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UA working with new generation of parents Goal is to 'partner' with involved moms and dads of millennials

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The day University of Arizona President Robert N. Shelton was set to enter college in 1966, his parents drove him to the airport in Spokane, Wash., gave him a hug and wished him luck.

Dad didn't help him haul suitcases into the Stanford University dorm. Mom didn't grill campus officials about crime prevention.

Welcome to the new world, where the Millennial Generation flocks to campus with iPods, gaming systems, and parents in tow.

Classes start Monday at UA. Of the nearly 37,000 students enrolled, most are "millennials," part of the generation born between 1982 and 2002. The generation's oldest members started entering college in 2000. About 5,700 of them moved into UA's 21 undergraduate residence halls this week. The vast majority were accompanied by parents.

"This generation of college students and their parents are closer relationship-wise than any other generation," said UA Associate Dean of Students Keith Humphrey. "It is the complete opposite of the late '60s. . . . They want independence, but they also value the role of their parents and family in a drastically different way."

To accommodate that change, the UA Dean of Students Office and the Parents and Family Association are modifying their default cut-the-apron-strings message to be more accepting of parents of millennials.

"Frankly, we know this is just the beginning of this generation," said Kathy Adams Riester, assistant dean of students and director of the Parents and Family Association. "They aren't going away so we're trying to embrace working with the parents. . . . (they've) been super-involved in their kids' lives since birth. They aren't just going to stop because we say so."

Generational researchers Neil Howe and the late William Strauss, authors of "Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation," estimate the number of millennials is so great that their full matriculation into college is referred to as the "tidal wave."

By 2012, about 13.3 million millennials are expected to be enrolled in U.S. higher education institutions - and their parents are paying attention to how those institutions treat them.

A few years ago, they were labeled "helicopter parents" and university administrators spent considerable time during UA new-student orientations trying to persuade mom and dad to let their children go.

While parents say there is still a vestige of that message at sessions, it is not overwhelming.

"It was the complete opposite of Pomona College where my other son went," said Shelley Kagen, who traveled from Seal Beach, Calif., to move her son into Coronado Residence Hall on Wednesday. "There they told us to stay away. Here it was more about telling us what is available to students and ways parents can get involved. They still told us students needed to be independent, but they were a lot more accommodating of parents."

The change isn't completely parent-driven, Humphrey said. Students want it, too.

"Ten years ago, if students were having a problem, the calls went to a staff member in (the Dean of Students) office," Humphrey said. "Now, without question, the calls go home first, so we have to partner with parents to help students become self-reliant adults. We view parents as agents of student retention."

Joey Kagen, 18, said he "absolutely" considers himself independent, but would call his parents first if he had a problem at school to get ideas about how to proceed with UA officials.

"I talk to them every day," he said with a shrug.

The change also makes economic sense: Colleges compete for students and the tuition dollars they bring. Pushing parents away in today's economic environment is akin to shooting oneself in the foot.

An outward sign of UA's philosophical change toward millennials and their parents came two years ago when the Parents and Family Association quietly moved from being under the auspices of the UA Foundation - the university's fundraising arm - to its new home in the Dean of Students Office.

In that position, they've launched a number of initiatives, including Guest Link, where parents - if signed up by their children - can have access to their children's academic and financial records.

Universities are prohibited by the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act from sharing student information with anyone other than the student, said Riester. This can be an issue for parents who reason they should have access to their student's information because they're paying the bills.

"They told us that if we didn't sign up, we basically don't have any access to his life at all," said Lisa Lyon, who was moving her son Jeremy into Coronado on Wednesday.

Stephanie Fousse, who will turn 18 later this month, said she doesn't see Guest Link as intrusive into her life as a young adult.

"Honestly, I have open doors with my parents, but it's good because there's a chance they could catch something about bills being due that I might miss with Guest Link," she said. "It's always nice to have someone who has your back."

Other parent-friendly initiatives UA started are podcasts on the Parent and Family Association Web site covering various issues, a contract parents and students can use to negotiate things such as how often parents will call, and committees parents can join that range from legislative lobbying to raising funds for student grants.

"It's kind of like PTA for college," Riester said of the committees. "This group of parents are doers, used to making a difference."

She said parents of Phoenix-area freshmen helped the association put on a "college send-off" event earlier this month that cost \$13,000, with the money raised by the parents.

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"It was a great event, and we couldn't have done it without the parents," she said.

The association also sends out monthly e-newsletters about campus issues and concerns to parents who sign up online and UA offers a text messaging emergency alert system for parents, if their children sign them up.

"It is about encouraging independence and responsibility in the student but keeping parents informed too," Humphrey said. "It's a balance."

The change toward embracing super-involved parents has not necessarily been easy for college administrators. It is time-intensive, with costs involved in running a university office that has parents, not students, as its primary consumers.

But UA thinks the benefits outweigh any negatives. So do some parents.

Beatrice Perry has a son who is a UA senior and a daughter entering this year, and joined the association to stay informed.

"Kids need to make their own mistakes. But that said, if parents are informed about what the university has in place to keep our kids safe and healthy, then when they do call us, we can give them advice instead of freaking out and driving to the campus. If you feel the university is keeping you away from your child, you get more worried."

Humphrey said he understands parental worry. This generation is marked by tragedies such as the Columbine High and Virginia Tech shootings and Sept. 11, and parents want to know their children are being cared for properly.

"Frankly, college life is more complex than it used to be and the support a student needs has to come in many forms in different ways from different people," he said.

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Dealing with parents of millennials

These are some ways universities are interacting with parents of millennials, according to UA's Kathy Adams Riester:

- * Embracing, not pushing away
- * Welcoming parental input while explaining how the university is keeping their student safe
- * Saying, "Of course you know your student best, but at the university, we have found . . ."
- * Reassuring them they've done a good job raising their child to be successful, so it is good to let them make mistakes
- * Keeping parents informed with newsletters, e-alerts
- * Offering contracts for parents/students to help them navigate the separation process
- * Offering committees in family and parent organizations that allow parents to stay involved, busy and

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supportive without being in students' daily lives

- * Answering e-mails and phone calls promptly
- * Explaining the student privacy act and options that allow parents access to student information
- * Avoiding flippancy or curtness when responding to concerns
- * Having an active parent and family organization

Generations

Definitions of generations vary somewhat depending on the source, but are usually accurate within two to four years.

David Plane, UA professor of geography and regional development said definitions are somewhat fluid for every generation except the boomers, which is defined by fertility rates in the years past World War II.

- * The Silent Generation: Late '20s - mid '40s
- * The Boom Generation: 1946-1964
- * Generation X: mid '60s to early '80s
- * The Millennials (sometimes referred to as Gen Y): early 1980s to about 2000.

What makes a millennial?

Certain characteristics mark millennials, according to Neil Howe and William Strauss, authors of "Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation." Millennials are:

- * Team-oriented, having come of age during the "team project" emphasis in primary and secondary schooling
- * Hardworking
- * More concerned about safety than prior generations
- * Goal-oriented, having come of age during the advent of high-stakes testing
- * Socially networked and able to mobilize
- * Highly skilled at multitasking
- * "Exceedingly close to their parents"
- * Optimistic and confident, but also stressed about the end result (i.e. college no longer is about learning but about marketability in an ever-changing job market)
- * Collectively, millennials appear to have a shorter attention span and expect a lot of feedback for their work.

Characteristics of parents of millennials

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In general, parents of millennials are:

- * Protective
- * Concerned with their sons/daughters safety and security
- * Involved
- * Want to help them achieve
- * Well-educated/intelligent
- * Demanding
- * Savvy consumers and want their students to receive "their fair share."

Source: Generation researchers Neil Howe and William Strauss

Caption: Marc Lavin of Chicago, and his daughter, University of Arizona student Brittany Lavin, wait for an elevator as Brittany moves into her dorm room at Coronado Hall on Wednesday.

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