2018 Parents Focus Group re College Knowledge_FINAL_10.09.18

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FOCUS GROUP:
PARENTS OF WVU FRESHMEN
-COLLEGE KNOWLEDGE-
RESEARCH OBJECTIVES
At the beginning of this year’s New Student Orientation (NSO), parents/guardians were given a reference tool called “College Knowledge,” – a costly resource. The 60+ page information binder was designed to provide parents with quick answers to questions when they returned home. Those responsible for planning NSO wanted to conduct research for the following reasons:

• To understand if the current binder is well-liked and useful
• To understand the aspects of College Knowledge that are helpful/unhelpful
• To identify important information missing from the binder
• Explore ways in which communication can be improved upon

A separate objective the planners wanted to understand whether the NSO session called “Are We There Yet” is helpful, and determine ways in which it might be enhanced.

METHODOLOGY
We recruited parents of freshmen through the Mountaineer Parents Club to participate in a one-hour focus group during Fall Family Weekend.
PARTICIPANTS
The September 29 focus group consisted of eight parents – five females and two males. Seven out of eight are going through the college experience for the first time. Participants include:

- Ann (a small town outside of Philadelphia)
- Jean (Central VA)
- Keith (Waldorf, MD)
- Charlene (Waldorf, MD)
- Cindy (Jim Thorpe, PA)
- Mark (Martinsburg, WV)
- Sherry (Newcastle, PA)
- Aileen (Connecticut)
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

a) College Knowledge

Parents believe “College Knowledge” is an important resource for parents of freshmen. Regardless of whether parents/students conducted thorough research before NSO or had already heard the information contained in College Knowledge presented at previous WVU events, every parent deemed it useful to have the binder for quick reference. In fact, many have already found the need to use it.

Nonetheless, there is some information missing from the binder that parents deem appropriate to include:

- Safety information – the layout of the residence hall
- Health-related information – where/when students can get medical assistance
- Important dates – a full year’s schedule of key deadlines

College Knowledge can be simplified, as parents see no value in the “pretty pictures” that accompany each of the sections. They have already seen those types of photos in other communications WVU has sent them/their student. Including photos makes it difficult to quickly find what they are looking for.

Distributing the binder to parents before NSO is of little, if any, value. However, giving them information prior to the event would allow them to formulate questions they could get answered at NSO. The idea of sending them an electronic binder (that includes links) in advance of NSO was well-received. Nonetheless, their receiving information in advance does not diminish their desire to have a hard copy binder as well.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

b) “Are We There Yet”

All but one parent was going through the college experience for the first time with their student. Thus, it’s not too surprising that they believe “Are We There Yet” was a valuable session. They appreciated the various areas of the University that were addressed and the composition of the panel. They also felt the amount of time allocated to the session was appropriate.

Those who are familiar with Dr. Jack Byrd’s communications strongly advocated that he speak to parents and/or students at some point during NSO, so this may be an opportunity to hear from him. He is said to provide invaluable, practical, real-life advice.
DETAILED FINDINGS
PURPOSE
These parents’ understanding of the “College Knowledge” binder was that it was a reference tool that would provide answers to questions that might arise once they returned home from NSO. None of them gave it to their student; they kept it for themselves.

The majority took a quick look at it during NSO but didn’t have time to read any of it in-depth. They were told the binder contained some pages in which they could take notes during NSO; some utilized it. However, a few parents recounted that the presenters encouraged them to take photos of the screens rather than take notes during their presentations.
LOCATION
When asked if they knew where their binder was at the present time, every parent could identify its exact location. Each stored it in in a convenient place for easy access:

- The kitchen (a high-traffic area)
- The bedroom (next to his bed)
- A container with all the financial aid paperwork
- A bookshelf (they walk by daily)

HELPFULNESS
Parents were asked to assign the binder a helpfulness score using a 0-10 scale, where “0” is “I couldn’t find any information I needed” and “10” is “I couldn’t do without it.” Everyone gave it a 5.5 or higher.

“We’ve visited many times so we’re kind of the same thing over and over again. But I’d give it a 6 or 7. I don’t really need it but it is laid out nicely. When you go on the Internet sometimes it’s hard to find things. This is laid out in separate sections, which is nice.” – Female, Pennsylvania

“I felt like I got more information from the Parent’s Club, but I like having the binder. My son looked at it after New Student Orientation. He’s wanted to come here since he was three years old and he’s done a lot of research. I don’t know if there is anything in here that he hadn’t already looked up.” – Male, West Virginia

“I used the back page a lot. Maybe I was on the website and couldn’t figure something out and wanted to call someone. So I could find the number right here. A lot of information in here is what we have seen or heard before but this is a central source. I don’t have to go to the website and start tying things in” – Female, Pennsylvania
MISSING INFORMATION

Information that was reportedly missing includes:

- Complete list of due dates
- Roommate information (what to do, etc.)
- Floor diagrams for the dorm rooms (amenities in the residence halls)

“The dorm room layout was something that was my biggest issue. After a lot of searching, I finally found a posting from maybe ten years ago. It flipped and it tuned. It was important that I could look at it and ask myself if this was somewhere where I felt comfortable leaving my only child. I’m quite sure every parent is going through the same thing.”

- Contact information in emergencies
- Schedule of what students can expect during Welcome Week
- Where students can go when sick (and hours)

“She got sick at home and got worse as we were driving her back. I told her to go to the clinic but the clinic was closed for the weekend. It would have been helpful for me to flip through this and tell her what other options she had.” — Female, Pennsylvania
Several parents would have liked the binder to include a structured schedule for Welcome Week. Doing so would enable students and their parents to have a better idea of what the week would entail. Nonetheless, two parents reported that their students did, in fact, receive a detailed schedule.

“My daughter is in the Engineering LLC. I recall knowing that after she moved in, she said a 6:00 p.m. floor meeting with the R.A., etc. Maybe they should consider expanding all the things they afford the LLC.” – Male, Maryland

“I don’t feel like this book provide any information on what they were going to face freshman week after they moved in.” – Female, Pennsylvania

Another acknowledged that having students being given such a detailed schedule is likely contingent on what Resident Assistants choose to do and how well they are trained.

One parent said the Campus Read was not addressed at any time during NSO, so it should have a larger presence or be more prevalent in the binder.

“We were in the bookstore looking around and we saw this book and found out that every freshman had to read it. My daughter texted her roommate and some other students and nobody else knew about it either.” – Female, Virginia

“If we had known their Welcome Week schedule ahead of time, we could have better planed. They went from one thing, to another with no time to shop for anything they needed. That schedule could have been included in the binder.” – Female, Pennsylvania
UNNECESSARY INFORMATION
When parents reference the binder, they typically do so with a sense of urgency. So several deemed the photos unnecessary.

“There a lot of pictures but I think that’s kind of a waste. What I was looking for was content, not action shots.”  – Female, Virginia

“I’ve seen the pictures on the website and in the brochures we’ve received. I want to go to the financial section and see where I need to go on the website instead of spending half an hour on the website.”  – Female, Pennsylvania

While the information in the binder can be found on the website, parents appreciate having the binder.

“I get bogged down in the minutia of the website. I have to ask for something in a specific way. But in this binder, I can just go to that particular section and get my answer.”  – Female, Philadelphia
ALTERNATIVES
Parents were receptive to the idea of being able to read along and take notes concurrently during speakers’ presentations and take notes in each section. However, when it was presented as an alternative to having the binder, they lost interest; they preferred having the binder.

One parent suggested that WVU send the binder before they and their student go to NSO. Being able to review it ahead of time would help elicit questions whose answers they could get during New Student Orientation. Many parents feel they don’t have any breathing time during orientation to read through the binder.

Another suggested that parents receive an electronic version of the binder ahead of time.

“If you want to reference something because these are links, you can pull up the information if you have questions. Rather than read the paper, then go to the website, it would take them to the section. For example, if you have a question regarding financials, it’s a situation that can before very stressful because time is of the essence. This way, they could just click on a link.” – Female, Maryland
“ARE WE THERE YET”

During this focus group, parents were also asked for feedback on the NSO session called “Are We There Yet.” All of these parents attended the session and perceived it as a welcome opportunity to ask questions they felt more comfortable inquiring about some topics without their student being present. About half the parents really liked the session; some had heard the information before.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Likes</th>
<th>Dislikes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not too long</td>
<td>Some found it repetitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Various disciplines addressed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Panel composition</td>
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“I had to sit through an hour before I could ask my session at the end but that didn’t bother me. I was in the mindset that I want to take in as much information as possible. When I asked the question, the answer was immediate, open and honest. I was in the mindset that I want to take in as much information as possible.”

“I think this binder is great…it’s in addition to, not in spite of.”  — Male, Maryland
COMMUNICATION

Parents also shared their thoughts on communication from the University in general.

- It’s important to notify students very early about the importance of activating their email account because they receive a flood of information through that account.
- Dr. Jack Byrd, the professor in the engineering department, was held in high regard for the communications he sends students and weekly emails to parents. He reportedly also sends “bonus” emails that deal with organizations and activities.

  “The minute a student is registered, he starts sending out very practical information...in the summer. He sends emails about everything and anything...about life! We definitely have a gem in the engineering school with that gentleman.” – Female, Maryland

- All the parents – even those who had not heard of him before – agreed that Dr. Byrd is someone parents would benefit from by hearing him speak at NSO.
- Today’s students do not email much; they text. High schools are texting students (e.g. 70% of U.S. public schools use Remind, whose tagline is “The end of unread emails and handouts.”).
- There is also a system that allows students to talk to everyone on their floor at one time, and it’s a secure platform.
- During NSO, the health center should consider having HIPPA forms available for students to give permission on the spot for parents to be contacted.
- One parent said it would have been very beneficial if the University provided more guidance to students on how to choose a roommate, how to contact them, etc.