
“Can My Mom Sit In?”: Defining the Proper Scope of Parental Involvement in Academic Advising

Alan Reynolds
University of California, Davis

Abstract: Parental involvement in higher education is on the rise, including in academic advising. Much of the literature on this topic takes parental involvement for granted and discusses ways to make the best of this situation. This article takes a step back and asks if parents should be involved in advising at all, and if so, under what conditions. Of particular concern are cases where parents join advising meetings with their child. When, if ever, is this appropriate? Taking developmental advising as a guide for thinking about the goals of advising, in what ways does parental involvement contribute to—or detract from—student development? I articulate three guidelines that help define the proper scope of parental involvement:

1. Generally, parents should not join advising meetings.
2. Although not encouraged, parents may join up to one advising meeting.
3. Advisers should never meet with parents without the student present.

Reforming advising policies and messaging along these lines would allow for cases of positive parental involvement, minimize cases of harmful parental involvement, and redirect parental involvement into more constructive channels.

Keywords: parents, parental involvement, higher education, FERPA, developmental advising

INTRODUCTION

Parents have become increasingly involved in the educational choices of their college-going children over the past generation. From 2001-2011, 90% of four-year colleges reported experiencing increases in parental involvement on campus (Levine & Dean, 2012), and anecdotally, this trend continues to the present day. There are many reasons for this shift. First, the soaring cost of higher education has resulted in a situation where many parents help pay for their children’s tuition.

Direct correspondence to Alan Reynolds. E-mail: apreynolds@ucdavis.edu



DOI: 10.26209/MJ2462940

The Mentor: Innovative Scholarship on Academic Advising Volume 24 (2022), 20-37

ISSN: 1521-2211

journals.psu.edu/mentor

Since parents now find themselves financially invested in their children’s college experience, they are more concerned about ensuring that their children graduate on time (Kapaona & Ono, 2016). Second, the students who attend college are now more ethnically and culturally diverse than ever before. Increasingly, more college students come from cultures that value high levels of parental involvement in many areas of life (Kapaona & Ono, 2016). Third, K-12 schools have become more and more solicitous of parental involvement over the past generation, so parents now often expect colleges to be similarly welcoming of their participation (Levine & Dean, 2012).

These forces, among others (see Kepic (2006) for a more exhaustive account), have contributed to a situation where parental involvement in the educational choices of their college-going children has become normalized. As Fiedler (2007) notes, “Regardless of the method—email, telephone or personal visits—faculty and staff on today’s campuses should expect to hear from concerned parents of traditional-aged college students” (para. 1). However, many college faculty and staff are wary of such parental involvement. Kepic (2006) summarizes the trend: “[Y]ears ago many higher education professionals were looking for ways to get more parents involved in the education of their children. But now, the pendulum has swung so far to the other direction that the over-involvement of some parents often interferes with the mission of many institutions of higher education” (p. 3). Consider the widespread use of the disparaging term “helicopter parenting” (Hwang & Jung, 2020; Schiffrin & Liss, 2017; LeMoyne & Buchanan, 2011), or headlines such as “Students, Welcome to College; Parents, Go Home” (Gabriel, 2010) and “How helicopter parents are ruining college students” (Joyce, 2014). The involvement of parents in higher education was once encouraged, but has now, in the eyes of many college administrators, become a problem.

This increase in parental involvement has naturally shown up in the context of academic advising. Almost all academic advisers today will have occasional contact with the parents of their advisees, whether over email, telephone, Zoom, or in the office. Because academic advisers can expect to interact with the parents of their advisees, there is a great deal of literature about how best to manage parental involvement within the advising context (Menezes, 2005; Ewing-Cooper & Merrifield, 2018; Kapaona & Ono, 2016; Oyler, 2008; Fiedler, 2007; Stack, 2003). This literature is useful for advising practice because of the many unique issues and difficulties that arise when parents enter the advising space with their child. This literature is also important to help advisers navigate the complicated legal terrain set up by the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) (for a specific focus on FERPA issues, see Rust, 2014; Robinson, 2004). All advisers should familiarize themselves with this important literature so they are prepared to handle the occasional but inevitable interaction with the parents of their advisees. However, this article does not pursue this well-trodden line of inquiry. Instead, I am interested in taking a step back from the practical and legal questions surrounding how best to cope with parental involvement and asking a more fundamental and philosophical question: *What is the proper role of parental*

involvement in academic advising? This is a normative question about what academic advising *ideally* should look like, setting aside current norms and even laws. Indeed, I want to start at square one: should parents be involved in academic advising *at all*?

It is important at the outset to clarify what I have in mind with the phrase “parental involvement.” There is a wide spectrum of ways in which parents can involve themselves in the advising process. What I am focused on here are those cases of parental involvement that require the student to first sign a FERPA waiver for their adviser. By signing a FERPA waiver, a student gives permission for their adviser to discuss the student’s legally-protected academic information in the presence of a parent. The most common case of such parental involvement is when a parent sits in on their child’s advising meeting. Usually this means the parent comes to the office physically, but it could also mean joining via Zoom or telephone.

When a student signs a FERPA waiver and includes their parent in their advising meetings, the parent now becomes an active participant in the advising process. The presence of a parent in the room (or on the phone or Zoom call) represents a significant change in the nature of the adviser-student relationship. Instead of a one-on-one relationship, there is now a third member providing input, asking questions, and helping to direct the conversation. Even though the adviser is still in charge, and the student is still the focus, a parent in the room undeniably creates a new dynamic. There is a phenomenological change in the advising relationship—it *feels different* in most cases when a parent enters the advising context, for better or for worse. The purpose of this article is to determine the precise conditions under which this kind of parental involvement is conducive to the goals of advising.

SOCIAL NORMS OF PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

As an entryway into this problem, it might be helpful to step back and think about the role of parents in their children’s lives in a more general sense. In most cases, what we see is that parents have a great deal of active engagement in the affairs of their children when their children are younger, but the level of involvement decreases over time as each child becomes an adult. During the K-12 years, parents’ involvement is not only allowed, but it is also encouraged. Parents generally have access to their children’s grades and are alerted to any behavioral or health issues their children may face. Moreover, they are regularly updated with such information in parent-teacher meetings. Parents are not only given access to information about their children, but they are also empowered to make choices on behalf of their children in certain contexts. Parents even have a voice in some of the pedagogical and curricular decisions that will structure their children’s educational experience through Parent-Teacher Associations. During these years, parents not only provide the necessary background support for their children, but are also directly involved with many aspects of their educational experience.

From the point of view of parental involvement, the K-12 educational context stands in stark contrast to the world of employment for the college graduate. Consider the self-conception most people have after they graduate from college. At this point, the college graduate feels like a “real adult,” entering the “real world” of gainful employment. In the workplace of their now-adult children, parents are understood to have no place and no voice (although this has not stopped some parents from trying to intrude into the workplace on behalf of their children, much to the annoyance of employers and often, the parents’ adult children) (Peluchette et al., 2013). Workplaces do not generally elicit the participation of parents at all, besides perhaps including them in after-hours social events. Upon entering adulthood and joining the workforce, most people understand that they face their workplace issues and concerns on their own, and most of the time their parents understand and accept this as well.

This is an interesting contrast where we see clear and agreed-upon, although opposite, norms for parental involvement in K-12 (strong encouragement of parental involvement) and in the workplace (zero parental involvement encouraged or allowed). College is often temporally situated between these two periods of life. So, we can ask: should college lean more toward the K-12 paradigm or the workplace paradigm? In its mission, college overlaps with both: college continues the educational process of K-12 but also takes on a role preparing students for the workforce. In terms of identity development, the college experience is also a time of transition. The college student is no longer a dependent child but is developing the skills of adulthood. The traditional college student is aged 18-24, beginning college within a year or two after high school graduation. This is an ambiguous phase of life. For example, the 19-year-old first-year student is legally prohibited from purchasing and consuming alcohol, and yet it is socially acknowledged and even widely accepted that this student will experiment with alcohol before being legally allowed to do so. In many ways, we are collectively unsure about the scope of freedom and responsibility for this age group. To make matters more unclear, norms of adulthood are currently in major upheaval due to recent economic and social changes. Consider, for example, the current steep upward trend in the number of people who are living with their parents after college (Friedman, 2019). The identity and social expectations of those in their late teens and early twenties are currently in a phase of uncertainty and transition.

There are, however, some stabilized expectations and norms regarding parental involvement within the college years. For example, parents are often intimately involved in the financial side of college, dealing with such issues as tuition, financial aid, and student accounts. This makes sense because many college students rely on parents for financial support. Because of this, parents are generally permitted easy access to their children’s financial aid, tuition, and student account information. On the other hand, parents are not generally encouraged or permitted to communicate with their children’s professors about academic issues. Consider the sternly-titled article “10 Reasons Parents Should Never Contact College Professors,” which includes “No one does this,” “It annoys the professor,” and “The

involvement brands the student as a child” (Hyman & Jacobs, 2010). This is especially interesting because, as noted above, parents typically are encouraged to communicate with their children’s instructors during the K-12 years. Why the dramatic change in college? University professors expect their students to reach out to them over email or office hours if they have any concerns, and they will generally ignore or rebuff a concerned parent reaching out to them hoping to intervene on behalf of their child. So, we can see that within the college experience, there are different levels of parental involvement permitted in various departments on campus.

Thus, we are prompted to ask: should academic advising lean more toward the student finances paradigm (open to parental involvement) or the faculty paradigm (no parental involvement allowed)? This is not an easy question to answer. Academic advising views itself as somewhere between bureaucratically explaining and enforcing policies on the one hand, and facilitating student development through dialogue and pedagogy on the other. Consider the oft-used slogan “advising is teaching” (Lowenstein, 2005). Advising is truly a form of teaching, and this in some ways aligns the goals and processes of advising with those of the faculty. But at the same time, advisers are not fulfilling the same role as faculty. For example, advisers do not have the same hierarchical relationship vis-à-vis their students—unlike faculty, advisers do not assign their students grades. In any case, academic advisers have seen their job description and responsibilities expand over the years, and the role continues to evolve (Kuhn, 2008). There is a certain amount of ambiguity regarding the professional self-identity of academic advising. These factors complicate the question posed in this paper. That is, the proper role of parents in advising is unclear in part because the role of the adviser is somewhat unclear. To better understand the proper role of parents in advising, then, it will help to clarify the goals of advising.

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS CONCERNING PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

What are the goals of academic advising? And how do parents fit into them? The first thing to be said is that academic advising should serve the interests of students, not parents. Parents sometimes get involved in academic advising for reasons ultimately related to their own interests, such as wanting to feel informed, feel in control, or feel assured. This is not to cast aspersions on the motivations of parents because these outcomes are not bad in themselves. It makes sense that a parent would, for example, want to be informed about the academic progress of their child. Studies show that when parents get involved in academic advising, those parents report satisfaction in the experience (Menezes, 2005). However, furthering the interests of parents is not an aim of academic advising, and parental satisfaction does not necessarily translate into student success (for reasons discussed below). Because of this basic point, parental involvement cannot be justified based on the interests of parents. Parental involvement can only be justified based on the

interests of students. The very policy of FERPA and the existence of the FERPA waiver imply this idea: the student should be in control of their educational information and choices, and the parent can only legally get involved if the student judges that it will serve their own interests. It is important to be clear about this normative principle at the outset. If parental involvement increases the satisfaction of the parent but sets back the interests of the student, such parental involvement is unjustified, and we should set up institutional barriers to prevent such involvement from taking place.

The goals of advising, then, are focused on the interests of the student, not the parent. What, then, is the nature of these goals? To clarify the goals of academic advising, it helps to turn to advising theory. There are numerous major advising theories, each of which explores different facets of advising. For the sake of the argument in this article, we just need to determine the goals of advising at the most general level. To clarify the big picture goals of advising, then, we should consider developmental advising, which has been called “the most fundamental and comprehensive approach to advising practice” (Grites, 2013, p. 45), and which “forms the basis from which many other advising approaches have evolved” (Damming & Rakes, 2017, p. 32). Developmental advising is widely understood to reflect the core values and aims of the profession. What, then, does developmental advising say about the goals of advising?

Developmental advising contrasts itself with prescriptive advising, the latter of which is concerned with telling students what to do (e.g. which classes to take, which forms to fill out). While there are circumstances where prescriptive advising is appropriate, the profession of academic advising has a higher aspiration set forth by developmental advising, which is *overseeing holistic student development*. As Crookston (1994) puts it, advising should be concerned with “facilitating the student’s rational processes, environmental and interpersonal interactions, behavioral awareness, and problem solving, decision making, and evaluation skills” (p. 5). Consider the multiple dimensions of student development that Crookston (1994) lists, which range from the rational to the emotional, the reflective to the active, the personal to the social. This is the ideal that development advising sets for the profession.

In its ideal form, then, academic advising is not simply about helping students graduate college. It is more fundamentally about helping students become their best selves, capable of successfully navigating and problem-solving in many contexts: not just academic contexts but across the whole range of the human experience. This is a complicated task for many reasons, including the fact that students come to their adviser at different stages of development. Students arrive at college with an array of life experiences that equip them with different levels of maturity, strengths and weaknesses, and capacities of all kinds. Regardless of their developmental starting place, successful college students need to develop the ability to critically reflect on and navigate through obstacles of all kinds, whether it be dealing with academic difficulties, roommate conflicts, or securing an internship. These skills are crucial because they are necessary to succeed not only

in college but also after graduation. Academic advising has thus taken on a very important and far-ranging goal.

There are many conditions that must be met in order for holistic student development to be realized. Students need to meet with their advisers on a regular basis, and their meetings need to be long enough for in-depth conversation. In a typical meeting, a student might bring up a problem that they are facing. Instead of telling the student how to solve the problem (which would reflect a prescriptive advising approach and result in no student development), the adviser will invite the student to reflect critically on the problem and brainstorm possible solutions. Once the student has arrived at a possible solution, the adviser will help the student determine next steps. In subsequent meetings, the adviser will follow up with the student about the situation and help the student reflect on how things went. In each step, the adviser should affirm and empower the student and help the student see themselves as having the agency to advocate for themselves and navigate through their own problems. It is important that the student sees their adviser as someone they can trust so that they feel free to discuss their concerns openly and honestly.

Given this big picture account of the goals of academic advising, we can now think more clearly about the proper role of parents in academic advising. First, we know that advising is not primarily concerned with advancing the interests of the parent, so parental involvement in advising can only be justified if it advances the interests of the student. And we know that the goal of advising is to help students develop the whole range of their capacities to equip them to succeed in college and in life more generally. Therefore, we can ask: what would parental involvement need to look like if it were to constructively serve the goal of holistic student development? What does this successful parental involvement look like? By first getting a sense of this ideal case, we can then turn to the ways in which that ideal so often does not materialize in practice.

WHEN PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT GOES RIGHT

For many students, parents are a crucial source of support during the college experience. It is well documented that student perception of parental support is linked to higher graduation and retention rates (Smith, 2012; Shoup et al., 2009; Lipka, 2007). It is imperative that students get the emotional, psychological, and financial support they need from their parents or other loved ones. However, it is also clear that successful college students will undergo a process of individuation during the college years and develop their own identity and autonomy. Klein & Pierce (2009) summarize what this should look like:

The most successful college adjustment was seen in students with parents viewed as providing the unique combination of *high care* and *low overprotection*. Higher parental care and less overprotection were significantly associated with better college adjustment across several domains of college-related problems, including academic problems,

anxiety, interpersonal problems, depression, self-esteem problems, and family problems. (p. 172, emphasis added)

Students need to be supported but not suffocated. There is a balance to be found here, and advisers can help students achieve and maintain this balance with their parents. For many students who live with their parents for their whole lives before entering college, developing this high care and low overprotection relationship is a project that needs to be worked on. Getting to this healthy balance is a process that takes time, and it can be a difficult process for some students and parents, but it is an important part of student development and maturity.

The goal, then, is to encourage parental support but discourage intrusive parental involvement. What does this ideal look like in the context of academic advising? For the majority of students, this means that parents support them throughout their college experience but never step foot in the advising office. The caring parent will regularly communicate with their child about their educational and advising experiences (“high care”) but will also expect their child to meet with their professors and advisers on their own (“low overprotection”). While this is how things will go for most students, we want to consider those cases where the parent does get involved. Drawing from studies, anecdotes, and the personal experience of the author, we will examine the ways in which parental advising results in positive and negative outcomes. Let us start by examining those cases where parental involvement goes well. There are some common features of these cases.

Firstly, a parent might accompany their child to their first advising meeting as a means of encouraging their child to attend and engage with advising. There are many reasons why students may be resistant to meeting with their adviser when they first start college. Students may have experienced mostly prescriptive advising in high school. As a result, some students simply may not understand the point of advising when they start college. Some students have a certain level of social anxiety about approaching people they view as authority figures, which results in students not always reaching out for help or utilizing resources, like going to office hours with their professors or meetings with their advisers. Other students are overconfident, thinking they can do it all themselves without advising help. Whatever the case may be, it is crucial that all of these students get their foot in the door of the advising office during their first term of college. Students often leave their first advising session amazed at how helpful academic advising can be. That first advising session will often turn skeptics into believers, guaranteeing that students will voluntarily return to future advising meetings. For a few students, going to that first meeting may only happen if a parent joins them. Clearly, the goals of advising are advanced in these cases of parental involvement. Meeting with a student and their parent is better than the student not attending at all. This is especially important in those situations where students have a registration hold on their account until they meet with their adviser—delaying or postponing that first advising meeting can result in students registering late and not getting into important sequenced coursework.

In addition to getting their child to attend their advising meeting in the first place, sometimes parents provide information to the adviser that the child may not be comfortable providing themselves early in the advising relationship. Consider the following two examples from the author's experience. A student with learning disabilities had his parent attend his first advising meeting because the student felt more comfortable having his parent explain some aspects of his situation and accommodation needs. His parent played an important role in his support system and had a great deal of important knowledge about the situation, so the student wanted his parent to be part of that first meeting to make sure his adviser would be fully informed. Another student was a Black female in a STEM major. Her mother came along to the first meeting and the mother explained that both she and the student felt that previous advisers had tried to steer the student into "easier" majors due to implicit racial and gender bias. The daughter was somewhat introverted and may not have felt comfortable telling her new adviser about these negative previous advising experiences. The mother was able to explain these concerns to me, providing assurance to the daughter that with this knowledge her new adviser would not repeat the same mistakes. In both cases, the knowledge conveyed by parent to adviser was useful to the adviser and student—and as an added bonus, provided a sense of satisfaction to the parent.

We can now summarize the potential positive contributions parents can make when they get involved in advising: (1) getting their child to go to their first advising meeting, and (2) providing information to the adviser that the child may not be comfortable sharing. It is important to note that these positive contributions are realized by the parent attending one single advising meeting. As I will argue, after the parent joins their child in one advising meeting, the positive benefits have been realized, and continued parental involvement is unlikely to contribute to the overall goals of advising. Let us turn, then, to how parental involvement can detract from the goals of advising.

WHEN PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT GOES WRONG

A major problem when parents become involved in academic advising is when they continue coming, meeting after meeting, and the positive contributions they might have made early on become overshadowed by the negative outcome of inhibited student development. Joining one meeting often leads to joining future meetings. As Kopic (2006) worries, "If you allow a parent to get involved once, you have reinforced the exact behavior you may be trying to avoid. It will be even tougher to say 'no' to the parent the next time and you have shown the student that they don't need to confront their own issues and problems" ("Reasons for Increased Parental Involvement" section, para. 6). It is important not to passively allow this habit and expectation of continued parental involvement to form. In the ideal case, the parent stops attending after one meeting. They provide their positive contribution by bringing their resistant child into the meeting and offering whatever helpful information they have, but then their encouragement recedes to background

support—that is how the high care and low overprotection parenting relationship is achieved in the context of advising.

The lingering parent who continues coming to advising meetings is often a symptom of some underlying problem. As Kopic (2006) notes, parental involvement often reflects and amplifies a “disconnect between student and parent” (“Reasons for Increased Parental Involvement” section, para. 6). Sometimes the problem is that the student is not communicating openly or honestly with the parent, and so the parent comes to the advising meeting to “learn the truth” about their child’s situation. Sometimes the parent and student have different views on something (e.g. the parent wants the child to pursue a particular major and the child disagrees), and the parent hopes to enlist the adviser to their side to help convince the student of their perspective. Sometimes the parent just feels the need to be informed about their child’s educational experience but does not feel adequately informed by talking with their child privately after the advising meeting. Letting the parent continue coming to meetings simply maintains and reinforces this parent-child disconnect. Whatever the reason, it is hard to imagine the student’s interests being advanced by the continued presence of a parent in meeting after meeting.

Surely some readers will now think to themselves “but I’ve had a parent come to multiple meetings and it was productive—or at least it wasn’t negative.” No doubt some advisers have had such experiences, but does that imply that parents attending multiple meetings should be allowed? There are some critical questions to be asked about these cases. First, do those additional meetings benefit the student by advancing student development in some way? These meetings can often go fine, but they need to be evaluated against the benchmark of our advising goals. What kinds of patterns and precedents have been established? Is the student truly flourishing with the parent’s continued presence? To be clear: we are aiming higher than “the meeting went okay.” We are aiming for student development to take place in every advising meeting. Parental attendance in multiple sessions creates inherent challenges for student development: specifically, the development of self-confidence and the ability to problem-solve without the presence of a parent. These skills are important to develop because students will need them to succeed in college, in their careers, and in life more generally.

Additionally, in these cases we should consider whatever benefit long-term parental involvement might have contributed, and we should ask *if those benefits could have been better accomplished by a private conversation between child and parent before or after the advising meeting*. It should be clear but still worth emphasizing: I am not advocating for parents to be cut off from their child’s educational experience. Parental support is crucial for student success. I am, however, arguing that the conversations that parents have with their children about their goals and experiences should be taking place outside the advising office. That is where they belong, and that is where they will do the most good for the student. Why should an adviser be involved in these conversations? It becomes difficult to imagine scenarios in which a student is benefited more by having their parent attend

multiple meetings compared to the alternative of them attending advising alone and communicating with their parent outside the advising office.

Within the context of any given advising meeting, parents can play a negative role by distorting the communication between adviser and student even when the parent has the best of intentions. This can happen in a number of ways. Sometimes parents will talk too much, seeing themselves as talking for their child. Parents may be accustomed to this form of communication from the K-12 years. When parents talk on behalf of their child, it can be hard for that child to speak up if they feel that they are being misrepresented. Alternatively, parents may not talk much at all, but their very presence may alter what the student feels free to say. Although not true in every case, there is very often a power dynamic between parent and child such that the presence of a parent in the room will make the student feel deferential and unable to freely speak their mind. Whenever parental involvement distorts the communication between adviser and advisee in these ways, it is devastating to the advising process. Not only do these experiences fail to advance the interests of the student, they can actually undermine student development by making the student feel less agency and ownership over their educational experience and reducing their overall self-confidence.

Given these common pitfalls of the parent's presence in advising meetings, it is all the more crucial to "wean off" the involved parent from advising after the first meeting so that the student will get a chance for a one-on-one relationship with their adviser. The author has experienced cases where an involved parent has all the best intentions to let their child speak freely to their adviser in the presence of the parent, and yet the student confided later that they did not feel fully comfortable speaking their mind with their parent in the room. This discomfort is not necessarily a symptom of any problem in the parent-child relationship but may simply reflect a natural power dynamic that can be hard to overcome even for the most experienced advisers. Even for the student who feels comfortable with their parent involved in all their meetings, they may not be aware of the subtle effects that their parent's presence has on them. Students may be so accustomed to parental involvement in all aspects of their life that they may not appreciate how their development is being hindered by their overinvolved parent.

Lastly, there are many contexts in which students need to be able to reflect on their goals and advocate for their interests without a parent involved. If academic advising is about overseeing student development, part of that development is helping students gain the confidence and ability to discuss important matters without the presence of their parent. As Menezes (2005) notes, it is crucial that parents understand that "letting their children do things for themselves can help students emerge as capable adults" ("Parent role" section, para. 1). For example, it is common for first-year college students to express anxiety about going to their instructors' office hours. Yet attending office hours is crucial to students' academic success, and instructors expect students to attend office hours without the presence of a parent. Beyond college, students will eventually need to have all kinds of interactions in their workplace without the involvement of a parent, including with

employers, supervisors, coworkers, and customers. Outside the workplace, there are many contexts that people will need to navigate without the presence of a parent, including complex medical and financial situations. If this bias against parental involvement is to be critiqued as “overly-individualistic,” then that is a critique to be made of our whole society, not simply the advising context. There are so many social contexts in which parents are not welcome that it makes perfect sense that academic advising would want to help students be able to navigate problems without parental involvement. One could imagine a society where parents were integrated into more areas of adult life, including college and the workplace, and perhaps that would be a better society than our own. But that is not the society we now live in, and advising should aim to prepare students to navigate through the world as it is.

Given these negative outcomes associated with parental involvement, a natural question arises: should parental involvement in academic advising be prohibited altogether? One possible solution to the problems posed by parental involvement would be to prevent parents from being involved in the advising process by eliminating the FERPA waiver for academic advising. We can return to the case of faculty office hours, where parents are not welcome. Faculty expect students to come to them with their academic questions and concerns on their own, without their parents. Why not duplicate this norm for advising? This is a tempting response since it would shut the door to all the negative consequences that parental involvement so often entails for students and advisers. However, this extreme policy would be hard to justify for two reasons.

First, parental involvement is often but not always negative. There are positive cases of parental involvement discussed above, and we do not want to prevent these. There are also some important differences between faculty office hours and the academic advising. Students go to office hours to get their academic questions answered. Students go to advising to get help navigating their college experience. While it is difficult to imagine parents contributing anything positive in faculty office hours, it is conceivable that parents might contribute positively to the advising process in very limited ways. It may be true that the majority of cases of parental involvement contradict the goals of academic advising, but what we should try to do first is reform the policies and messaging about permissible parental involvement in advising so as to reduce negative experiences, while allowing and encouraging positive experiences. As the saying goes, we shouldn’t throw the baby out with the bathwater.

Second, while preventing parental involvement in advising may benefit students in many cases, it also reduces student autonomy by removing an option from them when it comes to their own advising experience. It is true that there are instances when parents basically force their children to sign a FERPA waiver to allow the parents to intervene in the advising process. That said, there are also obviously many cases when this process is initiated and desired by the student. While eliminating parental involvement entirely would happily prevent the former cases of parental overreach, it would also violate student autonomy in the latter

cases. It is important to let students have some say in their advising experience whenever possible, and giving them an option of including their parent in one advising meeting seems valid. Instead of abolishing parental involvement, then, the first step should be to reform it. But how?

REFORMING AND REDIRECTING PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

Advising offices should have policies in place that help prevent or mitigate the negative outcomes associated with parental involvement. First, advising offices should publicize the message, “parents should not join advising meetings.” This guideline is appropriate for most student cases and publicizing it (at orientation, on the advising website, etc.) helps create the expectation that students should be meeting with their advisers one-on-one. Advisers should not widely advertise the FERPA waiver, and it should be understood by students and parents that this route is not encouraged and is an exception to the general rule of parents not joining meetings. If nonetheless a student seeks it out, advising offices should adopt a “one and done” policy for parents joining advising meetings. This restriction should be included in the language of the FERPA waiver and communicated to parent and student in that first meeting. This will also help encourage the parent to communicate whatever helpful information they might have about their child to the adviser in that first meeting. The adviser should also explain to the parent and student the benefits of one-on-one advising and how it facilitates student development. Barton Dingee (2007) describes how this might look:

Advisers should use a ‘one time rule’ with parents who accompany students to the initial advisement appointment. At the end of the session, advisers can inform parents that while they enjoyed meeting them today and answering their questions, academic advisement is a process best accomplished with just the student and adviser. Parents need to understand that when the adviser meets with the student in the future that it will be alone, although parents can be encouraged to help their students prepare questions to bring to the adviser. (para. 6)

Setting these boundaries with parents the first time they are present at an advising meeting is crucial for avoiding the negative outcomes of continued parental involvement. Parents want to do what is best for their children, so they are likely to be receptive to an explanation about how their absence in future meetings is the best way to help their children grow and thrive. Parents are likely unaware of exactly what academic advisers really do. Providing this knowledge will help them feel more comfortable about not returning to future meetings. As Menezes (2005) puts it, “If parents understand the competencies and expertise of the academic adviser, they are more likely to trust the judgment and wisdom of the adviser and allow their children to experience and appreciate the new and exciting challenges college life can bring” (“Parent role” section, para. 1). Advisers should respectfully

set these boundaries with parents and explain how these boundaries help facilitate student development.

So far, we have articulated two guidelines regarding parental involvement. First, advising offices should publicly state “parents should not join advising meetings.” This policy works for most students most of the time. However, when a parent shows up to a meeting and the student is eager to sign the FERPA waiver, advisers should communicate their second guideline: “one and done.” Although not encouraged, parents are allowed to join up to one advising meeting. Beyond this, are there any other cases when parental involvement is justified? While I am confident that these guidelines cover 99% of student cases, I also want to be sensitive to those once-a-year advising emergency cases where students come into the office with a parent when they are in the midst of a major life crisis. Students go to their advisers for advice and consolation in the face of all kinds of serious and traumatic issues, including life-threatening health problems, the death of loved ones, interactions with the justice system, financial calamity, and more. Such crises might prompt students to consider, for example, dropping out of college immediately—and they may justifiably want a parent involved in such a momentous discussion. Advisers need to use discretion and make judgment calls in such cases to determine if parental involvement will be beneficial to the student. The “one and done” policy should be firm but not inflexible, especially in the face of these kinds of extraordinary cases.

As a final policy about parental involvement, advisers should never meet with parents without the presence of their child. Students will sometimes ask their advisers if they can sign a FERPA waiver and then have their parent call or meet with their adviser without the student being present. Such meetings do nothing to facilitate student development and do much to undermine the student’s agency, confidence, and problem-solving abilities. These cases usually reflect a student who is looking to outsource their problems to their parent, or a parent who is looking to control their child’s educational experience. When a student makes such a request, advisers should use it as an opportunity to explain the goals of academic advising, articulate the need for the student to take responsibility for their education, and discuss more constructive roles for their parent. Students may simply be accustomed to their parent making a lot of educational decisions for them without their presence in the K-12 context, and advisers should be clear that this will not be the case at the college level. As always, there are exceptions to every rule, even this one—one can imagine a case in which a student has a serious illness or injury that requires a parent to temporarily step in to deal with their academic situation on their behalf. In all other non-emergency cases, advisers should never meet with a parent without the student present.

In addition to creating policy to properly limit parental involvement in advising meetings, advisers should do what they can to encourage parents to support their children’s advising experience outside the advising office. Parents can play an important role as background support for their children. If a parent has a child who is shy or intimidated at the thought of going to advising, the parent can encourage

the child to attend advising and can explain why advising is important. Parents can check in with their children before and after advising meetings to give encouragement and provide their own input. Advisers should communicate directly to parents about the goals of advising and how parents might best support these goals. Parents cannot be expected to know what advising looks like at the college level and how they can best support their children vis-à-vis advising, especially given the differences between advising at the high school and college level. Some proactive communication with parents would go a long way to redirecting their involvement in positive directions. This communication can come at different times and in different forms. Advisers can meet with parents at first-year college orientation. There could be a parents' section of the advising website. Parents could be invited to join a listserv or get a monthly newsletter. Through these avenues, parents can learn about advising goals, dates, deadlines, and updates, so that parents can better communicate with their children about their advising experience. There are many ways to communicate with parents about advising to help parents feel connected to the advising process and to encourage them to become involved in positive ways outside the advising office.

CONCLUSION

Parental involvement in higher education is not going away. This means that parents are going to want to show up in advising meetings, often to the detriment of our students and our advising goals. We must think beyond the immediate question of "what are best practices when parents are present in advising meetings?" We need to have an understanding of the proper scope of parental involvement in advising. I have proposed three guidelines to this end:

1. Generally, parents should not join advising meetings.
2. Although not encouraged, parents may join up to one advising meeting.
3. Advisers should never meet with parents without the student present.

These guidelines should be used to update advising policies, practices, and messaging. Doing so will help change the expectations and behaviors of intrusive parents and their college-going children to reflect the reality that advising best achieves its goals in the one-on-one relationship between adviser and advisee.

REFERENCES

- Barton Dingee, S. (2007, June). Parents in the room. *Academic Advising Today*, 30(2). <https://nacada.ksu.edu/Resources/Academic-Advising-Today/View-Articles/Parents-in-the-Room.aspx>
- Crookson, B. B. (1994). A developmental view of academic advising as teaching. *NACADA Journal*, 14(2), 5–9. <https://doi.org/10.12930/0271-9517-14.2.5>

- Damminger, J., & Rakes, M. (2017). The role of the academic advisor in the first year. In J. R. Fox & H. E. Martin (Eds.), *Academic advising and the first college year* (pp. 19–42). University of South Carolina, National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience & Students in Transition.
- Ewing-Cooper, A., & Merrifield, K. (2018, March). Advisors’ perceptions, attitudes, and suggestions for working with parents. *Academic Advising Today*, 41(1). <https://nacada.ksu.edu/Resources/Academic-Advising-Today/View-Articles/Advisors-Perceptions-Attitudes-and-Suggestions-for-Working-with-Parents.aspx>
- Fiedler, C. (2007, June). Preparing advisors to respond to parents. *Academic Advising Today*, 30(2). <https://nacada.ksu.edu/Resources/Academic-Advising-Today/View-Articles/Preparing-Advisors-to-Respond-to-Parents.aspx>
- Friedman, Z. (2019, June 6). 50% of millennials are moving back home with their parents after college. *Forbes*. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/zackfriedman/2019/06/06/millennials-move-back-home-college/?sh=30ae72d7638a>
- Gabriel, T. (2010, August 22). Students, welcome to college; parents, go home. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/23/education/23college.html>
- Grites, T. J. (2013). Developmental academic advising. In J. K. Drake, P. Jordan, & M. A. Miller (Eds.), *Academic Advising Approaches: Strategies that teach students to make the most of college* (pp. 45–59). Jossey-Bass.
- Hwang, W., & Jung, E. (2020). Parenting practices, parent–child relationship, and perceived academic control in college students. *Journal of Adult Development*, 28, 37–49. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10804-020-09346-0>
- Hyman, J., & Jacobs L. (2010, May 12). 10 reasons parents should never contact college professors. *U.S. News & World Report*. <https://www.usnews.com/education/blogs/professors-guide/2010/05/12/10-reasons-parents-should-never-contact-college-professors>
- Joyce, A. (2014, September 2). How helicopter parents are ruining college students. *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/parenting/wp/2014/09/02/how-helicopter-parents-are-ruining-college-students/>
- Kapaona, A., & Ono, M. (2016, June). Re-envisioning parental involvement in higher education: Shifting the paradigm of the helicopter parent. *Academic Advising Today*, 39(2). <https://nacada.ksu.edu/Resources/Academic-Advising-Today/View-Articles/Re-envisioning-Parental-Involvement-in-Higher-Education-Shifting-the-Paradigm-of-the-Helicopter-Parent.aspx>
- Kepic, G. (2006). Causes and implications of parental involvement in the advising process. Retrieved from NACADA Clearinghouse of Academic Advising Resources website:

- <http://www.nacada.ksu.edu/tabid/3318/articleType/ArticleView/articleId/629/article.aspx>
- Klein, M. B., & Pierce, J. D. (2009). Parental care aids, but parental overprotection hinders, college adjustment. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 11(2), 167–181. <https://doi.org/10.2190/CS.11.2.a>
- Kuhn, T. (2008). Historical foundations for academic advising (2nd ed.). In V. N. Gordon, W. R. Habley, et al. (Eds.), *Academic advising: A comprehensive handbook* (pp. 3–16). Jossey-Bass.
- LeMoynes, T., & Buchanan, T. (2011). Does “hovering” matter? Helicopter parenting and its effect on well-being. *Sociological Spectrum*, 31(4), 399–418. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02732173.2011.574038>
- Levine, A., & Dean, D. (2012). *Generation on a tightrope: A portrait of today's college student* (3rd ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Lipka, S. (2007, November 9). Helicopter parents help students, survey finds. *Chronicle of Higher Education*. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/helicopter-parents-help-students-survey-finds/>
- Lowenstein, M. (2005). If advising is teaching, what do advisors teach? *NACADA Journal*, 25(2), 65–73. <https://doi.org/10.12930/0271-9517-25.2.65>
- Menezes, M. D. (2005). Advisors and parents: Together building stronger advising relationships. Retrieved from the *NACADA Clearinghouse of Academic Advising Resources* website: <http://www.nacada.ksu.edu/tabid/3318/articleType/ArticleView/articleId/114/article.aspx>
- Oyler, K. (2008). Utilizing parents as a resource: The use of appreciative inquiry in academic advising. *The Mentor: An Academic Advising Journal*, 10. <https://doi.org/10.26209/mj1061542>
- Peluchette, J. V. E., Kovanic, N., & Partridge, D. (2013). Helicopter parents hovering in the workplace: What should HR managers do?, *Business Horizons*, 56(5), 601–609. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2013.05.004>
- Robinson, S. (2004). Legal issues for advisors: A primer. Retrieved from the *NACADA Clearinghouse of Academic Advising Resources* website: <http://www.nacada.ksu.edu/Resources/Clearinghouse/View-Articles/Legal-issues-primer.aspx>
- Rust, M. M. (2014). FERPA and its implications for academic advising practice. Retrieved from the *NACADA Clearinghouse of Academic Advising Resources* website: <http://www.nacada.ksu.edu/Resources/Clearinghouse/View-Articles/FERPA-overview.aspx>
- Schiffrin, H. H., & Liss, M. (2017). The effects of helicopter parenting on academic motivation. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 26(5), 1472–1480. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-017-0658-z>
- Shoup, R., Gonyea, R., & Kuh, G. (2009, June 1). *Helicopter parents: Examining the impact of highly involved parents on student engagement and*

educational outcomes [Paper presentation]. 49th Annual Forum of the Association for Institutional Research, Atlanta, Georgia.

Smith, L. (2012). Supporting parents in supporting their students: Why including first generation families in the process is important. *The Mentor: An Academic Advising Journal*, 14. <https://doi.org/10.26209/mj1461298>

Stack, C. (2003). Talking with the parents of advisees. *The Mentor: An Academic Advising Journal*, 5. <https://doi.org/10.26209/mj561681>

Alan Reynolds works as Student Services Supervisor at University of California, Davis. He previously worked as an undergraduate advisor at University of California, Merced and Coastal Carolina University. He earned his Ph.D. in philosophy from University of Oregon.