

STUDENT AFFAIRS LEADER

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Time to Retire 'Helicopter Parent'?

It would be tempting to think that after years of use, "helicopter parent" is ready to be retired. But some parent program directors say that the term and its siblings have retained their power to be hurtful and unhelpful. Others in student affairs find the terms too broadly applied to parents who interact with their students appropriately, while others say that it's too bad that the terms ever took on negative connotations at all.

But the people who spoke with *Student Affairs Leader* agree on two things: that parent involvement, when appropriate, is a positive and that families benefit from guidance on what "appropriate" is.

Calling names

Marjorie Savage, director of parent programs at the University of Minnesota, is not a fan of the term. "Personally, I hate the helicopter name and all the spin-offs—'lawnmower parents,' 'stealth bombers,' 'submarine parents,' et cetera," she says. "I'm amazed that while we try to teach our small children not to call people names, educators are somehow willing to call parents derogatory names."

Jody Donovan, executive director of parent and family programs at Colorado State University, also dislikes the term because it belittles family members' good intentions. "It denigrates and makes fun of the love that parents and families have for their students," she says.

But there *have* been significant changes in how family members interact, compared to previous generations, and in some cases, parents do create problems. "Helicopter parent" and similar terms have offered parents, institutions, and the general public a shorthand—albeit an imperfect shorthand—to recognize and talk about it.

"Even parents use the terminology to describe themselves," says Savage, author of *You're on Your Own (But I'm Here If You Need Me): Mentoring Your Child During the College Years* (2003).

In fact, terminology for overinvolved parents is not common just to North America or Anglophone countries, Savage says.

"In England, a professor has dubbed parents as 'agents' (as in football agents who step in to handle the student's contracts and deal with authorities when problems arise) or 'bankers' (who put up the money for whatever the student wants and needs) or 'white knights' (who charge in to save the day and then ride away into the distance). In Japan, there are '*koiku* mamas,' [or] 'education mamas,' who do whatever is necessary to ensure their children get the best education possible. Even Scandinavian countries have their own version—'curling parents' who sweep the ice clear of anything that might keep their students from precisely hitting their goals," Savage says.

According to the student affairs professionals *Student Affairs Leader* spoke with, the problem with these terms is that in addition to being derogatory, they're often applied to a whole generation of parents, when only a small proportion of parents are actually overinvolved to the point of damaging their students' development or are aggressive with college staff.

"I probably have ten to fifteen really positive experiences with parents and families for every negative one," Donovan says. "I think we tend to hold on to the negative ones to have war stories. We get mileage out of the negative ones: 'I can top your story.'"

Trading war stories can be fun, Donovan admits, "but when you're the brunt of it, when you're a parent trying to do the best you can, that doesn't create a very welcoming environment."

In research Donovan has conducted at Colorado State, students initiate contact with their parents about half the time, suggesting that parents aren't "hovering" as much as interacting.

"We have this assumption that the parents are bugging the students, and what [the results] told us was that ... the students are reaching out and asking their parents and families to be involved."

Perry Francis, coordinator of counseling services in Eastern Michigan

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University's Education Clinical Suite, agrees that aggressive parents are in the minority. They are, however, disproportionately vocal, making it seem as if they are the rule rather than the exception.

"It's what I call the 90-10 rule," Francis says. "Oftentimes we don't hear about the 90 percent of the things that are going right."

Alternatives

So what terminology can we use to describe the appropriate involvement that Donovan and Francis say most parents exhibit?

Donovan says that she and her colleagues use an "umbrella" analogy. "We created it in direct opposition of the 'helicopter,' and it helps families and parents know what to do."

The analogy goes as follows: If you were in the rain with an umbrella and noticed someone else without one, you'd probably offer to share. You'd wait to see if the other person accepted your offer of assistance. And if the offer was accepted, you'd walk slightly behind or alongside—but not in front of—the other person. And you wouldn't follow that person around with your umbrella on a sunny day, just in case.

"That same thing would hold true if your student is struggling. Parents and families have an umbrella of life skills, life lessons, and family values," Donovan says. "And if you're holding the umbrella, your students' hands are free do to the work of the university."

Colorado State not only introduces parents to that analogy during admissions and orientation, but also introduces staff and faculty to the analogy to help them understand the process students and their families are going through, Donovan says.

"We've been able to impact the institutional philosophy around working with parents and families so that the knee-jerk reaction isn't 'I hate talking to parents.' The reaction is 'Let me see if I can help them, and if I can't, I'll pass them to Jody.'"

Marcia Baxter Magolda, distinguished professor of educational leadership at Miami University in Ohio, uses a tandem bike metaphor in her books *Authoring Your Life: Developing an Internal Voice to Navigate Life's Challenges* (2001) and *Making Their Own Way: Narratives for Transforming Higher Education to Promote Self-Development* (2009).

In this metaphor, the front rider of the bicycle is called the "captain" and the rear rider is the "stoker." The captain maintains control of the ride by guiding the direction of the bicycle and controlling the gears. The stoker contributes to the journey by adding extra power to the pedaling. In *Authoring Your Life*, Baxter Magolda recommends that college educators take the stoker role, allowing the student to assume control of the bicycle's speed and direction.

Baxter Magolda's metaphor is also useful for describing how parents and students can work together, Eastern Michigan's Francis suggests: The parent and student are both on the bicycle, pedaling toward the same goal. As the student grows and develops throughout high school, he or she gets practice time on the front seat. In college, the student takes over the front seat and full responsibility for the direction in which the bicycle is headed.

James Boyle, president of the College Parents of America, says he hasn't heard of any fresh analogies for appropriate involvement but personally likes the long-standing coach-athlete metaphor.

"The coach is on the sidelines, but the player or student is in the game. The coach can make suggestions about how to approach the game and can help instruct during the game, but it's the student who has to do the work."

Rehabilitation?

Although these analogies are good teaching tools for families, staff, and faculty, they don't have the punchy, sound-bite quality of some of the negative terms, Savage says, so those

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H1N1 campus preparedness and response guide:

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have released guidance on how colleges and universities should respond to influenza during this academic year. Available at www.flu.gov/plan/school/higheredguidance.html, the document recommends that institutions

- help faculty, staff, and residential students with flu-like symptoms self-isolate (except for accessing medical care) by reviewing and revising policies such as student absenteeism and faculty and staff sick leave policies
- discourage ill people from visiting campus
- permit high-risk students, faculty, and staff to stay at home if flu is spreading in the campus community
- consider suspending classes or exploring distance education options if there is an outbreak

Locking classrooms from the

inside: A University of Michigan Senate advisory committee recently proposed reviewing the advisability of equipping classrooms with doors that lock from the inside to help protect students and faculty

from potential on-campus shooters. Classroom doors currently cannot be locked from inside due to state fire codes that require that classroom doors be opened with only one motion. A new locking system would be needed for the current doors to meet the existing code while being able to be locked from inside. Those in favor of the interior locking plan cite the increased security that locks could bring. Those opposed say the cost and inconvenience of interior locks are not worth the effort.

Updated alcohol risk assessment

guide: The Higher Education Center of the U.S. Department of Education has updated its publication *College Alcohol Risk Assessment Guide: Environmental Approaches to Prevention*. The guide is designed to help administrators identify campus environmental factors that contribute to alcohol-related problems. The update incorporates recent prevention research. The guide can be downloaded from or viewed at www.higheredcenter.org/services/publications/college-alcohol-risk-assessment-guide-environmental-approaches-prevention.

Students and emotional and physical violence:

Nearly 20 percent of college students visiting their institutions' health clinics say they were victims of emotional or physical violence in the last six months, according to a study of students at campuses in Washington, Wisconsin, and British Columbia. Students who visited the health clinics at these campuses were asked to fill out surveys. The results, reported in a recent *Journal of Adolescent Health*, show that among female respondents, 15 percent reported experiencing emotional violence (including threats, ridicule, and property destruction) and 3 percent reported experiencing physical violence. Among male respondents, 9 percent reported experiencing emotional violence and another 9 percent reported experiencing physical violence. One-third of the women and two-thirds of the men said that they had been drinking alcohol when the violence occurred. There were no significant differences between Canadian and U.S. responses. ●

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professionals should be well aware of who holds the authority to answer those questions within the institution's various schools and colleges. It is essential that when such information is provided to entering transfer students, it is as accurate as possible.

Finally, **understand the mix of your transfer students and how they are accessing higher education.** This understanding will dramatically improve the quality of their educational experience at your institution.

Many transfer students will appear to have "hopped" from institution to institution. Data indicates that there is a great

change in how students are enrolling in higher education. Borden (2004) discusses "swirling students," identifying them as students who may enroll concurrently in more than one institution or students who take some courses online or students who enroll for purposes other than getting a degree or students who stop in and out of the higher education experience, depending on their life circumstances.

Understand that as transfer students are changing, so must institutions as they work with them. In fact, we may have to redefine just what "retention" means as students "swirl" through the options that are available in American higher education.

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Handel, S.J. "Transfer Students Apply to College, Too. How Come We Don't Help Them?" *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 54(9), B20.

Arthur Sandeen, Ph.D., and Margaret J. Barr, Ph.D., together have more than 45 years' experience as vice presidents of student affairs. They are both contributing editors to Student Affairs Leader. Send your questions for them to editor Therese Kattner at tkattner@magnapubs.com. ●

The Benefits of Collaborating with Study Abroad

Our February 1 cover story “Why Student Affairs Should Care about Study Abroad” explored why student affairs and study abroad administrators should collaborate to improve the health and safety of students abroad.

In the following interview, Gary Rhodes, Ph.D., director of the Center for Global Education at Loyola Marymount University, and Michael Sachs, J.D., associate vice president for student affairs at LIM College, expand on this idea as well as discuss how a student affairs/study abroad collaboration benefits faculty and staff as well.

SAL: *What are the benefits of a study abroad/student affairs collaboration?*

Rhodes: The collaboration is particularly important in areas that have significant health and safety implications for students. It minimizes the chance of students getting inconsistent messages. If, for instance, on-campus policy prohibits all students under 21 from drinking alcohol, but the program abroad in France considers a 19-year-old to be of legal drinking age and considers learning about French wine a part of cultural understanding, we may be missing an opportunity to provide appropriate use training for students, providing on-site faculty and staff with methods to support responsible drinking practices, and being clear about conduct policies. Alcohol use and abuse is connected to many of the safety challenges students face abroad—inconsistency about policy goes against effective student support practices.

Sachs: I also want to emphasize the need for students to understand their rights and responsibilities with regard to their participation in study abroad. Does the student code apply [at the study abroad site], and if so, are exceptions made for study abroad?

Rhodes: A study abroad/student affairs collaboration also benefits staff. Many of our campuses claim global

learning and understanding as a part of their missions, so not training staff on how to effectively develop and administer programs in which students go abroad excludes that staff member from the campus’ international learning goal. It’s also a missed professional development opportunity.

U.S. campuses are sending many students abroad on programs outside the study abroad office—from athletics to international internships, community service, and research projects. [Yet] most higher education administration programs provide limited training when it comes to international program administration.

Sachs: The question is, Are we doing the same emergency training in study abroad [that we do for on-campus programs]? For example, do we go over escape plans with participants in case of fire? Have we trained our faculty and staff to be “live in” staff members during the study abroad program?

We would never allow our residence hall staff to be responsible for a group of students without extensive training, yet institutions often do with regard to study abroad. When the [study abroad/student affairs] collaboration works, students will know their rights and responsibilities and health and safety issues will have been fully addressed.

SAL: *What are the challenges to creating or improving this partnership, and how can they be overcome?*

Rhodes: I think it starts with training. Many who get into the study abroad field don’t go through a traditional higher education or student affairs administration program, and those who go through training focused on international education administration may not get the student affairs training. On the other hand, many who go through student affairs or higher education administration training in graduate programs traditionally don’t get much

coursework focused on international program development and administration.

In addition, the faculty who lead programs don’t usually get recognized in promotion and tenure reviews for the work they’ve done in support of study abroad program development and administration—or for additional learning about higher education administration or student affairs. One of the benefits of additional support is that those with the appropriate expertise on issues of travel health or alcohol use or abuse could help develop consistent policies for on campus and study abroad and do so working with the faculty and staff with international expertise.

Sachs: There is also the silo challenge. Comments such as “That is not my area,” “That has nothing to do with us,” or “I don’t have time” need to be overcome. Trying to integrate study abroad into a host of often disconnected areas of the institution (judicial affairs, disability services, housing, food service, student life, academic advising, etc.) can be an enormous challenge, particularly since each area does not speak the same language.

SAL: *In your experience, is there an area that campuses tend to neglect when planning for the health and safety of study abroad students?*

Rhodes: This varies from campus to campus and with changes in staff. One year an institution may have one of the best study abroad infrastructures in the country, and then the leadership may leave or be replaced and have only limited expertise and campuswide collaboration.

One area that the study abroad field is looking closer at is the collection of incidents abroad, to provide better data on what happens to students abroad in terms of health and safety incidents: the

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terms might not die off any time soon.

But perhaps the terms can be rehabilitated, or at least made a little less derisive of parental and family involvement. College Parents of America president Boyle wrote a November 2007 column titled “In Defense (Again) of Helicopter Parents”

(www.collegeparents.org/cpa/news.html?j=1240) to question the idea that hovering is always a bad thing. He writes

I can't predict exactly how future press coverage of college parents will turn out, but I am not happy that the term “helicopter parent” has seemed to take on such a negative connotation. ... After all, we humans use helicopters to perform some important and essential jobs. Traffic reporters use choppers to help us keep an eye on local traffic and to suggest alternate routes if our commute becomes clogged. Emergency personnel use helicopters to perform search and rescue operations, and

those individuals really value the fact that these mechanical birds can hurtle into the sky on a moment's notice, flying whenever and wherever it is necessary.

W. Scott Lewis, a partner of the National Center for Higher Education Risk Management and previous judicial affairs director at the University of South Carolina, avoids the helicopter analogy altogether to describe what he asserts is the most difficult type of parent to work with, the “*Gilmore Girl* parent” (named after the television show in which a young mother and her adolescent daughter interact more as peers than as parent and child).

“These folks are a little more difficult [to work with] because they want there to be no negative impact on their children,” Lewis says. “They want the students to grow and be successful, just like you and I do, but they want there to be minimal or no stumbling blocks along the way.”

In contrast, helicopter parents from

Your ideas

Do you have an analogy or term you find useful in describing healthy family-student interactions? Share them with other readers by contacting editor Therese Kattner at tkattner@magnapubs.com. We'll print your ideas in an upcoming issue.

Blackhawk (large and intimidating) to Cobra helicopters (light and quick-strike) are “very educable,” and their engagement is a positive—if colleges are willing to introduce them and support them in using parenting strategies that aid their students' development.

“They want the same thing for their student that we want. This is important because once they understand that, they're very, very amenable to partnering with you.” ●

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Clery Act—type data you find on campus is poorly kept and disseminated for most study abroad programs.

Another area where additional collaboration could make a significant impact is collaboration with offices that support students from diverse backgrounds. One of the resources we've developed, AllAbroad.us, provides resources to support greater collaboration between these sectors and to provide additional support and mentorship to students from diverse backgrounds for study abroad. More needs to be done to increase participation rates by underrepresented groups, and this collaboration could make a significant impact.

Sachs: As I noted, issues of student health, safety, and rights are infrequently integrated into study abroad. It is assumed that the program is fully vetted, but no one really asks by whom and by what standards. I believe that most institutions believe that host institutions' facilities are at the same level as those in the U.S., but that is often not the case. Institutions tend to do a very good job assessing the academic programs in study

abroad but fail to take the next step and assess the nonacademic components.

Rhodes and Sachs will present the online seminar “Study Abroad and Student Affairs: Best Practices in Health/Safety” on October 6. More information is available at www.magnapubs.com/calendar/362.html. ●

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perspectives

Five Ways to Improve the Transfer Student Experience

Q: *At a recent staff meeting we were discussing programs and services for new freshmen, when someone remarked, “Don’t forget we have three hundred transfer students also coming in.” As I left I realized that we had not spent any time considering transfer students. Are we alone in overlooking them in our planning and programming?*

Margaret Barr and Art Sandeen reply:

Unfortunately, transfer students are often an afterthought as institutions plan each year for newly entering students. Programs and activities for transfer students are often merely seen as additions to the freshman orientation program. Often the institutional focus for transfer students is on the transfer of credits rather than on the transfer of the person. Your institution is not alone in giving transfer students less consideration than new freshmen, and the transfer student issue has been a topic of recent articles in both *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside Higher Ed*.

We think transfer students deserve greater attention, and with the current economic conditions, it is likely that many institutions will be receiving greater numbers of transfer applications, particularly from students in community colleges. There are several perspectives that may be useful in determining if your institution is adequately responding to the needs and concerns of transfer students.

First, **try to understand the reasons why students are transferring to your institution.** Have they changed their educational focuses? Are they changing institutions because of financial considerations beyond their control? Are they transferring from community colleges in order to complete the baccalaureate degree? Did they begin their college work as members of the armed services? Are they students returning to school after long absences

caused by raising a family or work issues? The answers to these questions, and any additional issues you may think of, truly define the needs and aspirations of transfer students coming to your institution. Just like freshmen, transfer students will bring a variety of levels of preparation, experience, motivation, and engagement.

Second, **examine what information the institution makes available to potential transfer students as they are making the decision to transfer to your institution.** Handel (2007) indicates that information for transfer students is very sparse both when general searches are made on the Web or when the potential student goes to the written information or website provided by the institution. Although much of the information provided for potential freshmen can help transfer students too, most transfer students, according to Handel, have additional questions, including the following:

- Does your institution accept transfer students?
- Should a student attempt to transfer after completion of one or two years of collegiate work?
- Is financial aid available to transfer students?
- What specific academic advising is available to help transfer students make the transition as seamless as possible?
- What unique programs and services are available at your institution for transfer students?

Third, **evaluate the effectiveness of your current program offerings for transfer students.** Does the timing of program offerings or the content of the programs create barriers for transfer student participation? What, from a transfer student’s perspective, could be done to improve the transition process? Such evaluations could include focus

groups of recent transfer students as well as transfer students who have been at the institution for some time. These students can provide valuable insights about what information and support is most helpful and inviting to transfer students.

Often transfer students do not believe that they need to be oriented to the new institution, because they are experienced college students. But the decision to transfer without participation in institutional orientation and support programs can interfere with the ability of the transfer student to immerse himself or herself quickly in the new educational environment. Learning from transfer students about what they feel they need to know and what methods of marketing information make the most sense to them will go a long way toward improving the effectiveness of your transfer student program. In addition, you should consider designating a student affairs staff member to serve as a continuing point of contact and support for transfer students. A generalist with knowledge of the institution can assist transfer students in connecting with student groups and sources of assistance.

Fourth, **make sure someone on staff is knowledgeable about articulation agreements and can answer questions about course credit transfer.** Many states have well-developed articulation policies between community colleges and public colleges and universities within their borders. (New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, and Texas are a few examples.) But such articulation agreements are less well developed across state lines and with independent institutions within the state. As a result, some transfer students may encounter difficulty in transferring credits. We understand that the issue of articulation of course credit is an academic one, but student affairs pro-

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