College Faculty and Student Affairs Staff Interactions with Parents of Students

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Abstract

On college campuses today, student services staff (administrators and support staff) and faculty members are not only interacting with students but also with their parents. College employee interactions with prospective students and their parents may be common during information sessions and open houses. However, outside of the recruitment season, less is known about the experiences of student affairs staff and faculty who interact with parents. Through semi-structured interviews, this study examined employees' interactions with parents of students at four colleges of applied arts and technology in Ontario, Canada. Of the interviewees, nine faculty members and 11 student affairs staff (non-academic employees) described interacting with parents. The analysis of the interviews revealed several themes. These included college employees' interactions with parents regarding students' program choice and educational decision making, academic challenges, and support services. Professional practices that serve parents (and other supporters) could contribute to institutional goals, including post-secondary student persistence. This study's research findings may inform student affairs practice and inspire new ways to support students' college journeys in cooperation with parents and family members.

Keywords

Parent involvement, College interactions with parents, Student services at colleges

Introduction

Scholarly literature has described parent involvement in higher education as a growing phenomenon (Henning, 2007; Wolf et al., 2009). Stratton et al. (2007) described parent involvement as having changed from proud, supportive parents who provided passive encouragement throughout the college years to parents who now assume an active role in the student's post-secondary education. Henning (2007) attributed changes in parent involvement on college campuses to increases in litigation and changes in societal perceptions of college students over the years. Others have described increases in parent involvement in post-secondary education due to modern technology use (Payne, 2009), rising costs of higher education (Getz, 2007; Henning, 2007; Johnstone & Marcucci, 2010; Williams, 2011), and changes in parenting styles (Howe & Strauss, 2000; Stewart, 2009).

Literature has attributed parents' increased involvement in the lives of post-secondary students to the Millennial generation's parenting styles (Howe & Strauss, 2000; Stewart, 2009). Payne (2009) alleged that parent involvement, in particular *helicopter parenting*, was on the rise because for "many parents, the accepted boundaries of privacy and independence, so obvious even a generation ago, seem to have been erased" (p. 182). Wolf et al. (2009) defined the term *helicopter parenting* as "the intense micromanagement of college students' lives resulting in decreased student autonomy and development" (p. 435). Unger (2016) cautioned that, in most cases, extreme parenting styles, such as parental over involvement or parental under involvement, are not ideal for the resilience of college students. Unger (2016) explained:

> *A child should be periodically stressed and constantly supported. Every child needs progressively more challenging situations to handle. They achieve well when they*

> *attribute their success to their own capacity to problem solve, rather than the capacity of their parent to make life easy.* (para. 6)

Similarly, Sanford's (1909–1995) ideas regarding challenge and support also described a desirable balance in which students feel supported enough to face and learn from challenges versus being over supported and not benefitting from the challenges that occur during higher education (Patton et al., 2016).

Furthermore, parenting styles can have significant social, economic, and political impacts (Mendel, 2020). Parents often "vote with their feet" and through their choices and actions can shape social structures and systems (Mendel, 2020, p. I). Dominant parenting styles may have influenced recent increases in professional practices and institutional service provisions for family members of post-secondary students. For example, the results of the 2015 and 2017 National Survey of College and University Parent/Family Programs reported continued expansion in institutional programming and service provisions in support of parents and families of post-secondary students since the 1990s (Savage & Petree, 2015, 2017). Kiyama and Harper (2018) described most colleges and universities in the United States as offering some sort of programming for parents and families of students.

Nevertheless, literature and data describing the involvement of parents within Canadian higher education, over time, are limited. However, anecdotal descriptions shared by employees of colleges of applied arts and technology (CAAT) in Ontario, Canada have suggested that increases in parent involvement have also occurred on their campuses. College professionals have anecdotally reported that parents are seeking opportunities to be involved in students' post-secondary experiences. These have ranged from attending information sessions with prospective students to contacting employees for assistance on behalf of enrolled students. To gain a better understanding of parent involvement in the lives of post-secondary students and employee interactions with parents of students at colleges in Ontario, a descriptive, mixed-methods research study was conducted in 2019.

The study included a content analysis of online information for parents of students (henceforth, "parents") posted within web pages authored by colleges in Ontario. Surveys of prospective and enrolled students, parents, and employees associated with colleges in Ontario were also administered. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with employees working at colleges in Ontario. This article shares findings from the interviews with student affairs staff and faculty. The interview participants included nine faculty employees who identified themselves as course instructors or professors and 11 non-academic student affairs employees who identified themselves as either an administrator or a support staff person. The interviews provided new insights into interactions between students, their parents, faculty, and non-academic employees working at colleges in Ontario. The qualitative analysis of the interview findings revealed that study participants had frequent and diverse interactions with parents. In this article, interviewees' descriptions of their interactions with parents are presented under the themes of: (i) students' program choice and educational decision making, (ii) students' academic challenges, and (iii) support services for students.

Method

Four CAAT research sites were strategically selected to participate in the study due to their enrolment and geographic characteristics. Specifically, the research sites were: a large college with a full-time enrolment (FTE) of almost 20,000 students, two medium sized colleges with an FTE of between 12,000–7,000 students, and a small college with an FTE of less than 1,000 students. Two of the college research sites had a primary campus located within Ontario's most populous region,

the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). The other two college research sites had main campuses located outside of the GTA, in the Northern and Southern regions of Ontario. All four college research sites described themselves as having diverse student populations that included traditionally aged (18 to 25 years of age), mature (over 25 years of age), domestic (citizen or permanent resident of Canada), and international (not a citizen or permanent resident of Canada) students. The study used convenience sampling to gather insights from the experiences of interviewees. Overall, the research participants' rich descriptions of their interactions with parents provided insight into parent involvement in students' educational journeys and the multi-faceted work of the study's participants who were employed by colleges in Ontario.

Data collection

A common script of 11 open-ended interview questions was used to inquire about research participants' employment and interactions with parents. The interviews took place between May 2019 and December 2019. All the interviews were completed virtually and conducted in English. During the one-on-one interviews, which ranged in duration from 10 minutes to 1 hour, research participants shared examples of instances when they had personally interacted with parents of prospective or enrolled college students. Follow-up questions were asked throughout the interviews to promote accuracy and to ensure the recordings of the research participants' comments reflected their intentions. Recordings of the interviews included the creation of field notes and audio recordings (whenever permitted by research participants). Both field notes and audio recordings were used in the transcription and coding of the study's qualitative data. In addition to data collection on the experiences of employees working at colleges in Ontario, this study also allowed participants to share their experiences of parent involvement in students' educational journeys.

Participants

A group of 20 college employees, including nine faculty and 11 non-academic student affairs staff, were interviewed. Study participants were recruited using electronic communications (online recruitment posts and mass emails), shared internally by their employers after ethics and administrative approvals were received. Administrative approvals were received from each of the college research sites' independent research ethics boards (REB), the Expert REB Panel of the Ontario Colleges Multi-College Ethics Review Process and the Social Sciences, Humanities and Education REB of the University of Toronto. College employee participation in the study was voluntary. As a token of appreciation, research participants were emailed a $10.00 e-gift card following their interview.

Data analysis

Audio recordings and field notes from the interviews were transcribed into case nodes in NVivo. The transcriptions were read several times to improve accuracy and to obtain a general sense of the interviewees' comments. Open coding was then used to create and continually revise an ongoing index of codes (a memo) representing interviewees' remarks related to parent involvement in the lives of college students. Codes were then assigned to specific lines and sections of text within the transcriptions. The memo and codes were used to identify similarities, differences, and peculiarities among the transcripts. The memo was also used to create theme nodes in NVivo. The theme nodes organised study participants' comments gathered from the interview transcripts into core themes and sub-themes (attributes of the core themes). The core and sub-themes highlighted and linked ideas, patterns, and connections among the transcribed text. Overall, the analysis process produced a systematically developed set of interconnected themes, some of which are discussed in this article.

Below, interpretations of the study's findings in relation to interviewees' interactions with parents are presented.

Results

The qualitative analysis of the interviews revealed that study participants had experienced frequent and diverse interactions with parents. In particular, the interview findings revealed that the participants had interacted with parents regarding: (i) students' program choice and educational decision making, (ii) students' academic challenges, and (iii) support services for students.

Theme One: Students' program choice and educational decision making

When asked if they had personally interacted with parents, 14 of the 20 interviewees shared that their interactions with parents related to students' program choice and educational decision making. In fact, several interviewees stated that interactions with parents regarding program choice and educational decision making had become more common at their college over the course of their employment. In some instances, employees described recruitment-related interactions with parents as customary during their college's recruitment season. Many interviewees described interacting with parents of prospective students during periods of recruitment. Specifically, interviewees described engaging with parents of prospective students at: college open houses, program information sessions, travelling recruitment events, community outreach events, and during on-campus tours. Interactions with parents of prospective students during open houses and program information sessions were most frequently mentioned by interviewees. For example, in describing their program choice and educational decision making-related interactions with parents, a college employee shared:

> *I do attend college fairs and open houses.… So, I do see a number of parents in those settings.… At the college open houses I have interacted with parents.… Mainly they will ask me about the program.... They will ask a lot of questions about the program ... and where students can get placed ... what is the likelihood of them getting hired after.… A lot of parents will actually ask about continuing education after the formal program as well.... [their student] Going on to do their undergrad or bachelor ... what those programs look like.*

Furthermore, interviewees also described interactions with parents outside of their college's recruitment activities. Interviewees described interacting with parents of prospective students when walking around campus. Employees also described receiving calls and emails from parents of prospective students throughout the academic year, not just during the recruitment season. In addition, interviewees described parents coming to their offices on campus for in-person meetings to discuss student education options. Most study participants described meeting with both prospective students and their parents together. However, several interviewees also described having met with parents without students. For instance, a faculty member explained:

> *I have had one interaction with a parent of a prospective student. So, their child was taking high school [out of town].… They weren't able to come visit.… So, I met the parent here at the college. They asked a lot of questions. They seemed very particular. I remember having this feeling, oh my goodness, how is this going to work out? But*

> *interestingly, as soon as the student enrolled, I never heard from them [the parent] again and the student is a wonderful student.... It turned out. Everything was really positive.*

Moreover, study participants also shared accounts of casually interacting with prospective students and their parents off campus regarding program choice and educational decision making. For example, interviewees described answering program choice and educational decision making-related questions from students and parents during their personal time and when out in public places. For instance, a professor remarked:

> *So, you are at the grocery store and its August. Someone says, "Hey, you work at the college! Do you know anything about this program? That program?" So, you are kind of like ambassadors to the school.... I think talking to parents is often the way of sort of reducing their fears for their kids.*

Theme Two: Students' academic challenges

Notably, 11 of the 20 interviewees stated their interactions with parents had concerned students who were experiencing academic challenges. Several interviewees portrayed parents as "coming in, trying to fix a problem for their child" (shared by a faculty advisor). Study participants described the academic challenges which prompted parent involvement. These ranged from students having difficulty with their course work, failing a course, plagiarising, work placement terminations, and student failures to complete or obtain required elements of their academic program.

In terms of college placements and practicums, interviewees described interacting with parents regarding students who had failed to obtain required work permits or had been terminated from their placements due to misconduct. Regarding practicums, a college staff member stated that their interactions with parents had been:

> *Almost always around something that happened.... When students are doing well in their practicum, we don't hear from parents. Because there is no reason for the parents to reach out to us. And so, they [parents] only really get involved, when there is a negative experience, like when they [students] get terminated.*

In addition, study participants described interactions with parents due to academic challenges, such as failure. Both faculty and non-academic interviewees recounted meeting with parents to discuss options available to students who had failed assignments or been unsuccessful in earning course credit. Interviewees' accounts of parent involvement regarding students' academic failures also included situations involving plagiarism. In circumstances involving plagiarism, interviewees explained that parents often met with college employees because they wanted to understand if anything could be done to allow their student to improve their grade, pass, or obtain credit. For example, a sessional faculty shared:

> *I had one student who plagiarised a paper and then plagiarised another paper and then failed the course. And so, the parents wanted to meet with me. And I specifically said, "I am not going to change the grade in the course". And they said, "oh no no, we wouldn't*

want you to change the grade. We just want to make sure that we know how to avoid this in the future". And I said, "okay, great we can have a conversation about that". When they came in, they said "okay, how can we change the grade".... So, it was a little frustrating.

Theme Three: Support services for students

Eleven of the 20 interviewees described interacting with parents of prospective and enrolled college students regarding various on- and off-campus supports services. These interviewees frequently described discussions with parents about learning accommodations and mental health supports for students. Several interviewees recalled that parents had asked them about accommodations for students with learning disabilities. For example, a faculty advisor asserted:

I have to say that in the parent sessions at orientation, there will be maybe two or three questions from out of town parents about things like shopping and transportation. The rest of the questions will be about services for students with disabilities ... specifically learning disabilities.... I can guarantee that I am going to have a parent of a student with a learning disability coming asking me questions at an open house, info session, or during a tour, or at an event day. Guaranteed.... And maybe not just two or three but 10 or 20.... So, a lot of questions about that.... How their student with learning disabilities is going to get the support they need.... Very rarely do I have a parent of a prospective student or of a registered student come and talk to me that is not a parent of a student with a disability.

Study participants also reported that parents had joined students at meetings regarding support services. For example, a professor/coordinator described:

Sometimes a parent will come in with the student to ask questions. To just kind of see what we can do about their learning accommodation.... I don't really have any control over their learning accommodation, but I can kind of discuss it with them ... and a little bit about the implementation of it. Sometimes they [parents] will also come into talk about course load. So, whether the student should be taking a full-time, full load of courses or part-time. How could we organise the schedule, and that sort of thing.

Moreover, study participants also described interacting with parents regarding mental health support services. Interviewees described mental health-related interactions with parents as both proactive and reactive. Study participants reported parents had proactively requested their assistance in pre-arranging on- and off-campus mental health supports for enrolled students. For instance, a coordinator explained:

Often parents would come in because they'd been referred by their [student's] ... psychiatrist, family doctor. And they were looking at ... all the accommodations needs for students but they were told to connect with the case manager at the college.... So that's

> *not really my role. But usually I would walk them through the process and let them know what kinds of supports we have on campus for them [their students] and the process ... to get the student connected to the supports we have.... To make sure that either ... the appropriate supports would be here for them [their students] or if there are things that they [as parents] needed to do in the community, like get the student connected, before they [their students] came to campus.*

Additionally, interviewees described reactive interactions with parents in response to student mental health and well-being issues. Specifically, parents of enrolled students contacted them directly to discuss concerns about their student's mental health. The interviewees described these interactions with parents as challenging to navigate. During such conversations with parents, interviewees described that they were only able to take information from parents and speak in general terms about policies and support programs at their college. Several interviewees described being careful not to disclose any student-specific information during conversations with parents due to institutional policies and privacy laws. For example, a professor/coordinator recalled:

> *I have had parents who have called because they are concerned about their son or daughter's mental health. So, if they're concerned about that, now we can't share any of that information with them. So, I just tell them that I can take what they're saying.... It is kind of a one-way conversation.*

Study participants also shared accounts of when they had disclosed personal information to parents on behalf of students. In these situations, interviewees described having had students' written or verbal consent to share information with parents. For example, in relation to student mental health and on-campus support services, a professor recollected:

> *We had a student. She had a really hard time ... [She] was definitely in crisis. So, I took her to our advising services. They were fantastic. But she wanted me to stay with her, which was fine. She called her father ... so I had a brief conversation with him.... Just to say, "I'm with your daughter, she is with advising.... She is gonna be okay". Because the father lives [far away from campus].*

Discussion

Through interviews, 20 faculty and student services staff working at colleges in Ontario shared rich descriptions of their personal interactions with parents regarding students' educational journeys. Commonalities among the interviews were captured under the themes of: (i) students' program choice and educational decision making, (ii) students' academic challenges, and (iii) support services for students.

Most of the study participants interviewed had personally interacted with parents regarding students' program choice and educational decision making. While interviewees predominantly described interacting with parents of prospective college students at recruitment events (information sessions, college fairs, open houses, etc.), some interviewees described informally interacting with parents in their offices, casually around campus, and when off campus. Ontario college

interviewees' interactions with parents regarding students' program choice and educational decision making is noteworthy because scholarly literature has also described parents as influencing students' higher education aspirations (Auerbach, 2007; Bers, 2005; Bers & Galowich, 2002; Christofides et al., 2015; Lopez Turley, 2006; McCallister et al., 2010; Smith, 2008; Turrentine et al., 2000).

Specifically, literature has suggested that parent involvement in students' program choice and educational decision making has the potential to both help and hinder prospective students. For example, Christofides et al. (2015) described the involvement of parents as supporting students' higher education aspirations. Conversely, the involvement of parents was also described as hindering students' higher education decisions through misinformation, unrealistic expectations, and by restricting students' post-secondary choices (Auerbach, 2007; Bers, 2005; Bers & Galowich, 2002; Lopez Turley, 2006; McCallister et al., 2010; Smith, 2008; Turrentine et al., 2000).

The study's research findings have documented parent involvement in students' program choice and educational decision making on college campuses in Ontario. However, literature has suggested that such involvement could result in mixed outcomes for students. Thus, collaborations between institutional staff, students, and their parents may be helpful in supporting students' program choice and educational decision making. For instance, institutional information resources and educational exploration opportunities could be offered to parents and family members. This could help combat misinformation or unrealistic expectations that students and parents may encounter during the program choice and educational decision-making process.

As well, more than half of the interviewees discussed that their interactions with parents had concerned students' academic challenges. In particular, they described interacting with parents regarding students who had: failed a course, plagiarised, been terminated from practicum, or not met required elements of their academic program. In relation to parental involvement, literature has described parents as being supportive of students' educational endeavours, with parental support and encouragement helping students to be successful in their post-secondary studies (Awang et al., 2014; Cutrona, et al., 1994; Codjoe, 2007; Dennis et al., 2005; Strage & Brandt, 1999). For instance, when Awang et al. (2014) conducted semi-structured interviews with first-year university students, students described their parents as academic assistants. In another study interviewing academically successful Black students attending higher education institutions in western Canada, "all the students stated that they persevered because of their parents' involvement, encouragement, and home support" (Codjoe, 2007, p. 142). In addition, others have highlighted social support and encouragement from parents as promoting the academic achievement of post-secondary students (Codjoe, 2007; Cutrona, et al., 1994; Dennis et al., 2005; Strage & Brandt, 1999).

Both this study's research findings and literature document parental involvement in students' post-secondary education. Therefore, partnering with parents may be an untapped opportunity to support students navigating academic challenges. New synergies of support for students experiencing academic challenges could be created through student-directed conversations and institutional processes including parents and/or other family members. Students can consider parental expectations and financial support when making decisions related to continuing or leaving post-secondary education (Bank et al., 1990; Budny & Paul, 2003; Martinello, 2008; Sparks, 2019). Hence, institution–student–family synergies in support of academic challenges may also encourage student retention and persistence.

Further, 11 out of 20 interviewees described interactions with parents regarding support services for students. Predominantly, interviewees described interacting with parents regarding students' learning disabilities and student mental health. This included frequent interactions with parents

seeking information about support services and learning accommodations for prospective students with learning disabilities. Interviewees also met with parents to discuss on-campus and off-campus mental health support services for students. Study participants also described instances when they had reached out to parents directly in response to students' requests for support.

Furthermore, many of the interviewees also stated that student privacy was top of mind when interacting with parents regarding support services for students. Since students' academic and medical records are confidential and protected under Ontario's provincial privacy laws, additional research may be warranted to better understand how to support college students' needs and privacy when parents are involved. Significantly, student information held by higher education institutions, including students' academic and medical records, are protected under Ontario's *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* (FIPPA, 1990). FIPPA (1990) does not allow higher education institutions to disclose student records, including learning accommodations or medical records, with parents or other third parties without the express consent of the student (or in dire circumstances).

The study's research findings highlight a possible mismatch between parental involvement regarding support services for students and Ontario's privacy laws protecting student records. Student affairs staff seek to holistically support those who are navigating learning accommodations and mental well-being while studying. In this respect, collaborations between parents/family members and college staff may extend the circle of support from which students can receive what they need. Professional practices have the potential to allow students greater autonomy in directing both the institutional and familial support they receive for their personal learning accommodations and/or mental well-being. This may include offering students the option of waiving their legal rights under FIPPA and allowing their parent(s) to be privy to personal education records through the signing of a release or consent form.

Conclusion

This study has provided insights on parent involvement in students' educational journeys and the multifaceted work–life realities of faculty and student affairs staff employed by colleges in Ontario, Canada. Specifically, findings provided new understandings of the interactions between college employees and the parents of prospective and enrolled students. These related to: (i) students' program choice and educational decision making, (ii) students' academic challenges, and (iii) support services for students. The new understandings of student, parent, and employee interactions in colleges in Ontario were corroborated by scholarly discussions of parent involvement within higher education literature. Literature also described recent changes in parenting styles, including increased parental support in students' post-secondary journeys.

In conclusion, professional practices and institutional policies seeking to support students' educational journeys in collaboration with students' parents and family members should consider that such partnerships can present both opportunities and challenges in the context of higher education. In extending institutional relationships to include students and their parents, student affairs staff may support students' success and well-being through enhanced inclusivity, communication, and collaboration between home and school. Nevertheless, including parents may also create new challenges for student affairs staff as they strive to holistically support post-secondary students and their familial supporters, while also protecting students and promoting their development as adult learners. Additional research is warranted to support college employees' in their interactions with parents.

Acknowledgments

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