Marketing to Helicopter Parents: Hovering Headache or Untapped Economic Resource

Oscar T McKnight, Ashland University
Ronald Paugh, Ashland University
Aaron McKnight, University of Chicago
Heidi Parker, Ashland University

Available at: http://works.bepress.com/oscar_mcknight/8/
MARKETING TO HELICOPTER PARENTS: HOVERING HEADACHE OR UNTAPPED ECONOMIC RESOURCE?

Oscar McKnight, Ashland University
Ronald Paugh, Ashland University
Aaron McKnight, Ashland University
Heidi Parker, Ashland University

ABSTRACT

Too often helicopter parents are deemed bothersome to professionals in higher education. However, this research indicates that helicopter parents are a niche market. Thus, incorporating the helicopter parent into a university's official target marketing campaign appears warranted and necessary given the current economic climate.

INTRODUCTION

For more than thirty years, researchers have demonstrated a keen interest in understanding the familial and parental dynamics associated with facilitating students' transition to university life (Chickering, 1969; Tinto, 1975). Kenny (1990), and Kenny and Donaldson (1992) found that "securely attached" students experienced a smoother adjustment to collegiate challenges. Wintre and Yaffe (2000) demonstrated that "authoritative parenting" contributed positively to academic adjustment and institutional attachment. Given these earlier research efforts that are supportive of the "involved parent" dynamic, a serious question emerges regarding the somewhat pejorative term "helicopter parents" and its attendant economic and marketing implications.

Helicopter Parents

Numerous characterizations of "helicopter parents" have emerged over the past two years. Wills (2005) defined "helicopter parents" as those moms and dads who persistently "hover" during orientation exercises, oftentimes hampering their child's transition to college life away from home. He documents the increased usage of "parent bouncers" on college campuses, whose primary task is to keep parents away from their child during orientation and advising sessions. Rainey (2006) defines "helicopter parents" as those who are in frequent contact with their children via cell phone, e-mail, and visits to campus. Damast (2007) offers a similar definition of "helicopter parents," albeit with a new twist—their children are graduate students entering a prestigious MBA program. Finally, a meta-analysis of ten public universities reported in the Christian Science Monitor (2007) indicates that between 60 and 70 percent of parents exhibit some form of "helicopter" behavior.

One could readily assume that "helicopter parents" is a pejorative term with negative implications to university administrators (Thom, 2007). Word Spy [http://www.wordspy.com/words/helicopterparent.asp], an online educational resource, provides a definition of helicopter parents taken from a 1991 Newsweek article (Zeman): "a nosy grown-up who's always hovering around. Quick to offer a teacher unwanted help." Regardless of its definition or characterization, one fundamental economic reality has emerged—"The days of parents dropping off their student on campus and waving good-bye are gone" (Lum, 2006).

Parental Hovering: Economics in Disguise

One rational explanation for parental hovering could be investment in, and protection of, their economic asset. Although no lengthy recitation of escalating costs in higher education is attempted, two salient points must be made: (1) the Pell Grant, which once covered 40 percent of the total cost of a private four-year college education, now covers 15 percent (Kahlenberg, 2007); and (2) the cost of attending college continues to rise faster than the rate of inflation, the Consumer Price Index, and other
economic indicators (Lovett and Mudhenk, 2004). What’s more, this parental hovering does not automatically cease with commencement. It is not uncommon to find parents showing up at job fairs discussing options and negotiating salary and benefits (Armour, 2007). A compelling argument can be made that an important segment of parents commits to a significant economic investment in their child’s education and they want to ensure that this long-term investment pays off. Parental hovering may be an economic calculation, not a psychological inability or failure to sever the umbilical cord.

Enrollment Management: University Economics

Although most academics would argue that the university should not be viewed as a business, the reality is that the university official who neglects the bottom line will inevitably court disaster. University costs continue to escalate in tandem with those rising parental costs. There has been a constant growth in university administrators, partially attributable to “bureaucratic accretion,” an adaptive response to complexity (Gumpourt and Pusser, 1995). University officials must make huge investments in various infrastructures if they want to maintain their academic ranking (Ehrenberg, 2002). There is less public funding for universities, and more of an emphasis on building recreation centers and stadiums to attract and retain students (Physical-Education Facilities/Recreation Centers, 2007). When taken together, university officials have as many economic challenges as the parents. It becomes evident that a stakeholder partnership is necessary.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Currently, there is a paucity of empirical research that addresses demographic and socioeconomic variables and their relationship to the familial dynamic of helicopter parenting. An article by Jayson in USA Today (2007) does acknowledge that mothers of sons do most of the “hovering,” but the bulk of what is known about helicopter parents is still derived from anecdotal evidence. No empirical research could be found that examined the possible relationship between students’ cognitive ability or aptitude and the presence of a helicopter parent in the family.

This research is focused on the marketing and enrollment management considerations pertaining to the helicopter parent phenomenon. Thus, as the basis for hypothesis development, four research questions are posed: (1) Is student gender associated with having a mother or father designated as a helicopter parent?; (2) Does the student’s cognitive ability or aptitude, as measured by ACT/SAT score, predict the presence of a helicopter parent in the family?; (3) Can having a mother or father designated as a helicopter parent predict enrollment?; and (4) Does the presence of a helicopter parent have more predictive influence than the student’s gender or cognitive ability when predicting enrollment?

DERIVATION OF HYPOTHESES

Four hypotheses were tested in this research. These hypotheses assess the demographic relationships and enrollment probabilities associated with the phenomenon of helicopter parenting.

H1: Does the student’s GENDER account for a significant amount of variance when predicting the criterion variable HELICOPTER PARENT?

H2: Does the student’s ACT/SAT SCORE account for a significant amount of variance when predicting the criterion variable HELICOPTER PARENT?

H3: Does the variable HELICOPTER PARENT account for a significant amount of variance when predicting the criterion variable ENROLLMENT?

H4: Does the variable HELICOPTER PARENT account for a significant amount of variance when predicting the criterion variable ENROLLMENT over and above the combined variance accounted for by the student’s GENDER and ACT/SAT SCORE?

METHODOLOGY

All data were derived from a regional, private Midwestern university. The initial student applicant pool [N=2000] was reduced to a sample size of 112 applicants, given research delimitations. A “helicopter parent” was operationally defined along three dimensions: (1) those parents who had more contact with the admission counselor than their son or daughter; (2) those parents who had additional contact with faculty or student affairs directors (i.e. residential, student activities, counseling, etc.); and (3) those parents who had more contact with the admission department than the average student applicant or parent. Students were then assigned to one of two groups: (1) a self-selected parent group (i.e. helicopter parent) that had more contact with the admissions representative, faculty, or student affairs official than the applicant, i.e., their son or daughter; and, more contact than the average parent in the application pool [n = 56]; and (2) a randomly selected
Table 1 - Summary Table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypothesis</th>
<th>R</th>
<th>R-square</th>
<th>Adjusted R-square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Alpha</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>H1: Does the student’s GENDER account for a significant amount of variance when predicting the criterion variable HELICOPTER PARENT?</td>
<td>.018</td>
<td>.0000</td>
<td>-.009</td>
<td>.035</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.851 (NS)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>df=1/112</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H2: Does the student’s ACT/SAT SCORE account for a significant amount of variance when predicting the criterion variable HELICOPTER PARENT?</td>
<td>.103</td>
<td>.011</td>
<td>.002</td>
<td>1.191</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.278 (NS)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>df=1/112</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H3: Does the variable HELICOPTER PARENT account for a significant amount of variance when predicting the criterion variable ENROLLMENT?</td>
<td>.447</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.193</td>
<td>27.47</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.0007 (S)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>df=1/112</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

student group in which their parents had not initiated any known contact with the admissions representative, faculty, or student affairs official [n = 56]. Telephone conversations and/or personal interviews with helicopter parents were documented for later assessment.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The findings illustrating the results of the first three specific hypotheses can be found in Table 1. H1 addressed the student’s gender and its ability to predict helicopter parenting. This hypothesis was found to be not significant. The applicant’s gender bears no relationship to their mother or father being designated a helicopter parent. This is contrary to the information in the USA Today article, but the author cited preliminary research findings, with additional research interviews planned.

H2 examined the student’s cognitive ability and its relationship to helicopter parenting. This hypothesis was found to be not significant. Helicopter parents are equally likely to be involved with their son or daughter, without regard to their academic aptitude or ability.

H3 assessed whether being designated a helicopter parent is important in predicting enrollment. This hypothesis was statistically significant [df = 1/112; F = 27.47; sign. = .0007]. This model had an R = .447 and R-square of .20, implying that being designated a helicopter parent, i.e., contacting university officials more than the student applicant, will predict enrollment.

The findings for hypothesis four can be found in Table 2. H4 focused on whether helicopter parenting is important to enrollment, over and above the combined variance accounted for by the gender and cognitive ability of the student. This hypothesis was important both for forecasting and segment validation. Using model comparison, this hypothesis was found to be statistically significant.

The Restricted Model [Model 1] includes the variance accounted for by gender and cognitive ability; the Full Model [Model 2] includes gender, cognitive ability, and helicopter parent. Model 1 accounts for .011 percent of the variance; whereas Model 2, with the variable helicopter parent, added .198 percent of the accounted variance [Sig. F Change = .0009]. Therefore, being a helicopter parent accounts for a significant amount of variance over and above the variance accounted for by gender and cognitive ability, when predicting enrollment. This research finding implies that being designated a helicopter parent is relatively more important when predicting enrollment than either the student’s gender or cognitive ability.

DISCUSSION AND RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

Four hypotheses were tested, with H1 and H2 found to be statistically non-significant. It is important to note, however, that these two non-significant findings do have implications for enrollment managers. For example, since gender has no significant relationship to being designated a
Table 2 - Model Summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>R</th>
<th>R Square</th>
<th>Adjusted R Square</th>
<th>Std. Error of the Estimate</th>
<th>Change Statistics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 (Restricted)</td>
<td>.106a</td>
<td>.011</td>
<td>-.007</td>
<td>.50324</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 (Full)</td>
<td>.457b</td>
<td>.209</td>
<td>.187</td>
<td>.45212</td>
<td>.198</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

aPredictors: (Constant), GENDER, ACT/SAT SCORE  
bPredictors: (Constant), GENDER, ACT/SAT SCORE, HELICOPTER PARENT

"Hovering" parent, it is not reasonable to assume that a male or female student is more likely to have a helicopter parent. Moreover, since no statistical significance was found between the student’s academic aptitude and having a helicopter parent, it is not reasonable to assume that "capable" or "less capable" applicants will have a helicopter parent.

H3 and H4, found to be statistically significant, bring "gravitas" to H1 and H2. Specifically, they demonstrate the relative importance of being designated a helicopter parent in relationship to enrollment. The actual yield rate elicited in this research indicates the following: For a non-helicopter parent, the yield is 25 percent; for a helicopter parent, the yield is 69.6 percent. This important finding strongly suggests that a helicopter parent increases yield by a factor of three [2.78 to be precise]. The overall yield rate for this class was 26 percent. This finding is important for two reasons: (1) it provides a theoretical basis for forecasting the impact of an applicant having a helicopter parent; and (2) it validates the finding that students do not select this specific university based on their gender or academic aptitude. This last conclusion is important when generalizing to highly selective institutions or gender balancing policies.

From a marketing and enrollment management perspective, it makes good business sense to target this niche, helicopter parents. Marsha Lindsay (2007) argues that the future of marketing is niche marketing, and that the only marketers that survive and thrive will be those who embrace “nichecraft.” This is a narrow niche of parents that exhibits characteristics that create opportunities for astute university officials. If offerings and attendant communications strategies are created that resonate with this niche, a more loyal customer base with all the benefits like more predictable revenue stream and word-of-mouth advocacy, can be generated on the university’s behalf.

RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

This study exhibits all the inherent concerns of examining an intact and self-selected group. However, the most obvious limitation is the representativeness of students and parents examined. The research findings were limited to one admission class in one Midwestern university. Obviously, an examination of a larger, more representative sample is warranted in any attempt to generalize research findings and implications.

This research used an operational definition of helicopter parent, thus generalizing results or combining these findings for meta-analysis could present some difficulty. In addition to the stringent 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. Moreover, these parents may have “hovered” at other institutions prior to “landing” at this university, a design artifact that has been not been controlled. For clarity in future research endeavors, a more precise definition of hovering behavior should be considered. However, based on these preliminary findings, it is reasonable to assume that these “over involved” parents are exhibiting "pre-helicopter" parenting behavior.
IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE STUDY

This research validates the existence of a narrow niche of helicopter parents. However, little is known regarding their key information needs. For example, what “clusters” of information will resonate with this audience? What kinds of offerings and communications messages can be tailored in such a way that university enrollment managers can provide something ultrarelevant and vastly different from competitive institutions? What kinds of instantaneous, interactive feedback are necessary to minimize “buyer’s remorse” as helicopter parents reconsider their initial decision to enroll their son or daughter at the university? Answers to these types of questions would complement the body of professional literature and benefit all those engaged in marketing institutions of higher education.

CONCLUSION

This research offers a valid rationale for developing a niche marketing strategy targeting helicopter parents. Findings suggest that it makes economic sense for university officials to target helicopter parents in their marketing communications strategies. The yield rate is nearly three times that of a non-helicopter parent. Moreover, even though both “partners”—parents and university officials—have their own economic concerns, both will ultimately benefit from the student matriculating until graduation. Helicopter parents may appear to be a hovering headache to some, but to savvy marketers, helicopter parents are an economic opportunity attempting to land.

REFERENCES


Jayson, Sharon (April 4, 2007), “‘Helicopter’ Parents Appear to Defy Socioeconomic Pegging,” USA Today, 5D.


Lindsay, Marsha (June 4, 2007), “Today’s Niche Marketing Is About Narrow, Not Small,” Advertising Age, 30; 32.


Wills, Eric (July 22, 2005), “Parent Trap,” The Chronicle of Higher Education: Short Subjects, A

Wintre, Maxine Gallander and Mordechai Yaffe (2000), “First-Year Students’ Adjustment to University Life as a Function of Relationships With
