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# NOT HELICOPTERS BUT ALLIES: PARTNERING WITH PARENTS TO BETTER SUPPORT STUDENTS

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By

**Marjorie Savage**

Education Specialist, Department of Family Social Science,  
University of Minnesota

# AUTHOR

## **MARJORIE SAVAGE**

Education Specialist, Department of Family Social Science, University of Minnesota

Marjorie Savage, Education Specialist in the Department of Family Social Science at the University of Minnesota, has developed nationally acclaimed parent/family programming centered on communication and technology. She is a frequent speaker and consultant on the topic of family-college relations, both nationally and internationally. She has written numerous articles and chapters on the topic and is the author of a book for college parents, *You're on Your Own (But I'm Here If You Need Me): Mentoring Your Child During the College Years*, Simon & Schuster Fireside Edition. She is also co-author of the ASHE Higher Education Report, *Parental Involvement in Higher Education: Understanding the Relationship Among Students, Parents and the Institution*.

# Table of Contents

<b>1: THE OPPORTUNITIES YOU MAY BE MISSING</b>	13
<b>2: UNDERSTANDING THE PARENT'S PERSPECTIVE</b>	18
<b>3: FAMILIARIZING PARENTS WITH CAMPUS RESOURCES</b>	24
<b>4: HELPING PARENTS UNDERSTAND NORMATIVE STUDENT DEVELOPMENT</b>	31
<b>5: HELPING PARENTS UNDERSTAND WHEN TO STEP IN, WHEN TO STEP BACK</b>	38
<b>6: DEVELOPING AN AFFINITY FOR THE COLLEGE</b>	44
<b>REFERENCES</b>	54
<b>APPENDIX 1: FIRST STEPS FOR THOSE NEW TO PARENT/FAMILY PROGRAMMING</b>	56
<b>APPENDIX 2: SAMPLE SURVEY</b>	63
<b>APPENDIX 3: TRANSLATING STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES TO PARENT LEARNING OUTCOMES</b>	82

# 1: THE OPPORTUNITIES YOU MAY BE MISSING

While some colleges are seeking positive ways of managing parent involvement throughout the college years, others have established farewell rituals near the start of a student's first term to deliver the message that parents are expected to let go and step back. These separation programs range from formal ceremonies like the "Parents Parting Ceremony" at Morehouse College to workshop sessions on "Letting Go" during orientation or move-in days at other institutions.

## Not Just About Letting Go

Introducing programming that recommends parents "let go" may send a clear message that the institution expects mothers and fathers to step back, but there is no evidence that parents are less likely at these institutions to refrain from contacting their student or the staff. Indeed, this approach (especially if adopted in isolation from a more holistic strategy for parent engagement) may actually impede many of the beneficial opportunities to leverage parents as key resources in promoting the academic success of your students.

Parents can be invited to play a key role in the student's college experience—if that role and the relationship between parent and college is clearly communicated and well managed. It's critical to find appropriate and intentional ways to leverage parents as allies in improving the academic success of your students.

Parents, more than any official at your institution, are in a better position to identify early warning signs, provide encouragement for at-risk students, and offer meaningful support for freshmen navigating their first term. With their buy-in and collaboration, your staff can make critical interventions when students are struggling, which will make a difference in student retention and on-time graduation rates.

## The Benefits of Working with Parents

The purpose of working with parents is not to make parents happy. A partnership with families provides positive outcomes for students and for the institution. At colleges and universities around the country, administrators and staff have come to see that family involvement has a positive impact on the educational and developmental outcomes institutions are setting for their students. In many cases, parents are not only supporting higher education goals for student achievement, but also helping institutions meet those goals. They often are able to deliver our messages better than we can in several ways:

- When parents understand the information colleges and universities are sending to students, they can reinforce those messages at the optimal times in a student's life; staff on campus may not know when a student is in crisis or when mental health issues are developing, but parents can read the clues and take action at critical points.
- Parents add value to institutional messages based on the student's individual history and family values; the college or university does not have access to a student's personal history as a context for predicting areas of concern and for framing messages.
- Parents can intervene in situations wherein the college or university cannot, such as physical and mental health issues, or financial difficulties the student is facing.
- Because they know their student's personal background and past history, parents can also help your institution deliver important safety messages concerning alcohol, drugs, peer pressure, and campus safety.

Although it is difficult to separate the impact of parental involvement during the college years from all other forms of student contact, there is evidence that parental support makes a positive difference. For K-12 students, parental involvement has been linked to multiple positive outcomes: higher grades, higher scores on standardized tests, more social competence, less substance abuse, enrollment in college, and greater participation in out-of-school activities (Harvard Family Research Project, 2007). At the college level, the 2007 National Survey of Student Engagement found that when students talk frequently with parents and follow their advice, they are more likely to engage in campus activities and are more satisfied with their academic experience. At my own university, a “leaver’s survey” showed that among students withdrawing from the university during their first year of enrollment, there was only one consistent characteristic: their parents had not attended the parent orientation program before the student started school.

Most parent/family program professionals can cite their own stories about students who have improved their grades or social lives because of well-timed parental involvement; instances wherein a student remained in college because a parent intervened; and examples in which a student’s health or even his or her life was at stake, and family involvement made all the difference. I recall one instance when a father contacted the parent office to ask if someone would check on his daughter. He was unable to reach her, and she had seemed distraught and depressed when they talked earlier that day. A community adviser checked on the student and discovered she had taken multiple pills in a suicide attempt. Medical intervention saved her life—because university staff members responded to a parent’s concern.

## 4 Outcomes for Parent Programming

Over the past decade, many colleges and universities have cultivated learning and development outcomes for students, and a next step for many institutions included establishing outcomes for parents. Families today are accustomed to outcomes. Throughout the K-12 years, they

are introduced to benchmarks and outcomes-based education. At the college level, they continue to expect clear communication about what students will accomplish and what the end result will be from the college investment. Rather than establish barriers for families when their student begins college, your institution can set specific outcomes that will guide you—and parents—in managing communications and involvement. With defined goals for working with parents and other family members, institutions find they gain the benefits that parents can provide with far fewer challenges related to perceived intrusiveness or confusion about what is appropriate parental involvement.

By considering first where parents can be helpful to the college or university, where parents feel an obligation to be involved in their student's life, and what the student actually needs from family, institutions can set clear boundaries and help parents understand their changing roles, not only when their student starts college, but also as the student progresses deeper into his or her college years. Most schools, when developing a list of "Desired Outcomes for Parental Involvement," share similar objectives. With an ultimate goal of helping parents support their student's success, outcomes typically center around four major points

1. Familiarizing parents with the resources available to their students and to themselves
2. Helping parents understand normative student development and the typical college student experience
3. Assisting parents in understanding when and how to empower their student to make independent decisions and take responsibility, and when to step in to help their student
4. Developing an affinity among parents for the institution

Each of these four outcomes can define action steps that identify what parents should know and do.

## What's Next

In this book (Chapters 3-6), we will offer practical strategies for influencing each of these outcomes. And in the Appendices, we'll offer supplemental resources to help you either get started or improve your existing programming, including:

- First steps for those new to parent/family programming
- A sample parent survey
- Suggestions for translating student learning outcomes into useful parent learning outcomes

First, though, in Chapter 2, we would like to offer some insights into the perspective that parents bring to your campus—and how that can influence your communications with them.

*Most colleges advise parents to “let go” of their college-aged children and step back. But does this miss huge opportunities?*

Parents, more than any official at your institution, are in a better position to identify early warning signs, provide encouragement for at-risk students, and offer meaningful support for freshmen navigating their first term. It's critical to find appropriate and intentional ways to leverage parents as allies in improving the academic success of your students.

In this book, review:

- What opportunities you're missing
- Ways to familiarize parents with campus resources
- How to help parents understand normative student development
- How to help parents understand when to step in, when to step back
- Strategies for developing parents' affinity for the college
- A Sample parent survey

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