Running head: THE ROLE OF PARENTS AND THEIR STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The Role of Parents
And Their Students in Higher Education

Eunice Joshua Clarke
Dr. Tracy Tambascia – EHDP 563
November 12, 2008
The Role of Parents
And Their Students in Higher Education

When you think of a student who is entering college for the first time, the traditional image is that of a person who is coming into his or her own. The student is a budding adult who would make their own decisions and become independent from their parents. But today, a new type of mindset has emerged; not only from the newly-enrolled college student, but from the parent as well.

Today, many parents of college students have firmly re-defined their role when it comes to ensuring their students’ growth and success in higher education. The parent is constantly in close contact with the student and is involved in many, if not most, of the stages in their students’ development and success. This new type of parent is defined in higher education as the “helicopter parent.”

This paper will explore, discuss and focus on three periods of history regarding the role of the parent of the college student: (1) in loco parentis and its eventual re-defining of the term; (2) the “helicopter parent” and the parents’ current role in helping their student succeed in college; and (3) the merging of a past and current ideas of the parent/student/college relationship into a new way of working together, known as “in consortio cum parentibus” – in partnership with parents.

In Loco Parentis. Before the 21st century, the definition was very familiar to student affairs as well as other university and college administrators. In loco parentis, a Latin phrase which means “in place of the parent” (Sweeton & Davis, 2004) was the understanding that the university or college stands in place of the parent or guardian.
Based in English common law, the history of *in loco parentis* was first established as a legal doctrine for colleges in the United States with *State v. Pendergrass* (1897) which allowed the teacher to discipline a student. In *Gott v. Berea* (1913), colleges were given the right to give “reasonable care” to the student (Henning, 2007). “Reasonable care” soon turned into an expectation and perception that the college was obligated to discipline and protect the student in all matters of their lives, much like a parent.

However, this practice dramatically changed, starting with the case in 1961 of *Dixon v. Alabama Board of Education* (Henning, 2007).

During the 1960’s and 1970’s, colleges saw what was called the “fall of in loco parentis,” “due, according to Henning, to five primary factors: (1) increase in the number of older students on campus; (2) a lowering of the age of majority to 18 years; (3) a liberal shift in student thinking; (4) a rise in civil rights; and (5) a rebellion against authority. According to Bickel and Lake, a sixth factor also included the emergence of student economic rights (Henning, 2007). With these factors in place, they gave rise to the emergence of the student becoming more of the adult, with less authority from the parent and the college.

“Models” of the different periods in history occurred which demonstrated the evolution of the relationship between colleges and students. In the “Constitutional Model,” *Dixon v. Alabama Board of Education* (1961) involved six black students who were expelled for allegedly participating in Civil Rights demonstrations. But the 5th Circuit Court of Appeals concluded that college students should be afforded minimal due process rights, which was the first time in history that the U.S. Constitution was used to protect college students (Henning, 2007).

In the “Contract Model,” it addressed the students’ civil and economic rights. However, this model was unsuccessful because it was not balanced enough to protect the student; the
student did not have the right to negotiate. The “Fiduciary Model” was a concept based on trust between the student and college, in that the college would act in the best interest of the student at all times. This model, however, was also found to be unbalanced; but this time it was more in favor of the student than the college. As Henning points out, “the fiduciary model minimized students’ responsibilities while maximizing the responsibilities of the college (Henning, 2007).

The “Bystander/No Duty Model” was introduced by Bickel and Lake after the fall of in loco parentis. The college no longer had a duty to become involved in the students’ lives outside of the classroom. At this point, students were considered adults, responsible for themselves.

Other court cases emerged as a result of the “Bystander/No Duty Model”, that were in favor of colleges not being liable for certain outcomes (i.e., injury to the student). However, there was a shift during the 1980’s and the 1990’s of more colleges being held liable for the injuries. Parents soon became more involved in students’ lives academically.

The Helicopter Parent. “Helicopter Parent,” as it is affectionately written about in top periodicals such as The Wall Street Journal, The Washington Post, USA Today, as well as top journals known in higher education, is defined as “a parent who pays extremely close attention to his or her child’s or children’s experiences and problems, particularly at educational institutions” (www.wikipedia.org). Helicopter parent primarily refers to “baby boomer” parents who hover around their students. While there are many college administrators and faculty who have gotten used to the idea of parents’ guiding their student through every aspect of their lives during college, there are still some who believe that a lot of parents and parent programs are “interfering with the maturing process and academic engagement of our students.” (Coburn, 2006).
Some researchers have also found that since the New York Twin Towers tragedy on September 11, 2001 (9/11), parents have taken more interest in figuratively and literally holding their students’ hand in college (University Business, 2008).

Although a recently-conducted survey showed that helicopter parents “help students thrive” (Lipka, 2007), opponents of helicopter parents give many reasons for their objections to parents’ involvement of the students’ college experience, including, but not limited to: (1) unnecessary calls to administrators over trivial matters (i.e., parent calling to report a mouse seen in the students’ room and a mother calling to report a burned-out light bulb); (2) making an excuse for a student who did not turn in an assignment; (3) a dispute between two students; and (4) a call from a parent who describes their disappointment that their student received a grade which they feel they didn’t deserve. A faculty member explains: “Parents who intervene inappropriately usually do so out of their own anxiety, with little or no awareness that they might be impeding their child’s development (Coburn 2006).

Other factors causing this new involvement from parents includes the K-12 teachers are requesting more hands-on participation from the parent to the child and significant increases in diversity – different ethnicities, cultures, languages and ways of life that students may never have experienced before.

Communication between students and parents has also been significantly facilitated by technology. A survey by College Parents of America found that 74% of parents talked with their student at least 2-3 times a week, and one-third communicated at least once a day (Henning 2007).

*In Consortio Cum Parentibus.* Translated, this term means “in partnership with parents.” (Henning 2007). Henning points out that with this new model, parents work closely with both
the student and the college, and the parent is seen as a viable part of the relationship. Additionally, professionals in colleges can partner with the parent in the application stage by: (1) allowing students to learn from their own decisions; (2) allowing students to become autonomous, in that they are held responsible for the decisions they make; (3) acknowledge and uphold the rights of the students, which includes their rights under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and the Health Insurance Portability Accountability Act (HIPAA); (4) embrace the connection between student and parent; and (5) provide a supportive, and accountable training ground for students’ decision-making (Henning, 2007).

**Conclusion.** The relationship between student, parent and college has evolved greatly through the years. The college’s role with students was to protect and discipline the student within the college classroom. Increases in the age of students, lowering of the age of majority to 18 years, a liberal shift in the way students started thinking, civil rights, rebellions against authority and the rise of student economic rights played significant roles in changing the policy of *in locos parentis*. Baby boomer parents during the 1990’s through today became more involved in decisions of their college students, in that they wanted to protect, defend, and guard their monetary investment (higher tuition). Currently, most four-year institutions have accepted the new age of helicopter parents being part of their students’ college experience, and many have created positions and departments to support parents. With this in mind, Henning has developed a new term – *in consortio cum parentibus* – which describes a model that can have the college work effectively as a partner to both the student and parent and by being a guide to help the student during their time in college, while at the same time, emphasizing autonomy, responsibility and accountability from the student. With the parent as partner to the college, success of the student can be achieved.
References


