

RISING COSTS AND A PROTECTIVE STYLE OF PARENTING HAVE LED MOMS AND DADS TO MONITOR THEIR CHILDREN'S PROGRESS IN COLLEGE LIKE NEVER BEFORE. THEY'RE INCREASINGLY INVOLVED IN THEIR STUDENTS' DAILY DRAMAS, AND THEY EXPECT SCHOOLS TO RESPOND QUICKLY TO THEIR REQUESTS. BUT ARE THESE PARENTS HOVERING OR HELPING?

HELICOPTER PARENTS

By Joel Hoekstra '92

DIGITAL MONTAGE BY DON BRATLAND '87 · PHOTOGRAPHS BY TOM ROSTER



GREG KNESER DOESN'T REMEMBER HIS PARENTS SHEDDING ANY TEARS

when he left for college in 1979. Wayne and Gloria Kneser helped him pack his things in his brother's battered old AMC Gremlin, checked to make sure he knew where to find the cheapest gas prices and sent him on his way. Over the next four years, they phoned their son, the fifth of six children to attend college, about three times a month. But they didn't visit, and they rarely offered advice about how to make the most of the collegiate experience.

"The school I attended was just an hour away from home, but the only time I remember

interacting with my parents on campus was at graduation," recalls Kneser, 44, the dean of students at St. Olaf. "And I had loving, caring, *attentive* parents!"

Few parents today would treat their child's higher education so matter-of-factly. Having spent years shuttling kids to band lessons, soccer practices, church activities and S.A.T.-prep sessions, most modern moms and dads would never dream of letting their sons or daughters move into college residence halls without a helping hand. The parents of today's students are often intimately involved in their children's college careers: from the choice of college and their arrival on campus to their daily decision-making about courses, majors, overseas study and extracurricular activities. What's more, kids seem to welcome such participation. They trust their parents and rely on their parents' counsel.

Kneser, for one, is no longer surprised when the buzz of a cell phone interrupts a conversation in his office and the student says, "Do you mind if I take this? It's my mom."



A SIZABLE INVESTMENT

Parental involvement in students' lives during the college years is on the rise, say college officials across America. Evidence of this trend can be found in the anecdotes of college administrators, in the increasing efforts of colleges to reach out to parents and in the recent formation of the Virginia-based lobbying group College Parents of America, a membership association that serves current and future parents of college students.

The trend has roots in the hands-on style of child-rearing and relative affluence of today's college parents. Their children, dubbed the Millennial Generation, "are the most protected generation ever," says Rosalyn Eaton-Neeb '87, director of alumni and parent relations at St. Olaf and a former associate dean of students at Clark University.

"Parents of the Millennial Generation do so much for their sons and daughters to ensure success," says Kurt Stimeling '87, the associate dean of students at St. Olaf assigned to first-year students.

Colleges and universities have begun to react to this sea change, developing programs that cater specifically to parents' questions and requests. Many schools have website pages that deal directly with parental concerns: Centre College's site offers advice from other parents on what to bring to campus on move-in day; a page on the University of California-Davis site gives parents tips on what's current in college-compatible computer hardware. North Carolina State University recently conducted a webcast for parents, and the University of Minnesota has started producing videos for parents on housing and mental-health programs.

St. Olaf, too, has stepped up its efforts to communicate more effectively with parents. It has beefed up information for parents on the dean of students' website and sends out a monthly e-newsletter to parents of current students. Officials in several administrative offices say they regularly handle calls and e-mails from students' families. Federal law restricts administrators from disclosing some private data, such as student grades. But most of the parents who contact St. Olaf just want basic information.

"The college has a responsibility to be responsive to parents," says Michael Kyle '85, vice president and dean of enrollment. "I think parents are rightfully involved in their students' lives."

Many of today's parents have spent considerable time, effort and money to provide their children with every possible advantage. "These are parents who have been told since their kid was in preschool that they're supposed to be involved in their child's life," says Marjorie Savage, author of *You're On Your Own (But I'm Here If You Need Me): Mentoring Your Child During the College Years* (Fireside, 2003). "They're supposed to know their kids' teachers, friends and friends' parents. They're supposed to attend

school conferences and sports activities. They're supposed to be involved and know what the students are doing in school and out of school."

For many parents, paying for a child's education is the largest financial investment they'll ever make. The stakes are high, and parents want to get the best return, according to Robin Raskin, author of the forthcoming *250 Secrets Every Parent Needs to Know While Their Kids Are at College* (due out from Random House in March).

"They want academic advisers looking out for their kids from day one," she says. "They've heard stories about kids who don't finish in four years and have to take additional courses. That can translate into a tremendous expense."

Parents expect colleges to keep them informed of their students' progress. "Parents are looking for more of a partnership," says Raskin. They want reassurances from college officials that drinking and drug use aren't a problem on campus. They want information on campus security. They want direct communication if their sons or daughters move off campus, start seeing a counselor, fall behind academically, accumulate parking fines or run up bills in the campus bookstore.

Years ago, students might have regarded such parental intervention as meddling. But today's kids seem to welcome parents' knowing lots of details about their life on campus, just as today's parents pride themselves on being their children's friends and confidantes. "Students like their parents. They trust their parents," says Savage, who is program director in the Department of Student Affairs at the University of Minnesota Twin Cities campus. "They talk to their parents and take advice from them."

Cell phones and e-mail give parents and students ready and inexpensive access to each other 24/7. (Kneser's admittedly unscientific poll shows that the top speed-dial number on most students' cell phones is for Mom, Dad or home.) But some experts worry that such constant communication may thwart a student's steps toward independence, calling the cell phone the world's longest umbilical cord.

"It's good and bad," says St. Olaf's Eaton-Neeb.

"When I was the associate dean at Clark, I found that some parents were very helpful, and some parents completely got in their kids' way. Having sat on the dean's side of the desk, I want to say to parents: 'Most of these kids are OK.'"

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MICHAEL KYLE '85, VICE PRESIDENT AND DEAN OF ENROLLMENT



PARENTS AS PARTNERS

The Hill hasn't been swarmed by "helicopter parents," a term that college officials across the country have adopted to refer to overweening parents who parachute onto campus at the slightest whiff of trouble — hovering overhead "whether their children need them or not," according to the Internet encyclopedia Wikipedia.

Stimeling, the first-year dean, has had to ask a couple of mothers not to attend registration with their first-year students, and he occasionally has tangled with parents who get involved in battles between warring roommates. Then there's the story of the international student whose mother moved to Northfield to track her child's progress. And the tale of the mysterious car that followed the bus halfway across the country on a band tour.

St. Olaf College Pastor Bruce Benson says it makes sense that today's parents would be interested in the particulars of student life. "Fewer students today are first-generation college students," he explains. "If you're a first-generation student, you are going into territory where your parents have not been. So your parents don't really know how to care for or protect you while you're on campus because they've never been there themselves. So they send you off with more freedom, with fewer strings."

Many of today's parents came of age in a permissive era, when societal norms about drug use, political activism and premarital sex were shifting. While they recognize college as a time to test rules and push limits, they may want to spare their children the mistakes that they made — or, at least, saw their generation making. "The vast majority of parents with kids at St. Olaf have been to college, so they think they know how to protect their students. They think they know how to advise them," says Benson. "And yes, they probably *do* know."

FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS and their parents are welcomed to St. Olaf during Week One in September. During closing ceremonies, St. Olaf faculty and administrators reassure parents that their children are in a good place and acknowledge the excitement and sadness that come with letting go. Parents routinely single this out as the most meaningful experience in their four years at St. Olaf.

Like parents elsewhere, St. Olaf parents want their tuition dollars to buy the best education possible. The number of college-age students in the Upper Midwest is declining and will continue to drop for the next eight to nine years, says Kyle, the admissions vice president. Colleges everywhere are competing for the best students, and that drives up parents' bargaining power and expectations.

"With today's parents, you have a true sense that higher education is also a consumer product that needs to be evaluated and assessed compared with other options that their son or daughter might have," Kyle says. "Parents are asking many of the same questions today that they did 20 years ago. But they also want to make sure their son or daughter will be marketable to graduate schools and prospective employers. They want to make sure that their student is prepared for life after college — and they are interested in how an expensive liberal arts education might be better for their child than a less costly university degree."

St. Olaf administrators and faculty members strive to distinguish the college from its peer institutions, be they other liberal arts colleges or the University of Minnesota. "Parents tend to look at college as a straight line to a career," says Mary Cisar, a professor of French who has served as the St. Olaf registrar for the past several years. "It's important to talk about the value of a liberal arts education not just in economic terms but in terms of what roles it prepares students to play in society and what contributions students can make because of the knowledge and habits they gain through a St. Olaf education."

Even parents who understand the distinction between a private college and a state school may assume that the higher price tag at St. Olaf buys them full and immediate answers to their questions. "They believe they're entitled to information, to a class that their student wants, to a question on their bill,



to a new roommate choice,” says Stimeling, the first-year dean. “These are problems to be fixed, and the parent says, ‘I paid \$33,000, so fix my problem.’”

St. Olaf administrators do try to fix parents’ problems, which is why the responsibility of serving parents is spread among several offices on campus. “People will call and say, ‘You have such a great parent program,’ but I can’t point to one office and say: ‘That’s where parents go,’” says Eaton-Neeb.

“Parents don’t have only one kind of need,” she explains. “If it’s student oriented, I’ll point them to the dean of students. From there, they may head to the residential life office. If they have questions about activities coming up, our office has the answers.”

Today’s technology allows parents to bridge the distance between home and campus, and even between continents. Carol Eisinger ’74, of Chicago, recalls that when she spent a semester of her sophomore year in Germany, she spoke on the phone with her parents once: to verify what time their flight was arriving in Frankfurt for a brief visit. By contrast, when her daughter participated in a recent Term in the Middle East, they spoke every seven to 10 days and e-mailed almost daily. When the group took a weeklong excursion in Morocco,

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ROSALYN EATON-NEEB ’87, DIRECTOR OF ALUMNI & PARENT RELATIONS

Eisinger and her daughter lost touch. “It was very hard not to know where she was and how she was doing,”

Eisinger says. “We expect instant communication with today’s technology.”

Sheri Motz Peterson ’81, of Edina, Minnesota, is regularly in touch with her first-year student son, Chris. During an average week, they exchange e-mails three or four times and talk by phone at least once. During

Chris’s first months on campus, his mom sent five care packages and a letter each week. That’s a lot more communication than Peterson had with her own parents during her first few weeks at St. Olaf. “But I don’t think I’m pushing,” she adds. “He’s initiating most of that communication.”

Some parents see the Internet and cell phones as tools of connection, not control. Phil and Nancy Strohm, of Florida, try to limit the advice they give to their son Phillip, a senior. “He’s doing his own thing, and he’s made some mistakes,” Nancy Strohm says. “But I think we’ve let him make his own decisions.”

Bob Matson ’71, of Casper, Wyoming, is eager to see his daughter Maggie, a sophomore, develop the same sense of



independence that he acquired while away at college. “That’s why you extend your education. It’s why you go to a place like

St. Olaf,” Matson says. “You have a chance to become independent in a fuller sense of the word — intellectually, socially and emotionally — rather than just saying, ‘I’m out on my own, I’m gonna let ’er rip now.’ There’s more to gaining independence than just doing all the things that you could never do at home.”

KEEPING PARENTS INFORMED

St. Olaf begins serving parents even before their children have chosen St. Olaf. Parents of prospective students can visit the campus and talk with administrators. In both the spring and fall, the college hosts panel discussions on campus for the parents of prospective students.

St. Olaf also recognizes the importance of the parent-student bond in its welcome of first-year students, at the launch of Week One in September. Once students have moved into

RESOURCES FOR PARENTS

“Sending your kid to college is like potty training,” says one overwhelmed parent. “You know you have to do it, but you aren’t so sure you’ll live through it.”

Following are resources for parents recommended by our administrators in Alumni and Parent Relations and the Dean’s Office, people who are parents themselves.

BOOKS

You’re On Your Own (But I’m Here If You Need Me): Mentoring Your Child During the College Years, by Marjorie Savage.

Millennials Go to College: Strategies for a New Generation on Campus, by William Strauss and Neil Howe.

Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation, by Neil Howe, William Strauss and R.J. Matson.

Letting Go: A Parents’ Guide to Understanding the College Years (fourth edition), by Karen Levin Coburn and Madge Lawrence Treeger.

College of the Overwhelmed: The Campus Mental Health Crisis and What to Do About It, by Richard D. Kadison and Theresa Foy DiGeronimo.

WEBSITES

College Parents of America, a national membership association dedicated to serving current and future parents of college-age kids: www.collegeparents.org

St. Olaf Dean of Students, with a page specifically for parents and families: stolaf.edu/stulife/deanofstudents/familyinfo

Alumni and Parents e-newsletter, subscribe or view archived issues of this monthly electronic newsletter for alumni, parents and friends of the college: stolaf.edu/president/enewsletter



residence halls, families gather in Skoglund Center Auditorium. Faculty members march into the building in full regalia, and college administrators acknowledge the excitement and sadness that accompanies the moment.

Last fall, President Christopher Thomforde’s closing remarks were preceded by Kyle’s words to parents: “Please leave here today with the knowledge that your children are in a good place. They will call or e-mail with stories of success, an occasional complaint, fears, tears, laughter and worries. That is normal. Support them. Challenge them. Sustain them. But also allow them to be college students, to be the adults you have dreamed they will become.”

The Kleenex packets that admissions counselors strategically place at the doors get full use during this ceremony, which “parents routinely single out as one of the most meaningful things they experience in their four years at St. Olaf,” Dean of Students Kneser says.

First-Year Dean Stimeling explains: “We’re very intentional about saying, ‘See ya later parents, we’ve got work to do.’ And I think parents actually appreciate being asked to leave.”

Parents are invited to return to campus during Homecoming and Family Weekend in October and again during Celebration Weekend in May. In between are mother-daughter and father-son banquets that encourage parent-student connections. Of course, parents are welcome to visit campus any time, Kneser notes. But that invitation is becoming harder for parents to accept as the student body becomes more regional and national.

Because of privacy concerns and federal law, however, the door swings shut when parents inquire about personal information. The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) gives individuals over age 18 sole control over the distribution of data related to their education, including grades, course registrations and financial records. “Unless we have express permission of an individual student, in writing with a signature, we cannot release this information to anyone,” says Cisar, the registrar. That includes “a potential employer, a graduate school or even the student’s parents.”

The best way to get this information? Ask your son or daughter, Cisar says.

Because parents most often foot the bills, St. Olaf has developed a billing practice that complies with federal law but makes it easy for parents to track the process. Tuition bills are mailed to students at their home addresses, in care of their parents. Students may request that such bills be sent directly to their campus mailboxes, but in most cases, says Director of Financial Aid Kathy Ruby, parents simply open the envelope and write a check. Says Stimeling: “Most of our students are

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KURT STIMELING '87, ASSOCIATE DEAN OF FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS



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probably blissfully ignorant of how college is paid for.”

Student privacy becomes a murkier issue in matters where federal law doesn't apply, such as personal health and disciplinary behavior. FERPA allows institutions to notify parents about drug or alcohol abuse, but colleges aren't legally bound to share such information. A faculty committee issues a letter to

parents if a St. Olaf student is falling behind academically, but the policies are less defined when it comes to handling illness, depression or a violation of the college's code of conduct.

“If a student is in trouble, we hear about it in the dean of students' office. St. Olaf is a pretty small place,” Kneser says. “We always check in with the student first, but it's not uncommon for us to pick up the phone and call a parent or to send a letter home.”

He and Stimeling encourage parents to

“IT'S OK FOR PARENTS TO CALL US UP. WE ENCOURAGE THAT.”

GREG KNESER, DEAN OF STUDENTS



contact them if they have concerns about their child's emotional state, physical health or other matters. Given the close-knit nature of life on the Hill, the issue usually can be handled with a phone call or two. “It's OK for parents to call us up. We encourage that,” Kneser says. “It's the nature of a small private college to do that. It's part of the culture.”

It's never been easy to raise a child, and many would say that today's world is more hectic and less predictable than ever. From intense competition to get into the “best” schools to the rising cost of college tuition to the threat of America's highest-paying jobs heading overseas, parents can find plenty to worry about.

Still, St. Olaf officials would rather have parents stay calm.

“Compared with most schools, St. Olaf still has a reputation of being relatively safe, relatively careful with students,” says Pastor Benson. “It's a place that tries to honor student requests and help them succeed. So you don't have to be as protective, as parents, if your son or daughter is going to St. Olaf.” ■

Joel Hoekstra '92 is a Twin Cities-based writer and editor.



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