

An Open Letter to My Parents

By: Daniel Kast

Dear Mom and Dad,

I hope this letter finds you well, and that the sale of your home has gone without serious difficulty. I am somewhat disheartened to learn that I won't be spending any more time in that house; I may not have said it before, but I really enjoyed the summers I spent there, even though you made me leave my beloved Windy City.

I was thinking about you recently (I know, big surprise, huh?) as I was fending off belligerent questions from yet another “concerned” parent of one of the University's undergraduates. It seems that every other day I am dealing with the fallout from one disciplinary case or another—and it is never (well, hardly ever) the students themselves rocking the boat, as it were. Rather, it is the parents who can't accept the consequences for the actions of their son or daughter; often regardless of whether those consequences are what their child needs or even wants. I am reminded of a situation a few weeks back in which a student admitted that her mother had written and submitted her appeal of a disciplinary suspension without her involvement—or even her knowledge. (Needless to say, the appeal was denied.)

I know what you're going to say—dealing with these questions and complaints is part of the job I accepted. I agree, and you know I'm not about to shirk my responsibility (when have I ever done that? Well, except for that one time... but *Speed Racer* was on, and besides, I thought my sister was going to let the dog out...). However, I also signed on to help with students' educational development—not to coddle their parents.

Even methods I used only a few years ago are no longer foolproof. I have gotten to the point where I can recite the conditions and exceptions to the Family Educational Rights & Privacy Act of 1974 in my sleep. But recently even the shield of federal legislation has begun to falter (although it's entirely possible that it never existed in the first place; see below). Perhaps it's a question of demographics, as I find that a large proportion of the parents we deal with at the University of Denver are lawyers, but it seems to me in discussions with colleagues across the nation that this is hardly a localized trend. It used to be that the “war stories” we shared were about student behavior; now more often than not it seems we are swapping tales of parental or legal interference.

I suppose we should look at the positives in this type of situation; for example, so long as parents are immersed in every aspect of their children's lives, *in loco parentis* has no chance of becoming the norm once again. One could also potentially make a convincing argument that over-involvement is better than no involvement (although I can't help but thinking it might be nice to try the latter for a while).

I'm trying not to sound like a retirement home denizen, having bewilderingly watched the world pass him by and longing for the good ol' days; but I'm confident (at least I think I am) that it's

more than wistful nostalgia. Student attitudes towards ethical and moral dilemmas are being affected in a very negative way by their parents' willingness to come to their "rescue".

Anyway, the point of this little manifesto is to say "thank you". Thank you for being there whenever I needed you. Thank you for picking me up when I was down, and for knocking me down when I got too uppity. Thank you for listening when I needed it, and for talking when I didn't know what to say.

But most importantly, thank you for letting go.

It's unlikely I would be where I am today had you been one of these "helicopter parents" we hear so much about lately. You know the type: hovering around 24/7, talking to their children two or three times a day, never more than a speed-dial away despite their kids having "gone off" to college. Perhaps some of it is technological; when I went to school, it wasn't possible for you to keep track of me everywhere I went (thank goodness for that). But with the rise of the ubiquitous cell phone, this difficulty has been conquered, seemingly for good, bringing with it all the ramifications thereof.

Earlier this year, one of our residential staff members received a phone call from a worried parent, asking if he could check on her daughter, as she hadn't been heard from in quite some time. After he had mobilized the troops and arrived at the daughter's room (at 2:00 A.M.), a slight temporal miscommunication was discovered. Apparently, to this particular parent, "quite some time" meant since 10:00 that evening.

I'm not a sociologist, but I'm sure there are plenty of very good reasons for why parent-child interactions have reached this point. My own experiences tell me that for the most part, children are encouraging this behavior more than rebelling against it—students today feel perfectly comfortable filling their parents in on things I still haven't told you about. (Ask me later about spring break 1992...)

Besides thanking you for allowing me to deal with my own problems in a supportive but non-intrusive way, I thought I'd pass along some lessons I've learned over recent months, although not without pain and suffering.

First, I've found that more than anything else, it's key to know your own policies. This may seem like a self-evident conclusion, and in some respects it is. But while I think it is reasonable to assume that the director of a judicial affairs office will know the rules and regulations of the University, and understand the procedures used in adjudication quite well, there are plenty of other policies that must be comprehended fully if we are to survive in an age of perceived entitlement.

Certainly, students will often see themselves as customers, and I can't say they are entirely wrong. But it remains true that in most cases the parents are footing most of the bill (if not all of it), and this coupled with the over-involvement we've observed leads to an apparent belief that University administrators are no different than the manager of the local Gas 'n Sip.

Perhaps I'm being too sensitive in my characterization, but it is true that most parents who contact me about disciplinary issues are doing so with the intent of "setting things straight" rather than a more innocuous (and appropriate) attempt to simply understand things better. The hope seems to be that through the judicious use of decibels (or occasionally, the liberal application of honey) the outcome can be directed in whatever way desired.

The fact is that parents who start calling on behalf of their children are likely to keep calling. Should they not receive satisfaction from me, they'll move on to the next link in the food chain—or skip it altogether and call the Chancellor's direct line. They keep asking the same question over and over again, in hopes that this time the answer will be the "right" one. All too often, I've made guesses on things outside my direct knowledge, and found out later that it only prolongs the agony for all involved. If the answers start to vary depending upon the person being consulted, it only feeds the fire and encourages parents to continue their intervention.

If there weren't already enough good reasons for those in student affairs to make friends across the aisle and reach out to academic affairs, here's another: knowledge is power. If I can speak with authority on the registrar's policies regarding transcript holds, for example, or if I can articulate the English department's procedures for challenging a grade, then it's much more likely that parents will hear consistent messages from across the university, and hopefully increase our credibility in the process.

Following close on this first rule is the second: never make an exception. If there is any form of communication which rivals that of parent-to-child in terms of speed and efficiency, it is parent-to-parent. Obviously, parents of students who knew each other in high school have always talked, and always will. What's been surprising to me is the number of situations in which parents have communicated even though they never knew each other previously.

Last week, I received a phone call from a mother who wanted to know whether it was university policy to treat all similar situations in an identical manner. After a brief but futile attempt to explain the nature of student discipline, she cut me off and proceeded to tell me that she knew "for a fact" that another student had been found in an "identical" situation as her son had been last fall, and that she further knew "for a fact" via the parents of this other student that he had not been sanctioned as harshly as her son had been. I again tried to discuss the different factors that go into these decisions, but she once again interrupted, this time to ask when I would be dropping the complaint against her son.

The interesting point (at least to me) is that I'm fairly certain that she and the parents of this other student could not have known each other before their sons got to the university. Now, the decision not to sanction this second student very harshly was made for some very sound reasons, but the truth is that the decision was somewhat at odds with established precedent. Once the first student's parent heard of this—and I'm still baffled about how that happened—the call was made.

A wise man (woman?) once said, "The squeaky wheel gets the grease". That may be true, but the more salient point is that once the grease is applied, they'll all squeak. I don't necessarily mean to imply that we should start imposing "cookie cutter" discipline—as I've expressed to you about

previously, I don't think there's anything more detrimental to student development—but when decisions are made which are outside the norm, they must be defensible. The moment we start making exceptions for no other reason than it's the easy way out, or because we just want to avoid hearing from a particular parent again, is the moment we'll see the number of calls from parents increase exponentially, every one of them expecting the same result.

As a footnote to the above two rules, I should point out that while I was taught to use FERPA as a nice way of deflecting parental inquiry, it was never a great solution. Provided that the student in question is still a dependent of his or her parents, FERPA has always allowed disclosure of educational records. Therefore, even when I told a parent that “federal law prohibits me from discussing...”, I was actually articulating university policy and not legislative mandate. This just reinforces the importance of knowing your policy and understanding what actually drives institutional decisions about parental notification and involvement.

Finally, it's essential that we be able to discuss student development theory, and gently explain why it is that we feel it important to deal directly with students and not via third party representatives. Again, this may be self-evident to those who didn't major in library science, but I find that even my colleagues who can recite Maslow's hierarchy in Pig Latin while hopping on one leg can still get flustered by an overzealous parent.

In the rare cases that I've maintained my composure long enough to get into a calm discussion about the intent and purpose of student discipline, I've found that the chances of a mutually beneficial conclusion to the conversation increase dramatically. It may be difficult, but we should remember that parents who try to fix things for their children aren't doing so because they want to make our lives miserable—they do it because they are concerned for their children. If we can convince a parent that we also have the best interest of their son or daughter at heart (and that we know what we're talking about), it's just possible that the parent can become an ally rather than an irritant.

Anyway, that's all I have to say. I'll be home to visit soon—although I don't know if I'll be able to call the new place “home”—and I promise not to bring all of my laundry. I hope this letter hasn't bored you too much, and that it hasn't made you rethink your parenting philosophy. I ask you to resist the urge to make up for lost time and start calling every five minutes. Besides, it wouldn't work.

I still don't have a cell phone.

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