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Re-examining the Helicopter Parent: What Every Marketing Professional in Higher Education Should Know

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RE-EXAMINING THE HELICOPTER PARENT: WHAT EVERY MARKETING PROFESSIONAL IN HIGHER EDUCATION SHOULD KNOW

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ABSTRACT

This research seeks to determine specific differences regarding “areas of concern” between helicopter and non-helicopter parents during the college selection process. Research findings indicate that a consistent clustering of economic factors is preeminent for both the helicopter and non-helicopter parent. A comprehensive review of parental concerns and an engaging marketing strategy, “EMS”, are offered.

INTRODUCTION

According to Word Spy, an online educational dictionary and resource, helicopter parent is a concept that has been in existence since 1991. Word Spy can be found at: <http://www.wordspy.com/words/helicopterparent.asp> and provides the earliest citation of helicopter parent as “a nosy grown-up who's always hovering around. Quick to offer a teacher unwanted help.” Word Spy gives credit to Ned Zeman (1991), the author of Buzzwords, found in a *Newsweek* article. In essence, a helicopter parent is a mother or father who seems to interfere with their child's transition to college, and university professionals are not pleased.

In the past fifteen years, not much has changed in the conceptual meaning and tone when using the term helicopter parent. However, two recent national studies warrant serious reexamination of this phenomenon. The first was offered by the Art and Science Group (Bartini and Hesel, 2007), a marketing consultant to higher education. Their national online survey of high school seniors found that students are generally satisfied with the current level of their parents' involvement in the college planning process. They further suggest that students reported very little unwanted or intrusive parental behavior. The second study, reported in the *U.S. News & World Report* (Graves, 2007) reviewed the National Survey of Student Engagement findings and suggested that helicopter parents do more good than harm. The author further avers, “a student who has involved and caring parents does have an advantage — not just in the college application process but in life.” (Graves, 2007)

These national surveys suggest two divergent perspectives regarding the helicopter parent. The first is somewhat negative and views parents as obstacles; the second is somewhat positive and views parents as actively engaged. An opportunistic enrollment manager may ask — is a profitable market niche being ignored?

A BRIEF BACKGROUND

The Chronicle of Higher Education defined helicopter parents as those parents who persistently hover around during orientation, hampering their child's transition to college (Wills, 2005). These parents were intimately involved in selecting and scheduling courses for their child. Rainey (2006) defined a helicopter parent from a quantitative perspective, viz., over thirty percent will contact their child daily, and seventy-five percent will drop in once or twice a semester. Rainey stressed that the number of helicopter parents is large or at least growing. One year later, *The Christian Science Monitor* (2007) reviewed the results of a large study involving 10 public universities. Their findings indicated that anywhere between 60 and 70 percent of parents exhibit some form of “helicopter” behavior, suggesting that this parental behavior is “chronic” and ubiquitous. Since personal contact with helicopter parents appears imminent for university professionals, an immediate and critical question arises. What marketing communications strategies are currently in place for those engaged helicopter parents?

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Thom (2007) summarized the term helicopter parent as an educational label with a negative connotation. Graves (2007) in her review of the National Survey of Student Engagement findings suggests that helicopter parents do more good than harm. For the purpose of this research, the issue of whether a helicopter parent is positive or negative for student development will be left to the sociologist or psychologist.

For marketing in higher education research, it is important to understand common themes that a helicopter or non-helicopter parent may elucidate, specifically for the purpose of developing a strategic competitive advantage. If previous estimates are correct, i.e., up to 70 percent of parents are helicopter parents, three research questions become critical for enrollment managers:

1. Is there a significant difference between helicopter and non-helicopter parents regarding areas of concern prior to enrollment?
2. What questions or areas of inquiry do helicopter and non-helicopter parents request most frequently? And,
3. Can an engaging marketing strategy be developed that addresses the primary concerns of helicopter parents?

METHODOLOGY

An applicant pool [N = 2000] from a regional, private Midwestern university was selected for examination. Applicants were classified and assigned according to the number of contacts each student or parent had with the university prior to enrollment. Helicopter parent was given a three-fold operational definition: (1) parents who had more contact with the admission counselor than their son or daughter; (2) parents who made additional contact with faculty or student affairs directors (i.e. residential, student activities, counseling, etc.); and (3) this group of parents had more contact with the admission department than the average student applicant or parent.

A helicopter parent was assigned to a self-selected group because they made more contact with the admission representative, faculty, or student affairs director than did the applicant, their son or daughter. Moreover, a helicopter parent made more contact with the university than the average parent in the population pool. All parental contact responses were documented using the admission department's internal tracking system. Qualitative parental responses were sorted, categorized, and clustered according to content.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Three questions were posed in this study. First, is there a significant difference between helicopter and non-helicopter parents regarding areas of concern prior to enrollment? Second, what questions or areas of inquiry do helicopter and non-helicopter parents request most frequently? The third question, "Can an engaging marketing strategy be developed that addresses the primary concerns of helicopter parents?", will be addressed in the "Discussion and Research Implications" section.

The findings to the first two research questions are enumerated in Table 1. A functional acronym spells out 'ELEVATE.' However, the 'ELEVATE' model is not listed in rank-order, according to frequency or intensity. It is simply a mnemonic device that a marketing professional can employ as a communication strategy. The actual rank ordering, from most frequently occurring response to least frequently occurring response for helicopter parents is E1; L; V; E2; E3; A; and T. For non-helicopter parents, the rank order is E1; V; L; E2; A; E3; and T. No significant difference was found. Moreover, with respect to proportional concern within each area, no significant differences were found. However, helicopter parents did have proportionally more concern on six out of seven areas than non-helicopter parents prior to enrollment. The percentages listed in Table 1 do not total 100 percent because a helicopter parent could have asked questions in more than one concern cluster area.

Table 1. Areas of Concern for Helicopter and Non-Helicopter Parents: Elevate Model

<u>Concern</u>	<u>HP%</u>	<u>HP Rank</u>	<u>NHP%</u>	<u>NHP Rank</u>	<u>Difference</u>
Expense related	88%	1	74%	1	14%
Living Arrangements	86%	2	67%	3	19%
Extra-curriculars	56%	4	59%	4	-3%
Vocational Questions	71%	3	69%	2	2%
Academic Majors	53%	6	51%	5	2%
Teachers	47%	7	29%	7	18%
Emergencies	54%	5	49%	6	5%

Note. When examining rank-order concerns between helicopter (HP) and non-helicopter parents (NHP) –

Spearman's rho was .929; significant at the .01 level (two-tailed). When examining percentage relationships – Pearson correlation was .855; significant at the .05 level (two-tailed). On six out of the seven areas (binomial probability = .05), helicopter parents exhibited proportionately more concern prior to enrollment.

DISCUSSION AND RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

The research findings suggest that there are no significant differences between the concerns of helicopter parents and non-helicopter parents. However, both exhibit specific areas of trepidation. Helicopter parents may appear to be overly involved with their child's college experience because the proportion of concern per area appears to be elevated beyond the non-helicopter parent. However, the relative area of concern and rank of importance is similar for both. It may not be fruitful to target this niche with a specific communication strategy; the same message is likely to resonate with both helicopter and non-helicopter parents.

The data in Table 1 indicate that three primary concerns — economics, safety, and a mentally challenging environment — should be incorporated into a marketing strategy when engaging parents. Moreover, parents want to be assured that their economic investment — in their child and the university — will pay off. A safe assumption is that parents perceive their engagement and involvement as necessary, irrespective of their helicopter or non-helicopter status.

An engaged parent's role is not that dissimilar to how a day-trader monitors the stock market. However, a portion of previously cited literature on parental involvement indicates that university administrators and faculty would prefer to have parents treat their child's university experiences as a mutual fund, encouraging a "stay-the-course" mentality with a do not touch practice. Yet, as an objective researcher, it is understandable that parents perceive their child as an economic and psychological investment, and to be disengaged at this point would appear imprudent.

The third emerging theme for parents — a mentally challenging environment — addresses the "hidden" economic value of having a university provide quality faculty instruction from a professor (Ph.D.), not a teaching assistant. Parents want to be assured that the intellectual accomplishments of faculty will be shared and taught to their child. Again, the economic benefits of having their child receive a quality instruction appear to be paramount for parents. Therefore, an Engaging Marketing Strategy "EMS" is presented in Table 2 as a working model addressing the third research question — Can an engaging marketing

strategy be developed that addresses the primary concerns of helicopter parents?

Table 2. An Engaging Marketing Strategy "EMS" Model

Primary Concern	Theme	Parents Want
Economics [1]	Helicopter parents view their son or daughter as an investment. University enrollment is a cost/benefit ratio.	Information on cost, tuition, paid internships and career placement.
Mentally Challenging Environment [3]	Faculty degrees (Ph.D.), publications, presentations, honors and recognition.	To know if the faculty member will be in the class or will a teaching assistant provide instruction.
Safety [2]	Knowledge of where and who to turn if there is any kind of personal problem or concern.	To be assured that their child [economic investment] is safe and secure.

RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

This study exhibits all the inherent concerns of examining an intact, self-selected group from a Midwestern university. Because this research applied a stringent operational definition of helicopter parent, generalizing results or combining the findings in a meta-analysis could be problematic. In addition to the exacting operational definition, a helicopter parent in this study was not considered in its typical contextual placement. In this research, students had not yet enrolled and thus were not students at any university. However, given the operational definition, it is reasonable to assume that these "over involved" parents are exhibiting "pre-helicopter" parenting behavior.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE STUDY

The results of this study strongly suggest that marketing communication patterns among student, family, and university officials should not be

segmented into discrete positioning platforms, given the assigned level of parental engagement. It appears that regardless of the level of parental engagement, specific areas of concern exist for all parents and are theoretically related to enrollment. Of special interest could be those parents who had no contact at all (i.e., no phone, email, walk-in, etc.) with the university in the enrollment process. More generally, future studies examining the relationships of parental engagement to matriculation and retention appear warranted.

CONCLUSION

This research study initially posed one general question — regardless of definitional constraints, helicopter or level of engaged parent, are university officials overlooking a marketing opportunity? This research strongly suggests that the economic concerns of college choice are relevant regardless of the level of parental engagement. Therefore, basic economic tenets of investment should be the foundation of an engaging marketing strategy.

Although helicopter parent as a classification was used in this study, it appears to have little relevance when distinguishing between areas of concerns for parents in general. This research suggests that an engaging marketing strategy should include messages known to resonate with all parents. Institutional benefits are likely to include an increased yield, improved retention, and ultimately more satisfied parents.

Finally, this research does not discount the psychological or sociological factors associated with helicopter parenting behavior. However, these findings suggest that it may be more profitable for enrollment managers to focus on what all parents share as concerns rather than segment parents into artificial, and potentially negative, classifications like helicopter parents. Every marketing director in higher education should be aware that helicopter parents share the same concerns as lesser engaged parents — that is, economic justification in their investment. In the end, perhaps it is time to focus on a parent's level of engagement or economic investment — and let the concept of helicopter parent fly away.

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