Acknowledging the Role of Supporters in the Transition Experience of First Year Students.

Zarlasht Sarwari and Rochelle Pudney
Senior Project Officers, Office of the Director, Student Life and Learning,
UNSW Australia

Abstract

Parents and families are recognised as playing an increasingly pivotal role in the student transition experience (Wintre & Yaffe. 2000; Shoup et al. 2009; Carney-Hall, 2008). In an attempt to address the information needs of these key influencers, a strategy and associated projects aim to enhance access to quality information; ensure clear communication channels; and highlight avenues of support to contribute to positive student experiences.

Introduction

A broad range of programs and strategies have continued to evolve at UNSW supporting the first year student experience. Taking a more holistic approach to the experience of students and acknowledging the networks they draw support from, has led to the development of a strategy to include parents, families and supporters as valuable contributors to the positive transition and experience of students. The strategy aims to focus on four key areas; enhancing the student transition experience, clear and targeted communication, cultivating relationships, and clarity with respect to roles and responsibilities.

Background/ Rationale

UNSW has traditionally had limited direct communication and engagement with parents and families of students beyond recruitment efforts and the Official Welcome and Graduation events. Much of this has been guided by the motivation to maintain clarity about legal responsibilities held by the institution regarding privacy and prioritising the student as client.

Higher education research tells us the changing nature of student relationships with their families and supporters impact upon student success. Parents are becoming more involved in their students’ lives with higher levels of communication and decision making influence, particularly at times of stress (Touchette, 2013). This has meant more reliance among students on family support and advice, and the necessity of institutions to ensure these key supporters have access to relevant and timely information:

“The more informed the parents are, the more likely that they will be able to provide adequate and appropriate support”, (Touchette, 2009).

Furthermore, evidence suggests the evolving relationship between students and their families contributes to a positive impact on students’ adjustment and success (Sax & Wartman, 2010).
Positive correlations have been found with family support and student academic outcomes (Wintre & Yaffe, 2000), adjustment and retention, health issues, and career development (Carney-Hall, 2008; Rowan-Kenyon et al. 2008).

An important aspect of developing this strategy is considering the spectrum of social capital and resources available to students. The impact of a student’s social capital and their familial socio-economic status on student aspirations to consider and realise further education is well documented (Wilks & Wilson, 2012; Frempong, Ma & Mensah, 2012).

A recent study by Wilks and Wilson (2012) demonstrated the impact of demographic, financial, geographic, cultural and social capital factors in relation to student perception, choice and decision about university. One of the key themes which emerged from their study was the influence of parents and family. The education levels and experience of parents reflected their aspirations for their children, which in turn influenced their childrens’ aspirations from a young age. Those who had higher levels of education and understood the benefits also wanted higher education for their children. Children whose parents did not have high levels of education and did not appreciate the benefits of education on the other hand, experienced an uphill battle and often scored low in terms of their own aspiration for higher education.

UNSW recruitment efforts for prospective high school students acknowledge the influence of parents. Recruitment efforts and faculty information evenings are targeted as much to parents as to students. Once students gain admission to university however, there is limited literature available on the role of parents/family in the student transition experience. Similarly there is limited institutional engagement with parents and families beyond the recruitment and admission phases.

An important consideration in dealing with support and information needs for students and their families from equity groups is to be able to address factors of disadvantage which do not dissipate upon university admission. Once students have overcome the cumulative effect of disadvantage to reach higher education (James, 2012), it does not mean that they are free from those ongoing challenges in their new education environment.

The same barriers to access higher education for LSES students may still have ongoing effects at university, such as structural inequity, school quality and socio-economic status of school, financial resources and social capital (family and networks), (Frempong, G. et al, 2011). This raises questions as to how we can respond to the needs of these students and their families to support them during the transition process.

An important consideration to focus on supporter engagement at UNSW is the evidence confirming the large student cohort still living at home (ABS, Home and Away: Living Arrangements of Young People). Student data at UNSW indicates that 72 per cent of students who commenced their stage one studies at UNSW in 2014, live outside of the Central Sydney Area and commute to the university. More young people are living at home while completing their studies. This inevitably leads to further reliance of students on their families. This can be in the form of financial support, emotional support as well as general advice.
Part of the challenge for UNSW will be identifying the support needs of students and their families and being able to target specific cohorts who would benefit the most.

Internationally, the US has a far more established and extensive range of support and opportunities for parent engagement. Many universities boast a substantial staffing allocation dedicated to parent engagement. The different nature of funding for education in the US, and other cultural factors fosters a different relationship between institutions and the parents and families of students – for example, philanthropy and on campus residency. The US approach offers valuable experience which can be adapted to the evolving Australian higher education context.

The uncertainty around the Australian policy context of de-regulated higher education fees, has also contributed to confusion and anxiety about the financial implication to students and their families. Anecdotal evidence across faculties at UNSW, have cited an increase in enquiries regarding academic fees from parents and families.

**Objectives**

With these factors in mind, Student Life and Learning has developed an engagement strategy to address these issues. The strategy aims to:

- Acknowledge the ongoing support provided by parents and families which contribute to student success;
- Provide appropriate and useful information to further support the role of parents and families;
- Provide a clear means of communication for supporter enquiries and;
- Targeted engagement for families who are first generation and low socio-economic status cohorts.

Underlying the strategy was the acknowledgement that students hold a diverse range of relationships and experiences. In order to encompass all parents, partners, grandparents, carers and other significant relationships, the title of Supporter was opted for a more inclusive approach.

**The UNSW Approach – Innovating Supporter Engagement**

The strategy at UNSW sees families/ supporters as partners in the network of support available to the student from home to campus. The university is working towards promoting targeted information to supporters and allowing space for dialogue in the way of enquiries and feedback. For those families who are receptive to this information and interact closely with their students, it is hoped that positive outcomes can be achieved for the student overall.

Additionally, the limited funding available for such an initiative requires the strategy to be developed in such a way that makes it sustainable for the long term. Each aspect of the strategy has been considered to achieve a set of objectives that can easily be integrated into existing business functions of Student Life and Learning.

**Acknowledging the Role of Supporters in the Transition Experience of First Year Students, New Ideas and Emerging Initiatives.**
Currently parent and family engagement is not being measured. This strategy is the first step in being able to quantify the level of supporter enquiries, the type of engagement between supporters and UNSW and creates space for ongoing dialogue with supporters through a range of communication channels.

The steps below are an attempt to begin this process.

- Improve general communication and avenues for support between the institution and parents/families including printed publications and online enquiry channel.
- Establish online content targeted towards parents and families of current students (domestic and international), and measure the unique page views.
- The above communication will promote parent’s understanding of university culture, academic expectations and the suite of support and services available to students.
- Leverage existing events for future and current students as well as transition programs to engage with families through established events.
- Increase university outreach and monitor the level of access of these opportunities. For example, liaise with program coordinators of low SES outreach and make publications available including staff at engagement events.
- Maintain clarity of student privacy policy in relation to parent and family enquiries.

The engagement strategy has been launched in 2015 with the first phase in place. Parents can access relevant information online, including a ‘Supporters of UNSW Students’ guide available in hard and electronic copy at: https://student.unsw.edu.au/supporters. These guides have been distributed to supporters at the UNSW 2015 Info Day event and will again be distributed at the Official Welcome events in late February. Feedback will also be sought from parents and families at the events to inform future evolvement of the engagement strategy.

Following the experience gained during the semester one 2015 transition period, feedback will be collated to further inform our understanding of information needs of supporters as well as ways we can contribute to enhancing the student transition experience.

**Intended Outcomes**

With the initial phase of the strategy, the intended outcomes are to:

- Track the number of supporter enquiries
- Track the issues raised by supporter enquiries
- Encourage enquiries from supporters, and establish a consistent institutional response.
- Establish a procedure to redirect query to appropriate service area to respond adequately for resolution.
- Maintain clarity around privacy issues and disclosure.
- Survey supporters who have made contact with the university to measure satisfaction of engagement.
Acknowledging the Role of Supporters in the Transition Experience of First Year Students

Discussion Points

- How can institutions ensure that family groups who are most likely to benefit the most from support information (i.e., Low Socio Economic Status, Non English Speaking and First in Family groups), can access targeted support information.
- How can we ensure supporter engagement initiatives are sustainable, given the continued funding restrictions in the space of student support services? How can we justify expenditure on supporter engagement?
- In particular for the large numbers of students who live at home, how can the boundaries of supporter engagement be appropriately contained? How much support is sufficient? How do we engage with parents but not prohibit the maturation and development of students to seek help and resolve issues themselves?
Acknowledging the Role of Supporters in the Transition Experience of First Year Students

References


