THERE’S NO PLACE LIKE HOME

Robert Bonfiglio advises colleges and universities to consider whether their goals of promoting students’ self-reliance are fully in sync with the reality of twenty-first-century life.

By Robert A. Bonfiglio

EACH SUMMER, I speak to the parents of our new students at orientation. It is, for me, an opportunity to share with them our philosophy of student development, our aim to promote students’ self-reliance, and our preference for parents to give their students a little elbow room to grow. I speak about how we expect to help cultivate in students a sense of identity and independence and to adequately prepare them for adult life after college. A little humor always spics up a presentation, and one afternoon, I concluded my opening comments by joking about the prospect of students returning home to live after graduation. “After all,” I ad-libbed that day, “you really don’t want them moving back home with you after four or five years of being away at college, do you?”

It was an incidental remark on the spur of the moment and off the cuff. The remark resulted in lots of laughs and smiles. They know what I mean, I recall thinking. They recognize that it is our role to prepare students for the next phase of their lives, one that will predictably involve living on their own without the benefit of the support systems firmly in place at our college, which I described in detail throughout my presentation.

Recognition of the promotion of self-reliance as a prevailing purpose of higher education in the United States can be found in many college and university mission statements, including that of Harvard College, which asserts, “The support the College provides to students is a foundation upon which self-reliance . . . [is] built.”

Student independence and self-determination are also long-standing staples of theories of student development. For example, developing autonomy is one of the “vectors” of student development identified by Arthur Chickering in his classic work Education and Identity. In the first edition of Education and Identity, originally published in 1969, he wrote, “The road to emotional independence begins with disengagement from the parents, proceeds through reliance on peers, and ends with personal autonomy” (p. 59).

Returning home to live with mom and dad is not a goal that educators typically envision for their graduates. Rather, it is expected that graduates will pursue a job placement away from their parents’ home, enroll in graduate school, accept a temporary job in the area near their alma mater, or even travel. Yet as described in USA Today in February 2007 “some 18 million adults between the ages of 20 and 34 live with their parents. That’s roughly a third of that age group” (paragraph 2).

So should I really be joking with parents about the prospect of graduates moving home after commencement? Or should I be telling them in earnest that we aim to prepare our students to resume their former lifestyle back home, older and wiser, after they graduate? Is the joke on them, or is it on me?
In two generations, much has changed about the college experience and about the relationships between students and their parents. For example, in January 1967, *Time* magazine, in the article “Man of the Year: The Inheritor” characterized the relationship between young adults and parents in this way: “The young have already staked out their own minisociety, a congruent culture that has both alarmed their elders and at least stylistically, left an irresistible impression on them. . . . The young seem curiously unappreciative of the society that supports them” (pp. 2, 3).

To those of us who work with students and talk to their parents on a daily basis, that characterization certainly seems to describe a period that was a long, long time ago. The phenomenon of graduates moving back home makes me wonder whether we are failing in fulfilling our aims to promote student self-reliance or even whether those expectations are realistic in an age in which advances in information technology have enabled students and parents to stay tethered to each other over large expanses. It certainly is a challenge to promote student independence in the context of frequent, perhaps even daily communication between students and their parents. Sometimes, it even seems as if the expectations of parents to continue to be involved in the lives of their children while they are in college make our goals for student independence unattainable.

At my institution, in senior surveys and alumni surveys, our graduates tell us that the campus experience has enabled them to grow in their sense of independence. If that is the case, however, perhaps we should take a deeper look at exactly what developing independence means to the sizable number of young adults who are returning to their parents’ nest and whether we need to reconsider how to promote true autonomy, independence, and self-reliance.

On the other hand, deciding to return to live at home may have little to do with the impact of college on the development of personal autonomy and independence, and more to do with economic and social realities.

To many traditional-age college students, the adult lifestyle that they aspire to is a lifestyle that is more often than not achieved only with two incomes. Graduates earning entry-level salaries (and often burdened with high levels of educational debt) rarely have the immediate resources to achieve the upper middle-class lifestyle that they may have assumed would be their entitlement after four years of higher education—the type of lifestyle their parents arrived at only after years and years of hard work and financial sacrifice. As Harold Woods, an online commenter on the previously mentioned USA Today op-ed by Niederhaus and Graham, put it, “Too many young adults believe they are entitled to all of their parents’ perks without earning them.”

Grades saddled with entry-level salaries and high debt barely have the means to cover things that were typically included in their college room and board payment—telephone service, Internet access, and cable television. Add dramatically increased health insurance premiums, and one begins to get a sense of the high costs of independent living—high costs that were nonexistent a generation ago. When the standard and unavoidable costs for rent or mortgage payments, utilities, and a vehicle and its maintenance and insurance are taken into account, it is no wonder that many young people return home in an effort to maintain a semblance of the lifestyle to which they have become accustomed.

In addition to these economic realities, there are social realities that may be coming into play. It is possible that the cocoon of the campus has been so secure and well appointed that the prospect of the spartan first apartment seems even scarier to face than it used to be.

Perhaps the sense of insecurity that beckons our students home is even more foreboding, fueled by the possibility of terrorism on their city streets, global warming, or even natural disasters that seem to be gravely different and more ominous than the potential

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disasters that loomed in the faraway background for previous generations. Sadly, these students have witnessed that even the college campus communities they are about to leave are hardly immune to terror and violence.

I can only speculate on the likely reasons why young people are finding that there’s no place like home. Whatever students’ motives are, colleges and universities would be well advised to evaluate whether their efforts to meet institutional goals related to student development are fully in sync with the reality of twenty-first-century life.

David Brooks has observed, “There used to be four common life phases: childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and old age. Now, there are at least six: childhood, adolescence, odyssey, adulthood, active retirement, and old age. . . . Old success recipes don’t apply, [and] new norms have not been established. . . .” (p. A31).

Without these new norms, what direction should higher education take in order to prepare young adults for the next phase of life after college? What does it mean to foster independence in a culture in which technology begets sustained contact between parents and their children?

Many colleges and universities try to teach parents the art of letting go during new student orientation, but is letting go possible in our interconnected world?

Fostering a dynamic that builds support for parents in enabling students to break from the parochialism of their youth to examine their values and goals requires more of educators than offering guidance on letting go. It involves building a relationship of trust with parents, trust that their children will be safe at college, and it requires fostering greater public confidence in and support for the purposes of higher education, including the nurturing of self-reliance.

Most students come to our campuses with values that mirror those of their parents and their local community. It would seem as if consistent parental involvement in students’ lives serves to sustain those values. If, upon graduation, students immediately return to the same settings that spawned these values, the impact of higher education is, at best, muted. How can students grow and develop as individuals when they are resigning to returning to the comforts of home they left behind a few short years earlier?

In the foreword to famed Brazilian educator Paulo Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Richard Shaull wrote, “Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes ‘the practice of freedom,’ the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world” (p. 34).

Higher education has seemingly been very successful at facilitating “integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system.” Perhaps the time has come for those responsible for cultivating student independence to examine exactly what that term means to students and to their parents, and to creatively consider new ways to bring about student independence in a method that better prepares them for life after college.

Notes


