

Advisors and Parents: Together Building Stronger Advising Relationships

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Introduction

In the early 1980's adult attitudes toward children started to shift. According to Howe and Strauss (2000), the authors of *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation*, the '80's became the era of the protected and worthy child. Children became a planned part of adult life. Planned parenthood, fertility clinics, test-tube babies, and surrogate mothers all became popular. The children of the Baby Boomers and Generation X, known as Millennials, became the largest, healthiest, most wanted and most cared-for child generation in American history (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Millennials are the children we saw securely buckled into child-safety seats and shuttled in mini-vans and carpools to play sessions, soccer games, and other structured activities with their parents leading the way.

Millennials are now old enough to go to college, and the protective parents that structured their lives as children are still holding the hands of their now young adults as they make their way to colleges and universities across the nation. Parents want to be a part of their children's college experience. They want to monitor their progress in classes, insure they are involved in activities, and, in so many ways, be there for them to help solve any and all issues that may arise. As a result, this generation feels secure, close to their parents, and comfortable with authority (Howe & Strauss, 2000).

Today's parents can seem intrusive and demanding. Their presence is changing the relationship between academic advisors and the students they advise. Advisors are now faced with finding a way to include parents in the advising session without compromising a sense of trust and confidence with students.

Generational Distinctions

When working with students, academic advisors may find it helpful to understand the differences in social norms adopted by different generations. The socially accepted values and conditions of those raised in the '60s and 70s are very different from those raised in the '80s and '90s. The Baby Boomers, those born between 1943 and 1960, are a generation raised by parents who read Dr. Spock. Spock offered the first comprehensive philosophy to raising children and offered advice to parents in a changing society (Verbeek, 1994). The Baby Boomer generation was driven by new philosophies and government change. They rebelled against authority and were driven in fighting for what they believed was right for a better society. The Boomers are a generation of sit-ins, marches on Congress, and free-love.

Generation X, born between 1961 and 1981, is a generation that experienced single parent households and being latchkey-kids. They witnessed the beginning of the AIDS crises and the falling of the Berlin Wall. Generation X grew up in a society that advocated individual freedoms and looking out for #1.

Late Boomers and early Xers are the parents of the new generation, self dubbed, Millennials. The arrival of the Millennial generation was announced by "Baby on Board" signs on minivans. They were raised by protective parents obsessed with safety. They grew up respecting authority and believing in a system that exists to help make the world a better place (Howe & Strauss, 2000). This generation accepts their parents as personal advocates, who are ready, willing, and sometimes eager to challenge authority on behalf of their children. According to a 1999 survey in *Time*, seventy-nine percent of 12- to 14-year-olds polled said they looked up to their parents more than any other adult role model (Howe & Strauss, 2000, pg. 123). Today's generation admire their parents and care about what they think.

Millennials are also the first generation to be technologically savvy. They grew up with the Internet, cell phones, and other new technologies. When it comes to acquiring information, this generation is used to easy access and instant gratification.

Impact This Has on Academic Advising Today

Academic advisors today are not just meeting with young students eager to start their college career and plan their lives for the future; they are also meeting with the parents and other family members of this new college generation. Parents now expect to be an integral part of their children's college experience. This significantly changes the practice of academic advising and advisors need to outline the expectations of students and parents. Because more and more parents want to be included in the advising relationship, advisors must adopt a new approach to advising that will still create an environment for students to realize their autonomy and develop an educational plan consistent with their personal goals. Good communication is the key.

When communicating with family members it's important that they understand the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). FERPA guarantees students the right to privacy by limiting the accessibility to the student's academic records to third parties, including the student's parents. It's important for academic advisors to help parents understand that they may be undermining the advisor's attempt to establish trust with the student by asking the advisor to discuss the student's academics or other issues without the student's permission. It's ok for advisors to tell parents that they have met and know their son or daughter. This can offer parents a sense of security knowing their student is connected in some way with an official of the institution.

Other things academic advisors can do to help parents understand that the advisor and the institution have the best interest of their student in mind is to offer as much information within the guidelines of FERPA as possible. Important information advisors may consider sharing with parents include the goals developed by the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) Task Force charged with providing input to the Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS), available through the *Clearinghouse of Academic Advising Resources* (2005). These goals include but are not limited to:

- Assisting students in evaluating their personal values and beliefs.
- Assisting students in considering their life goals by relating their interests, skills, abilities, and values to careers, the world of work, and the nature and purpose of higher education.
- Assisting students in developing educational goals consistent with their life goals and objectives and using these goals as a guide to decision making.
- Assisting students in developing decision-making skills.
- Providing accurate information about institutional policies, procedures, resources and programs.

This type of information can help parents realize how advisors support students in their learning and that advisors possess the expertise needed to insure students get the most out of their time in college. When communicating with parents, advisors can explain how college provides a unique opportunity for parents and the institution to partner together in helping students adjust to college life (MacKay & Ingram, 2002). By encouraging communication between students and their parents, parents can be allies to advisors and help strengthen the advisor/advisee relationship.

Stack (2003) offers more advice when communicating with parents:

- Provide parents (whether in person or by mail) with some written information they can read later about advising theory used at the institution.
- Be sympathetic but not apologetic: if the student has run afoul of the college's rules and policies, he or she needs to take responsibility.
- Stay cool and clearly outline the student's options.
- Do not attempt to interpret or fix family dynamics. However, continue to emphasize the student's responsibility for his or her progress and encourage student-parent communication about grades and progress.

Fairness and Consistency in Advising

To foster trust and respect from parents and students, consistency in advising practices is vital. Baby Boomers and Xers are accustomed to challenging authority and will do so on behalf of their children. Parents will challenge inequities if they feel their child is getting a "raw deal". It's important to treat students as individuals, but advisors must be consistent in their approach to advising. Articulating and following an advising theory with all advisees can help avoid inequities and legitimize advising practices.

Defining Roles

Some parents see the academic advisor as a surrogate parent, i.e., in loco parentis. Advisors should clarify their roles and extinguish any myths about advising. Advisors should outline the roles of the advisor, the student, and the parent at the first advising session. These outlines may include, but are not limited to, the following examples.

Academic advisor role

- Monitor student progress and guide the student toward academic success;
- Help the student understand his or her responsibilities toward academic success;
- Act as a liaison between the institution and the student;
- Act as an advocate for the student;
- Refer the student to appropriate institutional resources.

In many ways the academic advisor is a teacher and facilitator. Advisors foster and encourage personal and intellectual growth in students (Crookston, 1972); they do more than help students register for classes. Academic advisors are well informed about the institution's resources available to students. Academic advising is not a "one-stop shop" but a wealth of knowledge that can help students navigate the institutional system. In short, the academic advisor assists students in the development of meaningful educational plans that are compatible with personal and/or career goals and instill a desire for lifelong learning.

Student role

- Responsible for learning and understanding;
- Monitor his or her own academic progress;
- Know the degree requirements of the college and major of interest;
- Communicate with the advisor regarding issues and/or concerns about academics or student life;
- Attend classes;
- Manage time for class preparation;
- Become familiar with university resources;
- Understand and adhere to university policies.

Student responsibility is the key to all development and learning (Davis & Murrell, 2003). In order to have a successful and meaningful college experience, students must accept full responsibility for their personal and academic progress. Academic advisors and parents can act as role models to help students accept this responsibility.

Parent role:

- Be available to support and encourage;
- Maintain regular contact;

- Offer advice (when appropriate);
- Encourage students to do things they can do for themselves;
- Allow students to make mistakes in this safe environment.

One of the most important and valuable things parents can offer their college students is support and encouragement. Because students of today's millennial generation look up to their parents as mentors and role models, positive reinforcement from parents is crucial to college success. It is also important that advisors, students, and parents support each other in helping students make responsible decisions that will shape their future. Young college students are in the process of realizing their autonomy. Helping parents understand the importance of letting their children do things for themselves can help students emerge as capable adults. If parents understand the competencies and expertise of the academic advisor, they are more likely to trust the judgment and wisdom of the advisor and allow their children to experience and appreciate the new and exciting challenges college life can bring.

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