

Parents and the Role of the Academic Dean

By Michael McDonough

An increasing part of any academic dean's week is fielding calls (and sometimes unannounced visits) from concerned parents. These so-called "helicopter parents" are well-known to student life professionals. In the past, they've called to try and influence the admissions process, to negotiate improved housing assignments, and to manage the personal lives of their children.

Today, they're as likely to call an academic dean as they are to call the dean of student affairs. They call to complain about substandard teaching, to protest an obviously unfair grade, or to demand a new course schedule.

We make a mistake by refusing to acknowledge these grievances, whether real or imagined, and our administrative role demands that we find ways of incorporating parental energies into a transparent problem-solving strategy.

It's helpful to remember why these parents are so involved in the lives of their supposedly independent children.

Accountability. Their vigorous engagement reflects their belief that a college education is an investment, that in their minds we offer a service for a fee and that, therefore, we should be accountable. In part, they're right.

A dean can be the institutional voice of accountability. Simply ignoring the parent or "handling" the complaint provokes the parent into more aggressive tactics, causing the dean to spend even more time on the issue.

In short, deans should think about the ways in which they can respond to questions of accountability, shaping responses that both address the immediate concern and provide education for the parents.

Cultural Anxiety. Parental concerns often reflect wider cultural concerns: economic anxiety, campus safety, volatile job market, escalating student debt. A dean needs to listen carefully to

each individual call, to resist the temptation of assigning each call to a generic pigeon-hole, and to develop a sensitivity to the underlying and unspoken worry.

Often, the problem is not an immediate one; but an empathetic listener can guide the parent through a number of broad anxieties and help to solve the student issue.

Poor Life Skills. A call to the dean often suggests that neither parent nor student is fully attuned to the nuances of the academic culture. After 20 years, I've become so accustomed to my environment that I need to remember how alien it might appear to an outsider. Again, the phone call may provide an opportunity to educate the callers and to channel their energies in a more productive and appropriate way.

This last example is becoming more and more common. In some ways, institutions have not made their workings, their expectations, or their policies transparent. In addition, we inherit high school seniors who lack essential life skills: the ability to negotiate, critical listening skills, self-sufficiency, and conflict resolution strategies.

These deficiencies may provoke deans to collaborate with their student affairs colleagues and to find ways of educating both parent and child in a more holistic way, recognizing that in order to be successful a student needs to harness evolving life skills with a broadening intellectual maturity. Only in combination will these families begin to see the college community in a more complex way and to enjoy success as they move through the curriculum.

Deans need to hone their listening skills and plot a comprehensive strategy to address the ever-evolving issue of providing parents with an opportunity to voice their concerns. In devising such a strategy, deans might consider some of the following components.

Scripted Response. As soon as possible, a dean should try to establish two

goals: a clear narrative timetable and a statement of desired outcomes. Often, parents will recognize that their opportunity to speak is the desired outcome. At other times, parents will discover that the outcome they want is either unreasonable or unattainable.

In those cases where a desired outcome is defined, deans can then focus their energies on the identifiable resolution and not be sidetracked by competing voices.

At the very beginning of the process, then, ask parents to state their desired outcomes. Of course, deans need to provide the same authentic opportunity for all involved faculty and staff.

Focused Collaboration. Academic deans must partner with student affairs professionals to design strategies that fully engage parents of the millennial generation. These strategies may include separate orientation sessions for parents and the distribution of material (print and Web-based) that makes explicit the expectations and workings of the institution.

Professional Development. The role of the department chair is becoming more and more involved, and the majority of these incidents begin in the department. Deans need to provide faculty with as comprehensive an orientation to the role of chair as possible; consequently, chairs need a protocol for responding to parental complaints. Such an orientation needs to cover the need to respect legal rights and process, to maintain the integrity of the faculty-student relationship, and to focus on outcomes as well as process.

Transparency. Above all, the dean needs to be as transparent as possible with all the stakeholders. While a dean may identify with faculty and staff, parents need to feel that the process is both open and being applied in an even-handed way. Parents should not feel

Creating Faculty-Centered Quality Assurance for Online Courses

By Molly Mott, PhD

Good beginnings

In spring 1998, SUNY Canton reached beyond its traditional classroom walls and offered its first online course, Earth Science 107. Eighteen students were enrolled in the course. Within a few years, the small upstate college, part of the State University of New York (SUNY) university system, had embraced distance education, earning the reputation within the state system as a leader in online learning.

The college owes this reputation largely to a quality assurance program first introduced in 2005, a time when many faculty members were skeptical of online learning. Drawing on research that indicated that good instructional design is one of the most important factors in the success of online courses, SUNY Canton developed a quality-assurance program to enhance learning and teaching in the online environment.

SUNY Canton's quality assurance program (commonly called the course review process) refers to the rubric developed by Maryland Online, a statewide consortium of community colleges and senior institutions, which received a grant to develop a replicable pathway for inter-institutional quality assurance in online learning from the U.S. Department Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE).

Based on standards of best practices in distance learning programs set forth by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education, the 40 standard rubric focuses on those issues most relevant to course design, such as accessibility of course materials, consistency among stated objectives and learning outcomes, navigational information, assessment and measurement strategies, and learner interaction and support.

After receiving permission from

Maryland Online to use the rubric, **SUNY Canton did something unique—it enfolded the review process into its faculty governance process, encouraging the very stakeholders skeptical of online learning to become a part of it.** The rubric was debated by the college's Online Advisory Committee and subsequently approved by the Faculty Assembly. Most significantly, the review process uses teams of faculty volunteers trained in evaluating online courses. All of SUNY Canton's online courses (those in which 10 percent of class meetings are replaced by online instruction) undergo this process before they are offered online.

The process not only provides a framework for preparing online courses to meet quality standards but remains grounded in guidelines and recommendations that promote student learning and teaching effectiveness. It respects academic freedom while promoting the quality of online courses and encouraging the continual improvement of existing online offerings. To date, 200 of SUNY Canton's online courses have been evaluated by this process.

Satisfied students

SUNY Canton students experience the benefits of the course review process. Results from online student evaluations reveal an overall strong satisfaction with course structure and instruction, a direct reflection of the standards detailed in the course review rubric. Follow-up interviews with online students revealed that many of the key elements successful to student learning and satisfaction (clear navigation, timely feedback, and teacher immediacy) are reflected in the reviewed courses.

Successful process

A course review process provides a vehicle for colleges and universities to

assess the quality of their online offerings. But as SUNY Canton found, it is the involvement of those most affected by the process (students and faculty) that is the key to its success.

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"handled" nor should they feel that they are hearing only selected highlights of the administrative process.

As more and more of the echo-boomers enter our institutions and as rapid advances in technology enhance student-parent communications, academic deans will spend more time responding to these incidents. By adopting some of these steps, however, deans can not only provide acceptable solutions but also reserve precious time for more strategic leadership activities.

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