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Giving New Meaning to 'Program for Parents'

Many community colleges have programs for parents — policies and tools for helping adult students balance child care and other demands of being a parent with the expectations of being a college student.

But as two-year institutions have increasingly become a destination of choice for traditional age students, a small but growing number of the colleges have begun developing “parent” programs of a different sort: initiatives (of the type much more common at four-year colleges) to help the families of students both understand how to support their children, and draw boundaries so that students can make their way on their own. The community colleges are adding orientation sessions, informational Web sites, and other resources for parents — part of larger efforts to alter and expand student service operations to respond to the needs and demands of 18- to 24-year-olds.

“We’re being faced with the challenge of adapting a lot of our college policies to younger students — how that student thinks and operates, and understanding their culture,” says Beverly Walker, director of retention services at North Central State College, a two-year technical college in Mansfield, Ohio, that has added services for parents as the average age of its students has dropped precipitously from the late 20s to the early 20s in recent years. “In addition to worrying about our students’ children, now we’re having to deal with their parents.”

And sometimes they can be a handful to “deal with.” The already clichéd “helicopter parents” pops up in many a conversation about the parent programs that community colleges are developing, just as it does at four-year institutions. But while some two-year-college officials acknowledge that the programs for parents are designed in part to help professors and staff

members play defense against intruding parents, preparing them to loosen the reins, most say the programs' primary aim is giving well-intentioned fathers and mothers better information and tools to gently guide their children through the sometimes tough transition from high school to college.

Out of High School, Into Community Colleges

Enrollments of traditional age students are growing at two-year institutions, driven by the colleges' lower tuitions and the comfort that many first-generation college students feel in staying close to home. That trend is just beginning to be evident in national data, as statistics prepared by the American Association of Community Colleges from information collected by the National Center for Education Statistics shows two-year-college enrollment increases in all age categories under 30 and decreases or no growth in all age categories 30 and over between 2003 and 2005 (the latest available year).

If the trend is just emerging nationally, it is unmistakable at some individual colleges. Colorado's Front Range Community College, which is getting a new program for parents off the ground, has seen the proportion of area high school graduates who enroll at the two-year institution climb by 1-2 percentage points a year in the last few years, to about 20 percent now. With that increase, says Kris Binard, dean of student services at Front Range, faculty and staff members at the college began reporting more and more inquiries from students' family members. "We were hearing from a lot more parents who are a lot more demanding, wanting to know every moment, 'How is my kid doing?'" Binard says.

In the initial stage of its new initiative for parents of students, the college added a parent component to its orientation program for new students. Students and their families meet together for the first segment, and then the students go out and "do their thing" with their peers. Meanwhile, college officials take a tour with parents, filling them in along the way on the information that federal privacy law allows the college to share (and not to share), what the academic cycle looks like, and campus offices to which parents might point their children when they run into different sorts of roadblocks.

Skagit Valley College, in northwest Washington, has had a program for parents for several years that Binard and other officials say they plan to imitate. (Others have had them even longer: California's Palomar College, for instance, began its program about a decade ago, and now has hundreds of parents each year who attend its six parent orientations — five in English, and one in Spanish, says Diane McAllister, supervisor of the two-year college's Access and Assessment Center.) The college began with a Web site, [No Parent Left Behind](#), that contains [a list](#) of "10 things that every parent should know" and [a guide](#) to what student records a parent does and does not have access to (which contains the question: "Since I'm paying for my child's education, why can't I get a copy of his/her records?") under the federal [Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act](#), among other things.

Last spring, the community college worked with the local public schools and nearby universities to set up a parent information night for the families of prospective students, and this fall invited parents for the first time to new student orientation. About a third of participating students brought parents with them — “proof that we need to be responding in a more systematic way” to the needs and demands of parents, says Linda P. Woiwod, dean of students at Skagit Valley. “Parent academies,” designed to provide more in-depth information about the inner workings of key campus offices and processes, are next, Woiwod says.

Mixed Feelings

As is true of all college officials who deal with students’ parents — other institutions that have gone this route includes [Metropolitan Community College](#) in Missouri and Maryland’s [Harford Community College](#) — two-year-college administrators are of two minds about their newest “clients.” Walker, of North Central State, counts herself among the guilty as part of a generation of parents who are arguably overinvolved in their children’s lives, including their educations.

“I have students come in for registration with their parents, and I start asking the student questions, and the parent answers,” says Walker. “I almost have to say to the parent, ‘I’m going to ask your son or daughter some questions now.’ We get used to doing that [when the kids are in elementary and secondary school], and we almost have to unlearn that and let our students go to college and learn the same things themselves. Our goal is to teach them how to be supportive without being overbearing.”

Binard, of Front Range Community College, agrees that “you are always going to have parents who are helicopters, or even bulldozers.” But over all, she says, “parents mean well — they want to know, ‘How can I help my child?’ ”

More typical than the parent who intrudes by answering questions meant for his or her child, Binard says, is the father she met with recently who wanted to know, “‘What can I do to help my student in this situation be more successful?’ He didn’t want me to do anything for the student, but wanted to know what the resources were that the student might need,” she says. “So we try to answer their questions in that way: ‘If your stud is getting a D in this class and is worried about not being able to do better, the withdrawal date is such and such.’ ‘Have them go to the advising office. Here’s the phone number.’”

“Everything you read about retention says that the No. 1 person that many students go to for help is a parent,” Binard adds. “If we can make sure parents know what they need to know to help students, retention is going to be better. That’s what we all want.”

Given the large proportion of first-generation college students at many community colleges,

some of the two-year institutions that have begun programs for parents are seeing an interesting side benefit. As Ohio's Owens Community College transformed its original registration-based program for parents into [Parent College 101](#), which travels to middle and high schools to help parents begin planning for their children's college possibilities, the college has motivated the older generation, too, says Bill Ivoska, vice president of student services at Owens.

"It's been so successful," he says, "that the parents want to go to college, too."

— [Doug Lederman](#)

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