

The Millennial Trail: Parental Involvement in Their Children's Engineering Education

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Abstract

Recently, faculty and staff in higher education have noticed an increased level of involvement by parents in academic matters involving the education of their children. This study explores some of the reasons for this increased level of parental involvement and should assist academic faculty and administrators in responding to this desire by parents to be more actively involved in their children's academic affairs.

Parents correctly note they were their child's first teachers and have been actively involved in their child's education since birth. What is currently meaningful is the degree of parental involvement extending past the secondary school level and into higher education. It is also notable that current college students are so accepting, and at times dependent, upon this parental involvement. This involvement is encouraged in many of the student services areas of higher education, but is resisted in most academic and academic support areas because of conflicts with student privacy rights under the Federal Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), institutional academic policies, and traditional academic boundaries.

Prior to the first day of classes for the Fall Semester 2004, the College of Engineering and Applied Science at the University of Colorado in Boulder offered a New Student and Parent Orientation Program. During this Program, parents were offered the option of completing a survey indicating their concerns with the adjustment of their child to this college, the amount of involvement they wished to maintain with their child, the most likely reasons they might contact a college faculty member or administrator, and their perspective on the purpose of their child's higher education. This paper provides a background on the recent growth of parental involvement in higher education and an analysis of parent responses to this engineering survey.

Introduction

The term "millennial" is used to describe the sociological generation of college students born after 1982. These students have been described as more optimistic in their outlook than the prior generation of college students (generation "x"), more interested in being a team player and less inclined to achieve individually. They are more accepting of

authority, increasingly inclined to follow rules, tend to be modest, and more accustomed to an active involvement of parents in their lives.¹

The parents of these millennial students also differ from the “generation x” parents. These parents are more child-oriented in their family, they practice a greater hands-on parenting style, they provide more direct supervision to their children, they do more things together as a family, and their children have been nurtured and protected at a level greater than the prior generation. These millennial families are increasingly composed of two parents (not necessarily biological) and if divorced the biological parents are more likely to have maintained close family ties. The parents of these millennial students have consciously reduced the pace of their lives to have more time together as a family.²

The parents of these millennial students have been encouraged by their elementary, middle and secondary level schools to be actively involved in the education of their children. This extends not only in the traditional areas of personal and social support, but into curricular areas as well. Reports on the activities of these parents is found in the popular press,³ magazines⁴, professional journals, student services publications⁵ and other governmental publications at the local, state and federal levels.⁶

This parental motivation for increased educational involvement comes from a variety of reasons beyond the natural parental desire to protect and support their children. It is found in the gender of the parent⁷, the career pattern of the parent, their active parenting style, and the additional time and resources they have to devote to their child’s educational experience. These parents are greatly interested in ensuring their children have a high quality education, the opportunity for admission to a selective higher education institution, increased occupational choices, and a quality of life at least equal to that enjoyed by their parents.⁸

In their effort to be highly protective of their children, these parents are likely to produce a generation of students with limited negative experiences and poor coping skills. Hara Estroff notes these children are increasingly risk-adverse, lack creative experiences and are psychologically fragile. They are likely to extend their adolescence as they gain confidence in themselves and mature through gradually increased levels of responsibility. While in college these children are likely to experience psychological distress with anxiety, depression and substance abuse. A recent study of college student mental health problems has documented a shift from relationship issues to anxiety related issues; one estimate is that fifteen percent of today’s college students suffer from anxiety disorders.⁹

This current parental involvement goes beyond what many of us remember from our personal experiences in secondary school and college. At the secondary education level today there is parental involvement in: planning the school calendar, planning school lunch programs, membership on school curricular committees, involvement with faculty selection committees, school bond efforts, special school administrative committees, and direct contact with students to recruit them to their alumni institution.¹⁰ This partnership

between parents and pre-collegiate institutions is also promoted by current federal faith-based and community educational initiatives.¹¹

In its competition for undergraduate students, an increasing number of higher education institutions are encouraging direct parental involvement in their student application and admission process, choice of an institution, selection of campus housing and residential academic support programs, application for financial aid and scholarships, and in the child's choice of an academic major. Parents are also expected to notify the higher education institution of any medical or special educational support programs needed by their child. Some colleges have established fund-raising programs in which select parents are used to solicit funds from other parents on behalf of the institution.¹²

It should not be surprising that today's parents expect to be actively involved in their child's education at the post-secondary level; especially during the transitional year of their child's higher education.¹³ The increasing cost of higher education has also motivated many parents to more closely monitor their child's choice of higher education institution, financial aid and scholarship opportunities, enrollment status, grades earned, length of time to complete a degree, economic value of co-op and internship programs, and placement services offered through the institution's career services office.

Many of these millennial students expect their parents to be interested in their activities and interests in college and will consider the opinions of their parents in a variety of personal and educational decisions. These students are not reluctant to actively involve a parent if they feel they have not been treated fairly or that parental influence may sway a decision to their benefit.¹⁴ When we enroll a traditional college student today we are indirectly enrolling a family with the expectation of being actively involved in their child's higher education. This engineering college is now experiencing infrequent situations in which parents are involved with their children's educational and career choices beyond the bachelor's degree and in one instance with a prospective faculty hire.

Advancements in communication have greatly enhanced the means by which a student and parent may remain in on-going contact if they choose to do so; the parent can be an electronic participant in the higher education of their child. With cellular telephones, telephones that transmit pictures, e-mail and the web, the student and parent can readily be in instantaneous verbal, written and photographic contact with their child. These advancements in telecommunications also allow the student and parent to conveniently be in contact with higher education faculty, staff and administrators on a variety of matters that directly impact them.

University of Colorado, Boulder

The Boulder Campus of the University of Colorado is a traditional higher education institution with most new students entering directly from the secondary school. The majority of these new students are academically well prepared for their collegiate experience and expect to be enrolled full-time in a degree program. Most will live in on-campus student housing during their first year on this campus. The College of

Engineering and Applied Science has the most academically rigorous admission requirements on this campus and has an academically demanding undergraduate curriculum. The parents of these new students are generally aware of the academic rigors of an undergraduate engineering curriculum and share their child's anxiety over the academic demands they will encounter. Most of these new students will undergo a personal, social and academic adjustment during this first year that will challenge them in a variety of academic and personal areas.

The College of Engineering and Applied Science has a singular orientation program for new students and family members immediately prior to the Fall Semester; these new students registered for courses prior to their arrival on campus. This orientation program is to assist them in better understanding their new academic environment, detail our academic expectations, provide them with information on campus student services, initiate contact with faculty and staff advisors, and validate their Fall Semester course schedule. Parents are encouraged to attend the first day of this two day College program, most parents return home following the first day of this orientation program.

The Engineering Parent Survey

A single page survey was given to all parents attending the New Student and Parent Orientation Program on August 18, 2004. We did not count the number of parents who attended this orientation program but estimate their number to be approximately 700; the number of male and female parents attending this Program seemed almost equal. This survey was not to be completed immediately following the orientation program but was to be mailed back to the College within five weeks following the beginning of the semester.

There were 66 male parents and 91 female parents who completed this survey and returned it to this College. With a noticeably higher female parent return rate, there may be a female parent bias in these survey results. However, a chi square analysis of parent responses on this survey revealed no significant difference in parent responses by gender. The percentage of resident and non-resident parents who responded to this survey is not statistically significant from the percentage of resident and non-resident students in our new freshman and transfer groups. Non-resident parent responses tended to come from those states in which the University of Colorado has successfully recruited students in the past.

These parents report they had 130 male children attending this college and 24 female children with 3 responses blank; these percentages indicated a slight underreporting from the parents of female new students. Parent age ranges were highest in the ranges 46-50 years (N=68) and 51-55 years (N=49); these are slightly higher age ranges than I anticipated from the parents of traditional new freshman and transfer students. On the basis of these measures and the chi square analysis, I find it reasonable to assume that these parent responses are most likely representative of all parents from this engineering new student population.

Engineering Parent Survey Results – Areas of Concern

Parents responding to this survey indicated their greatest concern was over the academic achievement of their child in this College, this factor had the highest numerical count overall and had the highest level of concern by both male and female parents. This comes despite the child's high school academic achievements, high test scores, and acceptance into this College. This choice is most likely to be reflective of parent concerns over the academic preparation of their child, the quality of the child's secondary school education, their perception of the child's study habits and skills, and the perceived rigor of an engineering undergraduate education. The literature referenced on parental involvement contains several references to parent concerns with how their child might perform in a competitive curriculum in college.

The second most frequently noted area of concern by the parents was not academic but relates to the personal adjustment of their child to this College; both male and female parents once again agreed on this being the second highest area of concern. Personal adjustment is a general term and is likely to have many underlying reasons for its high level of concern, such as the child's social skills and the child entering a new educational and social environment, one with a reduced level of parental influence. With higher education institutions increasingly challenged by student drug and alcohol use, coeducational social issues, large-scale student celebrations, and an increasing mix of student values and philosophies, it is not unusual that parents might be concerned with how their children might do in any higher education environment.

Table 1. Parents Primary Concerns with their Child's Adjustment to Engineering at CU-Boulder

Area of Concern	Total Parent Responses (N=157)	Male Parent Responses (N=66)	Female Parent Responses (N=91)
Academic Achievement	85 (54.1%)	35 (53.0%)	50 (54.9%)
Personal Adjustment	75 (47.8%)	30 (45.5%)	45 (49.5%)
Focus on Academics	61 (38.9%)	25 (37.9%)	36 (39.6%)
Balance of Work/Study	52 (33.1%)	22 (33.3%)	30 (33.0%)
Meeting New Friends	49 (31.2%)	16 (24.2%)	33 (36.3%)
Personal Maturity	37 (23.6%)	17 (25.8%)	20 (22.0%)
Separation from Home	24 (15.3%)	12 (18.2%)	12 (13.2%)
Selection of Major	17 (10.8%)	7 (10.6%)	10 (11.0%)
Ability to Function	15 (9.6%)	9 (13.6%)	6 (6.6%)
Other (Assorted)	17 (10.8%)	8 (12.1%)	9 (9.9%)

Beyond the initial two most frequently cited areas of concern, parent concerns clustered in three areas, with some slight difference between male and female responses. A first cluster was with their child's ability to focus on their academics, the second was with their child's ability to balance work and study, and the third with their child's ability to meet new friends. These were mid-range concerns that, once again, reflected general parent concerns over their children's academic and personal/social matters. Personal

maturity followed as an area with some concern, followed by concern over their child's separation from home.

A chi-square analysis was done on the difference between male and female parent responses in all areas on concern noted in Table 1; the male parents were slightly more concerned with the ability of their child to function and with the child's separation from home, the female parents were slightly more concerned that their child meets new friends.

Two areas in which limited parental concern was noted, these were the selection of a major by the child and their ability to function (see comment by the male parents). I was surprised with the lack of parent concern over their child's choice of a major; this may result from the child having already enrolled in the engineering college of their choice and the relative freedom of the student being able to change majors within this college. There were 17 parent responses in the "other" category, these were quite specific and related to their children's health, safety, and family matters.

Engineering Parent Survey Results – Level of Involvement

When parents were asked about the level of personal involvement they wished to maintain with their son or daughter while in college, by far the most frequent level was to have an on-going involvement in personal and academic matters. Female parents expressed a greater interest in the personal and academic areas and the male parents expressed a greater interest in involvement that would include information on their child's academic performance (grades).

Table 2. Level of Personal Involvement Desired By Parents

Level of Involvement	Total Parent Responses (N=151)	Male Parent Responses (N=63)	Female Parent Responses (N=88)
Limited, only when requested	8 (5.3%)	3 (4.8%)	5 (5.7%)
Limited, but to include grades	27 (17.9%)	14 (22.2%)	13 (14.8%)
Some, include faculty contact	5 (3.3%)	1 (1.6%)	4 (4.5%)
Some, faculty & administrators	7 (4.6%)	4 (6.3%)	3 (3.4%)
On-going, on personal matters	6 (4.0%)	3 (4.8%)	3 (3.4%)
On-going, personal & academic	93 (61.6%)	36 (57.1%)	57 (64.8%)
Other comments	5 (3.3%)	2 (3.2%)	3 (3.4%)

Few male or female parents reported their child would want daily contact; most indicated contact at least once per week was the child's desire. Female parents were more likely to indicate daily contact was desired than were male parents. Male parents indicated a more frequent desire by their child for infrequent contact, and to have that contact initiated by the child. This level of contact between student and parent may seem more frequent than we recall from our collegiate experience but is not highly frequent when considering the ease at which telecommunications contact may now be made.

Table 3. Level of Involvement Parent Feels Child Wishes

Level of Involvement	Total Parent Responses (N=154)	Male Parent Responses (N=65)	Female Parent Responses (N=89)
Almost Daily Contact	15 (9.7%)	3 (4.6%)	12 (13.5%)
At Least Once Per Week	83 (53.9%)	35 (53.8%)	48 (53.9%)
Infrequent, Initiated by Child	46 (29.9%)	23 (35.4%)	23 (25.9%)
Other/Blank	10 (6.5%)	4 (6.2%)	6 (6.7%)

Engineering Parent Survey Results – Reasons for Parental Contact with Faculty or Administration

The parents, both male and female, clearly indicated that their greatest reason for contacting a faculty member or college administrator would be if their child was experiencing academic difficulty in several courses. This was noted as the most frequent reason and the highest priority by both genders of parents. Second in frequency was if the child were to experience a medical or psychological emergency. It is not unusual to assume that a child having difficulties in several courses may have medical or personal issues that would be negatively impacting their academic performance in multiple areas. This would further explain the next two most likely reasons a parent might contact a faculty member or administrator, a family crisis or medical or psychological difficulties.

Table 4. Reasons Parent Might Contact Faculty or Administrator

Reasons for Contact	Total Parent Responses (N=157)	Male Parent Responses (N=66)	Female Parent Responses (N=91)
Academic, Several Courses	97 (61.8%)	38 (57.6%)	59 (64.8%)
Medical/Psych Emergency	87 (55.4%)	36 (54.5%)	51 (56.0%)
Family Crisis	74 (47.1%)	33 (50.0%)	41 (45.0%)
Medical/Psych Difficulties	71 (45.2%)	27 (40.1%)	44 (48.4%)
Doing Poorly in Course	62 (39.5%)	24 (36.4%)	38 (41.8%)
Not Treated Fairly	30 (19.1%)	16 (24.2%)	14 (15.4%)
Other (varies)	11 (7.0%)	6 (9.1%)	5 (5.5%)

While this survey did not ask what they might expect the faculty member or administrator to do once contacted by a parent, this contact is likely to be frustrating for the parent and the faculty member or administrator. Legal limitations imposed by the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) limit what the family members are entitled to know about their child’s educational record and academic performance.

I find it interesting that these parents indicate a rather low priority for contacting a faculty member or administrator being poor academic performance by child in a singular course, as this seems to be the most recent reason that parents contact me. It may be that the parents do not anticipate their child having academic difficulties at the time this survey was completed. My experience here is that the parents of today’s millennial children differ not in the reason for their contact with faculty and administrators, but in their

expectation that we will treat their child differently than other students or will alter our academic rules and policies to remove their child from academic difficulty.

Engineering Parent Survey Results – Perspective of Child’s Higher Education

Most parents indicated their child’s higher education is their personal matter, with the parents providing personal and financial support. This was followed with a substantial number of the parents indicating their child’s education is a family matter and they are in this educational effort together. Information on the millennial generation indicates that viewing their child’s education as a family matter is a common perspective. These parents also note, by a large margin, that their children’s education is for the child’s personal and career development and, to a lesser degree, to prepare them for life and society.

Table 5. Parent Perspective on Child’s Higher Education

	Total Parent Responses (N=155)	Male Parent Responses (N=66)	Female Parent Responses (N=89)
Support for Higher Education:			
I am not involved	2 (1.3%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (2.2%)
I provide financial support	4 (2.6%)	3 (4.5%)	1 (1.1%)
I provide personal and financial support	84 (54.2%)	38 (57.6%)	46 (51.8%)
A family matter, we are in this together	65 (41.9%)	25 (37.9%)	40 (44.9%)
Child’s Education is:			
The basis of their personal development	8 (5.2%)	3 (4.5%)	5 (5.6%)
For personal and career development	137 (88.4%)	59 (89.4%)	78 (87.7%)
Primarily for their career development	10 (6.4%)	4 (6.1%)	6 (6.7%)
Reason for Higher Education:			
An economic investment in their future	40 (25.8%)	18 (27.3%)	22 (24.7%)
To prepare them for life and society	104 (67.1%)	44 (66.7%)	60 (67.4%)
To provide them with advanced learning	9 (5.8%)	2 (3.0%)	7 (7.9%)

The parent’s perspective of their children’s higher education has a clear economic link. Looking at frequency alone, these parents indicate they provide personal and financial support for this educational undertaking, their child’s education is for personal and career development, and their child’s education is an economic investment in their future. With the rising costs of securing a higher education and the growing importance of education in the workplace, the economic factors behind securing a higher education must be remembered when we interact with parents and their children. We are not expected to alter our academic decisions on the basis of economic factors, but we must be aware of the financial impact of our decisions.

To summarize, the parents come to higher education with their child; they may not be staying on campus and attending classes, but they are available electronically and are involved emotionally and financially. Academically, today's student has rights under FERPA but is more willing to share academic and personal information with their parents than were prior generations of students, especially if the student feels that this parental involvement may alter a decision in their favor. The parents do not clearly distinguish between the academic areas of higher education in which their involvement is not welcome and other academic support areas in which their involvement is encouraged.

Recommendations

As educators and administrators we must better coordinate our academic and non-academic communications with the current generation of students and their parents. It is important that we clearly inform these parents of those areas in which their involvement is appropriate and inappropriate by law, regulation or tradition. For example, in student housing it may be appropriate for the student and their parent to select a specific residence hall or academic support program and to provide information on their child to assist in the selection of a roommate, but it is not appropriate for the parent to interview a prospective roommate or make the roommate selection.

We should review our institution's printed and electronic publications to determine the information now being provided to parents and the public. These materials may imply that parental involvement is encouraged in academic and personal areas in which FERPA applies and student privacy is guaranteed. It is also important that the academic units within the institution have a consistent policy and common practices on parental involvement, especially in areas such as student advising, information on student academic performance, the release of student grades, and academic actions.

It may be useful for the institution to develop a publication focused on the parent, with a section devoted to explaining the institution's policy on parental involvement, explaining FERPA and student privacy rights, how academic and personal advising is conducted, note areas of appropriate and inappropriate parental involvement, and points of contact within the institution for parents and other members of the academic community.

If the institution has a Parent Relations Office, Alumni Relations Office or similar offices, coordination must exist with these offices to ensure their publications and communications reflect the institution policy on areas of appropriate parental involvement.

Some institutions may find it useful to establish a broad-based standing committee with responsibility to improve communications with parents and clarify those areas appropriate for parental involvement. This committee should be composed of staff from student services offices, along with faculty and academic representatives. This committee could assist in recommending policies, reviewing publications, resolving issues internally, and might also be a referral point for parents. If this committee of this

type is established, I encourage the college or school of Engineering to seek faculty or staff representation.

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Biographical Information

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Appendix A: Parent Survey

August 2004

Dear Parent:

The College of Engineering and Applied Science is experiencing an increased level of parental involvement in the educational process of our undergraduate students. This reflects a national trend in which parents are demanding to be more actively involved in many aspects of the education of their children.

To assist us in responding to this increased parental involvement, we are attempting to secure a better understanding of why some parents want to be more involved in the education and personal lives of their adult children. Consequently, we are requesting you complete this survey and return it to this College. We will use this data in reviewing our internal policies and in revising our future communication with parents and students.

Please respond to the questions in this survey and mail your response back to us in the attached envelope. You will find one survey for the male parent and one for the female parent because of the potential for different responses by gender. Thank you, in advance, for responding to this survey. Please return all surveys by October 1, 2004.

Parent Information:

Male _____ Female _____
Resident of Colorado? Yes _____ / No _____ (if no, which state? _____)
Your age range: 30 – 35 _____ 36 – 40 _____ 41 – 45 _____
46 – 50 _____ 51 – 55 _____ 56 – 60 _____
61 – 65 _____ 66 and older _____
My child is a Male _____ or Female _____

Please select from the list below your primary three (3) concerns about your child's adjustment to this college [number 1, 2, and 3 with 1 the highest concern]:

Academic achievement _____	Personal adjustment _____
Separation from home _____	Meeting new friends _____
Personal maturity _____	Focus on academics _____
Balance of work/study _____	Ability to function _____
Selection of major _____	(other) _____

Please select from the list below the one level of personal involvement you wish to maintain with your son or daughter during their time in college [use an “X”]:

- Limited involvement, only when requested by son or daughter _____
- Limited involvement, but to include knowledge of grades _____
- (continued on back of page)**
- Some involvement, to include contact with faculty _____
- Some involvement, to include contact with faculty or administrators _____
- On-going involvement with child on personal matters _____
- On-going involvement with child on personal and academic matters _____
- Other _____

What is the level of involvement you feel your child wishes on personal and academic matters? (please select only one) [use an “X”]

- Almost daily contact _____
- Contact at least once per week _____
- Infrequent contact, only when initiated by them _____
- Other _____

Please rank order from the list below the three (3) statements that most closely describe the reasons you might elect to call or contact a faculty member or administrator in this college? [number 1, 2 and 3 with 1 the strongest reason]

- My child is doing poorly in a course _____
- My child is not being treated fairly in a course _____
- My child is experiencing medical or psychological difficulties _____
- Our family is experiencing a crisis that impacts school _____
- My child has a medical or psychological emergency _____
- My child is experiencing academic difficulty in several courses _____
- Other _____

Please select one statement from each of the three areas below that best describe your personal perspective of your child’s higher education: [use an “X”]

Area One

- It is their personal matter, I am not involved _____
- It is their personal matter, I provide financial support _____
- It is their personal matter; I provide personal and financial support _____
- It is a family matter; we are in this together _____

Area Two

- My child’s education is the basis of their personal development _____
- My child’s education is for personal and career development _____
- My child’s education is primarily for their career development _____

Area Three

My child's education is an economic investment in their future

My child's education is to prepare them for life and society

My child's education is to provide them with an advanced learning

Once again, thank you for completing and mailing this parent survey!