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## Including Families in the Honors Experience

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## Including Families in the Honors Experience

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Countless articles in the news, combined with colorful anecdotes from faculty and staff, share common complaints about helicopters, lawnmowers, bulldozers, and snowplows—not transportation options on campus but rather parents of college students who stay actively involved in their students' lives. Honors faculty and administrators are tempted to dismiss this involvement as unnecessary and burdensome. We even have the backing of federal law via the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), which dictates what we can and cannot share about a student's educational record with parents. At the University of Florida, though, rather than keeping our distance from parents and family members, we have opted to embrace the strengths of parental involvement by including them in our honors program. Working as true partners while always mindful of FERPA regulations, we have enhanced our efforts to open lines of communication with the goal of helping our students be successful. Given the parent and family involvement in higher education, examination of current institutional and honors initiatives can provide direction for honors administrators as they negotiate interactions with their students' families.

## **PARENTS AND FAMILIES OF COLLEGE STUDENTS**

The frequent descriptors of parents as helicopters and the like generally represent only the extremes of parent behavior. Wartman and Savage defined parent involvement as

showing interest in the lives of their students in college, gaining more information about college, knowing when and how to appropriately provide encouragement and guidance to their student connecting with the institution, and potentially retaining that institutional connection beyond the college years. (5)

Research has shown the positive impacts of parental involvement in the lives of college students, which include providing financial assistance (Carney-Hall), motivating students to succeed academically (Sanchez, Reyes, & Singh), and easing the transition to college (Kolkhorst, Yazidjian, & Toews). The favorable outcomes associated with this involvement include a greater sense of emotional wellbeing (Sax & Weintraub), student development support (Taub), and greater social satisfaction with the institution (Harper, Sax, & Wolf).

Conventional research and practice related to parental involvement has neglected a wide variety of familial structures due to a narrow focus on White, middle-class parents (Wolf, Sax, & Harper). Recently, though, higher education terminology has expanded to be more inclusive of family involvement beyond traditional parents. Families include legal guardians, extended family such as grandparents and siblings, unmarried partners, and caregivers in addition to parents (Daniel, Evans, & Scott; Kiyama et al.). Through these important inclusions, we recognize that many college students have a familial support system beyond just their parents (Kiyama et al.).

## **PARENT AND FAMILY INITIATIVES**

Targeted parent and family initiatives have had a presence on college campuses for many years now. In the 1990s, Administrators Promoting Parent Involvement (APPI) began hosting an annual national conference to bring together staff who worked specifically with parents in either a student affairs or development context (Daniel, Evans, & Scott). In 2003, the University of Minnesota began a biennial survey of college and university parent and family programs (Savage & Petree). Then in 2008, the Association of Higher Education Parent/Family Program Professionals (AHEPPP) was founded to

serve those who support family involvement on college campuses. AHEPPP's resources include national and regional conferences, a peer-reviewed journal, and research on parent and family programs. Membership includes more than 180 institutions (AHEPPP). In 2010, the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) added standards for parent and family programs based on AHEPPP's recommendations.

Other examples of parent and family initiatives in higher education associations include a Parent and Family Relations Knowledge Community through Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA); a Parent & Family Network through the Association for Orientation, Transition, and Retention in Higher Education (NODA); and parent fundraising resources through the Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE).

Examples of early institutional initiatives included parent/family handbooks, orientation programs, and parent and family weekends (Daniel, Evans, & Scott; Simmons). Dedicated resources have emerged through websites dedicated to parents/families, help lines or email addresses, and offices focusing on the parent/family relationship (Daniel, Evans, & Scott). These specific contacts can help route parents and families to appropriate campus resources and alleviate the tendency to call the president for issues of minor concern (Cutright).

According to the most recent National Survey of College and University Parent Programs (n=223) (Savage and Petree), slightly more than half of parent and family program offices report to student affairs (52.8%) while almost a third report to advancement and/or foundation offices (29.2%). Of the programs represented in the survey, only 15.4% started prior to 1989. More than 38% of respondents had full-time responsibility for coordinating parent and family programs. Common services and programming for parents and families included websites (100%), email responses (100%), phone responses (98.3%), parent/family orientations (98.2%), parent/family weekends (94.7%), email newsletters (94.7%), and social media (88.1%). Since the 2013 survey, the largest increase in parent/family resources has been on Facebook (+13.8%) while the largest decrease has been managing a non-advisory parent/family association (-11.5%). Emerging initiatives are providing materials for non-English-speaking/international parents and families as well as campus crisis management and emergency response notification.

The University of Florida has a campus-wide focus on providing resources and support to parents and families. The Office of New Student and Family

Programs coordinates many of these programs, including orientation, family weekend, a parent and family association, and regularly scheduled online chats. An email newsletter is sent to members of the parent and family association while all families have access to a dedicated website, email address, staff member, and limited-access Facebook groups.

The advancement office directs annual giving campaigns on behalf of the academic colleges and units. These campaigns target families in addition to alumni and friends. The foundation collaborates with the Division of Student Affairs to manage the Parent and Family Leadership Council, with each family (10 new families annually) committing an annual gift of \$5000 in addition to service as an advocate and ambassador for the university. The alumni association partners with New Student and Family Programs to provide a joint parent and family association and alumni association membership as well as a legacy pinning ceremony for students of alumni at each family weekend event.

Academic affairs units have also begun outreach to parents and families. Many academic advising offices have developed family-specific websites with tips and resources to support students academically. Common tips include student/advisor and family/advisor communication strategies, academic policies and regulations, academic and career planning, and keys for success. A particular emphasis is supporting students in the selection of their major. While not available at this institution, libraries on other campuses are focusing on parent and family outreach as early as prospective campus tours. The hope is that families will remind students of the resources available in the library when needed (Benjamin & Dermody).

Administrative units such as the student health-career center, bursar's office, financial aid office also include frequently asked questions for parents and family members. As parents and family members continue to engage with college campuses, one should anticipate an increase in resources and support geared toward this population.

## **HONORS INITIATIVES**

For more than a decade we have offered honors-specific programming and resources for our parents and family members in the form of recruitment events, family weekend activities, and annual giving campaigns. Over the past few years we have increased our outreach to families, engaging them as partners in student success.

## **Established Initiatives**

### *Family Weekend*

We have offered an honors event during the university-wide family weekend for more than a decade. Previous events have included a special breakfast, an afternoon reception, a mini-lecture from a current honors instructor, and an evening outdoor carnival. Honors staff and the honors student organizations have both played a role in coordinating events. Our honors ambassadors have been particularly active in developing more social opportunities for families to connect such as the carnival-style events that have included games, honors “swag” prizes, food, and entertainment from an a cappella group. Coordination with the overall family weekend program is essential in not conflicting with major events for all families. Given communication and scheduling challenges, an honors-specific event has not always been possible.

### *Prospective Visitors*

More than a decade ago, our student ambassadors began hosting formal weekly visitation programs for prospective students and families. Instead of making individual appointments for prospective visitors, those interested in the honors program can attend the weekly program, which includes lunch with our ambassadors, a tour of the honors residence hall, and an information session with an honors staff member. Families are also invited to our visitation day for recently admitted students. Both events are coordinated entirely by the honors ambassadors with consultation from the honors staff member who serves as their advisor as well as the program director.

### *Annual Giving Campaigns*

Annual giving campaigns target parents of undergraduate students on campus. Parents of honors students are solicited on behalf of the honors program while parents of non-honors students are solicited for the division of student affairs. The honors program contacts only parents for annual giving because alumni can be solicited only for their academic colleges. The associate director of honors provides an update on the program to the annual-giving calling staff and coordinates with the advancement office to update letters and emails sent to parents.

## **Recent Initiatives**

### *Facebook Group*

In 2013, we created a private Facebook group for families of honors students. The purpose of the group is for parents and family members of honors students to connect with each other as well as for the honors office to share items of interest. We specifically note in the group's description that we cannot discuss a student's academic record with anyone except the student.

We include the link to the Facebook group in the acceptance email to students, asking them to share the group with their families. Word of mouth is another draw to the group. Only family members are added to the group as students have their own honors Facebook groups.

Over the past four years, the group has grown to almost eight hundred members and includes parents and extended family members of current students and alumni. Both the honors director and associate director actively participate in the group by sharing honors announcements and events, answering questions, and referring families to campus and community resources.

Facebook group activity varies by time of year and is especially active after admissions decisions are released. Conversations typically involve scholarship and financial aid questions, orientation preparation, and the honors residence hall. Over the summer, questions about the honors residence hall become more detailed as families start buying room decor and storage. More seasoned family members are essential in helping to answer these questions as they have already taken room measurements and experienced moving a student into the hall. During early honors registration, we get questions about the registration process and how to see an academic advisor. Throughout the fall semester, families of first-year students are concerned about building community, making friends, and getting involved.

### *Medallion Ceremony*

We created a medallion ceremony in 2014 to recognize graduating seniors who had completed honors program requirements. Parents and family members have been invited as guests since the inaugural ceremony. The ceremony has been held a week prior to spring commencement but will be moved to commencement weekend in 2018 to make it easier for families to attend. The medallion ceremony is coordinated by the associate honors director with assistance from student event-planning interns.

### *Branded Items*

Several years ago, we created a special avatar for newly admitted students to share on social media that proclaimed, “Proud New Honors Student.” The avatar was attached to their acceptance email and posted on our major social media sites. After noticing that parents were editing the avatar to reflect their pride in being honors parents, we formally created one for them as well and shared it with their Facebook group. An honors student leader with graphic design skills designed the avatars for our ongoing use.

After requests from parents for their own honors shirts two years ago, we began selling Honors Mom and Honors Dad t-shirts and sweatshirts. We take orders two or three times a year during convenient times for on-campus pick-up: prior to breaks and at the beginning of the fall semester. The link to order items online is posted in their Facebook group. Parents often send us selfies in their honors swag to show their pride in involvement in the program.

### *Orientation Break-Out Session*

In 2017, we debuted an optional break-out session for families during new-student orientation. The university coordinates a parallel orientation program for families during each of the twenty new-student orientation programs, and various campus units host afternoon break-out sessions. Before 2017, new honors students attended a mandatory session about the honors program, academic expectations and requirements, and involvement opportunities with an honors advisor, but the family members did not have a comparable experience to learn about the program.

After observing mixed messages sent to students and families about academic expectations throughout orientation, we decided that face-time with families could help in supporting our aims. The thirty-minute break-out session was advertised in the orientation program and facilitated by the honors director. Families appreciated the opportunity to meet directly with honors staff and better understand the advising and registration process. We intend to continue offering this session in 2018.

### **Benefits of Including Families**

Including families in the honors experience has benefited not only the families but also the students and our honors program.



## *Families*

Families feel both informed about and involved in honors. They gain a new perspective on the students' experience and identify with the honors program. They build a network of other honors families who serve as resources, contacts, and even friends. They also tend to have a more positive view of the honors program once they have that personalized connection.

## *Students*

Students do not always read email, and social media information can get lost in the mix of dog memes and cat videos, so families serve as an additional medium for sharing important dates, deadlines, and opportunities. By learning about honors events and activities, families also have additional conversation prompts with the students. As families network with each other, they can and do connect students with each other.

## *Honors*

Experienced family members serve as a significant resource for new families, often anticipating questions and answering them before they are even asked. They remember answers provided by the honors staff on earlier occasions and share those with new families. Their involvement saves many phone calls and emails to the honors office and other departments on campus. Due to the positive view our engaged families have of the honors program, they help us with recruitment by sharing their experiences with friends who have children in high school. We have also observed an increase in annual giving from our families that might be attributed to increased communication with them.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE**

As higher education continues to dedicate more resources and support for families of college students, the honors community would be remiss in not participating. Despite the helicopter-parent stereotypes, parenting varies among different populations. We run the risk of excluding students when we exclude their families. Instead, we can harness family engagement to help our students make informed decisions about their undergraduate education. With a tiered approach, we have a stronger foundation for promoting student success.

For those honors programs and colleges without family-specific programming and resources, small, manageable initiatives are the best way to start (Savage & Petree). Staffing within honors to coordinate these initiatives can be a barrier to implementation, so partnerships and collaborations with other departments are essential. Honors student organizations can also assist with some programming, and current families may be willing volunteers as well.

### **Questions to Consider**

- How do you currently engage with families?
- Why do you want to engage with families of honors students?
- Who else on campus is engaging with families?
- Are there partnership opportunities to engage with families?
- How can you adapt current practices to benefit families?
- How can you adapt family initiatives in other departments to benefit your families?
- How do you access parent/family contact information so that you can engage them?
- What funding is available or necessary to develop initiatives for families?

### **CONCLUSION**

We recently asked families to share what has been most helpful about our family Facebook group, which is the most consistently and continuously used resource we offer to families:

- Having direct access and conversation with Honors administrators . . . has been wonderful. It has enabled parents to receive accurate, detailed, and helpful information about Honors courses, policies and opportunities for our students. But additionally, it has really helped create a feeling of community and family which has been priceless!!! “Meeting” other honors families has been great too. Sharing experiences and getting feedback has been very helpful!!!

- The honesty, professionalism and having our questions answered so quickly. Knowing that our children have access to the same team that we do, which is considerably reassuring.
- Sense of community, knowing questions will be answered accurately by administrators, and reading the answers to other people's questions has been extremely informative (because it often touches upon important issues that I, or other parents, might not have been aware of).
- It's very comforting to have a "go to" place for consistent, timely information on topics as wide-ranging as dealing with the flood of 2016, to registration questions, to voicing opinions about upcoming issues or proposed changes.

These comments illustrate many of the benefits of engaging with honors families. Family involvement in college students' lives is not going to decrease, so it makes more sense to harness that involvement for good than to ignore it and hope it will go away. Given the limited information available about parent and family engagement in the honors community, we hope to open new conversations and resource-sharing about involving this important partner in student success.

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