



# Partnering *with the* Parents *of* Today's College Students

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# Chapter 3

## Understanding the New Relationship

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Entering the collegiate experience is an exciting and challenging milestone for students and parents alike. This passage from postadolescence to preadulthood is rich with opportunities for deepening the parent-child relationship and solidifying the foundation for managing future life events in the family. Beginning with the student, who is consumed with the developmental changes associated with moving to adulthood, and continuing with established mental models and evolving expectations on the part of students and parents, this transition to the collegiate experience can have significant impacts on the family relationship. Student affairs staff has an important role in working as a partner with students and parents to provide opportunities for ensuring student success and, at the same time, supporting a healthy and supportive family network that can help students prevail even in the toughest of times.

### Developmental Tasks of PAPAs (Postadolescent Preadults)

Student Affairs professionals use a variety of models and theory-bases to explain and account for developmental issues faced by postadolescent preadults. Specifically, Arthur Chickering's and Linda Reisser's work (1993) on developmental tasks, or vectors, has been widely used and applied in a variety of contexts. Their theory proposes that college students move within these various vectors at different rates and levels of interaction among the other vectors (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Although there has been some revision to Chickering's and Reisser's (1993) model over the years as well as increased efforts to test the model's salience to underrepresented populations, the basic foundations of the model remain intact to produce the seven vectors as follows:

1. Developing competence: The ability to cope effectively with and skill attainment to meet intellectual and personal challenges.
2. Moving through autonomy toward independence: The capacity to carry on life activities and solve problems without constant reassurance, assistance, and external approval.
3. Managing emotions: Awareness of and appropriate control of diverse emotional responses.
4. Establishing identity: Realizing an accurate understanding of self as well as a positive, stable self-image.
5. Developing mature interpersonal relationships: The ability to develop safe, healthy, and long-lasting relationships.
6. Developing Purpose: Clarifying and developing plans to reach educational, career, and life goals.
7. Developing integrity: Articulating personal values and creating a consistent belief system.

It should be recognized that students are entering college with different levels of competence in addressing the tasks associated with these vectors. In addition to one's competency level, the priorities attached to these tasks by students and their parents may be influenced by the immediacy of challenges and opportunities presented to the student as well as the interests of the student. Finally, it is important to recognize that students may be simultaneously expending energy on a variety of vectors but at different levels of intensity (Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

Additionally, recent research on the brain development of adolescents indicates that the physiological changes associated with brain growth may account for adolescent behaviors including emotional outbursts, reckless risk-taking, and a paucity of cognitive controls needed for mature behavior and decision making (Wallis, 2004). These findings contribute to the complexity of the developmental progression of students during the important transition to college life.

## Mental Models and Expectations of the Collegiate Experience

Peter Senge refers to "Mental Models" as those embedded assumptions and generalizations that influence how we make meaning of the world around us from which we base our actions and responses (Senge, 1990, p. 8). These mental models are almost unconscious but drive our expectations of certain situations and contexts (Senge, 1990). Students and parents alike develop expectations of the college experience as well as expectations about how their relationship will change. These expectations are based on paradigms or mental models of how college should be or will be. The accumulation of impressions and information gathered over time that shape these mental models vary from person to person.

College-bound student impressions of college can be influenced by friends who are attending college, high school peers who plan to attend college, older siblings who are college students, and high school teachers and guidance counselors with whom they interact. Parents of college-bound students have a head start on constructing their mental models of college life based on their life experiences. For those parents who have attended or graduated from college, the memories of 30 years ago may still remain strong. The expectations of parents who did not attend college are formed to a large extent by impressions gathered from sources independent from personal experience. Similar to college-bound students, parents continue to construct their own mental models based on their own current experience, conversations with other parents and high school resource personnel, as well as experiences with having older children attend college.

A significant trend observed by student affairs professionals reflects a pervasive mental model demonstrated by parents of current college-aged youth. Modern parents are far more involved in their students' lives than in earlier generations. In the article, entitled "The Organization Kid" (Brooks, 2001), the author points out a clear trend on the part of parents to program their students' lives from an early age where nearly all activities are now planned and supervised by adults, as opposed to informal, self-organizing play

which typified youth activities of earlier generations. Such a trend naturally continues into adolescence. Parents are also dealing with the mental models of Columbine and high-profile incidents at various colleges and universities, and therefore have greater expectations of the college to protect the health and well-being of their student. Also, recent research on the emerging college-age populations, sometimes referred to as millennials, points out that this generation of students demonstrates greater loyalty to their families and are not anxious to separate from their parents (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Please refer to chapter two for a more detailed description of this particular cohort research.

All of this equates to parents playing a greater role with their students in decisions of where to attend college and whether to remain. These decisions are influenced by access to information and media impressions that provide parents and their students with plentiful opportunities to fuel expectations about college. There are numerous college rating publications and trade books that directly target college-bound families. Some of the most commonly used include the Princeton Review, *U.S. News and World Report*, and *Peterson's Guide*. Films and television programs can also form powerful images that can influence one's perception of the collegiate experience.

With increasing marketing sophistication, colleges are providing information to college-bound families that contribute greatly to forming impressions and expectations. The process of reviewing literature, surfing websites, visiting college campuses, talking with college admissions officers, going to open houses, and completing applications provides families with considerable information to consider in making a college choice. The mix of anecdotal and personal experiences, media messages, and unprecedented access to information about colleges contributes to building mental models that are the foundation of expectations for the collegiate experience.

Being cognizant of the impact of these mental models is critical in understanding the relationship triad of the student, parents, and the college. An important role we have as student affairs professionals is to help parents

and their students understand and make meaning of their mental models to ensure that there is mutual clarity and, ideally, an alignment of expectations that will support the transition to college life.

Parents need to understand how their behavior and attitudes are influenced by their mental models of college. Many times parents express perspectives on choices their student is considering based on their experiences as a college student in the '70s or early '80s. From time to time parents will be in conflict with one another based on differing expectations of what their student should or should not do in college. If this is frustrating for the parents, consider the level of frustration and confusion this causes the student.

Students are naturally forming their own expectations of the college experience and in some cases there is not consistency between their expectations and those of their parents. Perhaps the student places a lower value on the parent's perspective as compared to his or her peers or other significant adult influences that can result in discounting an important resource in the process of transitioning to college. Conversely, a student may place too high a value on parental expectations and by subjugating their personal views, can defer the developmental learning that occurs early in the college transition.

Both parents and students have multiple expectations of their college of choice. It is incumbent on the college to provide accurate and complete information to new-student families that is consistent with the reality of college life. Such transparency can facilitate the alignment of student and parent expectations with services and programs that are provided by the college.

Student affairs professionals can facilitate experiences that offer opportunities for mutual exploration and discussion of mental models and expectations early in the college transition process. By helping parents, students, and the college seek common ground, there can be a more complete and realistic understanding of the challenges and opportunities inherent in the college experience. Expectations can be clarified, questions can be addressed, fears can be managed, and relationships can be strengthened by providing opportunities for all partners to fully explore the collegiate transition. For

instance, student affairs professionals can assist parents through helpful publications and communications to understand their student's expectations for increased independence when they return home for holiday and semester breaks.

### Potential Impact on the Family Relationship

The combination of a student's attainment of developmental competencies and the mental models and expectations of students and parents alike can impact the nature of relationships in the family as they collectively approach the transition to college life. The relationship between parents and between parents and the student (as well as other members of the family) can be strained as information is collected and analyzed, alternatives are considered, and decisions are made.

William Bridges suggests that the process of transition begins with an ending (Bridges, 2003). Something stops or something new begins. For a student, high school stops and the experience of college begins. It is important for students to understand that, regardless of prior success or status, they are now on a more level playing field with equally talented peers and have opportunities to launch a new identity in the context of a new community. For parents, day-to-day involvement with and perceived control over their child ends and a new phase of their lives as parents and partners begins.

Bridges (2003) goes on to say that the transition associated with change is the gradual, psychological reorientation process that happens inside of us as we adapt to the external change. Transition often results from a change but may also begin before the change actually takes place. Nancy Schlossberg refers to such transitions as "anticipatory" in which the event, such as beginning college, is predicted or at least foreseen (Schlossberg, 1995, cited in Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). Schlossberg and her associates further reveal that transitions encompass three distinct phases, namely, "moving in, moving through, and moving out" (p. 112).

Successful progression through these three phases depends on four primary factors: situational, self,

support, and strategies. The situational factor involves the timing, ability to control, duration, and previous experience associated with the transition. Obviously, the more influence and/or familiarity one has with an impending transition, the more successful s/he will be in dealing with its requirements. Self as a factor refers to the psychological resources and personal characteristics that one brings to the transition. The support factor refers to the presence or absence of social support systems available to assist both students and parents through the transition. Finally, strategies refers to the abilities to cope with transitions. (Schlossberg et al., 1995, as cited in Evans et al., 1998).

It is this concept of transition that is important for parents, students, and the college to address especially in terms of its impact on our collective relationships. Applying Schlossberg's work, there are several factors specific to the evolving parent/student relationship that can affect transitions families may need to make as a student goes to college. The impact of these factors can be mitigated by appropriate and timely interventions by student affairs staff that can be of great assistance in helping students and their parents proceed through this period transition. These factors include:

1. Knowledge of the college culture (i.e., situation)

Chaskes (1996) describes the acclimation to college life through an analogy of the student as an immigrant to a new country. The culture of college is quite different from high school and has changed considerably since mom and dad were students. For those parents who have not attended college, this new culture can be very daunting and confusing. It is important for students and parents to accelerate their learning curve to become conversant about the collegiate experience and culture in order to more completely understand what is happening and how to access resources in the process of transition to this new and complex environment.

2. What parents and students bring to the partnership (i.e., self)

Knowing and understanding one's mental models, expectations, and competencies are important steps in accomplishing successful transitions. By openly and honestly sharing these insights with one another, family members can develop a more complete awareness of each others' potential contribution to the partnership required for effectively navigating the collegiate experience.

3. Proximity to the student (i.e., support)

Sometimes the distance between the parent's home and the student's college inhibits frequent visits and face-to-face interaction. Having a student move to an unfamiliar community can foster a level of concern, especially for the parents who are several hours away. When a student is living at home and involved in a variety of activities close to home, there is a great sense of awareness by parents of what is happening with their son or daughter. This changes when a student moves away to college, makes his/her own "home", and enjoys considerable autonomy from the watchful eyes of concerned parents.

For some families, distance is viewed positively as it creates opportunities for building independence and autonomy. However, for other families the separation of long distances can contribute to anxieties about college life during the transition process.

4. How families stay connected (i.e., strategies)

Some families are closer than others and the nature of this family connection can impact the transition to college life. Technology has helped many families maintain and enhance their connectivity. The use of cell phones, instant messaging, and e-mail make it very easy for students to be in virtually constant and immediate communication with parents. More personal strategies involve mutually agreed upon and preplanned visits to campus. Many institutions offer family weekends and sporting events that would facilitate such contacts. Family vacations can also be scheduled

with the academic year in mind to ensure parents and students get reconnected. Finally, the time-honored "care package" that include notes, pictures, and audio/video recordings of missed family events can be a nice addition to the cookies and other goodies.

5. Advocacy, intervention, and control

For years, responsible parents have exercised control over the life of their son or daughter. When not directly controlling aspects of their child's life, they have grown accustomed to intervening on behalf of their child taking actions that will protect and support opportunities for growth and development. Advocating a position to school officials and teachers that creates optimal conditions for their student is a common occurrence in our precollege educational system. Typically, parents, students, and college officials alike are challenged by the transitions associated with less parental control and fewer opportunities for intervention and advocacy.

As student affairs professionals, it is important to create opportunities for parents and students alike to address the transition issues associated with the changes in the family relationship, as well as the instrumental changes that they face in making preparation to attend college. Another variable to consider is the change caused by the introduction of a new partner in the life of a student: personnel from the college. This should be actively promoted as a positive development in that student affairs professionals can now provide another layer of support in times of crises, such as divorce, a death in the family, or a difficult financial situation. Such a change becomes the catalyst for modifying current roles of parenting and broadening the scope of resources, advocates, and partners that are provided by the college.

### Common Issues and Questions Faced by the Parents of College-Bound Students

Developmental issues, mental models, changing family relationships, and transitions create a myriad

of issues and questions that parents and students are eager to address. Helping parents and students identify and prioritize these issues and questions can provide a framework for conversation and exploration of strategies to effectively negotiate the changes and transitions to college life. Each family is different, having different experiences and expectations; therefore, it is important for a family to coconstruct a dialogue that can facilitate information exchange, promote understanding, and align expectations to minimize the adverse effects of transition.

### Issues and Questions to Consider in College Selection

- (a) Program: Does the college have what the student/parent wants as a program of study? What is the overall quality of educational and cocurricular experience?
- (b) Price: Is the college affordable? Is aid sufficient to cover needs? What are the expected out of pocket expenses?
- (c) Performance: Can the student perform to a level of satisfaction? How involved and connected can the student be at this college?
- (d) Lifestyle: what are the options regarding such things as housing, dining, transportation, employment, personal finances, and insurance?
- (e) Safety: Is the college environment safe? What can be done regarding crime prevention, personal safety, and property protection?
- (f) Health and wellness: Is this a healthy campus? What services are provided to address physical and mental health? What is the extent of alcohol and other drug use?
- (g) Value and prestige: Is the cost of college worth the quality of the experience and the achievement of outcomes by the student?
- (h) Location: Is the campus urban or rural, in or out of state?

### Implications for Our Work in Student Affairs

To be most effective in leveraging the relationship among parents, students, and the college, we must adopt a collaborative approach that defines the way in which we interact with one another. The notion of *in statu colleagarum*—or partners as a way of being (Ullom, 1997)—is a viable alternative to the age old *in loco parentis* philosophy that replaces the parent with the college rather than including parents as viable partners with college officials in the process of facilitating student success in college. It also speaks to the need for a potentially less contentious relationship based solely on contractual or legal parameters that has seemed to permeate American society. Adopting *in statu colleagarum* requires all partners to adjust their relationship paradigm with one another.

#### *Adjustments Students Can Make*

As students seek autonomy and self-reliance, they also need to accept self-responsibility for the choices they make in college. Parents should be considered by their student not as an advocate and intervener but rather as sounding board, supporter, and coach. College staff should be acknowledged by the student as viable resources available to support their total success in college.

#### *Adjustments Parents Can Make*

Parents should recognize and accept that their level of perceived control is less when a student is in college as compared to when the student was in high school, and should transition from the role as controller or manager to that of a coach. Parents should provide their student with space and time to make decisions while concurrently being informed and knowledgeable about the resource and opportunity-rich environment of the college. Parents can expand their family resource network by largely relinquishing the roles of advocacy and intervention to college personnel.

#### *Adjustments College Officials Can Make*

College officials should embrace parents as partners instead of isolating them as nuisances or worse, adversaries. Further, due to FERPA, the Health

Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (HIPPA), or other legislative restrictions, student affairs staff must create alternative opportunities for open and on-going communication with parents and let parents know of our commitment to work with them as partners to ensure the success of their student. College officials should recognize that they are not the sole experts in the life of students and that parents can be an essential asset to facilitating student development. Multiple contacts or points of entry for students can be created by the college so students and parents can easily access resources for success inside and outside of the classroom.

#### *Specific Interventions for Student Affairs to Consider In Working With Parents of College Students*

- Manage expectations by providing information and experiences to help students and parents construct mental models that are institutionally appropriate.
- Educate parents and students about predictable developmental changes that will occur in the college experience.
- Use media as a catalyst to explore reality in college and to present information that is more truthful and complete.
- Establish a reasonable expectations statement for the student-parent-college partnership and create opportunities for parents and students to generate their family-specific statement of expectations for their changing relationship.
- Provide avenues for on-going contact among partners such as newsletters, e-mail communications, phone trees, workshops, teleconferences, on-campus events, etc.
- Provide opportunities to help parents and their students find the “transition sweet spot” in which they can experience a level of comfort in their relationship through a process that includes being informed, communicating, and intervening appropriately when necessary.

- Create opportunities for parents and their student to intentionally address change and transition issues in their family.
- Create parent networks by helping parents of new students build connections with parents of upper-class students.
- Better understand parent and student issues and questions through assessment.
- Consider forming a parent task force to address strategies for working with parents in times of personal family crisis or campus-wide emergencies which might generate a high volume of parent contacts.

As practitioners in a values-laden profession, we are preoccupied with many tasks and issues. Perhaps one of the most significant tasks we face is the establishment of our own working relationship with students new to our institutions. This is important to us because it is the point of our life's work and we place a great value on our ability to interact with and assist students. While engaged in such an important endeavor, however, it is important for us to understand that we are relative newcomers to the lives of these individuals. Further it is important that we not ignore those that were part of these students' lives long before us (and will continue to be so long after us!), namely their parents. Student affairs practitioners are in a special position to facilitate the continued development of the parent-child relationship within the context of transitioning to college. By applying our sense of empathy and listening to the concerns each generation of parents express, we will continue to be effective in working with this important constituency.

### Questions to Explore in Student Affairs

1. What structured programs or events currently exist within your division or institution that involve intentional outreach to parents (e.g., parent councils, family weekend, orientation sessions)?

2. How does or could your division set "reasonable expectations" for parents in regards to scope of services, standards of care, admissions criteria, compliance with FERPA, and other mandated legislation?
3. Are there specific times of the year staff receives a higher volume of parent questions or requests?
4. What are the common themes to such questions or requests (i.e. housing contracts, admissions status)?
5. What is the general reaction and/or attitude among student affairs staff when it receives persistent inquiries or requests from parents?
6. How can your division use technology to better inform parents, establish expectations, and gather feedback?
7. Does student affairs staff at your institution invest discussion time and/or training in regards to parent issues? If so, on what topics?
8. Based on the responses to the previous questions, what are some proactive strategies or approaches your division could use to address parent concerns and questions?

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