

## ***Family, Community and Higher Education***

*Edited by T.S. Jenkins*

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Reviewed by:

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Termed “helicopter parents” and “tiger moms” in the media and on college campuses, the parents of today’s generation of college students are often defined as being too “hands-on” in the lives of their children (Vinson, 2013). However, editor of the book *Family, Community, and Higher Education*, Dr. Toby Jenkins, Assistant Professor at George Mason University, presents a counter perspective. With an introduction titled “Family First,” Jenkins argues that families are not just a part of students’ pasts, but are also a vital part of their present and future college success. Instead of expecting students to sever ties with their families and communities, she calls for colleges and universities to play a more active role in strengthening familial bonds for the betterment of students, families, local communities, and college campuses.

Jenkins calls the volume a book of stories each written by people of color. Some of the authors were selected from Jenkins’ own familial and social network, reinforcing the book’s message that family and community bonds matter. *Family, Community and Higher Education* is divided into four sections, with the first section “Family,” being comprised of four stories. The first story provides two voices—a father’s narrative about his experience helping his daughter in the college admissions process given alongside his daughter’s narrative, which is presented through her graduate school personal statement describing the significance of family in her life. Other stories include a woman who dreams of making it out of her “hood” to go to college, only to realize, once in college, that her old neighborhood was where she learned important values such as appreciation of diversity; a first-generation African American male collegian’s story about how the values he learned growing up shaped his ability to succeed in college; and a mother and father of an autistic child who write about their educational expectations and desires for their son, as well as their role as his advocates.

The next section focuses on mothers and begins with an author who tells a story about the generations of women in her family who passed down to her a culture of perseverance that guides her life. This section also includes two chapters that are co-written by mothers and daughters—one story describing the power that the mother’s advice has in her daughter’s academic and personal life and another story that uses a mother’s and daughter’s different generations—Baby Boomer and Net generation—as a theme describing their paths to college degree attainment. The final story in this section is a narrative of a first-generation woman whose single mother prepared her for the demands of college through lessons of discipline and hard work, leading the author to develop a framework for helping low-income, first-generation students and their families navigate college. The third section comprises three chapters focusing on fathers, which include a story of reconnection between a daughter and her absentee father, illustrating that the father’s life, including both his strengths and his mistakes, have acted as valuable lessons in her college and later professional life; a story of a single father and son who refocus their purpose in life during a time of adversity by following their passions together—the father by learning how to build racecars and the son by choosing to pursue a new career in higher education; and a story by Jenkins about her own father, who did not go to college, but who taught her important lessons about leadership, personal relationships, finances, and humility, all of which helped her to navigate college.

The final section, “Community,” begins with a story of an author growing up in a military family who describes the needs of Third Culture Kids such as herself in achieving college access and success. It is followed by the story of a professor who highlights her experiences as a Fulbright Scholar in Tanzania. She describes how she was challenged to reframe her perspectives on teaching and research in order to effectively work with students and develop a classroom community and feminist *ujamaa*. Jenkins concludes the volume with Chapter 14, in which she reiterates her arguments made in the first chapter—calling for colleges and universities to help bridge students with their communities and families as part of the educational experience. Jenkins also highlights that instead of first-generation and low-income students being pushed to “make it out” of their communities, they should be encouraged to engage in and uplift their communities.

This book makes three significant contributions to higher education research and practice. One is by reframing the perception and role of college students’ families and communities. Through each of the stories in this volume, Jenkins reinforces the need for colleges to do more to integrate and embrace families as well as strengthen ties between students and their families and communities. While students learn many lessons in college, *Family, Community and Higher Education* emphasizes that students’ families are often the first teachers, providing some of the most important life lessons that should be integrated into the college experience and used to better college student persistence. Secondly, the authors in this collection of essays illustrate the diversity of family and community backgrounds that are represented on college campuses. These include two-parent and single parent homes, multigenerational families, military families, families of various racial and ethnic backgrounds, and communities encompassing diverse socioeconomic brackets. The authors provide a set of narratives focusing on family that are often unheard or untold in higher education research. Each is written in a style that draws the reader into the authors’ personal lives and college experiences. Finally *Family, Community and Higher Education* provides an asset-based approach to examining the role of family and community in college students’ lives, particularly those from traditionally underrepresented populations. While many of the authors expressed an initial desire to move away from the “hood” or “ghetto” by going to college, they often found that many of their most important life lessons and strength to persist in college came from interacting with their home communities. Jenkins emphasizes that colleges can either nurture students’ family and community roots or tear them up, and she uses her own experiences as a researcher and practitioner to demonstrate how students can be encouraged to give back to their communities instead of separating from them.

In light of the increasing diversity of college students in the U.S., Jenkins presents a timely message about the importance of acknowledging students’ backgrounds and connections to their families and home communities; however, there were two main limitations to the book. While Jenkins provides recommendations for college practitioners in the final chapter and shares some of the innovative practices she has implemented, there still was a lack of concrete strategies for what practitioners could do to actively support the integration of students’ families with college life or what students could do to bridge the gap between home and school. Another limitation is reflected in the structure of the book and the disjointed nature of the stories. Although *Family, Community and Higher Education* is divided into four sections, there is not an explicit sense of connection across the stories or sections that pulled them together cohesively. While each story is unique and rich on its own, the book would have benefitted from a brief introduction or conclusion for each section in order to bring the stories together as a unified narrative and provide readers with strategies for implementing the messages held within the stories.

Despite its limitations, *Family, Community and Higher Education* provides powerful messages about the importance of family and community to college students' lives and to transformative education on college campuses. The stories are short and easy to read, yet they deliver vivid and compelling narratives. *Family, Community and Higher Education* offers numerous topics of discussion for new college students, including family values, self-discovery and identity, service to community, social justice, challenges and resilience in the transition to college, and appreciation of diversity. One strategy is to use the book as summer reading, encouraging both students and their families to read it together as preparation for the college transition. *Family, Community and Higher Education* may also be an ideal reader for students in summer bridge programs or programs targeting underrepresented students who may relate to the stories told by authors who embody populations that are often in the minority on college campuses. In addition, the insights and lessons found within each story can be particularly useful to student affairs practitioners who work with underrepresented students, student success programs, family programming initiatives, and community engagement initiatives. While Jenkins does not provide all of the answers, this book can inspire and challenge practitioners to be more intentional in partnering with families and communities as educational allies in order to work together towards the goal of achieving greater college student success.

#### References

Vinson, K. (2013). *Hovering too close: The ramifications of helicopter parenting in higher education*. *Georgia State Law Review*, 29(2), 423-452.