March 29, 2019

“The Times (and students!), They Are A-Changing”

A couple of weeks ago, I was helping someone with a sticky situation revolving around a student on the spectrum who had been dismissed from an extracurricular team activity because of his (clearly) inappropriate behavior. The faculty advisor had worked with the student over several months, but it hadn’t made any difference. This wasn’t a question of a little eccentric behavior. This kid was doing things and saying things that were way over the line, and it was all well documented. When the mother found out that her son was dropped from the team, she wrote some very pointed – and very accusatory! – letters to the DSS person, and to everyone above her.

My colleague wrote and said, 
I have been working in disability services for a little over 5 years now, and it seems like the parent-relation issues have really surfaced in the last year. In your opinion, was this just "luck" on my part for the previous years, or is this becoming a more prevalent thing for which we all need to "thicken our skins" and be prepared to face more often?

My first inclination was to write back and say, “Nahh... it’s always been this way.” Then I thought about it some more and realized that perhaps it isn’t that there are more parent-relation issues, but DIFFERENT parent-relation issues that are presenting these days.

I don’t think there is more involvement by parents these days. But I think perhaps the quality (intensity) and focus of those interactions has changed. And they have changed because the population of students with disabilities is changing SO DRAMATICALLY. The interactions we had with parents regarding students with learning disabilities and ADHD were (are!) annoying-as-hell. They wanted us to be just like the special ed teachers in K-12 (the ones they had been bullying for years) and to provide the same services that they got in the K-12 system. Our discussions with those parents were the same ones we had been having for years. We explained (hopefully, with great patience) that the laws were different, that students were expected to step up and take some responsibility, and that we weren’t going to be providing the same support because we were all about access, not success. The parents didn't like it, but they had to accept it.

But the conversations often aren’t the same today. Parents of kids on the spectrum, or kids with significant mental health disabilities don't want us to be just like the special ed teachers. They want us to be just like them. They want us to watch out for their kids, and to PROTECT them, in just the way they did when the kid was under their roof.

The mother of the student in question made some interesting statements in her angry (worried?) letters: 
“apparently no one is working with him to help him change it or to at least make him aware of
“I originally thought your office would be a place where my son could have discussions about how to fit in to the college”

“I now feel that my son has no protection on campus as a person with disabilities of that nature”

She is looking for someone (the DSS provider?) to parent the kid the same way she did, and to shepherd his time on campus in the same way she would if she were there. She isn’t fighting for her son to have success (by limiting academic strain, which is what we saw with LD kids/parents). She is fighting for someone who will take care of him because she isn’t there to do it herself.

As I think about it, that seems to be the difference in parent interactions lately. It is the TONE of interactions. They aren’t looking to make things easier for their kids. They are looking for their kids to be SAFE -- and they are looking to us to reassure them of that.

Parent issues have ALWAYS been a part of our work. Ten years ago, when my daughter was heading off to college, I wrote the "Open Letter to the Parents..." that you may have seen (attached here). That was at a time when the term "helicopter parent" was very much in vogue, and when we were complaining about how over-involved and demanding parents seemed to be getting in higher education. I think the disability services community took that parental involvement personally back then, because the parents were trying to “hover” over us, as well as their kids, in an effort to influence what happened for/to/with the student in regard to their disability-related needs. That’s OUR territory. We had been successfully shepherding students with disabilities just like theirs for years. We didn’t need (and didn’t welcome) parental interference.

Remember, though, that the term "helicopter parent” didn't originate in the field of DSS. The uptick in parent involvement was felt everywhere on college campuses some years ago. Our colleagues in advising, student affairs, admissions, athletics, and so on, were ALL having more contact with parents about things that parents had never interfered with before – things that we assumed the students should be prepared to advocate for themselves. The difference was, in part, that in our case the parents could be arguing about LEGAL issues (or thought they could), rather than just poking their noses in to see if they could get something set up for their son or daughter that the student couldn’t get accomplished themselves.

Ironically, this conversation took place the week the admissions scandal broke. There was an article in the NY Times that introduced a new concept (at least, it was new to me) – “snowplow parents.” (https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/16/style/snowplow-parenting-scandal.html) You can read it for yourself. It is one of those pieces that should be subtitled, “If you don’t laugh, you’ll cry.” It speaks to how kids, in general, are the victims (I use the word purposely) of over-parenting, and the debilitating effect that can have on children-becoming-adults. This line jumped out at me, particularly
“The point is to prepare the kid for the road, instead of preparing the road for the kid.”

Perhaps we are, once again, seeing the same kind of parental over-involvement that our institutional colleagues are seeing. It only SEEMS different (and more intrusive) because, viewed through the lens of disability, there is an assumption that students with disabilities not only shouldn’t have to advocate for themselves, but that others (us!) SHOULD. Parents may argue a grade with the prof (or the Dean) rather than the student making the argument directly. They call the Res Life director and complain about their kid’s roommate and demand a room change. In other areas of campus life, parents step in to do what the student should be doing. When they call the disability service office, it is to complain that we haven’t done what the student should be doing.

I looked over the “Open Letter to Parents,” to see if there were changes or updates that should be included. I came to the conclusion that even now, 10 years later, the letter works. It provides some needed advice/counsel for parents of incoming students. It says, “you have spent all these years preparing your son or daughter to be on their own. Now it is time to sit on your hands, bite your tongue, and let them go.” That is good advice for parents of students with disabilities who are ready to be college students and need the chance to show what they can do.

But what about the kids who AREN’T ready to be in college. What about the students with mental health problems who have made it this far because their parents plowed through (or over?!?) everything in their path? I’m not sure the letter would have anything much to say to parents of those kids. Maybe it is time for a different letter addressing a different set of needs?

That is my subtle way of pointing out the kind of thing that we will be discussing in the upcoming class from DAIS called, *How the Growing Population of Students With Mental Health Difficulties Impacts On Our Programs – And Our Institutions*. THIS is just one of the many potential impacts on the disability service function. Next week, we’ll talk about the potential impact elsewhere on campus.

Janie

*Road Sign: NOW LEAVING THE STATUS QUO. The place that never changes.*

*Change is inevitable. Progress is optional.*

*Isn’t it funny how day by day, nothing changes, but when you look back, everything is different?*