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College orientations for parents help ease separation pains

Colleges provide facts, offer advice on whether to let go

By **Matt Rocheleau** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JUNE 30, 2014



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MATTHEW J. LEE/GLOBE STAFF

The Rev. Terrence P. Devino gave an orientation talk to parents of incoming freshmen at Boston College.

College orientation is a rite of passage for freshmen, a time to savor the first taste of independence. But the tradition is not just for students anymore.

Special orientations for parents, once a rarity, have in recent years become common on campuses.

“A lot of parents are living their lives through their children,” said the Rev. Joseph Marchese, Boston College’s orientation program director.

The one- or multi-day events for parents, held mostly in June and July, allow colleges to cover issues students tend to ignore during their own orientations, such as academic expectations. But some administrators say the sessions also help overinvolved, or “helicopter,” parents who might be

having difficulty letting go, particularly amid increased concern over issues like school shootings, sexual assaults, and dangerous party and study drugs.

Boston College recently held an elaborate orientation for parents that spanned three days, five campus venues, and several meals — along with a wine and cheese reception.

Speakers assured parents their sons and daughters will be fine, telling anxious adults to essentially back off — don't call, text, visit, e-mail, or post on their child's Facebook page so often.

“Your kids, over the next four years, need you to be there for them and listen to them — not to judge them,” motivational speaker Norm Bossio told the 500-plus parents gathered in BC's Robsham Theater. “You've worked hard to get here. Don't wreck this by being a nervous wreck.”

He segued between jokes and heartfelt anecdotes, which caused some parents to well up.

One BC parent at the session, Joe Castro, said it's difficult not to worry about the safety and general well-being of his daughter, Emily.

“She's going to be all out on her own,” said Castro, of Weston, Conn. “I'm close with my daughter. I told her that when I'm driving home after I drop her off, I'm sure I'll be bawling my eyes out.”

He sees a dramatic shift in the 30 years since he was in college.

“My parents came up to drop me off and said, ‘See you later,’ and that was it,” he said. “But I think during this orientation they lay everything out . . . and get rid of your fears. They've convinced us, ‘Don't worry, they're in good hands.’ ”

Parent orientations were virtually nonexistent a generation ago.

Now, more than 90 percent of campuses offer such programming, according to a 2011 National Orientation

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Directors Association survey of 200-plus schools nationwide. Attendance rates are high, between 80 and 90 percent.



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Joe Castro (right) and Ted Fischer (center) were roommates as Boston College students. They're attending orientation again, this time as parents.

While BC essentially implores parents — particularly the incessant worriers — to simply let go, other colleges encourage them to maintain a closer level of involvement.

For years, Brandeis University administrators told parents to “detach as rapidly as possible,” said Andrew Flagel, senior vice president for students and enrollment at the college.

But he said Brandeis — which ends its orientation by bringing parents to a room stocked with wine and tissues for emotional mothers and fathers — has changed its tune in recent years.

“The concept of keeping parents at arm’s length can become very unproductive,” Flagel said. “In an age of digital technology and social media, that process of parents and students communicating back and forth is

very positive.”

“Parents feel like they are a part of what’s going on at campus. That’s not helicoptering, that’s just being proud of what their child is doing,” he added. “My advice is to keep being the kind of parent you most want to be.”

Becker and Emmanuel colleges and Suffolk and Lesley universities, also have retreated somewhat recently from emphasizing “letting go.”

“We’re not saying do it all for your child, but here’s how to help your child do it for themselves,” said Joe Onofrietti, Emmanuel’s dean of students.

Suffolk orientation director Patrick Heaton said he distributes his phone number during parent orientation, a two-day affair that includes lunch with faculty, a campus tour, and a “Telling It Like It Is” student panel. He said he welcomes their calls.

If a mother, for example, called saying she hadn’t heard from her child a while, Heaton might tell the student: “Your mom called, she’s worried, you don’t have to have a long conversation. But shoot her an e-mail. Let her know you’re eating and you’re OK.”



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But like BC, other colleges, including Holy Cross and Wheelock, say their overall message to parents is give their freshmen space.

Bryan McGrath, assistant dean of students at Wheelock, said some parents gasp when administrators advise them to wait six weeks after school begins before visiting their child or having them come home.

Holding student and parent orientations simultaneously can help ease the pain of the impending separation.

Remy Fischer, a Barrington, R.I., native who recently attended orientation at BC along with her parents, Ted and Lisa, said: “I consider myself very close with my parents. We have a tightknit relationship. But I think it will be a good experience. I feel like I’m ready,”

Plus, she is not the family’s first child to go away to college.

“Our parents will give us advice, but they won’t tell us what to do,” Fischer said.

Boston College's Marchese says much the same thing, although he frames it a bit differently. College, he said, is the "beginning of our identity and asking those big questions about ourselves — who are we called to be. Let the students involve themselves in that process. Don't construct a life for them."

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