

Warm-Up Poll

What is one word that describes how you feel when a parent calls, shows up for a meeting, or otherwise gets involved?

bit.ly/AHEADparents



From Helicopters to Lawn Mowers: Exploring Parental Involvement in Disability Services Across Higher Education

Jessica Machado, Naomi Martinez-Jones, Morgan Thompson

We ask you to join us in creating a culture that reflects...

Access and Inclusion

and

Civility and Respect

...this week and in all aspects of our organization.

Poll Results:

What is one word that describes how you feel when a parent calls, shows up for a meeting, or otherwise gets involved?

Agenda

Introductions & Context

Framing the Issue (FERPA & Current Landscape)

Data Insights

Interactive Scenario

Practical Strategies & Recommendations

Q&A

Legal Anchor (FERPA)



PROTECTS STUDENT
PRIVACY



STUDENTS CONTROL
ACCESS TO
INFORMATION



CONSENT REQUIRED
FOR SPECIFIC
COMMUNICATION

The Real Gap

K–12 vs. Higher Education:
These systems are
fundamentally different.

Families often arrive
with:

- Advocacy mindset
- Expectation of involvement

DS offices become
the “translator”

What Current Sources Show

- Parents remain important to college student success
- Parental involvement varies based on gender, race, socioeconomic status
- Balanced involvement (not over- or under-involved) is emphasized
- Colleges are increasing parent & family engagement efforts
- Supportive parenting styles linked to better outcomes
- Limited disability-specific guidance across most resources

What We Know—and Don't Know

What We Know:

- Parent involvement is still critical, but must evolve
- Support remains important for student success and independence
- Colleges need clearer models for balanced parent engagement

What's Missing:

- Parent support is important but under-researched
- The field lacks clear, consistent guidance
- Significant gaps exist in disability-specific research

What Our Data Shows

Experiences of DS professionals working with parents and families

Sample Overview

129 disability services professionals

Representation across:

- Public, private, and community colleges
- Small to large institutions

National geographic spread

Range of office sizes and service models

Frequency of Parent Involvement

63% interact
weekly or more

Only 2% report
no interaction

When Parents Show Up



Intake / registration (86%)



Academic difficulty (85%)



Crisis (82%)



Pre-enrollment (81%)



Accommodation disputes (61%)

Dual Reality & Tension

79% say parent involvement
complicates the process



79% say it **supports**
student success

What's Behind This Tension?

It's not just individual situations; *patterns* showed up across responses

Five consistent themes emerged

Theme 1: The Transition Gap (K–12 → Higher Ed)

- Families arrive with K–12 expectations
- Advocacy roles don't automatically shift
- Confusion about how accommodations work in college
- “[We are often] helping parents understand that there are no IEPs in college.”

Theme 2: Support vs Independence



Parents step in to
help



Students lose
opportunities to
self-advocate



Tension between
helping and
stepping back



“Students allow
their parents to
take over...
which impedes
the process.”

Theme 3: A Range of Parent Involvement

Supportive and
collaborative

Highly involved
or directive

Occasionally
escalated or
adversarial

“Most
interactions are
positive... but the
difficult ones are
loud.”

Theme 4: Boundaries & Student-Centered Practice



FERPA sets the limit



Communication is directed to the student



Clear expectations reduce conflict



“We set expectations from day one, and most families respect them.”

Theme 5: Impact on Staff

Time-intensive interactions

Emotional and high-stakes
conversations

Disproportionate effort for a small
number of cases

“More time and resources are spent
assisting a smaller number of families.”

Bringing it All Together

This is a **systems issue**, not just individual behavior

It's rooted in:

- Transition gaps
- Developmental shifts
- Institutional expectations

It requires **intentional practice**, not reactive responses

Apply It: A Real Scenario

Scenario:

A parent emails insisting their student needs accommodations the student has not requested. The student is present in meetings but disengaged and lets the parent speak.

Prompt:

What's your first move?

What's your priority?

Where do you draw the line?

Share Out



WHERE DID YOU START?



WHAT FELT
CHALLENGING?



WHAT GUIDED YOUR
DECISION?

Disability Services professionals must balance:

- Welcoming parent concern
- Protecting student autonomy and privacy
- Setting clear expectations for independence in college

What Works in Practice

01

Set
expectations
early

02

Keep the
student at
the center

03

Be consistent
with
boundaries

04

Stay
grounded in
your role

Practical Strategies You Can Use

Parent guides / pre-enrollment education

Structured meeting roles (student leads)

Redirect communication to student

FERPA-aligned communication scripts

Staff training for difficult conversations

Parents = support system

Students = decision-makers

DS = boundary + bridge

“Be the guardrails, not the driver.”

A Helpful Reframe

Reflective Questions

- How should staff structure the meeting to ensure the student's voice is centered?
- What are respectful ways to redirect conversation back to the student without dismissing the parent?
- How can staff explain FERPA and privacy boundaries in a supportive, non-confrontational way?
- What strategies help parents transition from primary advocate to supportive partner?
- How can the office reinforce expectations for student self-advocacy early in the process?

Final Takeaways

Parent involvement is not going away

It's not inherently good or bad

It requires intentional structure

This work is about both access and independence

Questions?

Thank you!