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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 professional *Students 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. "Ofentimes 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 to do 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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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/cpalnews.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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