

Students and Families: So Happy Together

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We all know it's here. Most of us have accepted it; many of us accommodate it. No matter what school of thought you fall into (cut the cord, coddling, or somewhere in-between), it's hard to deny and ignore the reality of parental involvement at the college level.

Research shows that we aren't simply imagining this significant increase in family involvement. The recent proliferation of Web sites, associations, and conferences dedicated to all things related to college families indicates the impact of parents and family members on the collegiate landscape. Newspaper headlines about "Facebook," university e-mail accounts for parents, and efforts by parents to impact federal legislation related to financial aid and FERPA are all common sightings. College and community bookstore shelves are filled with books about parenting college students, as well as bumper stickers ("My kid and my money go to XYZ University") and collegiate wear for moms and dads. Development campaigns, university associations and advising councils, newsletters, Listservs, and blogs all have been created for the college parent. According to a College Parents of America survey (2006), one-third of college parents report that they are in contact with their student as frequently as three times a day!

For years, orientation professionals have been doing what they can to encourage students to be immediately independent and, with military precision, have been keeping students and families separated during orientation programs. But today, the tides are turning and students and families alike are requesting more time with one another. As educators, we need to respond to this reality and embrace the aspects of it which can assist us in creating a successful college experience. Two years ago, we changed the orientation programs at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG) to reflect this new reality. A new program was developed to address this trend, and the program's success has proven to us that student and families are, indeed, so happy together.

In recent years, our Spartan Orientation Advising and Registration (SOAR) evaluations have indicated, through quantitative data and open-ended questions, that both students and families were anxious about academic advising and frustrated at the lack of time to converse with each other about the registration

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process. We also suffered from the popular parent pleading to accompany students to advising for the many reasons we've all heard. Being supporters of reasonable and responsible college parent involvement, we questioned why we were working so hard against something that students and families obviously wanted and needed. How much harm could be done in letting them talk, vent, and problem solve together?

As mentioned, academic advising seemed to be the number one leader in producing anxiety. In 2006, we began offering a presentation from each of the academic advising units to both students and families to ensure they all heard the same message. While that helped, it obviously wasn't enough. As a matter of fact, it possibly led to more anxiety, providing just enough information to produce further questions that wouldn't get resolved that day.

Simultaneously, our evening entertainment for both groups was struggling. The parent reception was lovely and well received, but not well attended (we suspect they were all out trying to find their students). The student program had morphed over the years into something that half the group tolerated and the other half loathed (apparently dance parties and karaoke are not for everyone).

We needed to revamp the evening programs, keep families interested and involved, satisfy students' and families' need to spend time together, and reduce anxiety and the number of requests from families to accompany students to the advising sessions. Both students and family members were receiving a tremendous amount of information on the first day of SOAR. What better way to provide students and family members the opportunity to discuss all they had learned than with casual conversation and dessert? Hence, the idea was sprung—an evening program that pulled them back together, purposefully guided them through discussion items, and treated them to a fabulous dessert reception.

The logistics of our new program were a bit tricky. Finding a space big enough to serve dessert to nearly 320 students and 300 family members at one time is no simple task, and neither is making sure the chocolate-covered strawberries are still available for those unlucky enough to be last in line. But once reunited, the happiness and relief seen on faces throughout the room reminded us that students and families really are so happy together.

We wanted the dessert reception to provide more than just additional time for students and families to see each other. The time spent together needed to be directed, intentional, and purposeful, not only in order for it to be worth including in an already packed orientation schedule, but also to help calm the anxiety that students and families had expressed over the past years in their evaluations of SOAR.

Following a quick activity to help families reunite, we began our guided discussion (students without families at SOAR were matched with orientation leaders). To facilitate more meaningful conversation, we gave students and family members specific topics to discuss together, reminding them of the various points of information they had learned and received throughout the Day One sessions. First, the group was reminded about the importance of campus involvement and its positive impact on success in college: *Talk together about the different opportunities*

available for involvement at UNCG.

Next, we addressed academic advising. We reminded everyone that due to space and time constraints as well as the need for students to learn this process on their own, only students would be allowed inside the academic advising sessions: *The message? Review together the information you have learned about academic advising and class registration at UNCG. Families, what suggestions do you have for your students for their advising sessions tomorrow? Students, what information do you want to share with and what questions do you still have for your families about the advising and registration process?*

Finally, the group was given the opportunity to discuss any other ideas or issues that had come up throughout the day: *Talk with one another about anything else you feel is important to share before you see each other tomorrow morning.*

Students and family members alike appreciated the additional time to discuss issues that had arisen during the day. The time allotted to discuss fall schedules and academic advising especially allowed family members to gain a better sense of what decisions their students would make the next day, alleviating the stress of not being allowed to accompany the students to advising and registration. Overall, the facilitated discussion worked so well that the biggest worry we had was getting everyone through the dessert line!

The results of the SOAR 2007 Survey confirmed that the reception was overwhelmingly successful for both students and family members. More than 68% of students and 83% of family members indicated that spending additional time together at the end of the day was constructive. Additionally, more than 73% of students and more than 81% of family members surveyed believed that this event should remain on future SOAR schedules.

Our final session in August was particularly exceptional. In August, our family program is only one day as opposed to the two-day sessions in June; so for many, the evening program was the last time to be together before families left campus and their students behind. The reception provided a time for any last minute questions to be answered and an opportunity for students and family members to say goodbye. From our observations, it was an especially positive and constructive experience for all participants.

Despite the success of the Student/Family Dessert reception, one challenge we continue to work on is the experience of students who attend SOAR without family members. Although orientation leaders were paired with students who did not have family in attendance, it was generally noted that those students were less engaged in the program and perhaps did not find the discussion as beneficial as students whose families attended SOAR. There is no easy solution to this concern; we are working on ways to better serve students who attend SOAR alone.

In 2008, we addressed several of the issues we experienced with this newly introduced program. Due to these improvements and a year's worth of experience under our belt, the program evaluation results did improve. The 2008 SOAR Surveys confirmed that now 76% of students and 85% of parents (up 8 and 2 percentage points respectively from 2007) indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed that the time together was constructive. Additionally, when asked if the time

together allowed them to clear up any unanswered questions, 78% of students and 82% of parents indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed that it did.

Overall, students and family members were so happy together. There were fewer complaints from family members in regard to advising and registration and almost no requests to accompany students to the advising labs. The purpose of the reception, to ease anxiety of both students and families in regards to advising and registration, was achieved successfully. Students and family members are happy together at UNCG, and we plan to continue to support this win-win relationship.

References

College Parents of America. (2006). *The National Survey of Parent Experiences*. Retrieved September 14, 2007, from <http://www.collegeparents.org/cpa/about-press.html?n=1282>