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How College/University Administrators Handle the Disgruntled Parent

by

Loreal E. Robertson

A THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of
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How College/University Administrators Handle the Disgruntled Parent

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University of Nebraska, 2013

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This qualitative study explored how student affairs and academic affairs professionals communicate with parents of undergraduate students who attend MidPointe University (MPU). The literature review indicates that there has been little research conducted on the nature of the interaction between college and university administrators and parents. Available research studies indicate that administrators communicate with parents with more frequency than expected, considering the past findings. Millennial students are sheltered, pressured, unique, and are overly involved (Howe & Strauss, 2007; Elam, Stratton & Gibson, 2007). Parents of today's students are making an extra effort to be involved in the lives of their children and want to support them, especially when it comes to education.

Semi-structured in person interviews were conducted with nine student and academic affairs professionals with varying levels of experience in these fields. Interviews took place on-campus at a large Midwestern, predominately white institution. Administrators in the offices of University Housing, Financial Aid, and Admissions were able to share their personal experiences and encounters with angry parents, share how they diffuse anger, discuss the protocol that their offices have (or do not have) for dealing with frustrated parents, and offer advice to new professionals who may experience this situation in their careers. Senior-level administrators who took part in this study admitted

to not communicating with parents as often as they have in the past; however, if a parent concern is brought to their attention, the level of anxiety from the parent is typically high. Findings indicated that administrators should communicate regularly with parents and that listening to their concerns, maintaining professionalism, and working to solve the issues are strategies that are best to utilize when working with frustrated parents.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The communication between parents, institutions, and students is important as student's transition into college and enter adulthood. Administrators and professionals in the field of higher education are often concerned with the involvement of parents with college students and to what degree the parents are hindering students from fully developing. The relationship between parents, institutions, and students has changed over time and it is unclear how these relationships should be defined (Wartman & Savage, 2008). Therefore, it is paramount for professionals to identify ways that can close the communication gap, get the students more engaged in their own affairs, and have parents on board with the guidelines of the universities. Administrators should seek to know how and what to communicate with parents effectively in addition to providing resources that can help them help their students' grow and develop during their time at the university and beyond.

When considering student matriculation, the parent-child relationship is not the only relationship to be considered. The involvement from the institution is also important as it too plays a key role with students' transition. As such, an institution would be remiss in not considering the impact that the relationship between the parents and their children has on the students' transition into institutions of higher learning.

Within many families, college acceptance and attendance is inevitably a time of change, loss, and uncertainty. Parents of today's millennial students are more involved and students seem more accepting of this idea (Wartman & Savage, 2008). Considering the relationships that students have with their parents prior to coming to college, how

students view their education, and how parents view their students' education can create opportunities for growth and help professionals evolve to meet the needs of both the students and parents. How to communicate successfully with increasingly involved parents should be of interest to all student and academic affairs administrators. As stated by Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton & Renn (2010) "Looking at concerns from a variety of perspectives can assist practitioners to more fully understand the dynamics in situations they face and come up with a number of possible strategies to consider" (p. 349).

Purpose Statement

When considering a students' matriculation, several relationships need to be considered. The interplay between the family (parent-child) and institutional systems all play a huge role in a student transitioning successfully into a higher education institution (Wartman & Savage, 2008). (*See figure 1*).

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how administrators in the fields of student affairs and academic affairs handle situations when disgruntled parents call their offices on behalf of their students. More specifically, the researcher sought to understand how administrators diffuse anger and deal with these often challenging circumstances in their daily careers as interactions with parents and families with institutions continue to increase.

The results from this study can help other professionals in fields of student affairs and academic affair, especially younger professionals, handle these situations and think of ways that they can close the communication gap and create better relationships between parents, institutions, and students. Current professionals in the field can create best practices to prepare for parent and family involvement and implement strategies such

as: 1) assess parent and family needs, 2) set program goals, 3) secure resources, 4) staff appropriately, 5) create consistent messages that set limits and offer opportunities for appropriate involvement, 6) communicate often, 7) include parents and family members in crisis planning and programming, and, 8) educate students on how to develop appropriate relationships with their parents (Ward-Roof, Heaton, & Coburn, 2008, p. 43).

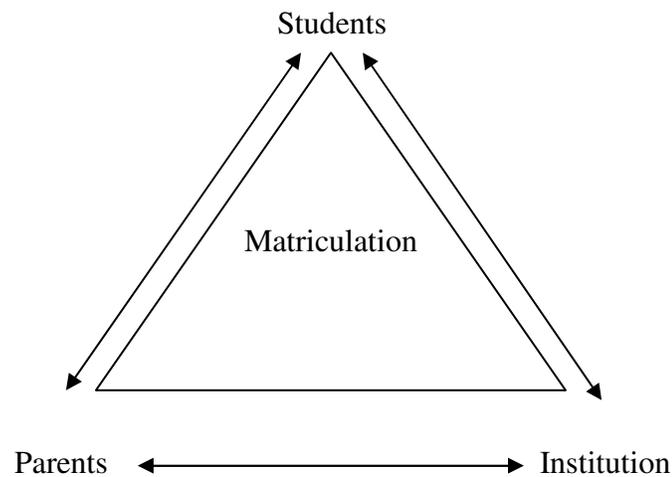


Figure 1. Interplay between relationships involving students' matriculation to college.

Research Questions

The researcher sought to answer how institutions could communicate with parents and provide resources that made them feel like they could still be involved and connected with their students. Considering the need to have better and effective communication between administrators and parents, the following research questions frame the main focus of this focus of the study:

- How do college and university administrators respond to situations when disgruntled parents call their offices regarding students?
- How do college and university administrators diffuse anger and deal with challenging circumstances?

- What are some best practices that current and/or new professionals in the fields of student and academic affairs can implement to make communication with parents more effective?
- How do college/university administrators view the whole relationship between parents, students, and the institution?

Research Design

The methodology used for this research was a qualitative approach. The research questions allowed for in-depth qualitative interviews to emerge from this study. Through administrators sharing their experiences and views on parent interaction, these professionals involved in this research contribute to a greater understanding of the need to strengthen communication efforts with both parents and students. The interviews were transcribed and coded for emergent themes that related to communicating with parents and the relationship between the institution, parents and students.

Definitions

The body of this research can be better understood once the reader becomes familiar with the following terms and how they are defined for the purpose of this study.

Helicopter parents- a term for a parent who pays extremely close attention to their student's experiences and problems at institutions of higher education (Wartman & Savage, 2008).

In Loco parentis- Latin word for "in place of the parents" that refers to a legal responsibility of a person or an organization such as an institution that takes the roles and responsibilities of the parents (Schenk & Williamson, 2005).

Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) - this Act places restrictions on what information institutions can share with parents or a third party (Wartman & Savage, 2008).

Delimitations

Delimitations are planned restrictions set by the researcher (Rossman, 2002). Delimitations are important to include in this research for the reader to get an understanding of which groups, ideas, or perspectives were shared or not shared in this research. All the participants in this study were administrators at MidPointe University in the divisions of student and academic affairs. All of these administrators have had experiences dealing with disgruntled parents and their viewpoints may differ from those administrators who have not had these kinds of experiences, work in different offices, or are newer in their careers. The perceptions from the viewpoint of parents or students regarding administrators' communication efforts were also not included in this research.

Limitations

Limitations are factors that could not be avoided or are unanticipated by the researcher (Rossman, 2002). There were two limitations of this particular study. The participants in this research were only administrators from a large public predominately white institution (PWI) in the offices of University Housing, Financial Aid, and Admissions. Therefore, there was no representation from any other institutions or offices where administrators have contact with parents of university students. Another limitation to this study is that no persons of color were represented as research participants.

Chapter Summary

The review of literature goes more into depth about how parents as well as students are changing as students' transition into college and the role of administrators during this phase. Understanding the reason for parental involvement and the relationships between the parent-child units can be helpful for administrators as they seek to meet the needs of both groups.

Chapter 2

Review of the Literature

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative study sought to know how administrators communicated with parents of college-aged students and viewed the whole relationship as it relates to parents, students, and the institution.

Introduction

In this chapter, the researcher discusses how millennial students differ from past generations and how the role of the parents has shifted as it relates to education. Although little research has been done on how administrators respond to complicated situations with parents, research exists that focuses on the relationships between parents, students, and the institutions. This chapter begins with a discussion of the topic of students today and the modern phenomenon of helicopter parents, and then considers relationships between parents, students, and the institution and concludes with resources on how to improve the relationship between those three entities. (*See figure 2*).

Cultural Capital

It would be beneficial to administrators to know where students come from and the types of familial relationships that students have prior to coming to college. The influence from family and the relationships with them begins the students' initial transition into college and their continuation there after (Wartman & Savage, 2008). From a different perspective, Tinto's (1993) theory of college student persistence focuses on students' ability to transition successfully both academically and socially into college

and persist through college when they are able to separate themselves from previous relationships.

[Students] too must separate themselves, to some degree, from past associations in order to make the transition and eventual incorporation in my life of the college....In a very real sense, a person's ability to leave one setting, whether physical, social, or intellectual may be necessary condition for subsequent persistence in another setting (Tinto, 1993, p. 96).

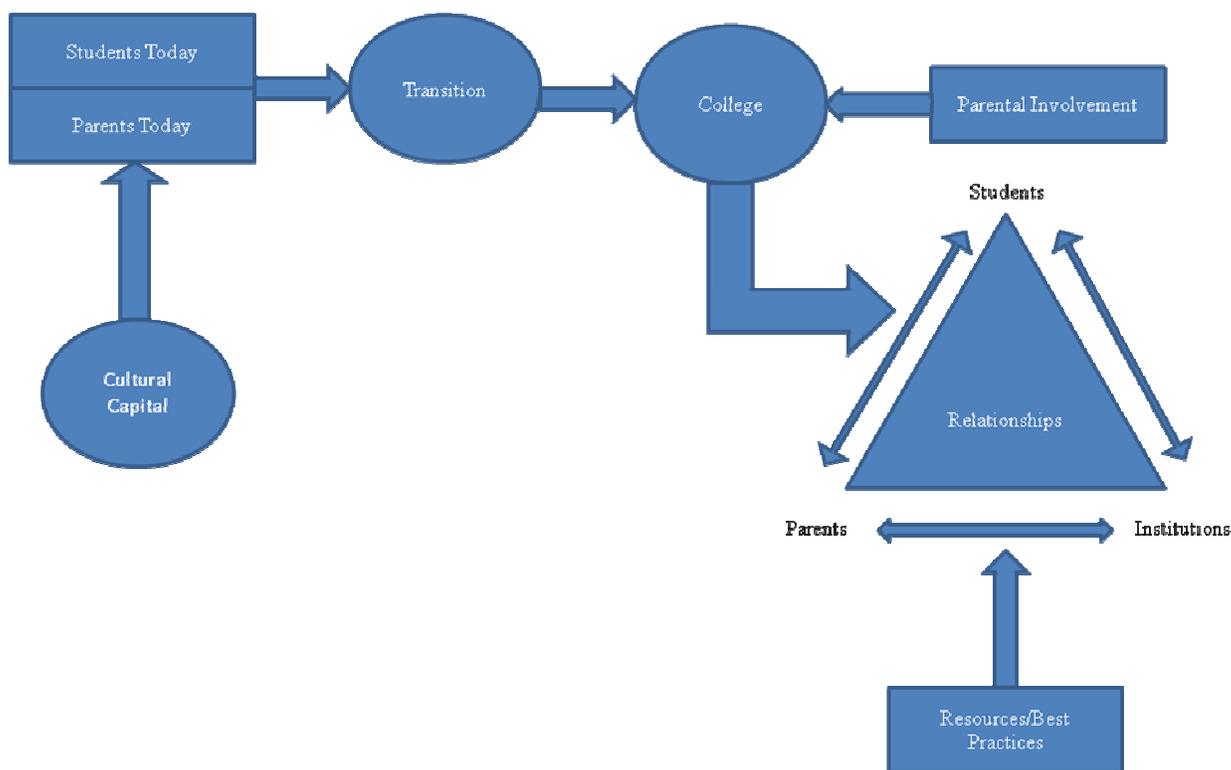


Figure 2. Visual diagram of literature review.

Some research says that students need to sever their relationships with their families prior to attending college in order to persist successfully (Kalsner & Pistole, 2003; Mattanah, Hancock, & Brand, 2004; Rice, 1992; Tinto, 1993) and other research says that these relationships need to be maintained for successful persistence (Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, & Hagedorn, 1999; Mattanah, Hancock, & Brand, 2004;

Rice, Fitzgerald, Whaley, Gibbs, 1995; Schneider & Ward, 2003; Soucy & Larose, 2000; Strage, 1998). These factors also differ depending on gender and racial background.

Students of Today

College enrollment is fueled mainly by the demand for labor (Shierholz, Sabadish, & Wething, 2012). Before the Civil War, when the domestic economy was driven primarily by manual labor and agriculture, the need for education beyond the primary years was relatively low, and youths left school at an early age to pursue work. After the war and into the 20th century, the industrial revolution brought a growing need for a more educated workforce as industry and large-scale manufacturing came to dominate the domestic economy (Bozick, 2009). In response, school enrollment surged.

In recent decades, attending college is a norm and second nature to increasingly more graduating high school students. The 90s and the first decade of the 2000s brought an increase in student enrollment rates from previous decades. Today, colleges and universities are continuing to have large enrollment rates and are attracting more diverse groups of people (Carey, 2004). The students of today are similar to those in the last two decades on college and university campuses but not only are today's student populations diverse in the aspect of race but also in gender and age (Carey, 2004). College and university students make up an increasingly more diverse demographic that includes women, minorities, non-traditional, International students and veterans.

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students of today are similar to those in the last two decades on college and university campuses but not only are today's student populations diverse in the aspect of race but also in gender and age (Carey, 2004). College and university students are more than just individuals of the Caucasian race or male students but also include women, minorities, non-traditional, International students and veterans.

Women are now feeling empowered and are outnumbering their males counterparts in terms of enrollment. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, it shows that, in 2009, 8,210 million males enrolled in post-secondary education, while 10,287 million females did. The center estimates that, in 2013, 8,359 million males will enroll in colleges and traditional four-year universities, while 11,351 million females will enroll (Koerner, 2010). Currently, the center shows that more women than men will earn college degrees, a trend that has not reversed since the trend was first noticed in the early 1990s (Koerner, 2010).

The work force remains competitive and the demands for educated professionals are increasing. Although many younger college students may not know what they want to do initially beginning their education, obtaining a degree can essentially put them a step ahead of someone who does not have a college education.

Colleges and universities are admitting an ever-increasing number of applicants and creating a more diverse atmosphere so those students have the opportunity to embark on an enriching college experience. Furthermore, college campuses are providing several avenues of learning opportunities to fit the needs of those students seeking post-secondary degrees. If colleges and universities continue to meet the needs of the students by providing financial aid, educational programs, quality education and use of the latest

technology (Boling, 2003; Poland, La Velle & Nichol, 2003; Repenning, Rausch, Phillips & Ioannidou, 1998; Resnick, 1995, 1998; Wilensky & Stroup, 1999), to connect with students, enrollment rates will continue to increase even more (Fass, 1998; Gordon, 1993; McAlpine & Gandell, 2003).

Parents of Today

Helicopter Parents.

Parents of today's college students continue to stress the importance of a college education but unlike past generations, parents are more involved than ever before.

A generation ago, parents also knew that college was important; they were too supportive. However, they placed responsibility on their students to find a career path, to make the transition from high school to college and to basically “navigate” the search and the landing (Condeni, 2012, p. 31).

Technology is steadily increasing with not only telephone communication but social networks and real-time communication which has expanded ways for parents and students to connect more frequently. These overly concerned parents are referred to as “helicopter parents” because they are involved in every aspect of their student's lives during the college experience (Rainey, 2006). Many institutions are seeking to move away from the term of helicopter parents and would prefer to distinguish parents as partners. Condeni (2012) refers to these parents as the NOD squad— Navigators of Destiny because parents of today's traditional-aged college students “not only navigate but bring “value” added dimensions to their steering activities” (p. 31).

Parents want to remain to have a hands-on approach as they did before students entered college. They tend to ask more questions regarding campus resources and have a higher level of expectation of not only the student but of the university as well (Wartman & Savage, 2008). Universities and administrators should work to reduce the anxiety of

parents; this way they are more likely to be supportive of their students, less assertive, and/or intervene in inappropriate ways. “Parents who understand the basic principles of student development have an easier time appreciating our reluctance to notify them or to intervene in situations that we think students should handle themselves” (Coburn, 2006, p. 14). Identifying and articulating the responsibility of the parent, student, and institution for parents and students prior to entering the university can make for a better overall experience for all who are involved.

Coping with Transition

Students’ Transition.

Students arrive to college campuses facing dissimilar issues than their parents faced when they were college-aged. With more students aspiring to attend college, it is important that high schools begin to take a more active role in both the admission and transition process.

For successful admission to college, academic preparation must be accompanied by a clear understanding of the complexities of the application process. As a context in which knowledge and information exchange occurs among students, parents, and colleges, high schools can be a crucial site in amassing and circulating information about college admission requirements to their students. By gathering more diverse information from a variety of sources, high schools can serve as a critical information reservoir and expand options for students who may otherwise gain information only from their own individual experiences and backgrounds (Kim, 2012, pp. 511-512).

Pursuing a college education requires adjustment on the part of all students, depending on background, experience, and prior schooling. Parents, counselors, university administrators, orientation and first-year experience programs all assist students with and during this transition period and have ultimately encouraged students to seek a higher education (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Tierney, Corwin, & Colyar, 2005;

Kelly, Kendrick, Newgent, & Lucas, 2007; Saunders & Serna, 2004; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Attinasi, 1989; Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996). Kelly, Kendrick, Newgent, & Lucas (2007) see transitional programs as necessary and believe that these programs should begin in high school in order for students to develop study, time management, and coping skills that are essential for the college experience and to be successful within their first year. They concluded that about 50 percent of the students they studied did not receive assistance from high school guidance counselors about college. Hurtado, Carter, and Spuler (1996) found that college academic advisors were important factors in facilitating students' transition to college (p.153). Assistance for college admission and transition looks differently for many students depending on the kinds of relationships they have with individuals in their lives.

High school students preparing to transition to college are relatively optimistic and positive about their college experience (Kim, 2012). Students who are leaving high school, attending college full-time, and living on campus tend to experience the most dramatic adjustment (Love, 2003; Chickering & Schlossberg, 1995).

Socialization is the process of being exposed to and taking on some of the new values, attitudes, beliefs, and perspectives to which one is exposed at college. Socialization is also the process of learning and internalizing the character, culture, and behavioral norms of the institution one is attending. The transition from high school is a “culture shock involving significant social and psychological relearning in the face of encounters with new ideas, new teachers and friends with quite varied values and beliefs, new freedoms and opportunities, and new academic, personal and social demands.” This culture shock is especially acute for those students who do not have siblings or parents who attended college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, pp. 58–59).

Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson (2006) defined a transition as “any event, or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles” (p.33).

These theorists presented four major sets of factors that influence an individual's ability

to cope with a transition which are: situation, self, support, and strategies, known as the 4's (Evans, et al., 2010, p. 216). In the situation factor there are also sub-factors. The first sub-factor is the "trigger" which comes in effect from a change in a student's life such as graduating from college. "Timing" also plays a factor in a student's life, for example if the student decides to go to college right after high school or if he or she takes time off before starting college (p. 216). "Control" and "role change" are also sub-factors (Evans, et al., 2010, p. 216). Students have control over what college they choose to attend and role change involves gaining higher educational experience.

Some other sub-factors are "duration" and "previous experience with a similar transition" (Evans, et al., 2010, p. 217). An example of the duration sub-factor is a student has to decide if college is the right choice and if the individual will stay until graduation and when a student had to transition from junior high into high school is an example of previous experience with a similar transition. The last two sub-factors are the "concurrent stress" and "assessment" (p.217). Concurrent stress can come from students having to worry about tuition cost or their academics and assessment asks who or what is seen as responsible for the transition, and how is the individual's behavior affected by this perception.

Researchers have found that these students look forward to the independency that college brings, some perceiving the college transition as an experiment of independence, a place where you can "prove yourself," "see what you are made of," and "see if you can survive on your own" (Holmstrom, Karp, & Gray, 2002, p. 446).

Parent's Transition.

This time of transition is not only difficult for the students but also for their parents. Parents have many ways of coping with this change and may even experience changes in their own personal lifestyles and routines once their child is off to college. More students are enrolling in college, now more than ever, and many travel far distances from home leaving their parents behind. As students enter college in the twenty-first century this process looks extremely different than it did when their parents or even grandparents attended.

For baby-boomer parents, more specifically, this transition is more drastic and thinking about life without their child is extremely hard. Baby boomer parents are “the healthiest, wealthiest and best-educated generation of parents in human history and they’ve poured their energy into making sure that their kids got the best of everything...” (Kantrowitz & Springen, 2003, p. 62). Though literature shows that the baby-boomer generation is the best educated, parents come in with variable levels of college understanding and knowledge. “Some hold graduate degrees, have attended four or five institutions, have put several children through college before, and can easily and comfortably speak to a professor. For others, this is uncharted territory, and even the jargon is opaque” (Cutright, 2008, p. 42). Student affairs and academic affairs administrators should recognize this and be comfortable in managing the needs and concerns of every parent they come in contact with.

Parental Involvement in Higher Education

Until the 1960s and 1970s, *in loco parentis* was the principal relationship between students and the institution (Wartman & Savage, 2008). As the practice of *in loco parentis*

began to decline, The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) was enacted (1974). This law prohibits the sharing of individual student information, even with parents, if students do not sign a waiver granting parents' or third-party permission to access their information (Wartman & Savage, 2008). FERPA grants three main rights to college students (or to parents if students are younger than 18): 1. the right to inspect and review or the right to access their education records; 2. the right to challenge the content of their educational records; and 3. the right to consent to the disclosure of their educational records (Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, 20 U.S.C. §1232g [1974]). Institutions as well as administrators have taken advantage of this FERPA provision in facilitating communication with parents by protecting that of students and working to assist parents in ways that do not violate this regulation (Lowery, 2005).

Though FERPA protects students and allows for privacy, there are some exceptions to this law. Some of these exceptions to the prohibition that allows for disclosure of student records to parents include:

- Results of a disciplinary hearing if a student is in violation and the violation involves violence
- Violations of drugs or alcohol policies if the student is under twenty-one years old
- Disclosure of relevant information that is deemed necessary to protect the health and safety of the student or others
- Disclosure of educational records when the student is a tax dependent (Cutright, 2008, p. 45).

Through literature involving communication with parent program professionals and interactions with parents and students, several factors have been identified that may have contributed to the trend of increased parental involvement in education: 1) generation, 2) cost of college, 3) use of technology, 4) changes in parenting, and 5) demographics 6) the parent's construction of his or her role in the child's life, 7) the

parent's sense of efficacy for helping the child succeed in school, and, 8) the institutional role or the general invitations and opportunities for parental involvement presented by both the child and the school (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997, p. 3).

The phenomenon of parental involvement includes parents 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 to the institutions, and potentially retaining the institutional connections beyond the college year (Wartman & Savage, 2008, p. 5).

As defined by Coburn and Treeger (2003) the contemporary parent of a college student is often described through examples of extreme behavior such as contacting the college late at night to report a mouse discovered in a daughter's room, complaining about a roommate who snores, expressing anger over a grade on a paper "my son worked so hard" (p. 9).

Relationships

Parents and Students.

The relationship that students have with their parents makes a difference in how involved their parents will be when students go to college. Because of this, today's college student wants and expects an adult to have some control over their college experiences and wants the college to find ways to respond to these needs (Fass, Morrill, & Mount, 1986, p. 30).

The degree to which a parent is involved depends not only on the relationship with his or her particular student but also with the student's school and the extent to which parents are included and encouraged to participate in their child's educational process (Hoover, Dempsey, & Sandler, 1997, p. 6).

Kennedy (2009) identified four reasons why parents feel the need to be involved in the lives of their students: 1) changing relationships between a parent and a child, 2) a significant investment in the child's future, 3) a greater ability to communicate in real time, and 4) the fact that they believe the interference works (p. 17). The relationship between Millennials and their parents is closer than before and Millennials are sharing sensitive information with their parents regarding sex, drugs, and alcohol (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Howe and Strauss (2000) reported that two-thirds of today's students report that their parents are "in touch" with their lives and that it is "easy" to talk to their parents (p. 187). According to Kenny & Rice (1995), the attachment model emphasizes the role of the caregiver which affects the relationship with their child and suggests that calling home to talk with family or discuss a concern with parents may actually be examples of healthy behavior and not acts that are a cause for alarm. Stronger relationships with parents can indeed have beneficial effects for students as they move into adulthood and as students find out who they are as individuals aside from what the thoughts or beliefs of their parents, students still want to maintain those close personal relationships with them (Nelson, Padilla-Walker, Carroll, Barry, Madsen, & Badger, 2007).

Institutions and Students.

"If higher education institutions do not decide and explain the kind of relationships they expect with students and with parents, the danger exists that external forces will make those decisions for them" (Wartman & Savage, 2008, p. 40). The relationship between students and the institution is referred to as *consumerism*, as the

students receive certain goods and services in exchange for tuition and fees, this is known as a contractual relationship (Fass, Morrill, & Mount, 1996).

In some regards, the institution views college students as both a child and as an adult. “Although students can have credit cards in their own name, vote, and rights to their educational records they cannot drink until the age of 21 and still must report parents’ income on financial aid records” (Wartman & Savage, 2008, p. 41).

The institutional view of students is that they are sometimes children— for example, when the institution stands in loco parentis and is held responsible for students’ behavior—and sometimes adults—as when the institution protects students’ records from parents and other outside parties under FERPA (p. 42).

In a study by Arnett (1994), college students were asked about their conceptions of the transition of adulthood and if they had reached this stage. Only 23 percent of participants indicated that they considered themselves to have fully reached adulthood. This stage of uncertainty is defined as “emerging adulthood” which is neither adolescent nor young adulthood which is the time for exploration of identity, instability, a focus on self, and feeling “in between” (p.8). Not only do institutions and parents still consider student’s adolescents but the majority of students do not consider themselves to have fully reached adulthood by the time they enter college either.

Both Arnett (1998) and Nelson & Barry (2005) have further acknowledged that the criteria contemporary emerging adults tend to view as being crucial for adulthood center around 1) being independent and self-reliant, 2) being able to form mature relationships, 3) being able to comply with societal norms, and, 4) being able to provide and care for a family, as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1
List of Possible Criteria for Adulthood

Category	Criterion
Role transitions	Financially independent from parents No longer living in parents' household Finish education Married Have at least one child Settle into a long-term career Purchase a house
Norm compliance	Avoid becoming drunk Avoid drunk driving Avoid illegal drugs Have no more than one sexual partner Avoid committing petty crimes like vandalism and shoplifting Drive safely and close to the speed limit Avoid use of profanity/vulgar language Use contraception if sexually active and not trying to conceive a child
Biological/age transitions	Reach age 18 Reach age 21 Grow to full height If a woman, become biologically capable of bearing children If a man, become biologically capable of fathering children Have obtained license and can drive an automobile Have had sexual intercourse Allowed to drink alcohol Allowed to smoke cigarettes
Family capacities	If a woman, become capable of supporting a family financially If a man, become capable of caring for children If a woman, become capable of caring for children If a man, become capable of running a household If a man, become capable of keeping family physically safe If a woman, become capable of keeping family physically safe
Relational maturity	Accept responsibility for the consequences of your actions Establish a relationship with parents as an equal adult Learn always to have good control of your emotions Become less self-oriented, develop greater consideration for others

Source: (Nelson, Padilla-Walker, Carroll, Barry, Madsen, & Badger, 2007, p. 669).

The feeling of independence is a process that happens over time and the idea of independence does not immediately form for students entering college. For administrators it may be helpful to “construct college student development more fluidly and understand college students to be on a continuum between but also including childhood and maturity” (Wartman & Savage, 2008, p. 43).

Parents and Institutions.

Administrators see parental involvement having both negative and positive effects on students and the college experience. Some of the negative effects of parental involvement interferes and disrupts student development as autonomous individuals. Some institutions must actively and often fend off parental involvement, even going to

the extremes of assigning “parent bouncers” to prevent parents from accompanying students to course registration and through-out orientation (Wartman & Savage, 2008). Administrators also see parents as effective partners by reinforcing messages that institutions deliver to students regarding student resources, information about health and safety, retention and financial advice (Wartman & Savage, 2008). Because the transition to college can be difficult for all involved parties, institutions of higher education are providing more support to families through Family and Parent Programming, orientation sessions, and distributing and/or recommending reading material such as the more popular “Letting Go: A Parent’s Guide to Understanding the College Years” by Karen Levin Coburn and Madge Lawrence Treeger (2003). This way, administrators can properly direct parents who are going to be involved and clearly define what this involvement will look like or be during the undergraduate years, “although parents may appreciate this kind of customer service, it is important for colleges to set boundaries that make it clear that their primary relationship is with students” (Coburn & Woodward, 2001, p. 33). Colleges can also be more intentional about the collaborative efforts with parents and increase parental understanding of the collegiate campus climate and provide ways explaining they can successfully support their student.

Understanding these relationships can help student affairs administrators’ effectively communicate with parents by providing programs that ultimately cater to their needs and reassure them that the best interest is in place for their student. Additionally, administrators can provide challenge and support for students and clearly define what the role of the institution should be during their academic careers as well as the rights and responsibilities the students should have for themselves. Strengthening this triad between

parents, students, and the institution and understanding the roles of each group can make for a memorable and enjoyable college experience for everyone.

Programming/Resources

Many institutions are seeing the need for parent and family programming and communication and are developing offices that strictly focus on this type of unique effort. Merriman (2006) stated that “parents and parent expectations are redefining the work of student affairs professionals as they expect institutions to respond to all of their concerns, protect their students, and expeditiously resolve any crisis they encounter” (p. 48).

College/university administrators knowing that they have a responsibility for students are making a greater effort to create opportunities for parents to be more involved with their child’s institution. Unfortunately, many universities do not have a parent or family office on campus and/or have little funding or support from the institution to create this type of resource. However, institutions can consider following four steps in creating an action plan for increasing the resources for parents and families on campus:

Step 1: What is your institutional philosophy for working with parents/family members?

Step 2: Describe any unmet needs of parents/family members on campus.

- What are the long term goals you have for meeting these needs?
- What is the first step you can take when you get back to campus in order to meet these needs?

Step 3: Identify your parent/family organization type.

- What type of parent/family organization do you current have on your campus?
 - If you do not have one, do you see a need to start one?

Step 4: On a scale of 1-10 (10 being highest) how effective do you think the organization is in meeting the needs of parents/family members?

- If you do not have one, on a scale of 1-10 (10 being highest) how effective do you think the organization could be in meeting your parent/family needs? (Page, Jarrot Collar, & Appel-Silbaugh, 2011).

Outreach programs can serve as a means to strengthen the relationship and communication among the parents, students, and the institutions. Programs and opportunities for family engagement might include:

- Student Send-Offs
- Parent Receptions
- Grant Programs
- Student Emergency Fund
- “Parent to Parent” Session at Orientation
- Author articles for Parent Newsletters
- Employers or Speakers on specific industries (Page, et al., 2011).

Parent associations, convocations, and graduation ceremonies are also other ways that parents can get involved to support the goals and missions of the university, their student and, in turn, establish relationships with staff on campus. Hirt, Kirk, McGuire, Mount, & Nelson (2003) studied how student affairs administrators spent their time. They found that 23 percent of their time was spent communicating with parents; this included communication with both current family members and prospective parents and family members.

According to the University of Minnesota National Survey of College and University Parent Programs, institutions are seeing how much they actually correspond with parents and how often they do so (Savage, 2011). Savage (2011) conducted a survey that collected information on the shifting range and emergent trend in college and university services to parents of their students. She concluded that the major areas of focus needed to include:

- Organizational structure
- Program demographics
- Staffing of the office
- Services and programming provided
- Budget

- Advice and general components from the practitioners who are working with parent and family members (p. 8).

Her results indicated that 58.3 percent of parent and family programs were in a student affairs office which decreased by three percent from 2009, while placement increased by six percent in the advancement/foundation/alumni office in 2011 (Savage, 2011, p. 8). (*See table 2*).

Colleges/Universities have been paying close attention to their relationships with parents. The following suggestions have been offered in the literature to create an even stronger relationship between the two entities:

- Assess your parent population. Find out who they are and what expectations they have of the institution. Also find out if their student is an International student or first generation—who may need special assistance.
- Develop institutional goals for parental involvement and clearly communicate them to parents and to the university.
- Communicate consistent messages to parents regarding special concerns such as FERPA and/or the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), the student code of conduct, and the financial aid process.
- Develop a coordinated approach to parent communication within all major departments.
- Educate parents about student development.
- Educate parents about appropriate and inappropriate forms of involvement.
- Educate staff about parent's today and best practices in interacting with them.
- Set programmatic priorities—orientation programs and parent weekend.
- Create an access point for parents who have concerns or questions.
- Develop and publicize emergency plans and procedures.
- Involved parents in ongoing assessment of programs and services. (Coburn, 2006, p. 15).

There are several professional organizations that are dedicated to advocate on behalf of parents and families and are determined to improve parent-institutions relationships such as the College Parents of America, the National Association of Student

Personnel Administrators (NASPA), American College Personnel Association (ACPA) and the National Orientation Directors Association (NODA).

Table 2

Placement of Parent/Family Services; 2003-2011

Office/Department	2003	2005	2007	2009	2011
Student Affairs	52.4%	52.2%	54.7%	61.4%	58.3%
Advancement/Foundation/ Alumni	37%	31.5%	31.8%	17.8%	24.1%
Academic Affairs	4.9%	2.2%	1.6%	7.3%	5.7%
University/ College Relations	2.4%	5.4%	14.2%	1.5%	2.4%
Enrollment Management	n/a	3.8%	4.7%	5.4%	4.3%
Other	2.4%	4.9%	3.0%	6.6%	5.3%

Source: (Savage, 2011, p. 8). National Survey of College and University Parent Program, Table 2

Chapter Summary

This chapter identified the students and parents of today, the involvement of parents and the relationships between parents, students and the institution. Establishing and communicating with parents and families of students can be challenging yet an effort on the part of the university is pertinent in strengthening that relationship.

“Consideration of various combinations of target, type, and approach leads to a comprehensive program of interventions having a powerful developmental impact on students and even the university as a whole” (Evans, et al., 2010, p. 358). Institutions can

make crucial allies of parents by “recognizing their concerns, addressing them with information and guidance on a timely basis in addition to keeping lines of communication open to give personal attention to individual circumstances” (Cutright, 2008, p. 47).

The relationship between parents, students, and institutions has changed and will continue to change in years to come. Administrators should continue to cater to the special needs of the students while keeping the concerns of the parents in mind as well. Hopefully this research will open the doors to future research on this topic, examine how the parent, institution, and student relationship has developed over time, and how communication has changed with parents and institutions within that time period. Chapter three will provide an in-depth view into the methodology chosen for this study and the justification behind the chosen method of this research study.

Chapter 3

Research Methods

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to explore how college/university administrators in student and academic affairs offices correspond with disgruntled parents and how a more seamless line of communication can be created between parents, students, and the institution. Administrators' interactions with parents are beginning to increase more than they have in previous years and particular offices are seeing an increase in those encounters as well (Wartman & Savage, 2008). The researcher chose to interview staff members from University Housing, Financial Aid, and Admissions because compared to other offices they have recurrent parent contact. Essentially, this study focused on how to better the institutional relationship with parents and get both these groups in accordance when it comes to the primary needs of the students.

Research Questions

The researcher was mainly interested in how administrators' communicated with angry parents without compromising their jobs all while maintaining a professional demeanor. The following questions were selected as such:

- How do college and university administrators respond to situations when disgruntled parents call their offices regarding students?
- How do college and university administrators diffuse anger and deal with challenging circumstances?

- What are some best practices that current and/or new professionals in the fields of student and academic affairs can implement to make communication with parents more effective?
- How do college/university administrators view the whole relationship between parents, students, and the institution?

Rationale for Qualitative Design

Qualitative research “is a type of research that encompasses a number of philosophical orientations and approaches” (Merriam, 2009, p. 19) and provides a holistic methodology conducive for this study. Due to limited research regarding the relationships and communication efforts between parents and institutions, qualitative research to better understand the central phenomenon of this inquiry. The purpose of this study explores how administrators communicate with parents and how they diffuse anger when conversations with parents escalate. The research design allowed and encouraged participants to share personal anecdotes and reflect on past experiences when they have had to deal with parents in the past. It is hoped that this research will uncover themes crosscutting this historically under-researched topic, contribute to future research studies, help administrators to implement parent and family programs and offices, and better communication outlets for parents, students, and institutions. The participants will be able to describe and expand upon their experiences when having to deal with parents and can share this information during training sessions and/or professional development opportunities with their staff. Additionally, new professionals entering the field of student and academic affairs can benefit from this source of information so that they too are better prepared to communicate with parents in their careers.

Design Type

This qualitative study examined commonalities between participants who had shared experiences. Hypothetical situations were provided for administrators to respond to as if it were happening real time. This method was chosen because the researcher believed that it allows for a more authentic response and forced participants to reply without much preparation or thought to the issue. In addition, the researcher had them reflect on a past experience with a parent and tell how they ultimately resolved that situation, or what resulted if the issue was irresolvable.

With that, the researcher was interested in finding out the “how” and the “what” administrators communicate with parents. The results of this study will be arguably more valid, unique, and in depth rather than generic because the participants immediately responded to the scenarios as well as shared their personal encounters with parents. Furthermore, the researcher was interested in how the responses would differ between the different levels of career experiences and between the various offices at UNL.

Researcher Positioning/Reflexivity

Parents play an integral role as their students begin to matriculate into institutions of higher learning. For many reasons, parents begin to communicate more often with college/university administrators and some of these interactions are not always the most positive or memorable. With this in mind, the researcher was interested in learning how to handle these encounters with parents if they arose. No handbook for college/university administrators to reference on how to deal with distressed or disgruntled parents currently exists. There has been an increase in the efforts of institutions to create offices and

programs that specifically cater to the needs of parents of college students (Wartman & Savage, 2008).

The researcher has not had any experience in communicating with parents. With this in mind, the researcher was interested in learning from experienced administrators who served in different areas of the institution on ways to handle these happenstances with parents if they arose. The role of the researcher was to identify some precautions or preventative measures based off the interviews with administrators to utilize when responding to parents. Through the experiences of nine younger, mid-level, and senior-level professionals, the researcher shed light on this under-researched topic and broke down the communication gap between parents and the institution.

Institutional Review Board Approval

Before the start of this study, the primary investigator completed the Consortium for IRB Training Initiative in Human Subjects Protections (CITI) for certification in human subject's research. Approval was sought from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and approval was granted on December 10, 2012 (see *Appendix A*). Nine participants were included in this study from the departments of University Housing, Financial Aid, and Admissions. The participants were emailed the informed consent letter (see *Appendix B*) before each interview was conducted. Each participant was given the opportunity to review the informed consent letter and ask any questions of the researcher before signing the document.

Any information obtained during this study, which possibly identifies the participants, has been kept strictly confidential. The data from the interviews was stored securely in the locked office of the researcher. The data from this research was used to

complete the thesis requirement for a Master's of Arts in educational administration at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. The information obtained in this study may be published in academic journals or presented at conferences or meetings, but the data will be reported as aggregated data. The audiotapes were erased after transcription.

Participants were given pseudonyms and no other personal data besides the participant's respective offices was disclosed.

Research Site

This research study was conducted at MidPointe University which is a large, public, mid-western institution. MPU is a four-year university that is also a land grant, research extensive, and predominately white. The fall 2011 enrollments at MPU ranged between 25,000-30,000 students including undergraduate, graduate and professional students and 10,000 faculty and staff members.

Interviews were conducted in a private room conveniently located in the student union of MPU, an area familiar to all participants in the study. A quiet location was needed in order to audio-record the interviews and allow for the administrators to share their viewpoints regarding the study.

Role of Departments

University Housing.

University housing buildings are developed to accommodate a wide-array of students from first year students to International students. Now many colleges and universities offer a variety of living options from traditional housing buildings to apartment styles that include separate bathroom facilities and a full kitchen. Offices such as housing encourage residents to interact and build strong relationships among their

peers and to be active in and outside of the halls. The educational role in college housing is founded on two very simple but very significant assumptions: Environment influences behavior and Learning is a total process (Riker & Decoster, 2008). “Within the residential community students experience both a physical environment and an interpersonal or social environment, both of which communicate something to them on a daily basis” (Riker & Decoster, 2008, p. 81)

It is simply not possible to disembodify the human personality and develop a student’s intellectual capacities in isolation from his cultural, spiritual, and psychological growth. Non-classroom activities, experiential learning, as well as classroom education must be developed to enhance student growth as total human beings. Students spend more time in their place of residence than in all other locations on campus combined, and the role of professional and student-staff members again becomes a prominent factor regarding the total educational process (pp. 82-83).

While students are living on campus and in the halls, the university has a responsibility to ensure their safety and provide them with an environment conducive to living and learning. Because of this great responsibility, housing officials communicate often with parents.

Financial Aid.

The cost of college continues to increase and is becoming less accessible for students to attend, “a college degree is such a necessity in this economy that people will pay nearly anything for it, and colleges know it” (Higher & Higher Ed, 2013, p. 12). The financial aid office is typically responsible for awarding scholarships and any monies offered or awarded to students, reasons why administrators in this office receive many parent phones calls. “The important goals of increasing college access and degree attainment in America are not likely to be realized without first improving college knowledge and financial literacy...” (McKinney & Roberts, 2012, p. 761). Many parents

and students are misinformed about the financial aid process and have no idea of where to begin when it comes to financing their student's education.

To whom do students turn when seeking information and guidance about financing their college education? Findings from existing research indicate that students, and their parents, view financial aid counselors as primary and reliable sources of information when making decisions about how to pay for college (McDonough, 2004; McDonough & Calderone, 2006; Perna, 2008). These counselors can help students complete the required paperwork (e.g., FAFSA, scholarship applications); identify available sources of financial aid; and meet the financial aid application deadlines. In addition, guidance and advice from a knowledgeable financial aid counselor may help student loan borrowers limit their cumulative amount of debt burden. Promisingly, consulting with a trained financial aid counselor has been shown to greatly improve students' overall understanding and utilization of financial aid (Dowd, 2008; McDonough & Calderone, 2006) (McKinney & Roberts, 2012, p. 762).

Admissions.

Admittance into college is students' and parents' first interaction with the college/university and with faculty and administrators. Communication with students and the university begin immediately once the student is admitted and has enrolled. Though there is some correspondence with parents from the university, after this point, it is minimal and any information is mostly communicated with the students. However, students do have the option to share with parents or another third party any correspondence from the institution and grant them accessibility to their information such as grades and financial records.

Universities seek to recruit the best and the brightest students to come to their institutions. Admissions counselors assist in the recruitment of new students by visiting high schools and attending college fairs providing students and parents with information about the university and answering any questions they may have. "And it's not just hitting [recruitment] numbers -- it's hitting numbers within those numbers,....admissions

officers are becoming not just gatekeepers of incoming classes, but also "class shapers" (Hu, 2012, p. 18).

Sample Selection

As stated by Merriam (2009), "The criteria you establish for purposeful sampling directly reflect the purpose of the study and guide in the identification of information-rich cases," (pp. 77-78). For this study, purposeful sampling was used by the researcher to identify nine participants, three from each department. Convenience sampling was also utilized to identify participants in the study that the researcher already knew and these participants helped to identify potential administrators that could assist with the study as well. These participants, to be eligible for the study, must deal or have dealt with disgruntled parents at some point in their student and/or academic affairs careers. A recruitment email (*see Appendix C*) was sent to all participants and soon after a follow-up email was sent that included the location, time, and date of the interview (*see Appendix D*). An electronic informed consent document was attached to the email so the participants had time to read over the information and ask any questions of the researcher before formally consenting to participate in the study.

Besides the participants' gender, no other demographic information was collected in this study. To keep the participants anonymous, pseudonyms were assigned to each administrator. Table 3 shows the interview number, the corresponding pseudonym for each participant, the participants' gender, division and department in which they work.

Table 3

Participants

Interview	Pseudonym	Gender	Office	Division
1	Winston	M	University Housing	Student Affairs
2	Terrance	M	University Housing	Student Affairs
3	Joyce	F	Financial Aid	Academic Affairs
4	Barry	M	Admissions	Academic Affairs
5	Molly	F	University Housing	Student Affairs
6	Phoebe	F	Admissions	Academic Affairs
7	Rosemary	F	Financial Aid	Academic Affairs
8	Lloyd	M	Financial Aid	Academic Affairs
9	Gavin	M	Admissions	Academic Affairs

Data Collection Methods

Data were collected through an eight question semi-structured interview (*see Appendix E*). The researcher designed and provided participants with a scenario, with the theme of student privacy that related to the participants' respective office— University Housing, Financial Aid, and Admissions. The participants were not given the case study ahead of time due to the researcher wanting “in the moment” reactions and responses as would happen when a parent called the office, in this event, there is no immediate

preparation. Follow-up questions were asked of the participants after he/she reads the scenario and personal stories and encounters were shared to give the researcher a broader scope of this topic. Several offices were identified by the researcher on MidPointe University's campus that had the most parent contact— University Housing, Admission, and Financial Aid. This provided the researcher with a broader scope of how administrators communicate with parents within those different offices.

A proposal was submitted to the Institutional Review Board at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and permission for this study was granted before data were collected. Upon approval, participants were identified from each office ranging from senior-level administrators to administrators who had been working in the field for only a couple of years. All participants were contacted via email with an informed consent document attached for their review. Before the interview, the researcher went through the informed consent document again and addressed any questions the participants had before conducting the study. An audio recorder was used during the interview and the researcher also took notes. All of the interviews were transcribed by a professional transcriptionist before data analysis took place.

Data Analysis

Once the transcriptions were completed, the researcher thoroughly read each one and compared the documents to the notes taken in the interview. During this process the researcher looked for specific information such as keywords, ideas, concepts, terms, and phrases that answered the research questions and for any information that could contribute to future research studies. The transcripts were read an additional time and notes were taken in the margins to begin developing themes and codes from the data (*see*

Appendix F). Descriptors taken from the language of the participants called in vivo codes were identified utilizing the “exact words of the participants” (Creswell, 2007, p. 185). The themes that emerged from this data are illustrated in Chapter 4 which presents the findings of this qualitative data.

Verification Strategies

Several verification methods, or triangulation, were utilized in this study to validate information and contribute to the trustworthiness of the research. An auditor well-versed in qualitative research methods was utilized in this study in order to be certain that the findings and interpretations all coincided with the data collected (Creswell, 2007). The researcher’s auditor was a male faculty member in the Department of Educational Psychology at MidPointe University who agreed to provide his services free of charge.

Rich, thick description was another verification strategy used to bring the participants more to life and allow readers to connect or identify rather easily with the participants. In this study, the researcher wanted the participants to respond instantly to a complicated situation with a parent. Participants talked the researcher through how they would choose to respond to this scenario without having much time to think or process the situation.

Chapter Summary

The third chapter defined the methodology of the qualitative phenomenology, how data was analyzed and coded and how the findings would be verified. This chapter also discussed the researcher’s position on the topic and further explained the reasons of

interest in wanting to do this study. Chapter four will present findings from the data analysis of the transcriptions.

Chapter 4

Findings and Analysis

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore how administrators in the fields of student affairs and academic affairs handle situations when disgruntled parents call their offices regarding students. Examining the whole relationship between parents, students, and the institution, the researcher sought to uncover how correspondence methods between these partnerships can be more defined.

Research Questions

Seeing the need for enhanced and effective communication efforts between administrators and parents, the researcher chose the following questions as the main focus of the study:

- How do college and university administrators respond to situations when disgruntled parents call their offices regarding students?
- How do college and university administrators diffuse anger and deal with challenging circumstances?
- What are best practices that current and/or new professionals in these fields can implement to make communication with parents more effective?
- How do college/university administrators view the interacting relationship between parents, students, and the institution?

Overview of Themes

This chapter provides an overview of the themes that emerged from the participants representing the offices of University Housing, Financial Aid, and Admissions from their experiences in dealing with disgruntled parents in their offices and the functions of each of these departments. Four themes are shown in Table 4.

Table 4

Themes

Themes

1. Policies and Procedures
 2. Communication
 3. Intersection of Relationships
 4. Roles and Responsibilities
-

The “Policies and Procedure” theme outlined the federal policy enforced by the university that protects the rights of the student and procedures that individual offices have or do not have for corresponding with parents. The “Communication” theme showed how administrators correspond with parents and how this may look different when communicating with students. The “Intersection of Relationships” theme discussed how relationships between the parent, student, and institution are both forming and changing. The final theme “Roles and Responsibilities” emphasized the function of the university and/or administrator, the student, and the parent, as students matriculate into institutions of higher learning.

Theme: Policies and procedures. When policies and procedures were discussed in interviews, all participants mentioned FERPA as being a policy that they must follow in their work. When it came to office procedures on how to deal with frustrated parents, some participant's office procedures were, if the department had procedures, similar and others were dissimilar. There were also some differences in procedures for participants who worked in the same department. Unlike many of the other participants who would immediately talk about FERPA when conversing with a disgruntled parent, Barry, who is a senior-level administrator who works in Admissions approached the FERPA policy differently in his work.

I wouldn't even talk about FERPA, because parents can't stand it. The minute you mention FERPA they say I pay the bills...FERPA is there, it's there to protect me in the end, but I would never jump that out right away. In my career I have not talked FERPA very often... I'm very careful that I don't violate FERPA, but I'll go closer to the edge than many people... FERPA has a real place but I think sometimes some people put up the barriers too much.

Barry is sure to not violate policy but chooses other ways to communicate and assist parents rather than mention a policy that won't allow for him to freely discuss any student information. In that same department both Phoebe and Gavin, classified as younger professionals, would begin their conversation with a parent by saying that they are unable to discuss any information associated with the student because it would be in violation of FERPA. For example, Phoebe said "Unfortunately, I am only able to freely discuss the student's status with the student themselves..." and Gavin responded "...I can get in trouble myself and lose my own job if I share this information...I wish I could, but I can't share this information with you by law." Although Barry, Phoebe, and Gavin all work in the same department their responses to the same situation were different.

In the department of University Housing, Terrance, who has been working in this department for over 20 years is more similar to Barry in his approach when dealing with parents and the FERPA violation. “I try to focus on the things I can do, and a lot less on the things I can’t do.” He acknowledged that there is some information that he isn’t at liberty to discuss with them but “there’s ways that we can give some information to help the parent help coach their student...” Both Molly who holds a senior-level position is newer to the housing department and Winston who is a Residence Director mentioned that as long as students have documented permission on file, they would then be allowed to discuss any information with their parents. Winston said, “...as long as I have a written consent form from your son or daughter, I can discuss all of this information with you.”

Joyce, Rosemary, and Lloyd, who all work in Financial Aid and have for over 20 years, said they would remind the parent of the FERPA law and that it is not just a university policy but a federal law. Lloyd said he made a point to emphasize the reason for this law to parents.

One of the things that I try to do is to speak to the reasons for the protection for their student. Reasonable people will understand that, the FERPA laws for example are in place to protect students’ rights, and we want to be respectful of that.

Joyce mentioned that there are factors that you must keep in mind when communicating policy with parents.

...you have to remember that they’re your customer. Now we may be a little bit different than a retail operation where the customer is always right. Our customer is not always right, (Laugh) and when you’re working with federal guidelines, and such, they can’t always be right.

Rosemary said that because there are several regulations that you must fully understand and follow, knowing your job thoroughly is very helpful when speaking with parents.

All nine participants discussed FERPA as being a policy that must be followed in their offices but also talked about procedures that their respective departments had, or did not have, when speaking with parents. Winston mentioned:

I don't think there's a specific protocol when dealing with parents, except that we treat everyone with respect. You always want to have them leave with a positive impression of the university but it would be good I would think to have a policy that says when dealing with parents, do this. Like have it written down maybe. I would say it's more of an oral tradition.

Molly in that same department said, "To have a specific protocol maybe isn't, you know, completely practical, because you'd have to try to problem solve what kinds of things are going to come up" however Terrance seemed to have a more detailed process of how parental phone calls are handled.

It starts at the hall level with the residence director. So the residence director typically deals with a chunk of the parent phone calls. When they get a parent phone call they typically document that phone call or that situation. They talk with their supervisor, the assistant director in that area and they strategize how they're going to work through it. Sometimes the assistant director will get the phone call, or call the parent back, so that, from a parental point of view it looks like hey, another level has looked into this. Then usually I'm the third phone call in the tree.

In addition to Terrance, administrators in both Financial Aid and Admissions speak on how if situations are not able to be resolved at the base level or with the initial contact that the call is then transferred up the chain. Rosemary said:

Generally the people that answer the phones are well trained in our office. And, we do our best to handle a situation on our own if at all possible. Unfortunately, we can't always resolve the parent's frustrations, and there have been times when they say I want to talk to your supervisor. And, you know, generally our supervisor has to tell them the same answer, but sometimes hearing it from

someone quote unquote higher up, you know, that seems to work for them. But that is our protocol, is that if a parent, if we are not able to resolve their issues, and we just feel like we have done everything we can for them, we then would pro—go ahead and give that call to our supervisor who's the Associate Director for Client Services.

Phoebe also mentioned that usually the counselors in the office are the first to speak to parents but she has been asked to step in if the counselor needed assistance.

Sometimes they'll still come wandering back and say I have a really upset parent, will you help? Will you talk to them? And they would send it on to me, and you know, if I got uncomfortable or into a situation, I would reference them to our Director of Admissions. Sometimes all people want to hear from is someone higher.

Few participants mentioned that terminating a phone call because of an abusive conversation with a parent was not the most desirable method but that this was a procedure that surely could be used if the situation led to this point. Joyce warned:

...even if somebody is just really being inappropriate....just indicate that again, [we] very much want to help them, but can't be very productive when you're screaming at me, yelling at me, that kind a thing, we can let them know that we're going to terminate the call.

Terrance agreed:

...parents can be kind of I'll say pushy or over the top. In the end, we got to put that aside, because sometimes you feel disrespected, and just deal with the issue. If a parent's really over the top, and they're swearing at, me you know, I appreciate that, that you have an issue but if you're going to continue to swear at me, or, basically threaten me on the phone, I have no choice but to hang up, because, this conversation is not good for either one of us.

Identity verification is an issue that both Lloyd and Gavin mentioned that administrators should be aware of when taking phone calls over the phone. Lloyd said "...we [are] conservative in terms of what information we give out over the telephone as opposed to in person, because it's more difficult to verify that we're really speaking to the person that they represent themselves to be." On a similar note Gavin mentioned:

If a parent calls, regardless if they know the student's ID, date of birth those kind of things, we cannot share information with them....Your student has to either call into us with their ID number, their date of birth at hand, um, or more importantly, it's easier just to email us. Because the email they use on their application, we use as their official email. So, anything that comes from that email is official correspondence with us, it's in writing, we can track it.

Lastly, some administrators mentioned taking ownership or responsibility by trying to rectify that situation if something in the process was incorrect and/or the department was at fault. Phoebe talked about reflecting upon these encounters afterwards and thinking if there is something that the Admissions office could do differently or should consider.

I think things through, and try to figure out if something was an exception, or not an exception. If there was something that was, a concern to our process, then, absolutely [we] will address that and change the policies if needed but, you always want to be careful. You never want to build a process for the exception. You always want to build a process for the rule.

Likewise, Joyce acknowledged that "...maybe we have overlooked something, or didn't process something quite correctly, or, you know, maybe, unfortunately had given misinformation that we can correct that might smooth the situation over."

FERPA seems to be a clear regulation that is complied with across the departments, yet procedures on how to deal with parents are similar within departments and even dissimilar within the same departments. Each participant discussed these policies and procedures within their individual offices and how they utilized them in their work when corresponding with angry parents.

Theme: Communication. Participants were asked what their first reactions are when they receive phone calls from unhappy parents and how they usually diffuse anger when corresponding with anxious parents. There was a general consensus from each

participant about listening first, allowing the parent to “vent” their frustrations and find out what the real issue is before giving a response. For example, Gavin stated:

There’s nothing that can help more than just letting them talk because sometimes they’ll be able to talk more about the situation and give you more information than if you try to talk and ask them questions that they don’t want to answer.

On the other hand Terrance’s approach emphasized the importance of involving and communicating students’.

...truly trying to understand from their perspective what the issues are and try to separate the emotion and try to have them help me understand the, the core issues and ask questions like what has your student done, who have they talked to, you know, those types of questions, to again, try to figure out the landscape.

Some of the participants had varying tactics on how they dispersed anger in these kinds of situations. Lloyd’s strategy appeared to be an effective one for him.

I’ve always tried to speak to people’s fear. I’ve found that anger is typically a secondary emotion. That the base emotion is fear and so I try really hard to try to figure out what is it that’s driving the anger.

Two of the participants talked about being parents of college-aged students themselves and how this shared experience usually helped in calming the parent down.

Rosemary stated:

Because now that I have my own college student I have a greater understanding about this. I’m able to discuss things with the parent at that level and I think sometimes I can say, I totally understand, because I’m walking in your shoes right now myself. That really has helped.... Generally I think when they understand, oh, it’s not just me that they’re treating like this, and, oh, other parents have to work through this too; I think at that point it often diffuses a situation.

Joyce added:

I have a college age student now, but I also have a high school student. And, um you know, when your high school has a website where you can check every single grade from every single assignment, and you are encouraged to do so, and to all of a sudden, now 3 months later after high school graduation, feel like everything now is going to them, nobody’s going to communicate with you and there’s not a way to keep track of these things that for the last four or more years, maybe even

12 years, you've been very used to as a parent in keeping track of on a daily basis, is very difficult to let that go.

The idea of showing care and empathy towards parents was mentioned by many of the participants as well as being a tactic. Joyce said "I think the main thing is they need to know that someone cares, and someone is listening to them....there's some comfort for families knowing that somebody just listened to them" she added "I think we need to be mindful of the switch I think in mindset that we've asked many of these parents to make in a very short time frame..."

Strengthening communication efforts with parents is very important for administrators to do as students matriculate to college. Several participants talked about how significant communication is and that we must make every attempt to correspond well with parents and students alike. Terrance acknowledged the fact that parents are essential when student's have an issue yet to a degree because parental involvement can be beneficial, especially for the student. Phoebe is one administrator who emphasized the importance of communication with all parties.

It all starts with communicate well. Communicate well to the student, communicate well, to the parents. If you are in a situation that you can communicate with them, following up with emails, then they can share that with their parent, and their parent doesn't have to feel so out of the loop as well.... I think it's important that parents are always considered, and like I said, communicated with as often as possible.

In another regard, Joyce added:

We tend sometimes in our area to be in a world where parents really feel like, if they don't have good communication with the student, then they really feel as if they're at a disadvantage, because they need to check with us frequently, which they don't want to do, which is totally understandable, or they're at the mercy of their child to either be asking them, reminding them, that kind of thing.

Participants such as Joyce and Rosemary recognize that they are not always able to win the parent over but work to do the best they can to address the concerns of parents and assist them to the best of their abilities. Overall, the participants said they always remained calm in these instances, are respectful to the parent, and maintained a professional demeanor. Molly offered the following:

So whatever you do, even if you think you're being treated unfairly by the student or by the parent, that you're respectful in what you say to them, your tone is always professional, and that you, you give their concerns a real listen all the way along... always try to have a professional, kind, attentive tone. But also to speak with self-confidence.

When administrators are communicating with parents, understanding the concern, showing empathy, and working to identify a solution, if possible, can help facilitate discussions with parents and students as administrators try to form relationships with both groups.

Theme: Intersection of Relationships. This theme focused on how relationships form and change with administrators, parents, and students' as student's transition into college. One participant described this relationship between this triad as being a "unique relationship." Some participants talked about how parents are adjusting to this change and that no matter what, most parents will be involved in the lives of their students in some way. Joyce makes a point of considering this change for the parents.

I think we need to be very mindful of the position that many of our parents are in especially with this generation of students where parents really like to make things real smooth for them, and, and don't want them to have many hiccups.

Lloyd understands the concept of parental involvement but believes that the parent should trust that administrators will serve the student as best as possible while not posing as a guardian.

It's increasingly difficult I think, because we talk about, helicopter parents... we as educators know better, and we know that, that this is not in the long run going to serve that student well. And so we really do still try, as much as we can, to not act in loco parentis. And that we're not the parent, and, the parent can't stop being the parent.

From this strong parental involvement, two participants in particular talk about how they formed a relationship with the student as a result of a parent concern. Barry recalls a mom contacting him because she was concerned about the progress of her son who recently transferred to the university.

...but I see this kid all the time, he's in graduate school now. But he transferred here and his mom said he is not doing well, but I don't want him to know I called you....So I called him and said we were looking at a group of transfer students who transferred to [MidPointe] and his name popped up on the random list for an interview....But I told him he was randomly selected. And I said would you please come in; I'd really like to talk to you about how we could do better to help transfer students in the future. We had a great conversation. He actually was doing much better than his mom knew. He was doing a lot of good things. He just wasn't sharing with her. So I called her back and said I'm impressed with him....I know he's on the right track....But, this guy, you know, he's still, he's in graduate school and he, uh, every time I see him he, says hello. So it's like, 6 years ago, and he still talks to me....I know we helped set him in the right direction, and it was because the mom called.

Phoebe also shared a story about how she formed a relationship with a student in her career.

I addressed his concerns, I apologized where necessary, absolutely just listened to him. Then told him, from now on, you know, please reach out to me if you have questions and that's why I brought this for you, because this is how I made a best friend who sent me this, which is a student's transcript, and it's just hilarious because he's like addressing it, directly to me, as personal and confidential. So, you build a relationship with them when you do that and now he calls about everything...

Several participants point out the differences in students' home environments and where they come from which ultimately reflects the type of relationship they have with their parents before coming to the university. Winston shared his thought on this topic.

“If we know that they were raised in a single parent family, that relationship, with that guardian is, um super significant to them.” Going even further, participants talked about how parenting has changed yet as a college/university we must show parents that their student is just as important to us as they are to them. Gavin called this a “mother” and “papa bear” instinct for parents wanting to look out for their children.

Molly said:

And parents today are different than they were 30 years ago...but parents really want their student to be taken care of, and want them protected, and want them safe. At the end of the day they also want them to be self-sufficient.

Phoebe echoed:

I think we have seen a change in parent involvement, uh, over time. A lot of cultures, the family becomes even more important, and so I think, you know, how do you convince the family that they're important to a university, while really recruiting just the student is really important as well.

Two of the participants summed this theme up adequately by emphasizing that relationships between all parties are important in students being successful during their time at the university. Terrance confidently retorted, “...as long as we work the problem and keep it on the issues, and work with the students, 99% of the time good things happen.” Barry told of how a former colleague would use the word “partnership” to describe the relationship between the institution, parent, and student and that each unit had the same end goal, helping the student excel at the university.

Relationships are important between the institution, parent, and student.

Considering the parent and student relationship prior to college can ultimately help administrators accommodate the needs of the students better and can in turn strengthen the relationship between not only the student but with the parent as well. Looking at this

triad as a partnership rather than adversaries can make for a better experience for every unit, especially for the student.

Theme: Roles and Responsibilities. The institution, parents, and students all have specific and varying roles and responsibilities as they interact and communicate with one another. Many participants talked about how maintaining professionalism, working to solve the issue, if possible, and always working to serve the students as they are the main priorities of the administrators. Looking at the roles of the institution and more importantly the administrator, Barry refers to himself as an ally and takes ownership of his position at the university. "...we want them to go to a place where they're successful. So what is my job? My job is to try to help the parents look."

Lloyd spoke in more detail regarding the role of the administrator and the importance of setting the tone immediately.

We try to provide the very best service to students, and we, and we try to be as courteous about that as we can. It's hard sometimes because the nature of our work. But, you know, we try to put a smile in our voice when we answer the phone, you know, we try to smile at people when they walk into the office. We try to make them feel comfortable and welcome.

All the participants offered perspective and wisdom to administrators who may encounter angry parents in their careers. Several mentioned explaining their positions at the university and clearly defining their role to both students and parents can help in managing issues. Winston said, "...explain my position maybe a little bit more, because a lot a people outside of Housing don't know that there's really a difference between an RD and an RA. They just think like I'm a glorified RA." Molly added , "...also just asking for their understanding of my position, that I'm obligated to do what is expected by the university in my role.

Many participants talked about the role of the parent changing when students come to college and what their new responsibility is now as a parent to a college student.

Lloyd referred to the parent's role reflecting that of a coach.

...your role as a parent has changed, is changing, and your role now is to be more like a coach, you know. Be around, be available, but let your student ask. You know. Let them come to you and ask. But you got to let your kid play the game. You can't play the game for them. You're not doing them any good when you play the game for them. That might have been fine when they were in, you know, third grade soccer, but your, your job now is to be available, to be a resource, to be a sounding board, to give advice when it's needed or asked for. But to let the student play the game.

The goal of administrators is to help students become more invested in their college career. Molly said that the role of administrators is to "help student's become more self-sufficient, and more able himself or herself to solve their own problems."

Gavin is an advocate for students being more invested in their education and taking more responsibility for themselves.

It's the students that are going to college and getting an education. They should be taking basically their education by the horns from day one....When you screw up, you take fault for that. You learn from that....but I think when parents really start to try to do everything for their students, it defeats the purpose of growing up.... it should be a learning experience.

Chapter Summary

Clearly defining the roles of the administrator, parent, and student and ensuring that everyone is aware of what those responsibilities are can assist in controlling and directing issues, this essentially can improve the overall relationship. Chapter five presents a summary of findings, suggestions for bettering the relationship between parents and the institution, and future recommendations.

Chapter 5

Conclusions and Recommendations

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how administrators in the fields of student affairs and academic affairs handle situations when disgruntled parents call their offices regarding students. More specifically, the researcher seeks to understand how administrators diffuse anger and deal with these unwanted circumstances in their daily careers as interactions with parents and families with institutions continue to increase.

Research Questions

The researcher sought to answer how institutions could communicate with university parents and provide resources that made them feel like they could still be involved and connected with their students. The following research questions were considered.

- How do college and university administrators respond to situations when disgruntled parents call their offices regarding students?
- How do college and university administrators diffuse anger and deal with challenging circumstances?
- What are best practices that current and/or newer professionals in these fields can implement to make communication with parents more effective?
- How do college/university administrators view the interacting relationship between parents, students, and the institution?

This inquiry's research questions and summaries of the findings are discussed below.

Summary of Research Questions

As institutions experience increased parental involvement and students experience increases in the costs of college, higher education stands at a crossroads. In this environment, different parts of colleges and universities are likely to send disparate messages about the preferred level of parental involvement (Kennedy, 2009, p. 20).

Institutions recognize that parents will be involved in their students' lives and working effectively to communicate procedures, information, and the roles of the departments can only help to create a better relationship with parents. In this study, participants discussed how they have communicated with parents in their careers, how they have diffused anger, offered advice on how to deal with disgruntled parents, and provided their perspectives on the relationship between parents, students, and the institution.

Research Question 1: How do college and university administrators respond to situations when disgruntled parents call their offices regarding students?

This question provides the central, organizing framework of this research. Many participants expressed how administrators should listen to the parent, find out what the concern is and work to address any concerns directed to them in their offices. Terrance mentioned that administrators should listen to the parent but work to get the student as involved in the situation as possible since the issues are usually centered on them. "So, we need to also then try to get it from the parent to the student; that's our next goal, is to work with the student, keeping the parent informed but working with the student."

Participants identified that they are willing to work with parents especially if that means making the students' college experience better for that student and their families. Many participants mentioned that they will not be able to solve every parent issue, and they

were comfortable with that concept, especially when they have done all they could initially to resolve the problem.

Research Question 2: How do college and university administrators diffuse anger and deal with challenging circumstances?

In compromising situations like when parents are calling very angry, it can be challenging for administrators to effectively assist them and concentrate on their needs. “Many parents expect out-of-class functions to provide excellent customer service...” (Kennedy, 2009, p. 21). Joyce shared how difficult this situation could be for administrators.

If it's your first person that kind of chewed on you that day, it's a little bit easier to remember to be a good listener, not interrupt, that kind of thing, compared to if it's the 5th or 6th time that you've been chewed on, then you know, just like with anything else, we're human your patience is a little lacking. And then you really have to be mindful of being professional, not interrupting, because you're not going to get very far if you don't.

Though it may be challenging to diffuse anger or solve all the issues that parents have when they call, finding commonalities, showing concern and empathy, and seeking to address the true concern of the parent can be ways to resolve problems or make parents feel less anxious about the situation.

Research Question 3: What are some best practices that current and/or newer professionals in these fields can implement to make communication with parents more effective?

Along with recruiting students to the university, administrators are also recruiting the family. Providing resources that strengthen communication with not only the students but the parents can help in these efforts. Lloyd advises administrators to leave the personal baggage at the door because those personal issues can interfere with how well you perform at your job and how well you provide services to others. “If you don't

feel good about you, it's going to be really hard to get somebody else to feel good about you. And so work on you so that you can feel good and confident about who you are.”

As a younger professional, Gavin expressed how office administrators can serve as resources and can be helpful for professionals to feel more prepared to work with parents.

The biggest measure you can take is just, you know, talking with people about situations that come up.... Having the protocols in the office that are set in stone that everybody abides by. I think that, you know, having training sessions on it, we do that. When parents call in upset, understanding, you know, how you talk to them.

Utilizing other colleagues and campus resources can serve as a means to reach out to parents and close the communication gap with them and the institution. Understanding that this generation of parents is different than prior generations will help administrator's welcome parental involvement rather than dismiss or ignore it.

The degree to which a parent is involved depends not only on the relationship with his or her particular student but also with the student's school and the extent to which parents are included and encouraged to participate in their child's educational process (Hoover, Dempsey, & Sandler, 1997, p. 6).

Research Question 4: How do college/university administrators view the whole relationship between parents, students, and the institution?

“If higher education institutions do not decide and explain the kind of relationships they expect with students and with parents, the danger exists that external forces will make those decisions for them” (Wartman & Savage, 2008, p. 40). As described earlier, this relationship is unique but can also be complicated if roles are not defined and clearly explained. Parents invest a lot of time and money in their students and they just want to make sure that they are being taken care of and that their needs are being met. Molly explained the feelings of the parents and the expectations they have for the institution as it relates to their students.

...make sure that you're projecting that you do care about their student, your main concern is, is their student safe, are they comfortable, are they able to attend class? And taking care of those basics...convincing the parent that you do care about those basics for your student can get you a very long way.

Building and maintaining relationships is important for not only the institution but for the parents and student. Terrance agreed:

I think sometimes when they have a student that feels like they're in a crisis of some sort, they want to know that somebody cares. That somebody's going to take their concerns seriously, and that there's going to be some kind a resolution because they have an invested interest in their student to make sure that they get through school and I think when they see that we're also trying to work towards that, I think it's much more reasonable.

Implications

The findings of this study indicated that administrators at MidPointe University communicate with parents regularly and that being attentive, listening to the problem, and working to resolve their issues are strategies that are used when working with parents. Merriman (2006) stated that "parents and parent expectations are redefining the work of student affairs professionals as they expect institutions to respond to all of their concerns, protect their students, and expeditiously resolve any crisis they encounter" (p. 48). There are times, however, when administrators are unable to rectify concerns even with the help of other colleagues.

One recommendation is that institutions provide families with resources and opportunities for parents and students to interact with faculty and administrators. For instance, equipping parents with a packet of information that includes important semester dates and campus resources from the offices on campus in addition to the services these offices provide. This way, families can begin to familiarize themselves with the functions of the university and with faculty and staff members so they know who to

contact and are comfortable with doing so. A Parent/Family Office can serve as a liaison between the parents and the institution and can make parents feel like their involvement is needed and wanted to help the student progress through college. This office can be the point of communication with parents and should be capable of directing and managing their needs and address any questions that parents may have. This office can also provide opportunities for parents to interact with other parents, administrators, and engage with the students in the campus atmosphere.

Reading and staying knowledgeable on current research regarding the changing needs of parents and students can be helpful for faculty and staff members across campus. Offering training and sharing research regarding the concerns of parents and families is important, as parents are different from those of prior generations, just as students are different than prior generations. A “parents’ only” reception is another way to engage parents which also creates a more intimate environment for parents and administrators to form relationships as well as allow for parents to be around other parents of college-aged students. These parents too, can serve as resources for one another during the students’ time at the university.

Participants identified that educating parents and students of their roles at the university and proving to parents that the students are the institution’s number one priority can help relieve tension and anxiety for parents who are closely involved. Coburn and Woodard (2001) stated “although parents may appreciate this kind of customer service, it is important for colleges to set boundaries that make it clear that their primary relationship is with students” (Coburn & Woodward, 2001, p. 33). Overall, one of the greatest responsibilities the institution has is assisting students and pointing them

in the right direction while demonstrating to parents that they want to work alongside them to help guide students as well.

Future Research

The findings of this research added to other qualitative studies that involve working and communicating with parents of college students. Departments are seeing the importance of having protocols established that can assist administrators in dealing with disgruntled and discontented parents. There is little research done on this topic but many campuses are noticing the level of parent participation increasing and seeing the need to create offices or resources that specifically cater to parents needs. A mixed methods study using surveys may be more useful in grasping the perspectives of parents and/or students regarding the relationships between the institution, parent, and student. Other future research may include interviewing parents, students, and administrators and look for similar or dissimilar opinions, reactions, and experiences. Understanding students' and parents' perspectives on the matter may be helpful for administrators to learn how to better serve them. Including people of color to any of the above research studies can add further perspective on this topic. An additional future research study may include comparing institutions that have a Parent/Family Office or Department to institutions that do not have such a resource.

Conclusion

Providing parents with as much information as we can at the forefront could possibly decrease the volume of parent phone calls and prevent so many parents calling or even hanging up angry. Having parents as partners instead of allies will better the relationship between them and the institution and create a better college experience and

environment for the student as a whole. Gaining the trust of parents is significant for institutions, this can be done by administrators showing parents that they care about the student as much as the parent does and will do everything possible to ensure the student's needs are being met. A Parent/Family Office can serve as this point of contact for parents and respond to their needs.

Strengthening the relationship with both parents and students creates a better overall experience for everyone involved. Focusing on what can be done by the institution rather than what cannot be done should be the primary focus. Overall, colleges and universities should remember that the needs of everyone should be considered because you are not just recruiting the student, you are recruiting families as well.

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Appendix A

IRB Approval Letter

December 10, 2012

Loreal Robertson
Department of Educational Administration

James Griesen
Department of Educational Administration
125 TEAC, UNL, 68588-0360

IRB Number: 20121213180 EX

Project ID: 13180

Project Title: How College/University Administrators Handle the Disgruntled Parent

Dear Loreal:

This letter is to officially notify you of the certification of exemption of your project by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects. It is the Board's opinion that you have provided adequate safeguards for the rights and welfare of the participants in this study based on the information provided. Your proposal is in compliance with this institution's Federal Wide Assurance 00002258 and the DHHS Regulations for the Protection of Human Subjects (45 CFR 46) and has been classified as Exempt Category 2.

You are authorized to implement this study as of the Date of Exemption Determination: 12/10/2012.

1. The approved informed consent form has been uploaded to NUgrant (file with - Approved.pdf in the file name). Please use this form to distribute to participants. If you need to make changes to the informed consent form, please submit the revised form to the IRB for review and approval prior to using it.

We wish to remind you that the principal investigator is responsible for reporting to this Board any of the following events within 48 hours of the event:

- * Any serious event (including on-site and off-site adverse events, injuries, side effects, deaths, or other problems) which in the opinion of the local investigator was unanticipated, involved risk to subjects or others, and was possibly related to the research procedures;
- * Any serious accidental or unintentional change to the IRB-approved protocol that involves risk or has the potential to recur;
- * Any publication in the literature, safety monitoring report, interim result or other finding that indicates an unexpected change to the risk/benefit ratio of the research;
- * Any breach in confidentiality or compromise in data privacy related to the subject or others; or
- * Any complaint of a subject that indicates an unanticipated risk or that cannot be resolved by the research staff.

This project should be conducted in full accordance with all applicable sections of the IRB Guidelines and you should notify the IRB immediately of any proposed changes that may affect the exempt status of your research project. You should report any unanticipated problems involving risks to the participants or others to the Board.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB office at [REDACTED].

Sincerely,

Becky R. Freeman, CIP
for the IRB

Appendix B

Informed Consent Letter

INFORMED CONSENT LETTER

Identification of Project:

How College/University Administrators Handle the Disgruntled Parent

Purpose of the Research:

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore how administrators in the field of Student Affairs and Academic Affairs handle situations when disgruntled parents call their offices regarding students. I seek to understand how administrators diffuse anger and deal with these unwanted circumstances in their daily careers.

Procedures:

The researcher plans on collecting data through audio-taped interviews with participants. The researcher will provide them with a scenario that relates to their offices (Admissions, University Housing, and Financial Aid) with the theme of student privacy. Participants will answer questions about how they would respond to this parent and what actions they are likely to take. The researcher is also hoping to get personal stories from participants on when they can recall having to deal with a disgruntled parent in the past.

Risks and/or Discomforts:

There are no known risks involved in participating.

Benefits:

The participants will be able to reflect on their experiences when they have had to deal with parents and can share this information during training sessions and/or professional development with their offices. More specifically they can share this information and their experiences with new professionals entering the field of Student Affairs and/or Academic Affairs.

Confidentiality:

Any information obtained during this study which could identify you will be kept strictly confidential. The data from the interviews will be stored securely in the locked office of the investigator. The investigator will only see your information for the year it will take to complete this research project. The data from this research will be used to complete the thesis requirement for a master's of arts in educational administration at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. The information obtained in this study may be published in academic journals or presented at conferences or meetings, but the data will be reported as aggregated data. The audiotapes will be erased after transcription.

Opportunity to Ask Questions:

You may ask any questions concerning this research. You may ask your questions at any time, including before giving consent to participate in the study. You may call or email the investigator or the investigator's advisor at any time. Our contact information is:

Loreal E. Robertson – Cellphone: [REDACTED] Email [REDACTED],
Dr. James Griesen – Email: [REDACTED] Office Phone: [REDACTED]

Institutional Review Board:

If you have questions concerning your rights as a research subject that have not been answered by the investigators or to report any concerns about the study, you may contact the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Institutional Review Board at [REDACTED]

Voluntary Participation:

Your participation in this study is voluntary. It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part in this study. If you do decide to take part in this study, you will be asked to sign this consent form. If you decide to take part in this study, you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. You are free to not answer any question or questions if you choose. This will not affect the relationship you have with the researcher. Interviews will take place in a private room in either the library or city-union and will be no more than 1-hour long.

Consent and Right to Receive Copy:

By signing this consent form, I confirm that I have read and understood the information and have had the opportunity to ask questions. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason and without cost. I understand that I will be given a copy of this consent form. I voluntarily agree to take part in this study.

_____ Initial if you agree to be audio-taped during the interview.

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Investigator Date

Name and Phone number of investigator

Loreal E. Robertson, Investigator *Cellphone:* [REDACTED]

Office: [REDACTED]

Appendix C

Recruitment Email

Hello, my name is Loreal Robertson and I am a graduate student in the Department of Educational Administration at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. I am pursuing a Master's of Arts in higher education student affairs. I am working on my thesis, which is focusing on how professionals in the field of student affairs handle the disgruntled parent when receiving phone calls regarding students. I am looking to interview administrators who have worked in the field long enough to share their experiences and insight on this topic.

As a participant, you will participate in one 45-60 minute interview with me in a private meeting space on campus. The interview will be recorded and then transcribed for you to review and check for accuracy. I will use a pseudonym for your name and any other names given so that no personal information is identifiable in the report of the research.

Additional information for participants of this study:

- Must be administrators or staff in student affairs.
- Participation within this study is completely voluntary. You can decline to participate or withdraw at any time without any penalty or loss.
- All of your responses will remain confidential and will be kept in a password-protected computer until May 2013 when the study is complete.
- The interview date and any other personal information will be anonymous.
- The data collected from the interviews will be used for research purposes only and will not be disclosed for any other reasons.
- There are no known risks for participants in completing this study.

If you would be interested in helping with my study or have any questions about my research, please contact me at [REDACTED] or contact me at either of my telephone numbers. If you would like to have contact with someone other than the researchers, please contact the Research Compliance Services Office at [REDACTED] or [REDACTED]

Sincerely,

Loreal E. Robertson, Graduate Student
Educational Administration
University of Nebraska-Lincoln
Cellphone: [REDACTED] Office Phone: [REDACTED]
Email: [REDACTED]

Dr. James Griesen, Professor
Educational Administration
University of Nebraska-Lincoln
Office Phone: [REDACTED]
Email: [REDACTED]

Appendix D

Follow-Up Email

Hello!

Thank you for volunteering to participate in my study. As a participant, you will participate in one 45-60 minute interview with me in a private meeting space at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. As a reminder, the interview will be recorded and then transcribed for you to review and check for accuracy. I will use a pseudonym for your name and any other names given so that no personal information is identifiable in the report of the research.

Below are the time, date and location of the interview:

TO BE DETERMINED

I have attached an informed consent letter that further explains this study and your role and rights as a participant. Before our interview, please sign the informed consent letter. This will serve as your consent to participate in the research. If you decide to take part in this study, you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason.

If you have any questions, please contact me at [REDACTED] or contact me at either of my telephone numbers. If you would like to have contact with someone other than the researchers, please contact the Research Compliance Services Office at [REDACTED] or [REDACTED]

Sincerely,

Loreal E. Robertson, Graduate Student
Educational Administration
University of Nebraska-Lincoln
Cellphone: [REDACTED] Office Phone: [REDACTED]
Email: [REDACTED]

Dr. James Griesen, Professor
Educational Administration
University of Nebraska-Lincoln
Office Phone: [REDACTED]
Email: [REDACTED]

Appendix E

Interview Protocol

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Date:

Location:

Investigator:

Respondent:

I want to thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. I am conducting a research study on how student affairs professionals handle the disgruntled parent when dealing with concerns about their student. Your perspective and experiences are important for this study, so I would ask you to discuss your experiences openly during this interview. I will be recording the interview so that I may accurately reflect this conversation. I will be transcribing the recording and will ask you to review the transcription for accuracy of meaning.

(Review consent letter and obtain respondent signature)

Do you have any questions before we get started?

University Housing

Mr. Walters is told by his daughter Wendy Walters that she is having some minor issues with her roommate. Her dad asks if she has talked to anyone about it and Wendy answers “yes I did, I talked to my Resident Assistant.” She also tells her dad that she and the roommate Tessa had to fill out and turn in a roommate agreement at the beginning of the year but Tessa as of late has not been following the things that she once agreed upon. Wendy says that it isn’t a huge deal and she is sure that everything will work itself out. After learning this information Mr. Walters calls you and explains the situation. You explain to him that these situations occur often within the dorms and that there are several options for Wendy in this case. Mr. Walters thinks that the RA should and could do more and tells you to send him a copy of the roommate agreement as well as the contact information of Wendy’s RA. You tell Mr. Walters that you cannot give out this kind of information due to FERPA regulations. He says to you that he pays for his daughter to live in the hall and that he is only doing what is best for her. He continues to say that Wendy is very passive when it comes to conflict and that he typically steps in when these kinds of situations happen. You say that you are happy to meet with him and Wendy but

he becomes more and more anxious and threatens to remove Wendy from the residence hall if he is not given this information. As the parent becomes more disgruntled, walk me through how you would continue to handle this situation?

Admissions

Former student of the university Tyler Thomas withdrew from the university and had not mentioned his withdrawal to his parents. Shortly after he withdrew, an exit survey is sent to his parent's home for him to fill out and return to the university. Since the mail was from the university, Tyler's parents opened the letter to find that it was an exit survey that was sent from the Office of Admissions. Without contacting Tyler, his parents immediately calls you to find out how come there was no phone call or correspondence to them about their students withdrawal. You tell the parents that sharing any information with them would be in violation of FERPA and that their student is the only one who has permission to ask questions regarding this matter. The Thomas' disregard anything you say and tells you that since they are financing Tyler's education they deserve the right to know any information from the university. As the parents become more disgruntled, walk me through how you would continue to handle this situation?

Financial Aid

Mrs. Jamison calls the financial aid office a few days after classes regarding her son Jonathan about his student bill. Mrs. Jamison says to you that his tuition and fees should all be covered by scholarships and that he should be receiving a refund check. She proceeds to ask when the refund checks would be issued and how much money Jonathan would be receiving. You noticed that Jonathan has not signed a FERPA waiver allowing his parents to have rights to his record with the university. You communicate this information to Mrs. Jamison and explain to her exactly what FERPA is and what that means in relation to her student. She says that she understands however depending on the amount of the refund check she doesn't feel that her son will be responsible enough and may choose to be un-wise with the money. You understand her concern and you encourage her to speak to Jonathan regarding this matter. She goes on to say that he probably won't disclose this information which is why she called the office. She continues to provide reasons as to why you should give her this information and that she will not let Jonathan know about the phone call. You explain to her again that you cannot release this information and asks her if there is anything else you can help her with. She becomes extremely frustrated and tells you how this is not that serious and that this kind of information should be released to parents who are closely involved with their children. As the parent becomes more disgruntled, walk me through how you would continue to handle this situation?

What is your initial reaction when you receive phone calls from unhappy parents?

How do you diffuse anger when situations like the scenario above arise?

Does your office have a protocol or policies in place when dealing with parent phone calls? If so, what are they? If not, what is the reason? Do you think there is a need for such a protocol?

Tell me about a time in your career where you had to deal with a disgruntled parent.

How did you process this situation after it was resolved if it did get resolved?

What are some precautions or preventative measures that could possibly be taken when dealing with parents?

What advice do you have for new professionals who may experience dealing with a disgruntled parent in their career?

Appendix F

List of Codes

Themes and Codes

Policies/Procedures
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FERPA • Office protocol (when communicating with parents)
Communication
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Between administrators and parents • Between administrators and students • Diffusion strategies
Intersection of Relationships
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Forming relationship- parents and institutions • Forming relationship- institutions and students • Changing relationship- parents and students
Roles and Responsibilities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Role change for parents when students enter college • Responsibilities of students in college • Role of administrators defined • Responsibilities of administrators to students • Responsibilities of administrators to parents

Appendix G

External Audit Attestation

External Audit Attestation
Wayne A. Babchuk, Ph.D.

Audit Attestation

Loreal Robertson requested that I complete a methodological audit of her qualitative research study titled “How College/University Administrators Handle the Disgruntled Parent.” The audit was conducted from February-April 2013. The audit was part of the validation strategies used in establishing the trustworthiness and accuracy of the research. I provided input on aspects of research design and implementation with special attention devoted to data collection and analysis procedures and findings.

I was initially given Chapter 1 (Introduction), Chapter 2 (Review of the Literature), Chapter 3 (Research Methods) as well as coded and uncoded participant transcripts and researcher-generated themes. Later, Loreal provided Chapter 4 (Findings and Analysis), and Chapter 5 (Conclusions and Recommendations). As mentioned above, I provided feedback on all aspects of the thesis.

Audit Procedure

The audit procedure consisted of the following steps:

1. Initial meeting to invite me to serve as an auditor for her thesis research and discuss my role and our mutual responsibilities in this process
2. Ongoing discussions of the research design and formulation of the purpose statement and central and sub-questions
3. Review of transcriptions, participant quotes, and initial open coding procedures
4. Review of emerging codes and themes
5. Ongoing discussions of findings, analysis, and the writing of the manuscript
6. Read initial and subsequent drafts of thesis chapters and provided input to Loreal as the project progressed with a particular focus on consistency in purpose and fit between purpose statement, research questions, sample selection, and data collection and analysis
7. Read final draft of the completed thesis
8. Submitted audit attestation draft for Loreal’s review and input
9. Signed and submitted completed audit attestation to Loreal

Initial Meeting

Loreal Robertson was a student in *Qualitative Approaches to Educational Research 900K*, a course I taught in the Fall Semester, 2012. In this course, she developed a preliminary research design as part of the required course mini-project and class presentation. Throughout the course, I provide ongoing feedback on various components of the students’ research designs as do the students’ peers both in small group and large group formats. Her research paper, titled “How Student Affairs Professionals Handle the Disgruntled Parent” was subject to this ongoing evaluative process and served as the basis for this M.A. thesis. Following EDPS 900K, Loreal asked me to serve as an

external auditor for her thesis research she was undertaking for a MA in Educational Administration. I agreed and we began to meet in the early part of the Spring Semester 2013 to further discuss her research as well as my role in the audit.

Research Design and Formulation of the Research Question and Sub-Questions

Beginning in early 2013, and finalized in the April of 2013, Loreal and I met periodically and corresponded via email regarding various aspects of her research design. As a follow up to the course assignment discussed in the last section, we reviewed her identification of a research problem, literature review, formulation of the purpose statement, central questions, sub-questions, purposive sampling techniques, selection of research methodology and its appropriateness to answer the research question(s), strategies of data collection and analysis, findings, validation strategies, and the writing of the manuscript.

Data Collection and Analysis

Loreal provided me with her entire M.A. thesis, participant transcripts, researcher-coded participant transcripts, and a list of emerging codes and themes. I looked at all of these documents to get a sense of how she was proceeding and the choices she was making throughout her research. I reviewed her emerging findings and themes and checked the consistency and accuracy of these themes with the data and purpose statement/research questions. I also paid careful attention to the participant quotes she chose to support her themes and how their fit with the conclusions she reached. I also read her literature review and how she integrated this into her research project.

Conclusion

Having reviewed the material outlined in this audit, I submit the following conclusions: The process of this study was consistent with its research design and the assumptions inherent in qualitative research practices. Loreal was fully transparent in describing all aspects of the research process and systematically developed and implemented a research plan that allowed her to effectively explore her research questions and extend the literature in this area. Her emergent themes and analysis are consistent with the assumptions of the qualitative paradigm and address the essence of the phenomenon of her study. Upon review of the final draft of this manuscript, I conclude that the goals of the researcher were met, the research design and its implementation was empirically sound, consistent, and effective in addressing the purpose statement, and the trustworthiness of the study can be established. There is support from the participant data for the emerging themes and her conclusions are consistent with them and augment the literature in this area.

Attested to by Wayne A. Babchuk this 12th day of April, 2013.

Wayne A. Babchuk, Ph.D.

Quantitative, Qualitative, and Psychometric Methods (QQPM)

University of Nebraska-Lincoln