THE CHRONICLE
OF HIGHER EDUCATION®

Managing the 21st Century Parent

How colleges' partnerships with families can boost student success

TABLE OF CONTENTS

About the Author

GLORIA KUSHEL

Alina Tugend is a longtime journalist who writes about education and other topics for national publications including *The New York Times, The Atlantic, The Washington Post,* and *Kiplinger.* From 2005 to 2015, she wrote the award-winning biweekly "Shortcuts" column for *The New York Times* business section.

She is the author of *Better by Mistake: The Unexpected Benefits of Being Wrong*, and contributed a chapter to the book *Mistakes I Made at Work: 25 Influential Women Reflect on What They Got Out of Getting It Wrong*. See more of her work at www.alinatugend.com.

Cover illustration by *The Chronicle*

INTRODUCTION

College leaders use an often-repeated phrase to describe the relationship they aspire to have with their students' parents: They'd like to make parents partners, rather than adversaries.

But that's not an easy task at any time, and with sky-high tuition, widespread concerns about safety — including from Covid-19 and campus violence — and diminishing faith in the value of higher education, the relationship between parents and colleges may be more fraught than ever.

Everyone has heard about the overinvolved parents (yes, the "helicopter" or "snowplow" parents) who call a professor to find out why their son got a C or email the career office to find out why their daughter didn't get a coveted internship.

But that certainly doesn't cover all — or even most — parents. Many other family members — particularly those of first-generation, low-income, and historically marginalized students — all too often would like to engage more, but feel overlooked and shut out.

That leaves college leaders in a balancing act between a range of parents. At one end are those with high expectations — typically college-educated, affluent, and white — who treat the college like a department store in which they are the customers and the administrators are the help. At the other end are parents who have scant understanding of how higher education works, and feel particularly excluded by the unspoken and informal rules that govern everything from grades to social rituals.

Over the past half-century, a number of major factors have shaped relationships between colleges and students' families, which many institutions now recognize may include extended-family members and guardians.

First, the passage of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, in 1974, has largely prevented colleges from sharing student information with anyone, including parents, unless given permission to do so.

Changes in parenting styles and technological advancements, meanwhile, have also contributed to greater parent engagement. Ever since today's college students were in kindergarten, their parents have been able to track their classes, homework, and grades online while keeping in constant touch with them by cellphones. On top of that, parents have greater concerns about their children's mental health as a growing number of college students report feelings of stress, anxiety, or depression.

> Colleges have been forced to get creative, both in redirecting overinvolved parents and finding ways to best reach those who don't fit the mold of white, middle-, and upper-class college graduates.

Finally, the ever-increasing price of college is driving students and families into debt, and leading many parents to question the value of a college education as they worry about their children's economic future. To make up for a shortfall in public funding, public colleges have become more reliant on students who can afford to pay their full way and on parents who can donate time, money, and other resources. Most recently, the Varsity Blues scandal, in which wealthy parents bought their students' acceptance into selective universities, highlighted not just illegal bribery but also the many legal ways that parents can bend the system.

So colleges have been forced to get creative, both in redirecting overinvolved parents and finding ways to best reach those who don't fit the mold of white, middle-, and upper-class college graduates.

The establishment of parents' councils is one way that colleges encourage family involvement. In some cases membership on such councils requires a minimum donation that can run into thousands of dollars, leading to claims that parents must pay to play. About five years ago, Clemson University, seeking to be more inclusive, renamed its Parents Council the Clemson Family Advisory Board. No donation is required for membership.

One unexpected benefit of the pandemic, although it has wrought so much devastation, especially among low-income families and communities of color, is that it has helped colleges become more responsive. When orientation, family weekend, and similar activities went online, families that lacked the money or time to attend those events in person (or that lived overseas) had an opportunity to join in. Even as such activities resume on campuses, many college administrators plan to continue offering online family programs, to attract wider and more diverse audiences.

This *Chronicle* issue brief will help college leaders and those who work with parents to better understand the attitudes and concerns of family members. It will provide an overview of the challenges colleges face in meeting a wide variety of family needs. And it will offer strategies and initiatives that a broad range of institutions are using to truly make all parents partners.

As Amy Swank, director of parent, family, and new-student connections at Bowling Green State University, puts it: "We're no longer accepting just a student. We're accepting an entire support group."

GETTY

The Goal: Making Parents Partners

ABOUT A CENTURY AGO, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign started a Dads Association, followed a year later by a Mothers Association. That same year, Texas A&M University formed the first of many Aggie Moms' Clubs, after one mother complained there was "no entertainment, no culture, and a complete lack of women's influence" on the campus.

It was a way to bring parents into the university fold, with the hope that support — financial and otherwise — would follow.

The connection between colleges and families goes back generations, to an era when parents were supposed to cede control of their children to higher-education institutions, which

TAKEAWAYS

Many parents expect to be involved in their children's education, prompting more colleges to establish formal family programs.

Bringing families into the fold can help boost student success, but colleges must be explicit on when parents should step in or back off.

Many colleges encourage parents to help their children help themselves, by learning to tap campus resources.

Colleges must be kept informed if a student faces a mental-health or other serious crisis.

functioned in loco parentis. Nowadays administrators often feel they are relinquishing their authority to parents.

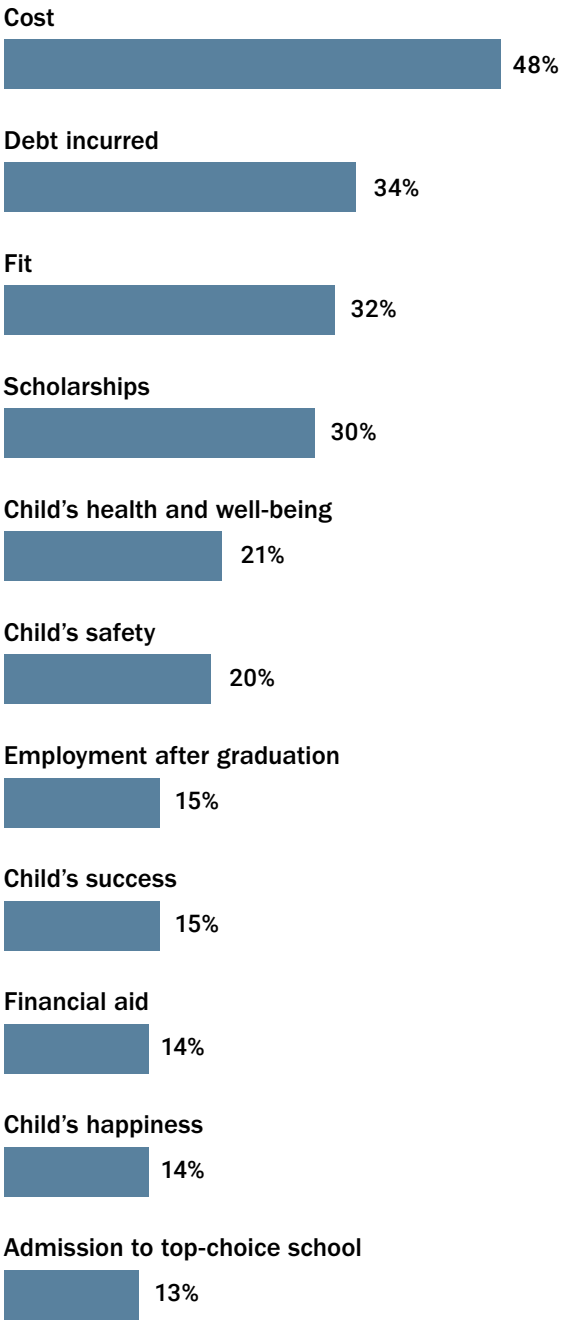
"As administrators we have to educate families that they are sideline cheerleaders," says Jennifer Forman Radwanski, director of parent and family partnerships at Stockton University, in New Jersey. "They can't run out on the soccer field and kick the ball."

BULLDOZER, SNOWPLOW, HELICOPTER

The term "helicopter parent," which was used as early as 1969, became common in the late 1980s as academic administrators increasingly found themselves dealing with parents they perceived as overly involved in their children's lives. Later, new terms evolved: snowplow parents, bulldozer parents, and, leaving the world of large vehicles, the parent as college concierge, as Laura Hamilton, a professor of sociology at the University of California at Merced, put it. "It's gotten to the point where parents often absorb the identity of the student," says Jon Boeckenstedt, vice provost for enrollment management at Oregon State University. "Every admissions officer can tell you that there are parents writing essays for students, parents completing applications for students, parents emailing admissions officers using the student's email account."

> "As administrators we have to educate families that they are sideline cheerleaders. They can't run out on the soccer field and kick the ball."

What Makes Families Most Anxious About College: Cost, Fit, and More



Note: Parents were asked to select their top three concerns. Fewer than 10 percent selected these categories: exposure to drugs or alcohol on campus, eventual admission to graduate school, and child's ability to make friends.

Source: 2020 Parent Survey Results, EAB

THE PARENT CONCERNS COLLEGES HEAR ABOUT MOST OFTEN

SAFETY

- How will you keep my child physically safe from sexual assaults, gun violence, and other potential acts of violence?

MENTAL HEALTH

- My child is stressed out or having mental-health problems. Whom can he contact?

ACADEMICS

- My daughter is struggling academically. What can the university do to help?

FINANCES

- How do we fill out a FAFSA, pay bills, find loans or scholarships, or keep our child in college if we lost some or most of our income?

DIET CONSIDERATIONS

- How does the meal plan work? My son has a food allergy or is kosher/vegetarian/vegan. How will he be accommodated?

MEAL-PLAN OPTIONS

- My son keeps buying food off campus because he hates the dining-hall meals, but we're paying for a meal plan. What are our options?

DORMS

- Can my child change dorm rooms? Can she get a single? She hates her roommate (or her roommate hates her).

INTERNSHIPS

- How does my daughter find an internship? Do you hold mock interviews and help write résumés?

SUPPORT

- Do you have specialized support for people of color, LGBTQ students, or first-generation students?

These are the stories that make the news. The Varsity Blues scandal, which saw a number of celebrities and other wealthy parents bribe their teenagers' way into top colleges, epitomized the stereotype of over-involved families that will do anything to push their children to success. While such families represent the outer limits of aggressive parental behavior, the story resonated precisely because it exemplified a certain type of entitled parent.

"The nature of the calls has changed over time," says Natalie Friedman, a former dean at New York City's Barnard College who established its Office of Family Engagement. "It used to be more seeking information, such as 'When is graduation? Where can we stay?' But now it's 'The water pressure in my kid's shower is bad. Fix it.'"

Parents' growing preoccupation with their children's college experience also reflects broader family and societal trends. "People are quick to blame parents, but I can tell you, students call their parents as much as parents call their kids," says Chelsea Petree, director of parent and family programs at the Rochester Institute of Technology, in Rochester, N.Y.

WHY PARENT INVOLVEMENT HAS GROWN

Among the factors that have led to this trend was the passage, in 1974, of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, or Ferpa, which largely prevents colleges from sharing student information with anyone, including parents, unless given permission by the student. Interestingly, the law was not intended to shut parents out, but rather reflected concern about transparency and record keeping at a time when Watergate was traumatizing the nation. The legislation initially focused on elementary and secondary schools to deal with the casual manner in which students' records — including teachers' comments and psychological assessments — could be widely shared. Higher education was included in the law as an afterthought.

HOW WELL HAVE COLLEGES COMMUNICATED WITH FAMILIES DURING THE PANDEMIC?

These numbers are from a fall-2020 survey of 3,392 parents and family members of students who were attending one of more than 75 institutions.

- **60 percent** of parents and family members felt colleges had taken the right steps for course delivery during the pandemic, down from 84 percent of those surveyed in the summer of 2020.
- **90 percent** said they had received information about Covid-19 separately from information their student had received.
- **77 percent** said they were confident they had all the information they needed.
- **46 percent** said they had participated in college presentations on Covid policies; 32 percent said such programs had been offered, but they had not participated.

Source: U. of Minnesota, Department of Family Social Science, and Association of Higher Education Parent/Family Program Professionals

Changes in parenting styles and technological advances have also played roles in families' relationships with colleges. Over the past several decades, parents and

children have become more intertwined in each other's lives, a transformation that has been accelerated both by cellphones, which allow constant communication, and by the expectation — set as early as kindergarten — that parents can easily view information online about their children's homework and grades.

"I hear students come out of class and get on their phones and say, 'Hi, Mom, I just finished my test,'" Friedman says. "Parents have been groomed and prepared to always be engaged with school, and then in college, that stops."

And in those child-parent conversations, parents too often hear only the negative news about failing tests and fights with roommates. So they start thinking their child's college experience is a cascading series of disasters, and no one is helping.

> "Parents have been groomed and prepared to always be engaged with school, and then in college, that stops."

Then there is the skyrocketing cost of college tuition and plummeting state support for public institutions, which means that a college education has likely become the most expensive investment families make aside from buying a house. They want to get their money's worth. At the same time, higher education is increasingly reliant on tuition money from affluent families to make up the shortfall.

Some 90 percent of students who attend four-year, private, nonprofit colleges get financial aid in the form of grants or loans, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. And most don't pay the full price of tuition.

Combine all that with many parents' fears that job opportunities are shrinking, and that even an education at an exclusive college won't necessarily spell career success. Then add in social unrest and the pandemic. It's a potent mix: "It's really scary to send kids away these days, and I can't blame parents who want to know what's going on and make sure their kids are safe and healthy," Petree says.

INTERDEPENDENT, NOT INDEPENDENT

Although there are many caveats based on race, gender, socioeconomic class, and other considerations, the broad research in the field of human development shows that family support is very important to students' success — but not too much of it. For example, one Florida State University study found that parental overinvolvement can lead to lower self-control — and academic burnout — among young adults. Other research has found that college students of overly controlling parents expressed greater anxiety and less satisfaction with life.

"Based on what we know about development, one of the key goals is to help students develop mature, interdependent relationships," says Kari Taylor, an assistant professor in the student-affairs-administration program at Springfield College, in Massachusetts. "There's this myth or misconception that we're aiming for independence, and we're not — we're aiming for interdependence."

Many college officials agree. Their goal is to work with families in a partnership. They want to make sure that families — or their support system, which could include a grandmother, aunt, older sibling, or family friend — are informed enough so if a student calls in a panic about something, they can suggest resources the child can pursue rather than leap in to fix the problem themselves. In other words, the response

to helicopter parents is not to give them everything or turn them away, but to offer "a flight plan," says Daphne Rankin, associate vice president for summer studies and special programs at Virginia Commonwealth University.

More colleges appear to be embracing that philosophy. There is very little data on how many have outreach programs specifically for parents and families, but such programs are on the rise, according to anecdotal information and a 2021 survey conducted by the Rochester Institute of Technology and the Association of Higher Education Parent/Family Program Professionals. Aheppp, as that group is known, is a professional organization for college administrators and others who work with students' family members. (While the survey was small, with 236 respondents, it is one of the only tools so far to track this issue. Almost all participants were from four-year institutions.)

In the survey, only 9 percent of responding institutions said they had a parent/family program before 2000, while 30 percent said theirs had been formed between 2016 and 2021. The rest established programs from 2000 to 2015.

Family programs are difficult to quantify, partly because they vary widely. Some colleges have a separate office or department devoted to family services, while others house such programs in another department. The survey found that about a third of the respondents worked full time in parent/family services, while 40 percent worked half time or less.

Colleges typically connect with families in a number of ways: through family orientations, family weekends, a parent/family website, an email newsletter, a family handbook, webinars, a guide or calendar, and a phone number and/or email address dedicated to parents Many also have parent Facebook pages, which in some cases administrators moderate.

Michele Gee, whose daughter is a sophomore at Rice University, in Houston, finds the parents' Facebook page immensely helpful for information and support, especially to see that other parents are going through the same thing she is.

"Last year was a difficult year, with the pandemic, and I found I was able to go to that group and get a bearing on things because letters from the dean would be posted almost immediately," she says. Letters to students might not make it to parents, she says. And when the page "goes south with opinions and rants, the administration comes in and reminds everyone of the policies, and that's respected."

But some colleges, including Bowling Green State University, have shut down their Facebook pages. They discovered that it's a "no-win situation," says Amy Swank,

COURTESY OF AMY SWANK

Amy Swank, director of parent, family, and new-student connections at Bowling Green State U., says parents should always reach out to the college if they have concerns.

ADVICE FROM COLLEGE STAFFERS WHO WORK WITH PARENTS

Following are some of the responses staff members provided when asked what advice they would give people entering the field of college-family relations. The comments were part of a 2021 survey of professionals at 236 institutions.

> "It's very important to take time to understand the emotions of families and to understand how identities are at play."

> "Conduct a needs assessment to understand your community and what they are looking for, and make sure to disaggregate your data to see how different populations have different needs. Also, listen to families."

> "Join with others at your institution."

> "Working with parents and families means working for our students."

> "Make sure that you stop and listen; sometimes families want someone to talk to and listen to their concerns or thoughts, then jump in to provide resources."

> "I am seeking to learn how to not spend too much time on a noisy few and maximize my time with what will benefit the most parents with the highest true need."

> "Try not to ride the emotional roller coaster with an upset parent."

> "Patience, and remember that it is about equity even though the parents that raise the most hell sometimes are of the most privilege, so pay attention to those parents who you don't know by name."

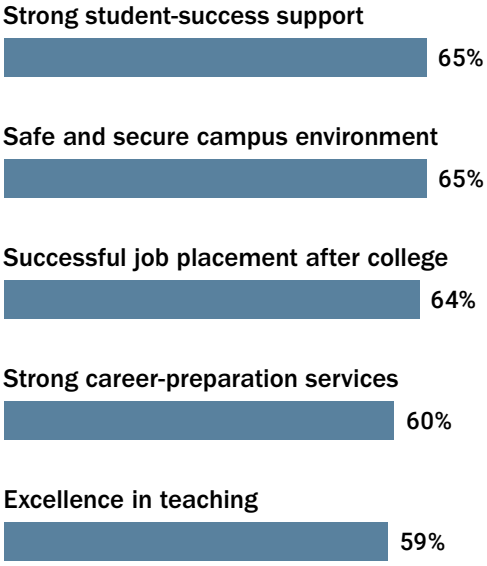
Source: Survey of Family Engagement and Services at Colleges and Universities, 2021

the Ohio university's director of parent, family, and new-student connections. If colleges try to remove inappropriate comments, they can be accused of censorship, she says. Such pages also tend to be breeding grounds for misinformation, forcing the moderator to spend lots of time correcting falsehoods. But even if an official site is shut down, some parents will often step in to start up their own.

HELPING STUDENTS HELP THEMSELVES

Colleges are trying to figure out not just what to offer but when. For example, Elizabethtown College, in Pennsylvania, is unusual in that it begins its family-information sessions the moment it receives a student's deposit. In a series of webinars, the first is called: "You've Deposited, Now What?"

Parents Say They'd Pay More for These Outcomes



Source: 2020 Parent Survey Results, EAB

More timely communication is good, but the right type of communication is crucial, say leaders of family programs. That means repeatedly reinforcing the message that parents should help their children to help themselves — and even giving parents a script.

Rob Kornblum says the advice he and his wife were given at Vanderbilt University, in Nashville, after the final goodbye to their son as a first year resonated strongly. "We walked across campus to an auditorium for a parent meeting, and one of the topics was when to intervene," he says. The dean suggested setting up a regular time to talk — maybe weekly — and discussed how to handle the inevitable depressed or panicked phone call. "He suggested saying, 'That sounds really hard. How are you going to handle it?'

"It really resonated with us," Kornblum says. He's seen plenty of parents asking questions on social media that they should have left to their children. One case, involving a mother seeking a haircut for her son, became an inside joke for his family. But, he says, "it's a fine line [between] wanting our sons to learn how to do things by themselves and for themselves and understanding they're still maturing and we want to help them."

Bowling Green parents leave orientation with a flier entitled "Conversations for the Ride Home." It includes a series of questions families and their new college students can discuss, including "How will you tell us if you make a bad decision and what will you expect from us in that situation?" "How often and in what way will we keep in touch?" "How will you know if you are struggling in college and what will you do?"

SUPPORT FROM A DISTANCE

When parents do call with concerns about their children, Rochester's Petree, who is also president of Aheppp's Board of Directors, says she never shuts them down, "but always encourages it to be a three-way

MICHAEL S. WILLIAMSON, *THE WASHINGTON POST*, GETTY IMAGES

Oscar Moreno-Tenorio gets a tearful hug from his proud mother, Yesenia Tenorio, as he moves into his freshman dorm at James Madison U.

conversation between staff, parent, and student." Even if a student waives privacy rights and staff members can talk to parents, she discourages that. "'Help your student understand how your insurance works and how to get a prescription, and questions they should ask the doctor when they get there. You can't go to professors' office hours with your student, but talk to them about what questions they should ask.' I try to reroute — 'You can be involved and make an important impact in your child's life, but it needs to look different, and there's a line.'"

That includes suggesting concrete ways family members can start a dialogue with their children, and being explicit on when they — and the college — can step in and when they can't. Petree says she is often very direct with parents. If they are worried about their child's social life, for example,

46%

of college professionals who work with parents said they had heard more concerns about mental-health issues in the past couple of years.

Source: *Survey of Family Engagement and Services at Colleges and Universities, 2021*

CRAIG F. WALKER, *THE BOSTON GLOBE*, GETTY IMAGES

Greg Lopatynsky has his graduation picture taken by his mother outside Marsh Chapel at Boston U.

she reiterates some of the activities the college offers. But she tells them, "your student is an adult, and we're not going to go to their residence-hall room and take their hand and bring them there."

One of the greatest areas of worry for families, and one of the most fraught for colleges, is mental health. In an emergency, of course, colleges intervene, but rarely is a situation black and white. Colleges say they welcome input from parents because they know their children better than anyone else.

Petree points to a recent email from a parent whose daughter's best friend had just committed suicide. Petree asked the parent to share counseling resources and an emergency number with her daughter. Petree also put an alert on a website called Tiger Concern Report, to warn staff members at the college. In such cases, for example, an RA may drop in to check on a student. Petree is glad the parents called: "We never would have known that she was going through this unless she reached out to us."

The Tiger Concern Report allows anyone on campus to post concerns about a student, such as a professor who notes that the student has suddenly stopped going to class. A team that includes counseling, advising, and residence-life staff members checks the information regularly.

If family members want a wellness check on their child, they can ask the college to have the public-safety department knock on the dorm-room door and essentially say, "Your mom's worried about you — are you all right?" Petree says. But if parents don't want the student to know they've called the college — which is not unusual — that's more challenging. Then a staff member can ask an RA to pop in but won't report back to the parents.

Swank, of Bowling Green, believes families should alway reach out to the college if they have worries. Bowling Green, which has about 19,500 undergraduate and graduate students, received 687 calls from families that were worried about their children's mental, physical, or academic well-being from January through November 2021. "And every single one of those students needed real support," she says.

One increasingly popular way to involve families is through a parents' or families' council. The composition and duties vary, but members often volunteer at college activities and play some sort of parent-leadership role on campus. They may be asked for a minimum donation, or, if they contribute a certain amount to the college, are automatically added to a council.

> "It is disappointing that any parent would suggest we support students based on contributions to the college."

As much as colleges try to keep parents informed, inevitably some things fall through the cracks. That was especially true during the pandemic's early months, when plans were changing on a dime and everyone — parents, administrators, faculty members, and students — was highly anxious. And when a troubling event occurs, it can leave a very sour taste.

One mother, who asked that she not be named because she didn't want to cause a backlash against her child, became frustrated while trying to sort out her student's living and dining situation at Colby College, in Maine, earlier in the pandemic. She was afraid her child's mild medical condition would be exacerbated by the type and location of her housing.

She says she contacted the housing and other departments — after her child had tried unsuccessfully — through multiple

emails and phone calls, and either was ignored or received brusque answers.

"I was told, 'We don't want to hear from you, we want to hear from the student,' but sometimes I think that's because it's easier to brush the student off," she says. The one person who seemed to care was the head of dining services, who gave out her personal cellphone number.

This mother believes that Colby has done a lot of things right during the pandemic, but wonders if her family would have received better service if it had joined the college's Parents Executive Committee, which requires a minimum donation of $5,000. "The whole thing was so upsetting," she says. "We felt so unseen and unheard."

Karlene Burrell-McRae, dean of the college at Colby, says her institution takes every student's concern seriously and spends significant time and resources on identifying solutions. But she says an important part of that process, especially when parents become involved, "is that students have shared with their families all the key information, so there are no misunderstandings."

Burrell-McRae adds that Colby supports students no matter their financial situation. "It is disappointing that any parent would suggest we support students based on contributions to the college," she says.

DOES MONEY BUY ACCESS?

Although most administrators like to talk about family involvement in lofty terms of student success and community relationships, the cold reality of money is always there. Colleges need families that not only pay full tuition but also can donate money, volunteer time, and offer connections for internships and careers.

"Most universities are looking to enroll wealthy students that have parents that are involved," says Hamilton, the UC-Merced sociologist, She is the author of *Parenting to a Degree: How Families Matter for College Women's Success* and co-author of *Paying for the Party: How College Maintains Inequality*. "Universities outsource a lot to affluent families for a lot of reasons, but one is to compensate for state budgetary deficits," she says. "As much as universities complain about helicopters, they also rely on helicopters."

Friedman, the former dean at Barnard, says it was very important that the college's office of family engagement not be housed in the development office, which is often the case. "We wanted this not to be tied to money, but to student engagement," she says.

In response to a question in the Aheppp survey about what role parent/family programs played in family fundraising, if any, 29 percent replied "no role, intentionally kept from fundraising." Another 21 percent said such programs played a "friendraising role"; 18 percent said they played a "direct role" in fundraising; 12 percent said they coordinated parent groups in relation to fundraising, and 12 percent said they provided parent information to fundraisers. In addition, 13 percent charged for parent council/association membership, with half charging under $100 and 20 percent more than $2,000.

One parent, who asked not to be named because he and his children have deep ties to Duke University, says it was responsive to several serious concerns he raised about security and housing only because he was a longtime donor. "It felt very corporate and transactional and not a place focused on the health and development of my children," he says. In response, he adjusted his giving priorities within the university.

Duke declined to comment.

Embracing families while keeping them at an appropriate distance is a delicate balance. Just about anyone who works in family relations has helicopter horror stories, and yet, many say, they are far fewer than one would think. "You have loud parents, and the loud ones stand out, but I feel like the media portrayal of the unreasonable parent is so unfair and so rare in my experience — and my entire job is to work with parents," Petree says.

"They really just want to make sure we're here."

MATT ROTH FOR *THE CHRONICLE*

Family members of Dahvae Edwards-Chew gather his belongings on move-in day at Morgan State U.

GETTY

Engaging Families of Underserved Students

AS COLLEGES SCRAMBLE to include more families in higher education, parents and other family members of first-generation and marginalized students all too often fall by the wayside

Nearly one-third of college students have parents with no college experience. But first-generation families aren't alone in being unfamiliar with navigating higher education or feeling alienated from it. Such obstacles also hinder families of other traditionally underrepresented groups such as Black, Latino, low-income, and rural students, as well as those with disabilities.

The disconnect starts at the beginning of the campus

TAKEAWAYS

As demographics shift, colleges are seeking more engagement with families of first-generation and underserved students.

Colleges can help by explaining unfamiliar terms, making family events and written materials more accessible, and demystifying the "hidden curriculum."

Family programs should reflect the fact that not all students are raised by middle- or upper-class parents.

Colleges must do a better job helping families navigate the ever-complicated financial-aid process.

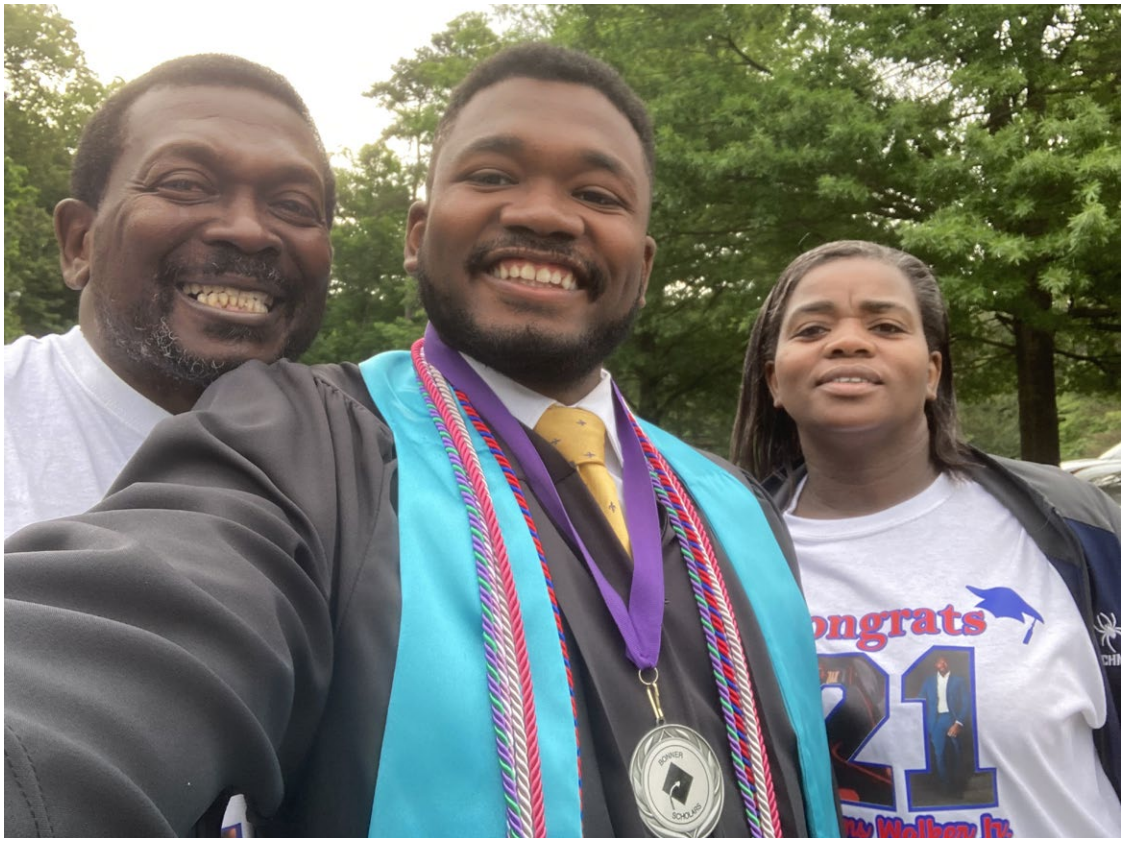
> "Orientation needs to be rethought. It ends up being a fall country-club visit for wealthy families."

experience, says Anthony Abraham Jack, an assistant professor of education at Harvard University. "Orientation needs to be rethought. It ends up being a fall country-club visit for wealthy families." Aspects of orientation such as how it is presented, and where and how long it is held, are unwelcoming to the families and students who need it most, he adds. "It only permits families of means to participate. Many first-generation, low-income students come to colleges alone."

Will Walker Jr., who graduated from the University of Richmond in 2021 and is now studying for his master's degree in higher education and student affairs at Indiana University at Bloomington, knows the feeling of going it alone. One of six siblings, he grew up in Winnfield, La., a small, economically distressed town. Both his parents have worked at a poultry-processing plant for decades; his father has risen to an administrative post, while his mother still works on the line.

"They were always very supportive and proud, but I went to college knowing I would be on my own," he says. "It was a very big welcome into independence."

Research has shown that about a third of students whose parents didn't attend



WILLIAM WALKER SR.

Will Walker Jr., a recent first-generation graduate of the U. of Richmond, celebrates with his mother, Ruby Dumars-Walker, and his father, William Walker Sr.

BEST PRACTICES FOR WORKING WITH FAMILIES OF FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS

- **Don't make assumptions about what parents know about the college process.** Provide a glossary of common terms; many websites offer helpful lists.
- **Is there a need for material/communication in a different language?** How many families would welcome – and feel more comfortable – if orientation or education sessions were in their native language rather than conducted with a translator?
- **Do any of the college staff or faculty members share backgrounds of the first-generation families you're reaching out to?** If those families come to campus, will they feel it's not really a place for people like them?
- **Invite first-generation faculty and staff members and families** who have been through the college process to speak at panels and sessions for first-generation families.
- **While the details of campus life are important, don't ignore the "hidden curriculum"** – the unspoken values and experiences that are crucial to a student's college life. Talk about how parents can help their students approach a professor or administrator with a problem. Discuss openly some of the issues first-generation students may face, such as being torn between their family and their studies, and how parents can respond.
- **Examine your institution and staff's attitudes toward first-generation students and families.** Are you unknowingly sending the message that students succeed despite their families instead of because of them?
- **Are you emphasizing independence over interdependence** and failing to consider different values and goals of other cultures and socioeconomic classes?
- **Tell the families of first-generation students that they should be proud of their children – and themselves!** Too often first-generation parents feel ashamed of their lack of knowledge about college and don't see the important work they have already done to help their student into higher education.

college leave college without earning a credential, compared with 26 percent of those whose parents had some college and 14 percent of those whose parents have bachelor's degrees.

Administrators are well aware of the need to reach out to families of first-generation and other underrepresented students. The most common initiatives include breakout sessions at orientation specifically for those families and maybe a special event at family weekend. Some offer Spanish translations of a page or two of their institution's website or of certain handouts, and may offer translation at orientation sessions. Others pay for low-income families to come to campus weekends and orientation events.

SEEING STUDENTS AS INDIVIDUALS

But colleges, especially four-year ones, often fall short for numerous reasons. First-generation and other underrepresented students are far from a monolith, yet too often they are referred to that way, rather than as individuals who arrive with a mix of experiences, needs, and abilities. In addition, those who run family and parent programs on campuses are often stretched thin, and the resources they do have tend to be focused on the more affluent families.

> "There needs to be a paradigm shift from viewing first-generation, low-income, and other marginalized groups as coming from a place of deficit."

Those families are not only the squeaky wheels, but also the ones who offer something many colleges desperately need — money and time.

Nonetheless, many staffers focused on college-family engagement want to do better and are trying to figure out how. "This is an area I personally struggle with because I'm not entirely sure how to get to those parents," says Chelsea Petree, director of parent and family programs at the Rochester Institute of Technology, in New York. "It's definitely a topic that people in my field are very concerned about, and are trying to get creative in offering better support."

19%

Share of freshmen at 4-year colleges who are first-generation students

34%

Share of first-generation freshmen at 4-year colleges who are Latina/o/x

Note: Survey defines first-generation as neither parent/guardian having any college experience.

Source: "The American Freshman: National Norms Fall 2019," Higher Education Research Institute, University of California at Los Angeles

Some say that a first big step would be for colleges to re-examine how they think and talk about first-generation and other underrepresented students and families.

"There needs to be a paradigm shift from viewing first-generation, low-income, and other marginalized groups as coming from a place of deficit — and that therefore the university needs to make up to those students what their parents can't give them in terms of knowledge," says Ashley Rondini, an assistant professor of sociology at Franklin & Marshall College, in Pennsylvania.

For so long, the idea of how best to support

student success, she adds, has been based on the needs of middle- and upper-class students whose parents went to college and who have family resources to draw on.

"A lot of institutions are so steeped in that model, it's almost invisible to them. So when students come from other kinds of families, it feels like their families are the obstacles — that students will do well despite the families they came from," she says. "And I don't think students experience it that way — many feel they are there to honor their families and their resilience and sacrifices they've made. So it creates a painful sense of dissonance." Rondini has conducted extensive interviews of first-generation students and their parents.

In a small but significant change, colleges are starting to use the word "family" rather than "parents." That is an important step in becoming more inclusive, many say, since low-income, Latino, Black, and first-generation students — more so than other students — might be relying for support on a grandmother, aunt, older sibling, or family friend rather than a parent.

DEMYSTIFYING THE 'HIDDEN CURRICULUM'

While there is certainly overlap between the needs of first-generation parents and those who have attended college, there are some key differences, says Cynthia Mosqueda, faculty coordinator for first-year success at El Camino College, a two-year institution in Torrance, Calif. Her goal is to elucidate for both parents and students the El Camino experience, which includes explaining what a major is, how credits work, and what it means to transfer to a four-year institution. Many families don't recognize that a community college can be a stepping stone to a university — something Mosqueda, herself a first-generation graduate of the college, easily grasps.

She and her parents didn't understand that she could go on to a university after attending El Camino. "Not all parents know there are multiple pathways" to a four-year college, she says.

> "If your child is one of two or three or 400 kids out of a mass of kids on a large campus, parents need to know that there's going to be a community of people connecting with them."

Enza Scardigno, whose older son was the first in the family to attend college, at Stockton University, in New Jersey, says one of the most useful items she received from the college was a list of terminology parents might not know. For example, she had no idea what a bursar's office was: "If they said, 'This is the money division,' that would be easier."

Some of the best models of such programs — which offer families a deep dive into what college is, how it works, and what their students need to succeed — are partnerships between a college and local schools or school districts. Arizona State University's WeGrad Family Education Network, formerly called the American Dream Academy, is one of the best known.

The program began in 2006, as the university was trying to figure out how to attract more community members, especially Latinos, says Alejandro Perilla, director of family programs at ASU and co-founder of the academy.

Administrators began to understand that one way was to get students academically and psychologically prepared years before they entered college, "and that begins with working with their families," Perilla adds.

WeGrad, which is funded by the university and participating school districts, is free to family members; it consists of eight-week, in-person courses that first-generation family members — largely Latino — attend for two hours weekly. There are separate programs for parents of elementary-, middle-, and high-school students.

The programs, now also available online, help families understand issues like grade-point averages, financial-aid forms, college costs, and the application process. They also offer advice on how students can find assistance and set goals. Over the past 15 years, some 60,000 family members have completed the program, which also helps the university to market itself. Research conducted by Arizona State in 2015 found that 83 percent of students whose families had completed the program went on to higher education and 20 percent attended ASU. Most of the students enrolled at local community colleges, Perilla says.

While Latinos are the largest group of first-generation students, college officials agree that they shouldn't be the only focus; it can be hard for parents of any underrepresented student to feel a connection. Dawn Person, director of the Center for Research on Educational Access and Leadership at California State University at Fullerton, has held special orientation programs for Black students and families both at Fullerton and at Cal State's Long Beach campus, where she used to work.

"If your child is one of two or three or 400 kids out of a mass of kids on a large campus, parents need to know that there's going to be a community of people connecting with them, looking out for them, and supporting them," Person says. People often feel more relaxed in these targeted orientation sessions and are more willing to ask questions, she says.

"If I'm in a room with African American parents, there is a different style that I'm going to use in delivering the information," says Person, who is Black. "I'm going to do more storytelling and more narrative. I'm going to use live examples of students who may have struggled, but then found their way with the support and the mentoring that they got from the Black community and from the staff on the campus." In addition, her programs focus on what might be of interest to that specific audience, she says. Should a student take a Black-studies class? Where is the Black Resource Center?

> "I would say to parents, 'You've got to adjust. They can come home for family dinners sometimes. But they can't be there every Sunday.'"

Colleges also should go to families rather than wait for families to come to them, experts say. Not only can travel be expensive and time-consuming, but family members can feel intimidated on campuses. "If the folks who are welcoming parents or who are working the front offices who most interact with parents — like financial aid, housing, or the registrar — are not representative of a diverse student body, and if they have no training in cultural competency and inclusive practice, the experiences of those families are not going to be positive," says Becca

Bassett, a Ph.D. candidate in education at Harvard. She also leads a college-success program that supports low-income, first-generation students of color from the Mississippi Delta, enabling them to attend and succeed in college.

Over and over, those who run family-engagement programs say one good thing to come out of the pandemic was the discovery that virtual programming allowed them to reach far more families than on-campus events could. They plan to expand such initiatives in the future.

Colleges are becoming better at demystifying the "hidden curriculum" — those unspoken and unofficial expectations and values that are so readily apparent to students whose parents went to college — for first-generation students. Now they must do the same for those students' families, says Jack, the Harvard professor and author of *The Privileged Poor: How Elite Colleges Are Failing Disadvantaged Students*.

TORN BETWEEN FAMILY AND COLLEGE

First-generation students often feel pulled between what is expected at home and what is expected on campus. They know their parents support them and take pride in their accomplishments, but those same parents might also wonder why their children are so busy despite taking only three or four classes. Why is it important to go to a lecture or a club, or to attend an event, that doesn't seem directly related to their studies? One first-generation student remembers her worried mother coming to campus to look for her one evening when she had stayed late to work on the college newspaper.

In an effort to remove the burden from the student, who may be torn between family and college, Person says she would tell Latino parents, "'Please know that your son or daughter will not be able to attend those Sunday events because on Sunday they've got a study group to prepare for their classes the following week.' And you see the parents look at me like 'What?!' And I would say to them, 'You've got to adjust. They can come home for family dinners sometimes. But they can't be there every Sunday.'" Having other first-generation parents or faculty members discuss what to expect and why — a strategy El Camino uses — can be hugely helpful.

One topic — financial aid — is a huge stumbling block in so many ways aside from actual financial concerns, potentially creating friction between children and their parents, and between parents and the college.

To apply for grants or loans, students may need to ask their parents for information the parents may be unwilling or unable to provide. Walker, the recent Richmond graduate, says Richmond was more communicative than other colleges in responding to his queries, but the process was still very complicated to navigate. "I was aware of where my parents kept certain things and knew what to look for. I'd say, 'I need you to give me your retirement paperwork, or something very specific on the mortgage.' These are also questions my parents didn't have a lot of answers to — these are things that had never come up before."

In addition, too often the first interaction between a college and a parent is a request for financial verification or documents on short notice. That can sow an atmosphere of anxiety and distrust, Bassett says. "This is a huge missed opportunity because it mirrors experiences lower-income families often have with other bureaucratic institutions which purport to help them," she says. Instead, colleges should use questions about finances as an opportunity to welcome families, explain how financial aid works, why the documents are needed, and ask if they have any questions. "That would start the relationship on a problem-solving front rather than as kind of punitive compliance interaction."

LEARNING TO ADVOCATE

Jack, a first-generation student himself, says colleges must have a better under-

standing of and cultural context for the lives of parents of underrepresented students.

"They are just as supportive as other parents, but the advice they pass on to their children is often advice they follow to keep their job as a security guard, janitor, or clerk," he says. "One student's father was a handyman, and he told her how to get ahead is to 'keep your head down and do good work.' It was how he kept his job as a manual laborer, by not making a fuss. Parents can be just as involved and as invested in their children, but their advice is misaligned with how students should act."

That's exactly what happened to Laura Hamilton, a professor of sociology at the University of California at Merced — where 71 percent of students are first-generation — in one of her large lecture classes. A first-generation student received an A on her first test and then failed the second. Hamilton didn't see the grade for a few weeks and then spoke to the student, who said both she and her mother had cried about it but didn't know what to do. The failing grade turned out to be the result of a computer glitch.

"It was one of the moments where I realized the student and the parent assumed the professor is the authority in the class and shouldn't be questioned," she says. In her previous job, at a university with a much smaller first-generation population, students didn't hesitate to insistently question a grade.

As a result of the grading incident, Hamilton now tells students at the start of every semester that they should approach her with certain concerns. She also explains that "this is one way privilege works — students harangue professors until they get a better grade. I'm not saying harangue me, but if something doesn't look right, let's have a conversation."

Too often, Jack says, colleges believe that low-income parents or first-generation family members won't become engaged. But the reality is, they "just don't know the agenda. Lower-income parents can be just as involved."

That's certainly true for Scardigno, the mother of two sons at Stockton University. When her older son, Michael, 20, started at Stockton in the fall of 2020, she and he called counselors to get answers to questions like where to pay, when to sign up for classes, and how to choose a major. "Someone who went to college could say, 'Oh, you need to do this,'" she says. "I don't know the terminology. I don't know what you should do. The counseling not only helped him; it helped me help him." While Scardigno agrees that students need to learn to advocate for themselves, she said her older son, unlike her younger, doesn't naturally do that, and it will take time.

If Scardigno didn't know where to call, she would start with the university's switchboard and always received prompt answers to her queries. She had different experiences when she had questions for other colleges her son was considering: She was simply shut down and told that her son would have to call himself.

"I got suspicious because if you're giving me the runaround, are you going to do this to my son?" she says. Scardigno has since joined Stockton's Parent and Family Association, which does not require a minimum donation.

La'Tonya Rease Miles, dean of student affairs at Menlo College, near San Francisco, believes colleges must re-examine their assumptions about family programs. Rease Miles, who established first-generation programs at UCLA and Loyola Marymount University, says colleges should no longer assume that the average parent is a four-year-college graduate with resources, but a first-generation family learning the many complexities of higher education in general and of their child's experience in particular.

"If we do that, we're actually going to benefit everyone," she says. "Because then we don't make assumptions of what people know or don't know."

PAT DELL'AQUILA

From left, Morris, Michael, Vito, and Enza Scardigno gather for a family photo. Enza Scardigno says one of the most useful items she received from Stockton U., where Michael and Vito are students, was a list of terminology parents might not know.

Let Parents Be Parents

By ERIC JOHNSON

I don't remember much about college orientation. But I remember arriving there.

It was a weekday, which meant taking time off from my summer job to make the short drive to campus. As my Jeep rattled to a stop, I looked around at a sea of late-model minivans and SUVs. Whole families were chattering and unloading luggage, toting overnight bags to the shuttle buses that would ferry us all to the student center and an overnight stay in a dorm.

I settled into a seat, looking around at my future classmates sandwiched between their moms and dads. Eavesdropping on conversations about classes and roommates and the merits of double-majoring, I was overcome with a single, bewildered thought: What on earth are all of these adults doing here?

My parents are loving, supportive people. They were enthusiastic about the whole going-to-college thing, even though they'd never done it themselves, and they sent me off with all the blessings and good will a kid could want.

And still, it never occurred to them — or to me — that they ought to be involved in college.

They had full lives and demanding jobs and a whole additional teenager still at home. And now, thanks to me, they had university bills to pay. Asking them to help manage the logistics of my new life would have been insane.

Colleges expect too much of parents, first-generation and otherwise. Educational institutions' instincts are to educate, to engage, to command interest and attention.

And while this is wonderful in the classroom or the research lab, it is unhelpful when applied to the mechanics of college life. Especially at the public institutions charged with serving a large percentage of low-income and first-generation students, the enrollment experience is littered with dense instructions on how to pay bills; long presentations on how to register for parking; downloadable guides with step-by-step instructions for logging into the clunky portal for Residence Life! (which is, of course, different from the clunky portal for class registration).

> First-generation parents don't need more instruction on the college process. Colleges need to require less of it.

First-generation parents don't need more instruction on the college process. Colleges need to require less of it.

My bank's online-payment system does not include a webinar or an orientation session; it just works. My car is infinitely more complicated than my campus parking pass, but I figured out how to operate the car without paging through the manual. It was designed well.

Academic bureaucracy and decentralized governance make the picayune hurdles of

campus life seem inevitable. But we can put our shoulders to the wheel when the incentives are right: fund-raising websites tend to be quite sleek. Nobody asks donors to go through a five-part tutorial before they can key in a credit-card number.

We ought to apply that same zeal for simplicity to all of the functional pieces of campus life. There's virtue in making coursework a challenge; there is no defense for making class registration a crucible. Drawing a firm distinction between the educational mission and all of the administrative hurdles to get there is key to removing barriers for first-generation students and families.

Consider language. We expect college students to read at a college level, to tackle challenging syntax and glean meaning from richly layered text, dense with allusion and idiom. And that's a fine expectation — for the classroom. It is a disastrous expectation when applied to a list of meal-plan options.

Most news organizations aim for prose at a middle-school level. Marketing firms (and fund-raising offices) aim even lower. That's not because they assume people are stupid, but because ease and accessibility are important when serving a diverse audience.

People have a wide range of education levels and limited time to devote to instruction manuals. We make better use of that time — and communicate a warmer sense of hospitality — when we make our processes easier.

It's all well and good to proclaim, "The University is firmly committed to accessibility" (19th-grade level), but so much better if "We work hard to make college affordable" (fourth-grade). The language we use in policy papers is not the language for speaking to parents.

This may sound like small potatoes, but it adds up. I attend financial-aid nights across my state every year, watching as overworked parents sit in cold high-school cafeterias, straining at the complexities of direct and indirect costs, net-price calculators, grants and subsidized loans, debt projections, and repayment plans. Meanwhile, the reps at for-profit schools arrive with cheerful promises and a sign-on-the-dotted line ease.

That's what we're up against. The places that entice large numbers of first-generation students are the places that ask little of their parents; that speak in plain terms; that recognize the value of targeted marketing and well-designed user experience to ease the process of enrollment.

To make life easier for first-generation parents — all parents, in fact — let them keep the role they have. Preach the importance of college, and celebrate the value of what their kids are doing. But don't expect parents to become expert advisers on higher education.

Offering care and encouragement as your child enters a new world is a herculean task. It ought to be enough.

Eric Johnson is director of editorial strategy for the College Board and a speechwriter and policy strategist for the University of North Carolina system. He previously worked in the Office of Scholarships and Student Aid at UNC-Chapel Hill.

This essay was originally published in The Chronicle of Higher Education *on February 5, 2017.*

GETTY

How 3 Colleges Connect With Families

COLLEGES RELY on a variety of strategies to connect with students' parents and other family members. Among them: webinars, newsletters, web portals, financial-aid workshops, clubs, affinity groups, orientation sessions, and virtual and in-person events. This section explores how a community college, a large public university, and a small liberal-arts college are developing family relationships.

One common factor: All three institutions have continued to evaluate their programs to determine how to reach parents more effectively. To that end, some have added new programs, set new priorities, or changed their organizational structure.

TAKEAWAYS

Strong family programs can give parents confidence that college is a good investment.

Financial-aid workshops, web portals, and other tools can empower parents of first-generation students to support their children.

Colleges should continually assess family programs – a goal that prompted one institution to offer orientation several times a year instead of once.

Materials designed for family programs should use accessible and inclusive language.

EL CAMINO COLLEGE

El Camino College, a public community college, has added new programs for families of first-generation students, along with orientation sessions throughout the year.

A Community College Brings First-Generation Families Into the Fold

Several years ago, Cynthia Mosqueda, faculty coordinator for first-year experience at El Camino College, and her colleagues began reading research by the University of California system on its first-generation students. They were then invited to a conference on the subject held at the University of California at Los Angeles.

"We got a lot of great information, and we thought, this is an initiative that we need to bring back to our college," Mosqueda says.

The community college, in Torrance, Calif., had some programs for first-generation families, but with about half of its approximately 20,000 students identifying as such, it needed ever stronger offerings, Mosqueda says. With vigorous backing from college leadership, El Camino began a number of new initiatives.

It decided to offer not one, but three

separate orientations for parents at the beginning of the fall, winter, and spring semesters, because students can enroll in the college at any of those times. About a quarter of first-generation families have been attending those sessions, but the number has been growing over the past several years, Mosqueda says. The last ones were on Zoom because of the pandemic.

The college also distributed a survey to all faculty members to see how many were themselves first-generation graduates. About 180 out of 450 full-time faculty members were the first in their families to go to college. Some of them now participate on collegewide first-generation panels that include staff members and students, and some also speak at events directed to first-generation families.

Darrell Thompson, a professor of English at the college, was a first-generation college student. His father, a city-maintenance worker, and his mother, a 411 operator, knew nothing about higher education, and he struggled to figure it out on his own. He started at El Camino but kept dropping out, taking six years to finish the two-year program. He then transferred to a four-year university and completed his bachelor's and master's degrees.

> "How can we empower the parents with resources and tools and strategies to support their son or daughter through their academic journey?"

Thompson, who is co-director of the first-year experience program, says one of the first things he does is tell his students his own first-generation story and reassure them that it's OK to fail. "I have a raft of F's on my transcript, and I'm a college professor — it's a hiccup," he says. "It's OK to fail and it's not the end — I give them the ammunition to talk to their parents about this."

Because understanding financial aid is crucial for families of El Camino students, the college offers a number of programs. They focus, for example, on how to maintain eligibility for financial aid and how to understand the difference between grants and scholarships.

"Those have been very successful in ensuring students maintain a good academic standing," Mosqueda says.

During the pandemic, the college started offering workshops for families who lost all or some of their income after submitting their financial-aid forms. In some cases families work with a college financial-aid adviser to start a loss-of-income appeals process.

Among the most common questions from parents are whether financial aid can transfer to a four-year university along with their student, and how the transfer process works. Explaining to parents how they can help their students navigate the college process is also an important goal, Mosqueda says, and in that area, first-generation faculty panels are particularly helpful. "That's part of the work that we're doing — how can we empower the parents with resources and tools and strategies to support their son or daughter through their academic journey?"

PBS highlighted El Camino's program for first-generation students in November 2019 as part of its program Inside California Education.

Mosqueda wishes El Camino had started some of these initiatives earlier. It's clear, she says, that parents really want to be involved. "We're providing the space for first-generation families that they might not have had in previous settings. And to me, that's been the most important thing."

CRAIG MAHAFFEY

Eric Keller (right), chairman of the Orientation Committee of the Clemson Family Advisory Board, speaks with a new student and her family. Volunteer board members aim to bring a family voice to orientation events.

A Big Public University Rethinks Its Family Outreach

In 2014, Clemson University was working to build a more robust parent/family program. It started by stepping back to see what already existed and what changes were needed.

The university hired Paige Kegley to fill the newly created position of associate director of student transitions and family programs. It was the first time Clemson had hired a full-time person for that role, and Kegley started by taking a hard look at the university's communications with families. Were people using inclusive language, avoiding student-affairs jargon, and reaching out to diverse types of families — focusing not just on race and ethnicity, but also, for example, reaching military veterans and out-of-staters? And could families get information easily?

Clemson also carefully rethought its parents' council, renaming it the Clemson Family Advisory Board to signal that it represented a broad range of family members, Kegley says. She helped create a membership application that she hoped would attract a diverse group. For example, one question is: "What representation of students and families do you believe you would feel comfortable advocating for?" It mentioned first-generation college, LGBTQ, disabled, military, and fraternity and sorority groups, among others.

The idea, Kegley says, is that "people have very different ideas of diversity, and some see it only as race. We give examples to help them use a larger lens. Also, if that question really turned someone off, it might not be a good fit. We want people to know they're not just the voice of their student, but should be collectively thinking of all students."

Family Advisory Board members are also required to attend an annual diversity-training program, which takes place at one of the board's quarterly meetings.

The family-program office has also doubled the number of its newsletters from five to 10 a year, created a family handbook, and revamped the parent-family calendar. The calendar now includes information on what parents can expect throughout the year and conversations they can have with their children.

> "Our philosophy is, we'll either tell you the answer or we'll tell you who to call."

While Clemson's family board does not seek donations, it is not unusual for colleges to require them in exchange for sitting on parents' or families' councils. Other Clemson boards that include current and former parents and alumni do seek donations: The Executive Council of the vice president for student affairs asks council members to commit to an annual gift of $25,000, while the Student Affairs Development Board suggests a donation based on its members' financial position.

In 2019, Clemson's family-programs office was consolidated with other departments to create the Center for Student Leadership and Engagement, says Kryssa Cooper, director of corporate and community engagement for Clemson's division of student affairs. (Kegley has since taken on another role at the university.) The name change reflects "the work done by the center to serve our primary stakeholders — current students," Cooper says.

Clemson is not alone in shifting its family program. A 2021 survey conducted by the Rochester Institute of Technology and the Association of Higher Education Parent/Family Program Professionals found that 39 percent of responding colleges said they had changed the reporting structure of their family/parent programs in the previous two years. The most common shift was moving the program under a different department or individual.

Also in 2019, Clemson established a family portal that can be accessed through its website; the university can track data, for example, on who has opened newsletters. All family communications are put through readability software, with the goal to have readability at a fifth- or sixth-grade level — something that can be tough when discussing complicated issues such as FAFSA, says Josh Barnes, the student-leadership center's executive director.

Through the portal, parents can join different communities and request targeted emails from the university by choosing such topics as financial aid and bills, athletics, and career issues, among others. The portal was instrumental during the early months of Covid-19, Barnes says, in delivering information to parents in real time.

"Our philosophy is, we'll either tell you the answer or we'll tell you who to call," he says.

Here are some tips that Clemson found helpful in its efforts to better engage families:

- Become aware of what programs and events your campus is already offering to students. Can they incorporate families?
- Set the tone very early with any parent/family volunteers.
- Cultivate patience. Recognize that some things will take a lot of time.
- Continuously evaluate what you are doing and how you can improve.

COURTESY OF ELIZABETHTOWN COLLEGE

New students and their families attend an orientation event at Elizabethtown College.

A Series of Webinars Keeps Parents Better Informed

Elizabethtown College wanted to engage parents more deeply in the college-going process, and to involve them sooner. It found that webinars were a way to accomplish both goals.

The private college in rural Pennsylvania has about 1,700 undergraduates, of whom 96 percent receive financial aid. It began offering webinars directed at parents in the fall of 2019, and rebranded them as Jay Chats in 2020. (The college's mascot is the Blue Jay.)

Families are invited to the first webinar shortly after they make a deposit for their child to attend. In May 2021, the first Zoom session for parents — called "You've Deposited, Now What?" — was led by peer mentors and by Stacey Zimmerman, director of leadership and new student/family orientation. A follow-up session took place in September, on "What to Expect on Move-In Day." About 76 percent of family members of first-year students either joined the video live or watched the recording afterward, Zimmerman says.

The college held five more programs in the fall, including one on "How We Can Both Support and Encourage Your Student to Be the Best." The chats, hosted by Zimmerman, featured student-life staff members and student leaders and are available online. Parents, happy to have administrators available, may ask questions that are

unrelated to the topic at hand during the chats, but that's OK with Zimmerman.

"We are growing into a generation of parents who are really tech-savvy and used to that instant gratification," says Keri Straub, Elizabethtown's director of marketing and communications. "This was a natural progression in our communication plans with parents, a way to say, 'You can feel even more connected to the investment you made for your child's education.' We want our parents to be just as much a network of support as we are."

> "We want our parents to be just as much a network of support as we are."

Zimmerman says students are sometimes more likely to reach out to campus resources if their parent gives them the information rather than if they simply hear it at a student event. "It's a concerted approach to involve everyone in the family in helping the student succeed," she says.

Allison Miller, whose youngest son is a first-year student, attended most of the Jay Chats and found them useful both to learn more about the college and to ask more-specific questions. Miller's two older sons went to different colleges, none which offered similar webinars, so she was pleasantly surprised by the Jay Chats.

Such webinars work best in the evening after the dinner hour, Zimmerman says, and are capped at one hour. The chats also save the college money because they enable Elizabethtown to mail parents far less material than in the past. An added bonus: Parents often seem more comfortable asking questions online than in person, she says.

To that end, in June 2021, when Elizabethtown's orientation was a hybrid affair of in-person and online events, families were encouraged to text questions, which is less intimidating than standing up in a room of 300 people as someone brings you a microphone, Zimmerman says.

On move-in day, Elizabethtown sends parents off with tissues, a Mars bar (a Mars plant is down the road), and other goodies in a reusable college-branded bag.

A FINAL WORD

Parenting is a messy and complex business, so it's no wonder that dealing with parents can be equally messy and complex. Now more than ever, families are spending huge amounts of money to educate their children, often with burgeoning doubts that an expensive education will spell success.

There is no question that some parents drive administrators crazy with their demands and myopia about their own child, ignoring the college's obligations to the greater community. And it's clear that in some cases, money plays a role — which families have it, who donates it — in colleges' efforts to focus their family outreach.

But a growing number of colleges appreciate that they can help parents, students, and themselves by neither pushing families away nor letting them run roughshod over administrators and faculty members. The goal is to guide families so they can help their children help themselves.

Many colleges also recognize that they must re-examine their interactions with families to ensure they understand the best ways to speak with those who are less familiar or comfortable with higher education. The pandemic provided an unexpected push in this area as colleges were forced into virtual — and therefore more inclusive — communication.

> The goal is to guide families so they can help their children help themselves.

"I don't want to lose some of those benefits that we've learned over this past year," says Chelsea Petree, director of parent and family programs at the Rochester Institute of Technology. "I want to make sure we're still being creative, and make sure that we're engaging all parents, not just ones with the capacity to come to campus."

From breaking news to key insights to real-world advice, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* is dedicated to serving academic leaders and professionals. Our newsletters, subscriptions, special reports, virtual events, and exclusive data projects provide a comprehensive view of the latest trends and critical issues affecting academe. For more than 50 years, higher-education professionals from around the world have trusted *The Chronicle*'s in-depth reporting and analysis to understand their world and make informed decisions.

THE CHRONICLE
OF HIGHER EDUCATION®

THE CHRONICLE
OF HIGHER EDUCATION®

1255 Twenty-Third Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20037

202 466 1000 | Chronicle.com

CHE-R-NRM-21-01-P