

We Should Talk About “Moms” and “Dads” Programs

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Students, faculty, staff, alumni, trustees, community leaders, and donors are just a few of the most important constituent groups in higher education (Donovan & McKelfresh, 2008). Some individuals might suggest parents belong on that list. Perspectives differ on the role of parents and families in education, and the notion of parent involvement has evolved over time. In practice, some parents embrace their role as teachers, advocates, and information sources, and engage in university-hosted parent programs such as parent orientation, newsletters, and advisory boards or associations (Carney-Hall, 2008). Some parents also become engaged in parent/family weekends (Carney-Hall, 2008), which are events showcasing student achievement, research, entertainment, resources, campus awards, and campus traditions (Ward-Roof, Heaton, & Coburn, 2008). In fraternity/sorority life, it is not uncommon for organizations to host “Moms” and “Dads” weekends, where a specific gender of parents go to their student’s campus to engage in programming with their student and other parents.

In 2016, I presented an [ACPA PechaKucha presentation](#) about parent/family programs where I asked the question, “Who are we leaving behind?” I know someday I will have a child who might attend college. That child might also join a fraternity or sorority. As a queer, gay man, I am prematurely nervous for the day my child’s organization hosts a “Moms Weekend” event, which by name, would exclude my male partner and I from attending. And as I think about that programming, I wonder about the students whose parents (or guardians, or family members) are simply unable to physically join their student. What about students whose parents would be expected to pay thousands of dollars, or take off work to travel? What about students who do not have parents, or whose parents are estranged, incarcerated, or deceased? While parent involvement can affect various parts of the college experience, including student development, policies and philosophies, programs and services, and even administrative structures (Carney-Hall, 2008), the lack of parent presence for an individual student may have a similar, yet negative, impact. Not all families exist as positive, supportive, and healthy entities (Donovan & McKelfresh, 2008). Having same-sex parents, losing a parent, having absent parents, growing up in foster care, or being raised by someone other than a biological parent are a few variations of how a student might be limited on engaging with parent/family programs in their fraternity/sorority. Additionally, language matters. Specific, gendered events for “just Moms” and “just Dads” may leave out a parent or family member who does not identify with these limiting and rigid gender categories. Furthermore, colleges may miss a significant population of families if they solely focus on White, middle-class, upper-class, 18-22-year old students with college-educated parents (Donovan & McKelfresh, 2008). This seems to be the target for many

institution's parent-based programs (Wartman & Savage, 2008), including fraternity/sorority programming.

Last fall I had the opportunity to interview an undergraduate student who was the coordinator of her sorority's Moms and Dads Weekends. When I asked her if there were women in her chapter who did not feel as if the events were for them, she stated, "I know there's a few in our sorority who have lost their moms or lost their dads, but we don't really talk about it that much." In response to how those women engage with the programming, she shared some choose to attend yet not bring anyone, share dads with other women in the chapter, or bring someone such as an uncle in place of a dad. In one instance, the individual talked about a woman in her chapter who decided not to participate at all.

"I passed her, and in passing was like, 'hey are you going to Dads Weekend,' and she's like, 'no, I don't have a dad,' and I was like, 'okay, you're still welcome to come, welcome to participate,' but she said she would just feel weird if she brought someone who wasn't her dad."

I imagine there are other individuals like this woman who choose to self-select to opt out of this type of programming; and I wonder should they have to? Knowing some parents or families are not involved or present in the life of their student (Wartman & Savage, 2008), why, then, do fraternities/sororities continue to place emphasis on parent and family programs? Furthermore, how do college students with nontraditional family structures fit into the planning and execution of parent-based programs, more generally?

As I continue to work with students and professionals from various institutions and geographic contexts, I am brought back to these questions through the lens of fraternity/sorority life. I am also brought back to these questions as a student affairs professional who believes we should all be interrogating how students are left behind when institutions and organizations make assumptions about parent and family structures. Is your institution making assumptions? Are *you* making assumptions? Take time with your staff and community to have a dialogue around inclusion, and specifically address the exclusion that could be a result of these programs. Your students are better off because of your efforts.

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