No one should suggest that it's easy to define the appropriate relationship among students, their parents, and their colleges. The law has struggled considerably over time with the question of who should bear the legal liability and responsibility for a student's conduct.

Are students considered to be children, with the institution in charge of their supervision and care, or are they adults, responsible for their own actions? What are the reasonable expectations of parents when they wave goodbye to their sons and daughters as freshman year begins? What are the reasonable expectations of college officials as they welcome new students?

The answers to such questions have evolved with changes in our culture or perhaps because of changes in our culture. And one of the most significant changes today is the larger role that parents play in the lives of their college-age children and the greater expectations that they have of administrators. The "helicopter parent," or hovering parent who repeatedly tries to intervene and manage his or her child's life, seems to be a growing phenomenon on many campuses.

To understand the new relationships and responsibilities, it is worthwhile to consider how the legal landscape has shifted. Courts once considered colleges to be standing in loco parentis — literally, in place of parents — and responsible for the supervision and protection of their students. The in loco parentis doctrine met its demise in the wake of the student-protest era in the 1960s, when courts concluded that colleges did not have the power or the ability to regulate students' off-campus conduct.

In the 70s courts went further, making clear that the modern university could not be considered an ensurer of the safety of its students, whom the law treated as adults. Continuing that trend, throughout the 80s and 90s courts generally rejected the notion of a special relationship between colleges and students that would shield students from accepting responsibility for their own behavior. In general, they held that college is an educational, not a custodial, institution, and that it is both unrealistic and inconsistent with the objectives of higher education to hold institutions liable for injuries resulting from irresponsible student conduct.

But while most courts viewed students as adults, responsible for their own actions, others found ways to find colleges liable when they attempted to protect students through security measures or regulation of conduct but injury resulted nonetheless. One case
occurred in the 1980s and involved dormitory security, and then others involving such conduct as fraternity hazing and alcohol use followed in the 90s. The disagreement among courts on the standards for assessing institutional accountability continues today. Now the courts appear to be moving more in the direction of in loco parentis or the creation of a special relationship between students and the university so as to impose a more rigorous duty on institutions to supervise the activities of their students. While the reasons for the shift are unclear, it may reflect the normal swing of the pendulum, general litigation trends, or maybe even pressure from helicopter parents.

In addition to such judicial precedents, another rule is worthy of mention: the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974, also known as FERPA or the Buckley Amendment. That federal statute generally limits what administrators are permitted to tell parents, absent student consent, about their children's academic performance and social conduct. It is based on the assumption that students are adults and their college activities are their own business, not their parents'.

Meanwhile, what has become a murky legal situation threatens to only get murkier, as new laws are on the horizon. For example, a bill being considered in Pennsylvania would, if passed, dictate how colleges deal with alcohol-related offenses. The legislation was spurred to a large extent by concerned parents.

In short, administrators have a difficult task when sorting out the complex and not always consistent obligations imposed on them by laws and court decisions defining the relationship between them and their students. The legal issues are further complicated by the increasingly active participation of more and more parents in the everyday lives of their college-age children. Parents are present on the campus today in a whole new way, and the paradigm of the relationships among students, parents, and colleges has changed accordingly.

While the law treats students for some purposes as children and for other purposes as adults, parents view their children as children, for whom they are paying significant tuition bills. They want to be their children's advocates to ensure that the college meets what they believe to be its obligations. They want access to administrators, and more often than in the past they want to hold the colleges accountable if their children are harmed or do not succeed.

When today's parents were in college, there typically was a pay phone down the dormitory hall and a long line on Sunday of students waiting to use it. It was embarrassing if parents tried to call their children — and mostly it was impossible to get through, so they usually didn't bother. Today students and parents are in constant communication by cellphone, text messaging, and e-mail. Parents are much more involved in the minute-by-minute lives of their children — or at least have the illusion that they are.

That parents and students communicate easily and frequently has to be a good thing, but the change in parental expectations raises challenges for colleges. The good intentions of
helicopter parents often collide with the "teachable moment" instincts of administrators who believe that students should assume responsibility for their own academic and social progress. If parents plan their child's course schedule, and the course load turns out to be more than the child can handle, the helicopter parent will often neither take ownership of the decision nor encourage the student to take responsibility. Instead, helicopter parents are inclined to criticize academic advisers or other administrators for failing to provide adequate guidance. Yet college is a time for maturing adolescents to learn how to make decisions for themselves, whether good or bad, and then learn how to manage the consequences. Parents who become too involved in their children's college experience deprive them of this crucial opportunity to grow up.

Parental hovering also plays out on our campuses in academic-discipline issues. Most institutions have procedures for resolving charges of cheating, plagiarism, and other forms of academic dishonesty. The procedures, as mandated by the courts, should provide for fair process to students who are charged with misconduct. For the most part, administrators work hard to handle such matters in the best interest of the student and the institution.

Parents, of course, should be concerned when their children face serious disciplinary charges. They should be supportive of their children and help them work through the process. But it is rarely helpful for parents — or the lawyers they hire — to interpose themselves between the student and the administrators, distorting the workings of the disciplinary process. Some parents intervene in ways that ultimately escalate the issues, turn the process into an adversarial rather than educational proceeding, impair the ability of the judicial officer to persuade the student to tell the truth and take responsibility, and unduly prolong the process.

The influence and expectations of helicopter parents may present as many, if not more, challenges in the social arena than in the academic one. For example, just as it is unfair to blame parents for students' high-risk alcohol consumption — although the issue surfaces as soon as freshmen come to campus — it is equally unreasonable to blame colleges for failing to supervise students in ways that parents themselves are unable or unwilling to do.

These are not easy issues, and we, as administrators, must help parents find the right balance. Some institutions have developed Web sites or newsletters that provide the most current information about college activities, issues on the campus, academic schedules, and other matters of interest to parents. Other colleges have established parent groups that inform parents about campus life and encourage them to talk among themselves and support one another. Colleges have also developed workshops during freshman orientation in which administrators can give parents advice about how to manage their own anxieties and effectively relate to their college-age children. (Humor is of critical importance in such sessions.) In addition, some colleges help train administrators and academic advisers in how to deal with parental concerns.
I know from personal experience how hard the process of "letting go" can be. You could call me a helicopter parent. I have separately identifiable rings on my cell phone for each of my children, and I always take their calls. I was upset when my son did not get into the freshman seminar of his choice. I have recently learned how to use text-message software so I can be in instant communication with my children, even when I am in meetings. Like other administrators with children in college, I see the issue from both sides.

What have I learned from my dual vantage points in the cockpit and on the ground? For our children's sake, we must manage our legitimate concerns and expectations so as to respect the boundaries separating us from our children's independent college experiences. We must let our children deal with the frustrations of college bureaucracies, and we should tell them by words and deeds that it's OK to fail. We should not and cannot look to administrators for every answer. We are all in this together.