Baby boomer parents: challenges with their increasing involvement

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Abstract
As the children of boomers move through education system, there is an increasing parental involvement in the college student's experience. This is the result of a combination of factors, including the increasingly higher cost of attendance, boomer parents' own experiences in higher education, societal trends to extend adolescence, and student issues today that can sometimes be life-threatening.

While this parental involvement can blur the lines of just who the institution is educating and responsible to—student or parent—administrators would be wise to acknowledge this participation and develop well-defined and consistent policy regarding it. As Murray (1999) pointed out, millennial parents and their children "are a team, and all members of the team play" (p. 44).

Clearly, these students and their actively-participating parents are a force to be reckoned with and will continue to be for some time. Their needs and demands will have a great influence over how higher education is shaped in the years to come.
BABY BOOMER PARENTS:
CHALLENGES WITH THEIR INCREASING INVOLVEMENT

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Baby Boomer Parents: Challenges with Their Increasing Involvement

Despite the fact that today’s traditionally-aged college students are the most diverse in history (Saunders & Bauer, 1998), they do have one thing in common—they are all offspring of the baby boom generation. This distinction—and these parents—follow them onto campus and into the residence halls, in financial aid offices, and, via cell phones, walking to early morning classes. Today’s parents expect to be involved in every aspect of their student’s college experience and are not as willing to relinquish control as parents of the past (Scott & Daniel, 2001). On today’s campuses working with traditionally-aged college students also means working with their parents. Consequently, it is the administrator’s benefit to understand today’s parents.

This increased and enhanced involvement by baby boomer parents is the result of many factors: the baby boomers’ own educational and social experiences that has led to more activism and a consumer mentality, the current attitudes regarding higher education as an entitlement and an economic investment, changing family dynamics and attitudes about in loco parentis supervision, and technological developments that enables greater communication.

Characteristics of Baby Boomers

Baby boomers—those born between 1946 and 1964—comprise 30 percent of the population (Russell, 1999; Smith, 2000). The sheer size of this cohort group makes it highly influential and this group has grown accustomed to redefining the many stages and aspects of American life. As this group sends its offspring to college, it is also reshaping this aspect of American life as well.

The boomer generation is the most educated cohort in history. If one’s personal experience “colors” one’s perception of another’s experience as Daniel, Evans, and Scott
Boomer Parents (2001) contend, then this group knows more about the college experience than past
generations and actively applies this experience to their children’s endeavors. Thus, there
are a great many parents who are neither unfamiliar with the system nor intimidated by it.
Among men aged 35 to 54, 30 percent of whites, 16 percent of blacks, and 13 percent of
Hispanics are college graduates. One in four women aged 35 to 54 is a college graduate,
and over half have at least some college experience (Russell, 1999). These parents know
what to expect from college and, more importantly, what to demand from it.

The Parent as Activist

The boomer experience in higher education during the 1960s and 1970s was a
time of increasing individual rights and, perhaps even more importantly, an increasing
distrust for authority. Pre-World War II generations learned the lessons of “The Three
Rs”—reading, writing, and ‘rithmetic (with a heavy dose of respect), boomers, on the
other hand, learned “The Three Ls”—legislation, litigation and (free) love. During their
educational tenure, they witnessed change brought about by the Civil Rights Act, the
Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), and Title IX. The Vietnam War
and the Watergate scandal left them disillusioned, while Ralph Nader and growing
consumer advocacy taught them distrust. Assassinations and resignations underscored
the fragile and transitory features of established institutions. This generation was no
longer awed by government and authority—including university presidents—but rather
saw them as suspect.

This watchful eye on the “establishment” continues today. Parents are more
prone to find fault and hold schools accountable. Threats of legal action are
commonplace. During the 1990s, 40 percent of all colleges and universities surveyed
reported an increase in threats of litigation (Levine & Cureton, 1998, p. 51; Murray,
Parents are getting “more and more vocal about what happens to their children in college,” says Sandra Boyette, a vice president at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, N.C. (quoted in Marklein, 1998, p. 1).

Howard and Connie Clery are an early case of parental activism. After their daughter, Jeanne, was murdered at Lehigh University in 1986, their efforts resulted in the Crime Awareness and Campus Security Act of 1990—amended to The Jeanne Clery Act in 1998—which mandates campuses to disclose crime statistics, timely warnings, and maintain extensive public crime logs (http://www.campussafety.org).

Activism, litigation, and legislation instigated a great deal of change on U.S. campuses and these changes, understandably, have created a different atmosphere than campuses of the past. Student support and advocacy groups continue to grow faster than any other type of student organization. Levine and Cureton (1998) contend that the advocacy role is a natural outgrowth of a student consumer mentality. To vie with these legal and social changes, the educational community increasingly is taking its cues from the business world especially when “customer” satisfaction translates into enrollment numbers and well-written and defined “contracts” protect institutions from expensive legal fees and damaging publicity (p. 59).

The Consumer Mentality

Boomers grew up during an era when “confidence in all social institutions had declined. Public opinion polls showed that a rising proportion of Americans felt that the nation’s social institutions, including government, corporations, and colleges as well, were somewhat immoral or dishonest. This encouraged a certain wariness, or a consumer orientation, in dealing with the full range of the country’s social organizations” (Harris and Associates survey, 1979, cited in Levine & Cureton, 1998, p. 52).
Subsequently, colleges and universities today are encountering a heightened sense of accountability for their staff and faculty, facilities and services, and the overall educational experience. Parents now view higher education as a consumer goal and want more “value for their dollar” (Golden, 2001, p. 78).

Parents and students alike approach higher education with a sense of entitlement and value instead of the privilege and honor associated with colleges in the past. They expect to be treated as “paying customers” and “place a greater deal of importance on the annual college rankings that appear in certain magazines” (Conneely, Good, & Perryman, 2001, p. 52; Daniel, Evans, & Scott; 2001, p. 8).

Another factor in this consumerist orientation is that students spend less and less time on campuses because of work and other responsibilities. During the 1990s, 71 percent of the colleges surveyed reported increases in the proportion of students working while attending college. This makes it is easier for them to see themselves as consumers of services rather than as members of the community (Levine & Cureton, 1998).

Families are becoming increasingly more sophisticated about how to approach the college selection process, rankings, the employment rate, and salary range of the most recent graduating class is of utmost importance. Students and parents arm themselves with information on all aspects of a school with a click of a mouse. Thus, according to Lange & Stone (2001), “the ‘buyer’ of a college education is in a more equal position with the ‘seller’” (p. 20-21).

Levine & Cureton (1998) stated that the children of boomers are “bringing to higher education the same consumer expectations they have for every other commercial enterprise—the focus is on convenience, quality, service, and cost. They are not afraid to shop around” (p. 50).
Student as an investment

Lange and Stone (2001) observed that “much of the country now views ‘going to college’ as the necessary path to economic and social mobility” (p. 16). And, while “they don’t believe that a college degree guarantees a good job, neither do they believe you can get one without college” (Levine & Cureton, 1998, p. 132).

The majority of freshmen say they go to college to “make more money” and put personal and philosophical goals at the bottom of the list. Interestingly, these latter goals were placed as principle goals by the college students of the 1960s. The notion of college as a place to “luxuriate in close personal friendships and lose oneself in philosophic reflection is a relic of a bygone era” (Levine & Cureton, 1998, p. 118).

This is not necessarily a greedy approach to education, but a practical one. Even during the more prosperous 1990s, students were frightened of their economic prospects. They were “equally frightened about being unable to repay their college loans, whether they could find a decent job after college, and whether they could afford a home and a family—or would have to move back home with their parents” (Levine & Cureton, 1998, p. 94).

Now, fast forward to the first decade of the millennium. Many states, experiencing deficits, are pulling back from supporting schools and the burden is being shifted to the individual. Meanwhile, financial aid is not keeping pace with rising college costs (DeBarros, 2003). Statistics show that college is the biggest investment to a family second only to the cost of their home and the cost of education has more than doubled in the last 20 years (Chronicle of Education Almanac, 2000). This is further complicated by the fact that the average loan is going up while the number of years it takes to graduate is
increasing (Oluwasanmi and the U.S. Department of Education quoted in Lange & Stone; 2001).

Tuition is higher, unemployment is higher, and the price of a home is higher. Families and students are going into debt like never before. This may help to explain why students and parents have a very purposeful, career-oriented mindset about college. While the cost of sending a child to college is going up, boomers have less children to send there. Fewer children and greater involvement with those children are main characteristics of boomer families.

Changing family dynamics

The number of siblings in the home has decreased significantly in the last generation with one in every ten reporting no brothers or sisters at all. Ironically, smaller families are living in larger living spaces. The individual child has more, but less people to share it (Daniel, Evans, & Scott, 2001). These smaller families “mean kids’ activities tend to be a primary focus for parents” (Marklein, 1998, p. 1).

This is another distinct aspect of the boomer life: their relationship with their children. There are more single-parent families, more single-child families, and more “maximally involved” parents. This involvement extends from the birth of their children to “arranging for and participating in all manner of activities, including many in which even the most committed parents traditionally stayed in the background” (Murray, 1999, p. 28). According to Neil Murray (1999), a director of career services at the University of California-San Diego, today’s parents are “omnipresent” in all levels and areas of education and administrators will be spending more time with parents and their concerns than ever before (p. 44).
Because boomers have been intensely involved in their kids’ lives throughout school, it is “unnatural” that this involvement would cease when the child reaches 18 (Carter, 2003; Lewin, 2003, p.1). Parenting with the same overachieving energy and resources they use in other aspects of living, boomer involvement has been rewarded with their children’s trust and admiration (Neil Murray, 1999).

...(T)his kind of ultra-involved parenting strengthens the bond between child and parent. The children have no cause for resentment and every reason to see their parents as what they are—allies, supporters, champions, advocates. Millennial families are partners in pursuit of the same goal with the children always at the center stage, high upon a pedestal, leading the way. The children rely upon their parents because that has worked for them. As a result, they value the participation of their parents and hold them in high esteem. This was recently documented in the Northwestern Mutual Life Insurance Company study, “Generation 2001,” which found that college freshmen admire their parents more than anyone else besides, naturally, their grandparents (Murray, 1999, p. 44).

Thus, children of boomers are not as “anti-authoritarian” as their parents (Lewin, 2003, p. 3). These students are comfortable with adults, less cynical, and often their parents are seen as friends and advisors. Trust and connectedness have replaced the generation gap and alienation that existed between baby boomers and their parents (Carter, 2003; Lewin, 2003). According to Knight (2003), millennials are “more likely than previous generations to consult with their parents on important decisions such as where to attend college and what to study” (p. 3).
Many parents see this as a healthy change, while some administrators wonder against whom these kids will rebel and when and how will they develop their independent personalities (Lewin, 2003). These ties to parents also may inhibit the interaction and mentoring between student and faculty that is linked to student satisfaction and predicted retention (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

Whether one argues that this increased parental involvement has caused the societal trend toward extended adolescence or that extended adolescence has fostered the parental involvement, parents who regard college-age students as children rather than adults remain more involved in students' lives (Daniel, Evans, & Scott, 2002).

Russell (1999) claimed that "one of the most important truths about boomers is that they are still the youth market" that they created three decades ago. She continued that "most boomers still live with the philosophy that age is a state of mind rather than a stage of life and refuse to adopt the attitudes and lifestyles of their parents" (p. 2).

Perhaps, it is this resistance to aging that has more to do with their imposing an extended adolescence on their children. This is a generation whose tenet was not to trust anyone over 30 and sang along with The Who's lyrics, "I hope I die before I get old." Boomers may have rationalized that as long as their children stay young and need them, boomers can foster a continued sense of youth for themselves.

And, when boomers are not there to nurture their offspring, they can demand that someone else does it for them.

*In loco parentis revisited*

Boomers, in the post-Vietnam War era fought hard to extending adult rights to 18-year-olds, and pushed through the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) formally recognizing the adult status of college students and limiting access to their
records. Ironically, it is this same generation that wants to undo—or at least ease—this act (Marklein, 1998).

Since the 1974 FERPA enactment, all subsequent amendments have been in the “direction of providing more disclosure to inform the public, victims, and parents about the activities and behavior of students on American campuses” (Weeks, 2001, p. 42).

Smith (2000) observed that “it is strange that the generation who in their youth fought so hard for their own personal freedom and to liberate themselves of parental control, has tethered their own children with pager, cell phones and parental notification policies” (p. 2).

Baby boomers are the generation who toppled ‘in loco parentis.’ Today as parents, they demand through the laws and policies they advocate and pass, as well as through the numerous lawsuits they bring, that today’s college and university administrators act on their behalf to manage and protect their children (Smith, 2000, p. 1-2).

Neil Howe, historian and co-author of *Millennials Rising*, claims, “The boomer parents of trophy kids will absolutely not tolerate not knowing what’s going on with them. Colleges are going to find that when their dorms and classrooms are filled with Millennials, they are going to have to be more accountable with what happens with their kids” (quoted in Knight, 2002, p. 4). Howe calls these ever-watchful, continually-hovering boomers, “helicopter parents,” and believes that they are likely to continue to challenge colleges to offer safer, more protective environments for their children (quoted in DeBarros, 2003, p. 2).

The Higher Education Reauthorization Act of 1998 (HERA) is symbolic of the demands on institutions to provide a more watchful eye. As an amendment to FERPA,
HERA allows, but does not require, institutions to notify parents that a student under the age of 21 has violated rules or policies governing the use or possession of alcohol or controlled substances (Palmer et al., 2001).

More and more, colleges and universities are being pressured into assuming a greater responsibility for every aspect of these "adult" children's lives. In fact, these institutions now must provide greater control over areas that were never even considered in the past—crime, substance abuse, health risks, credit cards, hazing and suicide (Black, 2000, p. 1).

There are increased claims filed against institutions based on *in loco parentis* principles that schools need to act more aggressively in psychological illness situations and protect students from themselves in situations of suicide and attempted suicide.

A growing number of these plaintiffs argue the school, acting as a 'good parent,' could or should have done more to save student lives in these troubled circumstances....(T)here is often the suggestion that if student affairs professionals were acting more 'in loco parentis' bad things would not happen....this qualified return to *in loco parentis* comes at a time when resolving cases internally is very difficult due to aggrieved parties and external supporters who claim a stake in the outcome. There is a push for strict legal remedies and what is perceived as justice rather than campus educational and developmental sanctions (Black, 2000, p. 2).

In other words, parents want higher education to oversee their children like a nurturing parent, but any slip up in the process will be met with harsh legal action. It is a fine line for administrators to walk in an educational environment.
Judicial policies that assume a student-development approach to responsibility, justice, and community may be lost on parents who perceive that a student’s rights have been somehow violated. A myopic concern to meet their own child’s needs as opposed to the needs of the larger community creates a dissonance among the parents that often is repeated in the actions of the students (Daniel, Evans, & Scott; 2001, p. 9).

However, because of their continued ties to and easily-accessed parents, it would seem today’s students would be in the least need of surrogate parenting.

**Communication and technology**

Many of today’s students talk—via cell phone or e-mail—to their parents at least once a day. This daily interaction blurs the stark division of separation and independence. Parents are the first they turn to with roommate problems and homework issues (Carter, 2003; Lewin, 2003; Marklein, 1998; Murray, 1999).

Daniel, Evans, and Scott (2001) point out that “the notion of setting boundaries for parents can pose a difficult challenge in today’s world of instant information, access, and gratification. When information is just one click away, parents are less likely to accept the idea that it could turn out to be developmentally beneficial for their son or daughter to live with a roommate he or she does not like in the present” (p. 11).

College parents are now armed with a great deal of information and avenues for interaction with other parents that allows them to “form specific questions” and “exacerbate their concerns” (Conneely, Good, & Perryman; 2001, pp. 52 and 59). With binge drinking on the rise and campus crime logs open to the public, parents can shop around on any given day for something new about which to worry.
One example of information availability and parental networking is the College Parents of America (CPA) website which claims to represent 12 million households and touts itself as the “only national membership association dedicated to helping parents prepare for and put their children through college more easily, economically and safely.” Here, parents can join forces to promote federal legislation for tax credits and deductions, access financial information and other information about safety issues such as alcohol abuse and fire safety on campus, spring break travel problems, and alerts related to scholarship scams (http://www.collegeparents.org).

With the attitude of “if you can’t beat them, join them” and recognizing the fact that parents are not going to go away any time soon, individual institutions are becoming more electronically accessible to parents. George Washington University and Arizona State University are two institutions that have taken a proactive approach to the increased parental involvement and technological access.

George Washington University recognized the growing involvement on campus and the increasing demand for information with the formalization of the Office of Parent Services (http://gwired.gwu.edu/cms/index.php?site=parents&id=892). The university’s Parents’ Association’s mission includes developing “a stronger parental constituency” and providing “advocacy for...students, parents and the University” and “the means whereby parents of students...can offer continuous support to each other” (http://gwired.gwu.edu/cms/index.php?site=parents&id=896). The popularity of this organized effort is not surprising given the reputation of baby boomers for organizing peace rallies, marches, and sit-ins.

Arizona State University offers a distance-learning course for parents of freshmen that familiarizes parents to the crises and dilemmas of being at college and allows them to
try their hand at solving them. In the process, the parents also become familiar with the people who are on campus working with students (Carr, 2000).

These are two institutions among many who have recognized the growing interest in all aspects of college living and learning and are employing newsletters, websites, orientation programs, and other methods to create a more proactive and comprehensive approach to parental involvement.

Implications for student services

Student services offices should strive to "coordinate messages about events, programs, and campus life so that parents receive a consistent and comprehensive view of the institution and gain a greater sense of the school’s commitment to its students" (McInnis, 2001, p. 67). This coordination must not only be within an office but between student services offices and academic offices as well.

Daniel, Evans, and Scott (2001) pointed out that attempting to work with parents can end up creating greater work for student service personnel if these attempts are half-hearted and unorganized. When campus interactions and guidelines are inconsistent, parents “learn quickly to capitalize on institutional chaos and contact a different administrator when they do not achieve their desired outcome at the first point of contact” (p. 4).

Interdepartmental consistency, clearly delineated agreements, and the use of FERPA guidelines should be used to reinforce appropriate boundaries and the idea that the primary relationship is with the student. The main goal for all involved—student, parent, and institution—should be a successful college experience that fosters the student’s development (Daniel, Evans, & Scott: 2001 Coburn & Woodward, 2001).
Colleges and universities must acknowledge the growing demand for open and pro-active communication with parents. This communication should incorporate a distinct parental element in orientation programs and, as more parents become computer savvy, continue with e-mail messages and parent web pages as an important means of communicating information to parents. Orientations for parents enables the institution to explain its community and provides a forum for parents to express their questions and concerns (Conneely, Good, & Perryman; 2001). Depending upon the demand and environment, separate and dedicated administrative offices like the Office of Parent Services at George Washington University may be appropriate (Coburn & Woodward, 2001; Marklein, 1998).

In order to take a pro-active communication approach, administrators must anticipate the fears and worries of parents and “offer easy paths of communication for parents such as e-mail listservs, distribution lists, and parent-friendly links to the institution’s homepage.” This allows a quick response to problems that may arise (Conneely, Good, & Perryman; 2001; p. 59).

Daniel, Evans, and Scott (2001) saw this need for “quick answers” as characteristic of the boomer generation. It is “logical that these parents should seek to exercise control because they are the decision makers in many of their environments” (p. 7).

Often referred to as the sandwich generation because of their dual responsibilities to children and aging parents, many baby boomers are experiencing a “cluttered nest” instead of an “empty nest” and demand swift resolution to conflict (Kingsmill and Schlesinger quoted in Daniel, Evans, and Scott, 2001, p. 6).
This resolution must also include a high level of consumer service that boomers have come to expect (Knight, 2003). Despite higher education’s resistance to think of itself in business terms, in order to survive and thrive in this competitive environment where information is disseminated quickly and more widespread, institutions of higher education will need to “reconceptualize students as clients and structure programs and services to meet their needs” (Daniel, Evans, & Scott; 2001, p 12). This may include providing a more in loco parentis atmosphere if more and more parents demand that type of environment.

Fortunately, there are benefits of acknowledging and working with parents. Harris and Jones (1999) reminded us that, although it may not always be evident, administrators and parent have a common goal and the institution should take advantage of the increased parental involvement. Parents can be a rich source of opportunities for the institution in the form of internships, job listings, professional career advice, contacts, volunteering, contributions, and voting power (McInnis, 2001; Harris & Jones, 1999). These contacts are especially important as state funds are becoming increasingly scarce.

Summary

Today’s college students—the so-called Millennials, or Generation Y—are a part of the demographic “baby boomlet” colleges are experiencing now and will continue to feel the effects of over the next decade. There were over 81 million births from 1982 until 2002 compared to 78 million post-World War II births that defined the baby boom. The largest ripple of boomer offspring entering college is expected to peak between 2005 and 2011. The high school graduating class of 2009—an expected 3.2 million—will be the largest graduating class in the history of the U.S. (DeBarros, 2003; Knight, 2003; Russell, 1999).
As these children of boomers move through education system, there is a growing phenomenon of increasing parental involvement in the college student’s experience. This phenomenon is the result of a combination of factors, including the increasingly higher cost of attendance, boomer parents’ own experiences in higher education, societal trends to extend adolescence, and student issues today that can sometimes be life-threatening. It is helpful for institutions to be proactive about this growing relationship (Scott & Daniel, 2001).

While this parental involvement can blur the lines of just who the institution is educating and responsible to—student or parent, administrators would be wise to acknowledge this participation and develop well-defined and consistent policy regarding it. As Murray (1999) pointed out, millennial parents and their children “are a team and all members of the team play” (p. 44).

Clearly, these students and their actively-participating parents are a force to be reckoned with and will continue to be for some time. Their needs and demands will have a great influence over how higher education is shaped in the years to come.
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