Parents getting more involved in kids' college life
By Elizabeth Benton, New Haven Register | July 27, 2006
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NEW HAVEN, Conn. -- They arrive in SUVs and minivans, with sets of extra-long sheets, extension cords and computers. They have researched discount textbook outlets, campus safety, even individual professors. But they are not honor students; they are not students at all. They are "helicopter" parents, so dubbed for their tendency to hover, prepared to swoop in at a moment's notice lest harm befall their progeny.
College administrators across the nation and state have reported a burst in parental involvement in campus activities and student life over the last decade. While some campuses have welcomed the trend, adding institutionalized support for the onslaught, some have raised concerns about over-parenting.
The University of Vermont, for instance, has received national attention for hiring "parent bouncers" to keep moms and dads at bay during orientation events. But Joan Boughton, associate director of Student Life and Parent Relations at Western Connecticut State University, said, "We don't see any of this as negative. We see parents as partners in education. We don't dissuade them, we welcome them."
The school revamped its summer orientation program recently to add a separate check-in for parents, a separate financial aid packet and information on how to get involved on campus. A parent association was formed three years ago. This year, more than 70 percent of freshmen arrived with a parent in tow, Boughton said.
Boughton said WestConn's parent-embracing model is the "forward-thinking, healthy way" to handle the new burst in parent presence on campus.
"This is no longer about, in the year 2006, whether or not parents should be involved in their children's education. They are going to be. Having done so, it's a matter of how you choose to deal with it as an institution," she said.
Sharon Brennan, director of admissions at Southern Connecticut State University, said Southern also has added a parent program on financial aid and academic advisement during student placement exams. For an exam seating 200 students, about 60 parents often stick around, Brennan said. The school, however, is careful to arrange separate events for parents and students to allow students space during the first few days on campus.
"If they are together, the kids are embarrassed and the parents will dominate," Brennan said.
Quinnipiac University added a one-hour parents program six years ago, Associate Dean of Students Cheryl Barnard said. Now, that has increased to an afternoon-long orientation.
"Compared to other schools, that's nothing," she said.
Brennan is concerned children of hyper-involved parents are at a serious disadvantage when they leave the nest. After 18 years with mom and dad hovering inches away, she believes students fail to develop basic safety skills, study and sleeping habits, negotiation skills, sharing skills and self reliance.
"If you have a parent who has done all that, who is going to do that? Nobody," she said.
Barnard described the phenomenon as two-pronged: "Kids don't know what to do with all this freedom, so the parent says, 'I still need to be involved.' "
And in recent years, she has seen more than a few involved parents. "The number of parents who set up their (children's) e-mail and passwords and register them is phenomenal," she said. "I get e-mails on a daily basis from parents using their student's Quinnipiac e-mail."

"It's a generation of parents that want the best for their children, and so they have done what they thought has been the best," Barnard added. "But what they haven't looked at is all the life lessons that their child has yet to learn because their parent has been so involved in their life."

WestConn student Chris Wallace, 20, whose parents were founding members of the school's parents association, says he learned to navigate school on his own. But when the East Haven resident arrived at school as a freshman, his parents were there beside him. For two years, the Wallaces met jointly with Chris' academic adviser to go over his course load.

Even when his parents weren't on campus, Wallace would have nightly chats with his mother about academics, girls and his weekend plans. But his support system changed last year when his mother died of cancer.

"It grew me up in a way. I never wanted to grow up this way, but it happened and I had to deal with it," he said.

For the first time, Wallace chose his own courses for the coming semester. He's enrolled in German, a choice his father questioned, but, "We compromise now."

He's even teaching his friends how to do their laundry.

"My friends didn't know what a spin cycle was," he said.

Jim Wallace, Chris' father, joined WestConn's parent association early in Chris' freshman year. Through his wife's battle with cancer, Jim Wallace said he found time to meet regularly with Chris' professors to talk about Chris' academic progress.

"Parents have to be involved. You just can't expect professors to take care of things like high school or grammar school teachers. The professors are not going to baby them," he said.

But while schools across the nation reach out to parents, baby boomer groups like College Parents of America, founded in 2003, continue to demand more.

"Schools want parents to pay the bill, but don't want them to be involved after that," said College Parents of American President Jim Boyle. "If they have been effective parents for the first 18 years of their child's life, they have helped get that child to the campus gates, it's not realistic to expect them to financially, emotionally or intellectually just turn away and say 'see you in four years,' " he said.

The group lobbies for better financial support for parents of college-age students, and works with colleges nationwide to beef up parent support networks in higher education.

"Smarter schools are setting up parent associations, and plans and programs to effectively communicate with parents," Boyle said. "For recruitment and retention of students, parents are part of the equation."

Boyle admits, however, that parental involvement must have limits.

"They should cheer from the sidelines, but they should stay out of the game," he said.

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