the W-curve theory, students enter the second semester of their freshmen year well ahead of their Fall semester integration. In most cases, students quickly re-integrate to campus life and re-establish academic habits while continuing to foster relationships. Students develop a more balanced view of the university, their academic pursuits, and their future. A true feeling of acceptance, integration and connectedness occurs when a student has successfully adapted to their new academic world (University of Wisconsin-Superior Parent and Family Program, 2020).

At the final meeting of the day, students and parents met in the auditorium and were asked to complete the evaluation form. The evaluations consisted of 10 questions allowing the attendees to respond in a Likert format, ranging their experience from Excellent (3 points) to Poor (0 points). Evaluations included the following questions: The objectives were clearly defined; The materials were organized and useful.; The topics covered were relevant to me and my student, The time allotted for the presentation was sufficient, The speakers were knowledgeable about the topic; The speakers solicited audience interaction, The speakers responded effectively to participant questions., The information provided help in me making a decision about my student attending ESU; The meeting room was

adequate and comfortable and Overall, I would rate this presentation as. There were about 452 evaluations received upon people leaving the auditorium.

The Results

There were a total of 452 evaluations forms received from parents in 2016. The form's highest score is a 3 and the lowest is a 0. Under the comments section, the parents reported that they were impressed by the level of information provided to them and asked that the same information be provided to their children. Overall the mean for the questions are as follows:

Figure 2.

Measure	Mean
The objective were clearly defined.	2.9
The materials were organized and useful.	2.85
The topics covered were relevant to me and my student.	3.0
The time allotted for the presentation was sufficient.	2.9
The speakers were knowledgeable about the topic.	3.0
The speakers solicited audience interaction.	2.8
The speakers responded effectively to participant questions.	2.95
The information provided help in me making a decision about my student attending ESU.	2.9
The meeting room was adequate and comfortable.	2.7
Overall, I would rate this presentation as	2.95

Comments were limited and included questions related to FERPA and how students were required to approve their parent.

Next Steps

Since 2016, we have presented to parents in 2017 – 2019. All results are similar and responses from parents are also similar. There have been a few outlier comments and questions from parents about housing concerns, billing and meal plans, of which all were sent to the appropriate parties on campus to follow up on.

It is planned that we will continue to provide this information to parents. The university administration has supported this approach and have encouraged the continuation of this positive interactions with students and their parents.

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