By CAROLINE E. MAYER

At New York's Syracuse University, fathers and mothers besiege the Parents Office with about 50 e-mails and 30 phone calls a day, ranging from minor queries—“When's Family Weekend?” or “What's the cheapest way for my kid to get home for the holidays?”—to major concerns about a student's grades or mental health. All queries, no matter how small, are answered within 24 hours, even if the response is simply an assurance that the issue is under study.

At Miami University in Ohio, parents offer the institution advice and new program ideas. It was a suggestion by the Parents Council, for example, that led to the creation of the Office of Off-Campus Affairs to help students deal with landlords and property owners.

At the University of California, Berkeley, undergraduate parents are a growing donor pool, giving $4 million last year, double the sum raised five years ago.

Meanwhile at Tufts University's undergraduate campus in Massachusetts, parents—even of students who have already graduated—are major players. Nine past parents and two current parents are on the school's International Board of Overseers; one is on the Board of Trustees. Former parents were also the leading donors to the university's new music center and boathouse, both finished in 2007.

Once considered pariahs by many in higher education, parents are fast becoming their prized partners. Whether public or private, small or large, two- or four-year colleges, institutions are actively catering to parents, hoping to turn them into an essential student support system—and enthusiastic donors.

One Big Happy Family

Parent programs expand to educational institutions of all shapes and sizes
THEN AND NOW

Parent programs are not new; some date back to the 1920s. Among the first was Texas A&M University’s Mothers’ Club (informally known as Aggie Moms). It was organized in 1922, after mothers felt the once all-boys school needed “good women’s perspective in life,” says Marjorie Savage, parent program director at the University of Minnesota and something of an expert on the history of parent programs. “They were first laughed off campus, but when they returned a few weeks later bearing picnic baskets of goodies, no objections were raised.” The group has actively raised funds ever since.

But in the late 1960s and ’70s, many of these groups began to languish. In that era’s political and cultural turmoil, students were demanding more independence and privacy—leading to the enactment of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, the student privacy legislation. “The message was [that] students were adults and the school should communicate with them, not the parents,” Savage says.

Syracuse was an exception to this trend; it created its parent office in 1972 to respond to erroneous reports about campus protests as well as address cutbacks in federal funding for student aid. “The chancellor realized that parents were emerging customers because students would have to look to parents for more support, and parents, if paying the bill, would want to hear about their investment and stay informed,” says Colleen O’Connor Bench, director of SU’s Parents Office.

Syracuse is no longer an outlier. Since 1990, nearly 150 schools have launched parent and family programs, almost doubling the number of existing programs, calculates Savage, who has conducted four national surveys on parent and family services at colleges and universities.

A fusion of factors is fueling the growth in parent programs. First, families are more engaged in their children’s development than ever. “Today’s parents have been their kids’ soccer coach and classroom moms, so their involvement doesn’t stop when they drop their child off at college,” says Melissa Gentry, director of parents programs at the University of South Carolina, whose office receives about 100 parent queries a week.

Technology has helped intensify this bond as cell phones and the Internet have made it easy for parents and children to be in constant contact. The ease and speed of this technology also mean parents can quickly find—and contact—appropriate school officials with the smallest problem.

Parents are also demanding more accountability as they shoulder more of the costs of higher ed, as Savage says, “They want some acknowledgement of the sacrifices they are making to send their son or daughter to the school, as well as reassurance that the school is, in fact, the best place for their child.”

For colleges and universities, increased parental involvement may be good news, representing new opportunities, especially in fundraising. “Today’s parents have been fundraising for their kids’ schools from kindergarten on, so this is a natural extension,” says Mantra Robinson, Berkeley’s director of parent philanthropy. “Schools are in more need of revenue, and parents are more involved than ever, so this dovetails nicely.”

WHAT THEY ACCOMPLISH

Of course, some institutions, particularly independent schools, have been courting parent donors for years. But even these schools are ramping up parent participation as families demand more engagement. “Three years ago, we used to have 15 families reach out to other families for financial support,” says Johanna Haan, director of the parent fund at The Hotchkiss School in Connecticut. “Now we have about 70 families in our volunteer group. Three years ago, about 65 percent of parents made a gift to the school; now 75 percent contribute to the annual fund.”

The exact nature of a parent program varies from institution to institution; some are housed in the alumni office, some in student affairs. Some programs plan major events, such as freshman orientation and parent weekends, and some have special parent councils that give advice and/or solicit funds from other parents. And increasingly, many parent programs have been renamed to include the word family, reflecting the growing number of grandparents, siblings, and other family members who want to be involved.

Overall, however, most parent programs are striving to:

• **Provide information.** Communication about institutional policies, upcoming events, and deadlines used to happen through printed magazines and annual handbooks. Now many institutions send out monthly e-newsletters and update their websites
weekly or more often. Some are even experimenting with Twitter and Facebook pages, where parents can answer one another’s questions.

Parent programs can also provide information about financial aid and scholarships—and perhaps, more important, some basic parenting skills. Most schools offer “letting-go” tips in “Parenting 101 Seminars” at freshman orientation or move-in day events, and a few offer online courses as well.

• Solve problems. Parent programs can be the conduit between parents and the appropriate college official. The problems can be as pedestrian as broken tile in a dorm bathroom to complaints about an inattentive resident advisor or more serious academic and mental health concerns.

• Entertain families. This has traditionally been done through parent weekends and regional get-togethers. Now some parents are demanding even more events. The University of Wisconsin-Madison added a Badger Family Spring Visit after parents requested more opportunities to visit the campus.

• Seek advice. Schools have often turned to a select group of parents—generally members of a parent council—for fundraising, but now administration officials are looking to this group for decision making and student career guidance. At Lehigh University in Pennsylvania, a suggestion from a parent council member prompted the university to create a minor in business; at Miami in Ohio, the parent council is helping conduct mock employment interviews with students and involving more parents in the job-hunting process.

• Promote the institution. Parents have long been considered special ambassadors, particularly among other parents, but today institutions are relying on parents to be special envoys to students as well. As Syracuse’s Bench explains, “We start communicating with parents when a student is first accepted, even before he or she has signed on the bottom line. We realize they can be a persuasive marketing tool because they are now so involved in their student’s education and decision-making processes.”

• Fundraise. Colleges and universities have long used student callers during phonathons; now, similar to independent schools, some are asking parents to pitch in and call their peers. “They make the most compelling argument why someone should give,” says Berkeley’s Robinson. “They can explain why they were proud to give $10,000 to support campus safety, keep the libraries open during finals, fund freshman and sophomore seminars.”

Operated properly, “parent programs ameliorate the need for intrusiveness by parents,” says Minnesota’s Savage. “Parents don’t know what constitutes an appropriate role for themselves at the college level. So if we let parents know what services are available on campus and how their student can access them,

Today’s parents have been their kids’ soccer coach and classroom moms, so their involvement doesn’t stop when they drop their child off at college.

they can serve as resources to their student.” And if parents understand what is typical student development during the college years, they may be less anxious, Savage says.

At the same time, she says, educational institutions of all sizes should take advantage of parents. “We’ve all come to the realization that if we want students to hear our messages, we might want to consider telling parents to deliver them. The campus bookstore, for example, sent out student messages this summer about their online orders and campus delivery program. It wasn’t until we mentioned it to parents, though, that students jumped online and ordered.”

GREATER REACH
It’s not just four-year institutions that are rushing to create family programs. Some two-year community colleges are as well, especially as they see an increase in the number of fresh-from-high-school, full-time students.

“Five years ago, it was rare that a parent attended an advising appointment; a year ago, it was rare for a student to come to an appointment without a parent,” says Margaret “Mickey” Hay, dean of students and academic support at Southwestern Michigan College. “Now it’s even more common for both parents to attend the appointment.”

SMC is considering launching a parent and family program next August during student orientation. “We can’t help the parents help their children
become responsible college students and adults without assisting them in helping their children make the transition.”

Montgomery College, a multcampus community college in Maryland, started its family program in 2007 after focus groups showed a need for parental engagement. “Many parents did not understand academic terminology, the enrollment process, or what resources were available to assist students,” says Ever Grier, coordinator of parent/family engagement at Montgomery College’s Rockville campus.

The college has added a special link for parents and families on its home page, and the Rockville campus has offered a variety of parent seminars—such as career and transfer planning and how to communicate with a college student—to standing-room-only crowds.

Grier has also targeted faculty and staff with seminars on best practices for dealing with parents. “Some were skeptical when we started, but the institutional culture seems to be changing, and colleagues are realizing the importance of family engagement,” Grier says. “We are more welcoming and understanding. … Parents used to get angry and frustrated, but we’re learning how to talk to them without infringing on a student’s privacy.”

Nick Fragel, director of alumni and development at Lancaster University in the U.K., was also worried about student privacy, but not for legal reasons. “I was concerned about adverse student reaction,” says Fragel. “I kept thinking, ‘How would I feel as a student if I knew the university was contacting my parents, just like my school did when I was under 18?’” So, in 1998, when Fragel launched a modest parental program at his previous institution, St. Anne’s College, Oxford, he gave students a chance to opt out on their parents’ behalf. “In the four years I ran the program, only two out of 650 students exercised this right.” Fragel says the program’s popularity allowed his successor to expand its scope and sophistication; now Fragel is keen to enhance the well-established parent program he inherited when he moved to Lancaster.

ADVANCEMENT + STUDENT AFFAIRS

Increasingly, parent programs are housed in the student affairs department, not the alumni or advancement division. That reflects a gradual shift, says Savage, whose recent survey found that 61 percent of parent programs are in student affairs, compared to 18 percent in advancement/fundraising/alumni offices. In 2003, 38 percent of the programs were housed in advancement offices.

Binghamton University, State University of New York recently switched its parent program from alumni affairs to the Dean of Students Office.

“Alumni’s major focus was on serving alumni, and the office was being inundated with parent requests for information,” says Dean of Students Elizabeth Droz. “They frequently had to transfer calls to other parts of the university that dealt more directly with students, creating unnecessary delays in responding to parents.” The university decided the dean’s office would be able to respond to parent requests and queries more quickly, making the program more service-oriented. “Parents want to be heard—and not just with a short hello/goodbye conversation—but with a 40-minute conversation,” says Droz.

in short

U P S I D E O F H E L I C O P T E R S . Stories abound about uber-involved moms and dads. However, on the whole, an engaged parent is good for the institution, and according to a 2007 report, likely also good for the alumni association. Experiences That Matter: Enhancing Student Learning and Success from the National Survey of Student Engagement found that college students who talk to their parents often and take their advice participate more frequently in educationally purposeful activities and are more satisfied with their college experience. And engaged students are more likely to be engaged alumni. Read the report at nsse.iub.edu/NSSE_2007_Annual_Report/index.cfm.

S L O W E X O D U S . According to the fourth biennial National Survey of College and University Parent Programs, most parent programs in the United States are increasingly housed in student affairs. In 2009, 61.4% were in student affairs, up from 52.5% in 2003, the first year of the survey. Advancement/fundraising/alumni is the next most likely home for these programs at 17.8% in 2009 (down from 37.8% in 2003), followed by academic affairs (7.3%), other (6.6%), enrollment management (5.4%), and institutional relations (3.5%). Survey authors Marjorie Savage and Chelsea Petree, both from the University of Minnesota, received data from 261 U.S. institutions. Read the full report at www.parent.umn.edu/ParentSurvey09.pdf.
The shift to student affairs doesn’t mean fundraising is being de-emphasized, however. Far from it, says Savage. “It’s a growing area within student affairs; as more schools are feeling the pinch, student affairs offices are being asked to develop programs to raise money—and we’re seeing parent fundraising efforts as a promising area.” In fact, she notes, some institutions have hired fundraisers to work in the student affairs offices.

When developing parents as donors, a close relationship between student affairs and advancement is critical, says Bench. “My colleagues in the development office would tell you that if a parent is engaged with an institution, feeling warm and fuzzy about their student’s experience, they are more likely to say yes when asked to donate. So you can bet I work closely with my development colleagues when they discover a parent who’s not happy.”

Indeed, paying attention to parents does help boost fundraising efforts. At Tufts, about one-eighth of the annual fund comes from parents of students who didn’t attend the university themselves; add to the mix parents of students who are alumni themselves, and parents account for 20 percent of the annual fund. At the College of Charleston in South Carolina, parents accounted for 37 percent of all unrestricted gifts in 2009. “This year, nearly one-fourth of all major gift conversations are with parents,” says Cathy Mahon, Charleston’s director of major gifts.

At Lehigh, parent donations were about $55,000 a year before the university created a parent committee in 1989. Within a year, that tally grew to $176,000. Now, parents contribute an average of $1.2 million a year to the university—more when the economy is healthy.

Surprisingly, many parents want to remain involved with the institution even after their students graduate. At Pennsylvania’s Bucknell University, former parents are clamoring for a reunion weekend. “There’s growing pressure to come back,” says Ann L. DiStefano, director of the parent fund and family programs. “They want to come back and play; they don’t want to give it up.” That’s just fine with DiStefano: “As long as I can give them a reason to come back, parents will be more likely to give.” She has found that the problem is timing—finding a free weekend with available hotel rooms.

Savage is not surprised that parents continue their attachment to their child’s school. “Today’s parents—even those who attended college themselves—don’t necessarily have an affinity for the institution they attended. In many cases, it was even a hostile relationship. At this point in their lives, though, they’re looking for ‘something bigger than themselves,’ and that’s often the college or university their student attends.”

Keeping parents engaged should also translate into increased giving from their offspring as they become alumni in the years ahead, says Nancy Morrison, director of Tufts’ parents program. “By involving parents, we’re planting the seed for their students’ future involvement. Students model their behaviors after their parents’—what their own parents do is so much more powerful than 25 news stories on the importance of giving back.”

Caroline E. Mayer is a freelance writer and former reporter for The Washington Post.

BUILDING THE PARENT PIPELINE. Whether your institution has a parent program or not, increasing parent participation in the annual fund is always a worthy goal. In a CASE webinar on Feb. 3, 2011, Grace Hamnett, advancement director at Ursuline Academy in Delaware, will share how she uses new-parent orientations as a way to get parents involved and giving from the get-go without actually making an ask. New parents at Ursuline who received orientation had annual fund participation rates 30 to 42 percent higher than new parents who did not receive orientation. Register for the webinar at www.case.org/Conferences_and_Training.html or order an on-demand recording of it at www.case.org/store.