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The New Trend of Parental Involvement in the College Admissions Process

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In an ideal world, it is said that a child will go through every phase of education from elementary school to middle school, from middle school to high school and ultimately, from high school to college. These children are molded to believe that college is their ultimate goal. For it is with this goal that they believe they will succeed in life. But where does this goal come from? In reality, one of the main reasons why this college dream is established is because of parental involvement.

Working in college admissions, I as the researcher have seen a range of parental involvement with students. There are the parents who are completely uninvolved, and then are the parents that are over-involved in their child's complete admissions process. After various encounters with students and their families, the researcher became curious about the realities that his students are currently facing. The trend of parental involvement has influenced the student's decision to select a school and major, ultimately negatively affecting their emotional stability throughout their undergraduate education. Based on the research, I as the researcher, developed recommendations for admission counselors to adhere to this trend.

Today's college-aged students are different compared to those of 20 years ago. These students, also known as the Millennials, are said to be the most overprotected generation in history (LeMoyne & Buchanan, 2011). With the change in modern technology and societal standards, parenting styles have changed. Technology has assisted parents in keeping an eye on their child at any given moment: a quick text message, a unique username to check their grades, or an app that locates exactly where they are geographically. Researchers know this phenomenon as the *electronic umbilical cord* (LeMoyne & Buchanan, 2011, p. 400).

Not all parents experience anxiety in regard to their children, but those that do are referred to as *helicopter parents* (Hoover, 2008). Helicopter parents emerge in the collegiate atmosphere – phoning professors to tell them a test was too hard, or emailing administrators to change a light bulb in a dorm room. What exactly leads the parents to get so involved in their child's small problems? The study revealed that this occurrence took place because students have actually asked for it. This trend is common among white students and their families. However, 30% of college-bound students are asking for more involvement from their parents – especially those who have lower standardized test scores and household incomes than compared to those students who are well-off in both their academic performance and finances. Admissions professionals acknowledge this dynamic shift and are now revising the process as one where they cater to families.

The college admissions process is constantly changing as student needs evolve. Technology tools encourage this shift. With students asking for their parent's involvement, parents are able to search the Internet and find exactly what they need to know. If they do not find the correct information or do not understand the information, a personal phone call or email is made to an Admissions Counselor; for Admissions Counselors are often coined as the *Institutional Gatekeeper*, representing the core values of the institution (Lange & Stone, 2001).

The rise in parental involvement in the admissions process could also be for other reasons as well: the families could have an influence because of their societal status such as alumni, presidential connection, and so forth. These parents are known to be extremely *pushy* with the admissions staff (Lange & Stone, 2011). Although the parent's involvement has an influence, counselors are there to help students make an informed decision. In reality, this decision is often about fit - would the student fit well and succeed at my institution? If for some reason the student does fit well, "the noblest goal is to help families find the institution that best matches the interests and abilities of the student, even if it is not one's own" (Lange & Stone, 2001, p. 22). A student's decision in selecting a college to attend is a major life event, but parents are now involved in the application process.

A second major decision these students face is deciding on a major or field of study, one that has an impact on career choices. The concept of parental influence on a student's field of study is interesting indeed, however studies (Workman, 2015) have failed to make the connection. The initial focus described by Workman (2015) was on how Living Learning Communities (LLC) and Academic Advising kept the participants grounded during their first year of college in order to select a major. Although, the study did not identify the influence that parents played on their students, the researcher was able to use his results to explore this phenomenon in depth, to uncover the substantial impact of family pressure. This pressure once again stemmed from being the child of an alumnus with potentially devastating emotional effects on students.

When parents get involved in their children's education, they believe that they are helping them succeed. However, some parental involvement is too much for the students to handle. Students may begin to lose sight of the impact that their parents have on their education and their emotional stability. The research literature reveals how different levels of parent involvement have an effect on student well being (LeMoyne & Buchannan, 2001; Schiffrin et. al., 2011). Students who have helicopter parents feel negatively about themselves and are prone to take medication for anxiety and/or depression (Schiffrin et. al., 2011). Also, parental over-involvement leads to student expressing an increased percentage of negative life satisfaction; students are not happy with the way their

life turned out, whether it be their major, sport or instrument they play, or what college they attend.

In examining studies on helicopter parents and the effect of parental involvement their students' well being, it is clear that there is a developmental change over the college years. This development change affects both parents and their children. Parental development occurs as they are preparing their child for college. Can they tolerate letting go or do they simply hold on and guide them through the college experience? The student development phase that they experience in the college admissions process serves as a transition to adulthood. For example, how parents engage with their children can be crucial at this particular time, and can affect the child's overall emotional stability. Anxiety, depression, and negative life satisfaction are what these students have said to report experiencing in college (Schriffin et. al., 2014). While students are experiencing negative life satisfaction, their parents do not comprehend the impact of their over involvement. As stated in a review of the literature, parents assume that they are helping their children, which may in fact be true, but often is not.

Based on the research, helicopter parents are increasingly common, and may result in no contact between the student and an admissions counselor. Today's admissions process is becoming a family affair; admissions counselors face this trend in the new context. Parental involvement plays an important part in the College Admissions process, whether the parent is involved or not. From an educator's perspective, one needs to take initiative in gauging interest of the parent as well as students. While working with the students' parents may be redundant at times, parents are typically the ones who are paying for their child's education. However, there are boundaries that Admissions Counselors need to establish with parents to help them prepare students for the independence that they will experience in college. Some of these boundaries include:

- Engage the student's interest during the first interviews to show them that you value their opinion
- Establish a sense of trust/comfort with the student so that it encourages them to work with you
- While parents will have their questions, make sure that the student's needs are priority
- Engage with parents especially during the financial aid season

Admissions Counselors in the United States have experiences these interactions for years and have need to recast this process as a positive experiences for all parties. Parental involvement can be beneficial, especially in the current years. With the shift of parenting in the millennial generation, counselors should expect

increasing involvement from parents. It is now that counselors need to work together to provide a familial experience during the College Admissions process.

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