

THE REALLY LONG GOOD-BYE

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Hovering parents can't cut the cord, and kids keep phoning home. When does independence day come?

THE RITUAL WAS SIMPLE TWENTY YEARS AGO: BU PARENTS DROPPED THEIR KIDS OFF on move-in day, unloaded the car, and didn't see them again until Thanksgiving. In between, there were letters (most of them written by parents) and phone calls (mostly from kids who'd run out of money). ■ Many parents still do that, but they've been joined by a new breed: helicopter parents, moms and dads who hover over their college-age children, chiming in on everything from housing assignments to homework. ■ A lot of parents, university administrators say, are simply informed and enthusiastic consumers who want their children to get the most out of an increasingly expensive college education. But faculty and staff at universities across the country complain that some parents are now shouldering responsibilities that should be part of the college learning experience — talking to professors about disappointing grades or mapping strategies for finding the best internships and jobs.



Wayne Snyder, the associate dean for students in the College of Arts and Sciences, remembers trying to explain to a concerned father that the University prefers to work with students directly to resolve academic issues. “He kept saying, ‘No, no, she’s just a child,’” Snyder says. A BU junior tells of a friend’s mother who researched professors’ areas of expertise and then created fifteen possible class schedules for her daughter’s freshman year.

The father of another student “was furious that he was planning to go on an Alternative Spring Break trip to do community service in Oklahoma, because he said that driving across the country in a van full of college kids is too dangerous,” says Katie Koch (CAS’09, COM’09). “As their e-mail exchange got more heated, and the deadline to sign up for the trip approached, his dad actually started sending him statistics on teenage driving fatalities and links to traffic reports.”

Then there was the freshman at a Bay State Road residence this September. When the topic of bathroom cleanliness came up at a house meeting with the building’s RA, reports an upperclassman, she raised her hand and said, “Don’t worry, my mom already scrubbed and Lysoled the third-floor bathroom today!”

And Brian McCoy, regional vice president of the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) and vice president of student affairs at Nichols College in Dudley, Massachusetts, once arrived for an independent-study meeting to find the student’s mother waiting to join the discussion.

Some parents “just can’t give up control,” Snyder says.

BUYER BE AWARE

The term “helicopter parent” and the idea that today’s parents are getting too involved became headline fodder in 2000, when the so-called millennial generation began entering college. Their parents — mostly baby boomers who had started families as thirty-somethings, later than in previous decades — had more money and chose to spend more time on their children as they grew up, says Elizabeth Markson, a College of Arts and Sciences adjunct professor of sociology. “The college student today has generally been a kind of trophy child,” Markson says. “By the time a middle-class child reaches college age, he or she is likely to have been the recipient of many goodies.”

Those goodies, which include designer jeans, pricey electronics, expensive after-school activities, and family vacations abroad, signal a common denominator among helicopter parents: affluence. Nazli Kibria, a College of Arts and Sciences associate professor of sociology, whose research focuses on families and ethnicity, says that the time and resources needed to be a

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— A freshman at a house meeting with her RA in early September



helicopter parent are luxuries not available to low-income families, where parents often must work more than one job. “Parents have increasingly invested a great deal in making sure their child has all of the opportunities to remain middle or upper class — enrichment classes, helping them with their schoolwork, paying for tutorials,” she says. “There’s so much effort put into making sure that they achieve that there’s implicitly a continuation of that pattern.”

By the time a student is a high school senior, these parents have invested thousands on the extras they hope will gain their son or daughter an edge in the competitive college admissions game. Then there are the college expenses: at BU, for instance, tuition alone is \$34,930 for the current academic year. Room and board and student fees typically add \$10,000 annually. At these prices, says College of General Studies Dean Linda Wells, it’s no surprise that parents are keenly interested in their son’s or daughter’s experience. “With the amount of money it takes,” she says, “both the students and the parents feel the investment.”

Daniel Solworth (CAS’06), who works in the BU Office of the Dean of Students, where he handles incoming parent requests, says he frequently hears a variation on “I’m paying fifty grand a year; I think that I should be able to’ — insert request here.”

MAKING THE CONNECTION

These days, it’s very easy for parents to check up on their “investments” via a mobile phone — “the world’s longest umbilical cord,” as it’s known to some college administrators. At a parent orientation session earlier this year, Nichols College’s McCoy asked how many had text-messaged their children since leaving them at 9 a.m. — three hours earlier. Nearly every hand in the room went up. The session was titled Letting Go.

“I think that what has changed most is the ability to easily communicate,” says Jim Boyle, president of College Parents of America, a national advocacy group. A recent NASPA publication, *Connecting to the Net Generation*, surveyed 7,705 college students and found that

94 percent own mobile phones and 76 percent use some form of instant messaging, and that 15 percent of those users remain logged into their accounts twenty-four hours a day.

Many students *want* to be electronically tethered to home. Jerri Patlyek (SMG'08), who in high school was accustomed to coming home each day and telling her mother about school, says that during her first days at BU, she'd often call her mom more than once a day to report on classes or friends or her extracurricular activities. It's a long way from the days when her father, Jim Patlyek (SMG'78), lived in Myles Standish Hall; back then someone used to answer the pay phone at the end of the hall and take messages for an entire floor.

When Solworth arrived at Boston University in 2002, he knew that he would be close to his parents — Falmouth, Massachusetts, his hometown, is only ninety minutes away. He taught his mother to use e-mail so they could communicate every day. She called him regularly during his first month and came to Parents Weekend and Terrier home hockey games. "Any chance she got, she wanted to come up and be involved," he says. She even put up a profile on Facebook.

Solworth says he was delighted that his mother was so involved in campus events, although he acknowledges that when the daily phone calls became too much, he simply stopped picking up.

Chelsey Waldman (COM'10), whose father, Richard (CAS'75), is a BU alum, says that being able to reach her parents instantly — by e-mail or mobile phone most of the time and by text message for something urgent — helped her make the transition to college. "In the beginning, I was calling them all the time, because I have always been incredibly close with my parents and it was difficult for me to be away from home," she says. Now in her sophomore year, she feels it's important to stand on her own. "I am striving to become more independent," she says. "We are so accustomed to sharing every little detail with each other that it has been hard to pull back and ask for some space."

In fact, students are often equally culpable when it comes to the increased contact between parents and their children and colleges, says Wells, who communicates extensively with parents when their children are first admitted to CGS, but finds that the calls diminish when the semester starts.

When parents do decide to take action, there's often a gap in the information they've received from their son or daughter, says Virginia Sapiro, who was the vice provost for teaching and learning at the University of Wisconsin before becoming dean of the College and Graduate School of Arts and Sciences this summer. "Long experience with parental phone calls tells me that their students have often not filled in the whole story for them," she says. "I



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— Wayne Snyder, associate dean for students in CAS, about a concerned father trying to resolve his daughter's academic problems.



can't tell you how many times parents have called to tell me that we have to bend some rule for their child because no one ever told the student the requirements, or because the advisors gave them misinformation, or the like. Just about every time I pursued the issue, the fact was that the student didn't see an advisor, didn't do so in a timely way, or didn't follow the advice."

NOW AND LATER

In this age of closer parent involvement, colleges and universities across the nation are adjusting their resources, beginning well before move-in day to build a collaborative relationship. For example, BU offers several two-day orientations for parents of freshmen, covering a wide range of topics, from student safety to health issues.

There's no doubt that the close connection can be beneficial, enabling colleges to help struggling or troubled students, says NASPA's McCoy. And family researchers point out that parents have always tried to get the best for their children.

Yet concerns remain about the long-term effects hovering parents have on their children. "What happens to these parents and children later?" asks Kibria. "The main problem that I see is this sense children might develop of 'I'm entitled to have people take responsibility for me, make decisions.' That might be something real."

It's too soon to tell how these relationships will affect millennials, who are just beginning to enter the marketplace. Initial research shows that when it comes to making career decisions, they're standing on their own: in a 2006 salary survey of new graduates of 200 colleges and universities conducted by the National Association of Colleges and Employers, only 6 percent of respondents said their parents were "very" or "extremely" involved in their job searches.

Still, letting go seems to be getting harder on both ends, despite what some graduates report. A Collegiate Employment Research Institute 2007 survey of some 750 companies found that parents are hovering after graduation: 41 percent of them, the survey reports, gathered information on prospective employers for their children.

Ultimately, the greatest challenge helicopter parents have to face may be getting their children to break away. But just as a parent's natural instinct to aid and protect can kick into high gear when a child goes to college, the child's impetus to strike out on his or her own comes through eventually. It may just come a little later.

"Recently, I've felt more like I need some space than I have in the past — I think it's important for me to gain my independence," says Waldman. "Maybe next year, talking to my parents every couple of days would be better." **B**