

BY KAREN J. FORBES

STUDENTS AND THEIR PARENTS

WHERE DO CAMPUSES FIT IN?

What do students need from parents? What do students need from us? The answers to these questions are constantly shifting in response to changing social attitudes and new ways of understanding student development. The author explores these changes and suggests a new way to think about the role of campus staff in the parent-student relationship.

LAST WINTER, after a particularly heavy snowfall, I asked my eight-year-old son if he had played in the snow on the playground. “Oh, no, Mommy. You get in trouble if you’re caught playing in the snow,” was his reply. He was clearly shocked that I would even have suggested such a thing. Less than thirty years ago, I remember traversing the snow piles made by the plows as one of the greatest joys of elementary school. We slipped, fell, got bumped and bruised, but I never remember anyone suggesting that we should stop.

In *Millennials Rising* (2000), Neil Howe and William Strauss argue that this generation of children is the focus of “the most sweeping youth safety movement in history” (p. 43).

Today’s parents are going to unprecedented lengths to avoid their worst fear—that harm will befall their child—and they are largely succeeding. Among the adjectives Howe and Strauss use to describe students born after 1982 are “special,” “sheltered,” and “conventional” (pp. 43–44). Families are having fewer children and can afford to spend both more money and more time ensuring that they are the healthiest, best educated, most well-rounded and protected generation in our history.

Recent articles in *Time* magazine describe how our preoccupation with protecting our children has made it difficult for many schools and towns to afford to build playgrounds that comply with complex safety standards. Some schools have banned the popular elementary school game of dodgeball because of the possibility that

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students would be injured both physically and emotionally. Friends tell me that they are scolded by neighbors for letting their children ride their bikes around the block in their crime-free suburban neighborhoods. Environmental psychologist Roger Hart, quoted by Laird Harrison in *Time* about the impact of stricter playground standards, said, "What's unfortunate is this paranoia about children's safety and the idea that you can manage risk by removing challenge. Kids have to learn how to make their own behavior safe" (p. F12).

The children who played on these safer playgrounds have arrived on our campuses, and the parents who have taken so much care with their safety and welfare are expecting us to maintain the same level of nurturing and safekeeping throughout their college years. Contrast Hart's statement with the words of a parent of a first-year college student: "They are young adults but not wise in the ways of the world. Learning by mistake is not an answer."

My conversations with colleagues throughout the country have confirmed my impression that the last decade has brought a significant increase in the extent of parental involvement in the lives of college students. Many of us have been struggling to reconcile the expectations of our students' parents that we will protect their children from all harm with our own desire to encourage their children to take the risks that may accompany the full exploration of all that colleges and universities have to offer. As we begin the new millennium, we are faced with redefining not only our beliefs about how we should interact with parents but also our ideas about how much of the parental role we should assume when students leave their well-protected homes to come to campus.

As many of us know, parents can behave in a demanding and contradictory manner. The majority of the parents of today's college students attended college

in the 1960s and 1970s, and they may vividly remember engaging in or witnessing behavior that they fear their children may repeat. These fears may be fueled by significant media attention to binge drinking and campus crime rates. Parents may want us to crack down on campus alcohol consumption and other dangerous behavior, all the while assuming that it will be someone else's son or daughter causing the trouble.

The cost of college and the rise of the consumer movement have also affected parents' attitudes toward our institutions. Both the media and state legislatures often paint colleges and universities as wasteful of taxpayers' hard-earned tuition money. In response, many parents view themselves as consumers and demand that colleges and universities adopt more of a customer service focus. Over the years, I have had more than one parent justify their demands that I violate the confidentiality of the counseling relationship by saying, "I'm paying a lot of money for this college." Colleagues in other departments tell stories about parents demanding single rooms, grade changes, increased financial aid, and forgiveness of policy violations as if they were haggling over the price of a car or a house.

In a *New York Times* article about the trend toward greater institutional supervision of students, Ethan Bronner quoted Graham Spanier, president of The Pennsylvania State University, as saying, "Today's young people are growing up in different circumstances. We do not want to make them more childlike. But parents are constantly contacting us asking what is going on with their kids. They want in loco parentis" (p. 1). It is not uncommon for me to hear colleagues bemoaning what they perceive as a return to in loco parentis. But in fact, our current beliefs about what it means to take the place of parents are colored by fairly recent changes in our beliefs about parenting as well as by misinterpretations of the origins of in loco parentis.

ACTING IN PLACE OF PARENTS?

HISTORICALLY, in loco parentis was much more about the power of the college or university to control and discipline students than it was about nurturing and protecting. In their engaging overview of changes in higher education law during the twentieth

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century, *The Rights and Responsibilities of the Modern University*, Robert Bickel and Peter Lake trace the origins of in loco parentis back to English common law. Legal commentator Sir William Blackstone wrote, “[the father] may also delegate part of his parental authority, during his life to the tutor or schoolmaster of his child; who is then in loco parentis, and has such a portion of the power of the parent committed to his charge, viz. that of restraint and correction” (p. 19). The authors write, “As a technical, legal doctrine, in loco parentis was not—ever—a liability/responsibility/duty-creating norm in higher education law. In loco parentis was only a legal tool for universities when they deliberately chose to discipline students” (p. 29).

Up until the civil rights era, institutions of higher education had enormous powers to enact policies and procedures that controlled student activities, and they were virtually immune to litigation by students who felt that their rights had been violated. However, during the 1960s and 1970s, students, rather than their parents, began to be treated as the consumers of higher education, and the courts began to shift toward viewing the university as what Bickel and Lake have termed a “bystander” (p. 49). In a number of court decisions in the late 1970s and early 1980s, many of which involved deaths or serious injuries resulting from alcohol use, judges communicated their belief that since students had fought hard for the right to be considered adults and were, in fact, assuming many adult responsibilities such as voting and serving in the military, they should be considered solely responsible for their own behavior and thus freed from institutional oversight and protection. In *Beach v. Utah*, a case in which an intoxicated University of Utah student was injured on a school-sponsored field trip, the judge wrote that the university had no responsibility for monitoring underage drinking. Bickel and Lake quote from the *Beach* decision: “Fulfilling this charge would require the institution to baby-sit each student, a task beyond the resources of any school. But more importantly, such measures would be inconsistent with

the nature of the relationship between the student and the institution, for it would produce a repressive and inhospitable environment, largely inconsistent with the objectives of modern college education” (p. 61).

In the *Beach* decision, the court reinterpreted in loco parentis to mean a college or university’s obligation to keep students safe rather than to discipline or control them, and it then proceeded to reject the very idea that schools owed students such a duty.

During the 1990s, however, a series of court cases have found that colleges and universities do have certain legal obligations to students. High-profile settlements such as that in 2000 between MIT and the family of Scott Krueger after his alcohol-related death, and changes in federal laws that allow parental notification of alcohol violations and mandate the reporting of campus crimes are indications that the so-called bystander era is largely behind us. Institutions of higher education now accept that they have a greater responsibility to protect students and also that parents can be partners in this process. Bickel and Lake characterize the relationship arising from the last fifteen years of court decisions as “one in which a university owes duties to students and students owe duty to protect themselves” (p. 105).

The *Beach* decision may have resonated with those of us who were students or who were just starting our careers in higher education in the 1960s and 1970s. Student autonomy was a focus not only in the legal and sociopolitical arenas but also in student development theories taught in graduate programs in counseling and education. The idea that our parents would have been notified about our behavior would have been anathema to many of us who were educated during these years, when we took it for granted that we were able to take responsibility for our own safety.

But parents of today’s students are generally less sanguine about their children’s capacity for self-regulation and tend to be bigger fans of the revisionist view of in loco parentis as meaning caretaking or nurturing. Interestingly, changes in developmental theory are lending

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some support to parents' beliefs that individuals in their late teens and early twenties can benefit from greater adult guidance. Until the last decade, theories of college student development have assumed that student autonomy is established during the early college years, but newer research suggests that the separation from parents occurs closer to the end of the college years and also varies with a student's gender, race, and culture. Students who remain more attached to their parents throughout the college years appear to accrue benefits in academic, vocational, affective, and social domains. As Maureen Kenny wrote in the *Journal of College Student Development*, "affective closeness to parents should not be perceived as synonymous with dependency or as the antithesis of independence" (p. 43).

In his May 2000 article in the *American Psychologist*, developmental psychologist Jeffrey Arnett proposed a new category, "emerging adulthood" (p. 469), to define the life stage of individuals aged eighteen to twenty-five. Arnett describes these years as "volitional" (p. 469) for young people in cultures where there is enough affluence and access to higher education to support them in exploring a variety of alternatives in the realms of work, interpersonal relationships, and worldviews. Because young people who live in highly industrialized nations typically require a lengthier period of education and training before entering positions of responsibility in their sophisticated, technical economies, they tend to defer marriage and childbearing. Arnett writes, "Emerging adulthood is a time of life when many different directions remain possible, when little about the future has been decided for certain, when the scope of independent exploration of life's possibilities is greater for most people than it will be at any period of the life course. . . . The demographic diversity and unpredictability of emerging adulthood is a reflection of the experimental and exploratory quality of the period" (p. 470).

But with this exploration and experimentation comes a greater involvement in risk taking. According to Arnett, emerging adulthood is the period of highest risk for engaging in unprotected sex, substance abuse,

driving at excessive speeds, and driving while intoxicated. He speculates that freedom from close parental supervision as well as from the constraining time commitments of marriage and child rearing give individuals in this age group the greatest opportunity to pursue high-risk behavior. But interestingly, it is the students who maintain the closest geographic ties to parents and who have the most frequent contact with them who appear to be the least close emotionally and to have the poorest psychological adjustment. Apparently, ties that are too close can hamper the development of a young person's maturity.

On my own campus, I often hear students talk about their lives as if they were "living in a bubble" and refer to "the real world" as a place of rules and responsibilities that they will inhabit in the distant future. I have heard students argue that they should not be held accountable for the results of their experimentation with alcohol and sex, and that they should be free not to honor commitments to leadership positions, student organizations, and even academics when they experience them as interfering with the exploration of new domains. It was not surprising to me, then, to learn that Arnett has found that most people in their early to mid-twenties do not consider themselves adults. When asked what would mark their transition to adulthood, the personal characteristics they most consistently cited were taking responsibility for one's self, making independent decisions, and becoming financially independent.

I recently came across a publication on my campus in which the student writer was complaining about our college's alcohol policy as a form of baby-sitting, unknowingly harking back to the *Beach* decision. Should we be surprised that students are contradicting themselves—telling us that they think it is unreasonable for us to try to control their behavior while admitting that they do not consider themselves ready to take on the responsibility of adulthood? As their advisers, teachers, and mentors, we may sympathize with their desire to be autonomous and to take the chances that can lead to richer, fuller lives, but we may also experience anger when they neglect their responsibilities, drink too

much, eat and sleep too little, and decline to follow our good advice and counsel. Does this sound like the feelings of any other group of adults we know?

We may feel frustrated with parents who call us to demand that we guarantee their children's safety while simultaneously expecting us to provide the life-changing experiences that will lead to postgraduate success, but we may also realize that parents' fears and frustrations are not completely unfounded. When parents send their kids to our colleges and universities, they are also sending us their conflicts between fostering autonomy and keeping control. They are hoping that we will know what to do.

WHAT DO PARENTS WANT?

ALTHOUGH a fair amount of research exists on the impact of parenting on college students, the literature contains virtually no information about what parents expect from the college experience. In an effort to make sense of the increasing contact we were having with parents, my colleagues Jim Krivoski and Don Kirts and I decided to investigate what parents of Lafayette College students expected the college experience to be like. We created an anonymous survey that has been given to the parents of incoming students since 1997. In 2000, we also sent an anonymous survey about their expectations to all incoming students, and we received 224 surveys back in which the mother, father, and student all responded. Lafayette College is a highly competitive liberal arts and engineering college of approximately two thousand students. Close to 90 percent of our students are white, and the majority come from affluent families who live primarily in the Northeast.

Not surprisingly, the majority of both parents and students described their relationships as close or very close. The more striking results of the survey are in the area of parental expectations about when and for what reason the college would notify them about their child's activities. We asked parents whether they expected the college to notify them in a number of different circumstances (for example: "I expect to be notified by the college when my child is found to be engaging in underage drinking"). This year, as in previous years, par-

ents were close to unanimous in their expectations that the college would notify them if their child had a major illness, was a victim of a crime, had a major psychological problem, violated a major campus disciplinary policy, or was having academic problems, and they were just a little less likely to expect to be notified when their child was using drugs or missing class. To a somewhat lesser degree, parents also expected to be informed if their son or daughter had an outstanding athletic achievement, had applied to study abroad, or was caught drinking underage. There were only four activities about which parents didn't really expect to be informed: when the student was performing in a theater or musical event, had a minor illness, had a conflict with a roommate, or was rushing a Greek organization.

Many parents' comments indicated that they supported the caretaking or protective interpretation of *in loco parentis*. One mother filled her survey with phrases such as "no excuses for not calling me" and "a must" after items about missing class, underage drinking, and using medical and psychological services. At the other end of the spectrum are parents such as the one who wrote, "They're adults—the school is not there as substitute parents." But ambivalent responses were probably among the most common, such as this vaguely threatening comment: "Yes, part of the college experience is to be away from home, living on your own, . . . but the parents must be notified if the 'child' is making poor choices. After all, without the *parents* the college would not exist! Right?" And the following response is one that I would characterize as magical thinking: "In some cases, it is my son's responsibility to inform us. Of course, if he did not, I would appreciate hearing from the school."

Not surprisingly, the students have somewhat different expectations of how often their parents would be notified about their activities. Overall, students were significantly less likely to expect that the college would be in contact with their parents. One student wrote, "I'm wondering what the college expects the involvement of parents to be. I personally think that when a student is 18, he or she should take full responsibility for themselves, since s/he will be legally considered an adult. I don't think the college should bring the parents into any situation without the consent of the student." But the following student's comment is flavored by the consumer

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mentality typical of many parents: "In my own situation, my college education is being paid for by my parents, and as long as they are supplying the money, they are allowed to have certain expectations of me. If I am in trouble or do anything that will result in failing or getting kicked out that will waste their money, they have a right to know."

Parents do not seem to have the expectation of involvement in their children's decisions. We were particularly interested in looking at how involved parents thought they would be in their children's decisions about alcohol and drug use. In fact, there was a very robust statistically significant difference between parents' responses about the amount of involvement they expected to have in students' decisions about using alcohol and drugs and the expectation that the college would inform them if their children were caught engaging in these activities. One parent gave a perfect illustration of this discrepancy: "I'm sure my son would discuss most of this with me before you even know, with the exception being if he became involved in drugs or heavy alcohol."

Unfortunately, parents tend to underestimate the degree of influence they have on their child's decisions to consume alcohol and drugs. In a 1997 study published in the *Journal of American College Health*, students were asked to list the health topics they most wanted to discuss with parents. Sex led the list, followed by drugs, alcohol, and HIV/AIDS. Students expressed a strong desire to talk with their parents as long as the conversations were marked by openness, honesty, mutual respect, and trust. It is especially disheartening, then, that so few of the parents in our study expected to be involved in the decisions their children made about these important health issues, choosing instead to delegate such education to the college. As one parent said: "Parents have a supportive role. They can make suggestions . . . but it is really the school that holds/has many of the answers. As a student goes away to college, the parent is allocating some of the parental role to the school—that's why you look for a school who cares, nurtures, fosters, and brings out the best in its students."

The results of the survey have opened our eyes to the degree to which parents fear for their children's safety and expect us to magically know what students are doing at all times. But we also became aware of the profound ambivalence and uncertainty that mothers and fathers are experiencing about the transition from parenting an adolescent to parenting an emerging adult. One parent wrote, "It's a very fine line for a parent to walk—encouraging and nurturing your child while not interfering. My expectation of Lafayette is to keep me informed of my daughter's progress and problems

(within reason)." Of course, defining *within reason* is exactly the problem we face!

THE FACILITATOR UNIVERSITY

BICKEL AND LAKE have proposed a model of the modern university that appears to address the needs of students to explore and take risks but also to be mentored and supervised; they call their model the "facilitator university" (p. 163). "When we think of a facilitator, we think of a guide who provides as much support, information, interaction, and control as is reasonably necessary and appropriate to the situation. A facilitator stands somewhere between a dominating parent and a pure stranger or bystander. The facilitator is not a parent, but does pick up on the idea that, for many students, familiar roles may be appropriate or even essential, particularly when it is the first time away from home at age seventeen or eighteen, and the student is thrust into an environment that is intellectually and emotionally charged" (p. 191).

What would a facilitator college or university look like? What would be its policies and procedures? What might be the form of faculty and staff interactions with students and their parents? The school might decide to enact a parental notification policy for alcohol violations because it recognizes that parental influence is a valued and underused resource for changing student behavior and because research is demonstrating, according to Leo Reisberg in *Chronicle of Higher Education*, that such policies appear to reduce the recidivism rate for such offenses. A facilitator university might assess whether it depends too heavily on eighteen- to twenty-one-year-old resident advisers to supervise their peers when they, too, are subject to the demands of emerging adulthood. Staff at such an institution might be keenly aware that any policy they enact will be too strict for some students, too lenient for others, and just right for yet another group. Whereas some students will crave the mentoring and supervision of adults, others will eschew it, but both responses may be normal for individuals in this age group.

At Lafayette College, we have decided that students can benefit if the important adults in their lives can work together to facilitate their healthy development. Both our Office of Parents' Programs and our Division of Student Life have been actively educating parents about the role they can continue to play in such issues as alcohol and drug prevention. In addition to our implementation of a parental notification policy for alcohol violations, we actively encourage parents to maintain a dialogue with their children. Our president speaks openly with parents during orientation about

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what they can do to prevent underage drinking, and members of the Student Life staff conduct educational programs for parents about alcohol and drug prevention and fostering good communication skills.

But we have also been spending more time educating parents about the limits of what they can expect from us. We notify parents about what information they are entitled to under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, and I have created brochures and a special parents' section of the Counseling Center Web site to provide them with information about laws regarding confidentiality. Even though our eighteen- to twenty-five-year-old students may not always act like adults, the law has given them many of the rights of adulthood, which both their parents and their institutions must respect.

At the beginning of this article, I quoted a mother who warned us that "learning by mistake is not an answer." Those of us who interact with students (other than our own children) on a daily basis may believe that they will make mistakes and that the result can be tremendous growth and insight. It is always easier to tolerate experimentation when the children belong to someone else! We are challenged by the conflicting expectations of students who believe that because they have turned eighteen they need no adult supervision or mentoring and parents who may be underestimating the capacity of their children to make their own decisions.

I think it is also possible that some of our strong emotional reactions to parental demands and criticisms are triggered by our feelings about our own parents. A younger professional, for example, may feel a challenge to his or her professional autonomy if a parent calls to make a request and subsequently demands to speak to that person's supervisor. But equally unnerving can be the call from a distraught parent who is seeking help for a son or daughter. When parents call my office to seek advice on how to help the son or daughter whom I

may never have met, I feel astonished that they would place such confidence in the advice of a stranger. To hear a mother or father express helplessness in the face of a child's addiction or academic failure may shatter our illusions that parents always have the answers. For those of us who are parents, such interactions may reinforce our own powerlessness to save and protect our children from all of life's ills.

Good parents grow along with their children, but this process is rarely smooth and linear. If we keep in mind that parents and children are struggling to redefine their relationships in the midst of enormous shifts in our economy and our culture, thinking of ourselves as facilitators of this process may both reduce our frustration and increase our satisfaction the next time we take the phone call from Mom or Dad.

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