I don’t remember much about college orientation. But I remember arriving there. It was a weekday, which meant taking time off from my summer job to make the short drive to campus. As my Jeep rattled to a stop, I looked around at a sea of late-model minivans and SUVs. Whole families were chattering and unloading luggage, toting overnight bags to the shuttle buses that would ferry us all to the student center and an overnight stay in a dorm.

I settled into a seat, looking around at my future classmates sandwiched between their moms and dads. Eavesdropping on conversations about classes and roommates and the merits of double-majoring, I was overcome with a single, bewildered thought: What on earth are all of these adults doing here?

My parents are loving, supportive people. They were enthusiastic about the whole going-to-college thing, even though they’d never done it themselves, and they sent me off with all the blessings and good will a kid could want.
College 101 for Parents

Helping moms and dads help their first-generation students succeed

- College 101 for Parents
  ✔ PREMIUM

- To Help Latinas Get to College, Strengthen the Mother-Daughter Bond ✔ PREMIUM

- 4 Parent-Education Programs and Their Lessons for Colleges ✔ PREMIUM

And still, it never occurred to them — or to me — that they ought to be involved in college.
They had full lives and demanding jobs and a whole additional teenager still at home. And now, thanks to me, they had university bills to pay. Asking them to help manage the logistics of my new life would have been insane.

Colleges expect too much of parents, first-generation and otherwise. Educational institutions’ instincts are to educate, to engage, to command interest and attention.

And while this is wonderful in the classroom or the research lab, it is unhelpful when applied to the mechanics of college life. Especially at the public institutions charged with serving a large percentage of low-income and first-generation students, the enrollment experience is littered with dense instructions on how to pay bills; long presentations on
how to register for parking; downloadable guides with step-by-step instructions for logging into the clunky portal for Residence Life!™ (which is, of course, different from the clunky portal for class registration).

First-generation parents don’t need more instruction on the college process. Colleges need to require less of it.

My bank’s online-payment system does not include a webinar or an orientation session; it just works. My car is infinitely more complicated than my campus parking pass, but I figured out how to operate the car without paging through the manual. It was designed well.

Academic bureaucracy and decentralized governance make the picayune hurdles of campus life seem inevitable. But we can put our shoulders to the wheel when the incentives are right: fund-raising websites tend to be quite sleek. Nobody asks donors to go through a five-part tutorial before they can key in a credit-card number.

We ought to apply that same zeal for simplicity to all of the functional pieces of campus life. There’s virtue in making coursework a challenge; there is no defense for making class registration a crucible. Drawing a firm distinction between the educational mission and all of the administrative hurdles to get there is key to removing barriers for first-generation students and families.

Consider language. We expect college students to read at a college level, to tackle challenging syntax and glean meaning from richly layered text, dense with allusion and idiom. And that’s a fine expectation — for the classroom. It is a disastrous expectation when applied to a list of meal-plan options.

Most news organizations aim for prose at a middle-school level. Marketing firms (and fund-raising offices) aim even lower. That’s not because they assume people are stupid, but because ease and accessibility are important when serving a diverse audience.

People have a wide range of education levels and limited time to devote to instruction manuals. We make better use of that time — and communicate a warmer sense of hospitality — when we make our processes easier.
It’s all well and good to proclaim, "The University is firmly committed to accessibility" (19th-grade level), but so much better if "We work hard to make college affordable" (fourth-grade). The language we use in policy papers is not the language for speaking to parents.

This may sound like small potatoes, but it adds up. I attend financial-aid nights across my state every year, watching as overworked parents sit in cold high-school cafeterias, straining at the complexities of direct and indirect costs, net-price calculators, grants and subsidized loans, debt projections, and repayment plans. Meanwhile, the reps at for-profit schools arrive with cheerful promises and a sign-on-the-dotted line ease.

That’s what we’re up against. The places that entice large numbers of first-generation students are the places that ask little of their parents; that speak in plain terms; that recognize the value of targeted marketing and well-designed user experience to ease the process of enrollment.

To make life easier for first-generation parents — all parents, in fact — let them keep the role they have. Preach the importance of college, and celebrate the value of what their kids are doing. But don’t expect parents to become expert advisers on higher education.

Offering care and encouragement as your child enters a new world is a herculean task. It ought to be enough.

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