Haverford parents can now rest a little easier when time and distance prevent their children from coming home for important holidays that occur during the school year. After a successful start last fall, Home for the Holidays is gearing up for 2004-2005, preparing to provide interested students with a warm, caring alternative to staying on campus during these special family times.

Created by the Haverford Parent Volunteers (Philadelphia region), in conjunction with the College’s Office of External Relations, the program matches students with host families living in the Philadelphia area. These hosts are families of current Haverford students, and they are eager to welcome others to their holiday gatherings. Students may opt to stay just for a meal, or they may choose to spend a night or weekend. Hosts try to accommodate their guests’ schedules, and they provide transportation if needed.

Students may participate in Home for the Holidays during the Jewish High Holidays, Thanksgiving, Hanukkah, Christmas, Passover, and Easter. The entire Haverford student body receives general information about the program at the beginning of the school year, followed by a brief e-mail reminder and sign-up sheet a few weeks before each holiday.

Home for the Holidays allows students to choose from among several host families and even allows them to sign up with friends for placement together. A number of students took advantage of this option last year and seemed to feel more comfortable having a friend with them. Solo participants, however, also reported feeling very welcome and at ease.

The program takes into consideration any personal restrictions, such as pet or smoking allergies, as well as dietary preferences. Last year, we were pleased to be able to offer households with vegetarian, kosher, and Thai cuisine!

As the coordinator of the program, I have felt most rewarded by the overwhelmingly positive feedback from the participants. After each holiday last year, I e-mailed students and hosts to thank them for participating and to solicit their comments and suggestions. All of the students who replied told me the experience had been very enjoyable. They specifically mentioned how hospitable and accommodating their families had been — and how much they had enjoyed the plentiful home-cooked meals.

One young woman who came to my own home last spring told me she had loved joining a family group that included young children, college kids, parents, and grandparents. She explained that although students have always appreciated the religious services and holiday meals sponsored by campus religious organizations and the Dining Center, she had found these events somewhat depressing because everyone there was the same age. She had missed spending holidays in a home setting, surrounded by a multigenerational family.

Another student paid me the ultimate compliment by saying that being with my extended family reminded him of being with his own. (At least I’m assuming that was a compliment!) A host family wrote to me shortly after Thanksgiving. They confided that — since most of their relatives live far away, and one of their Thanksgiving “regulars” couldn’t make it that year — they would have been “forlorn” without the presence of their two Haverford guests. “From our vantage point,” they added, “the program gets an A+, and we are looking forward to participating next year.”

That’s music to my ears.

If you are a local parent and would like to be a Home for the Holidays host this year, please contact Leah Gordon Schutzman at WriteOn333@aol.com or (610) 356-3352. If you are an out-of-town parent, please encourage your son or daughter to give the program a try.

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Grade Inflation

by Tom Tritton, President of Haverford College

Consider two scenarios: (1) You are a serious student who works hard in all academic pursuits. In one particularly challenging course you put in an extra amount of effort and receive an A as your final grade, but are disappointed to learn that almost all of the other students also received the same grade, thus allowing little distinction to your accomplishment. (2) You are a serious student who works hard in all academic pursuits. In one particularly challenging course you put in an extra amount of effort but receive a B-. Your work seems as good as those who earned As but the professor believes in dispersing the grades on a seemingly (to you) arbitrary curve.

Which scenario is accurate? Probably both, and many students have experienced versions of each. Which is worse? Probably neither, as both situations represent a version of contemporary college life that seems inescapable.

But which scenario relates to grade inflation? Number (1) surely sounds like grade inflation in action since everyone in the class received high grades. But it is possible that all those receiving As met the expectation of high achievement that was established by the professor. And what exactly do we mean by the term “grade inflation”? The “grade” is easy to define, but “inflation” as commonly used means an increase in price relative to the underlying quality. Can this be measured with any degree of accuracy in a learning context?

Scenario number (2) could be an effort to combat grade inflation by holding students to a higher standard than they might have expected. And after all, isn’t it true by definition that half of all students are below average? But what point is there to penalizing a student who performs better than cooperation among students and faculty to work together for worthy goals. But maybe I’m just a hopeless idealist...

Nonetheless, it was agreed by the College faculty last May that grading standards will be the subject of more focused discussion in the coming year.

The causes for grade inflation are both varied and debatable. The two that make the most sense to me are: strong social pressure among both faculty and students to support self-esteem, and a consumer-based culture that leads people to feel entitled to “get what you pay for.” Remedies also are varied, including recalibrating grading scales, adding the overall grade distribution for an entire class to each student’s transcript, and assigning internal grades for determining true merit and external grades that will be used for graduate schools, employers, etc.

My own view is that the competition for top grad schools, jobs, and other placements is not with the students of decades ago, so grade inflation, if it really exists, has lifted everyone equally. More important, I think all students should receive a grade that indicates how well they performed in learning the material at hand. If they all earn an A, it is not a sign of a problem, but of success. This outlook seems preferable to a system that promotes competition for a limited number of top grades, rather than cooperation among students and faculty to work together for worthy goals. But maybe I’m just a hopeless idealist…
A DAD'S POINT OF VIEW: Right off, let me succinctly express my feelings about my son's graduation:

SOB!

There. That feels better.

As we observed the traditional Quaker moment of silence before the ceremonies commenced, I finally contacted my emotions. I had been so busy in the previous weeks helping my son contact his and comforting my wife (who was too much in contact with hers) that I had not paid adequate attention to my own.

In the months leading up to May 2004, each time I asked my son how he felt about graduation his answers fluctuated wildly between giddy elation and brooding pessimism, between confidence and despair. Nor was it different among his classmates. At any given moment they alternated between manic excitement and depressive trepidation as they contemplated the exit from the greenhouse of school and sniffed the intoxicating aroma of the loam into which their roots would soon be replanted. It all reminded me of the emotional stages Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross identified in another context: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and, ultimately, acceptance. Perhaps the big difference is that our young seemed to be experiencing all of these feelings at one and the same moment.

But so was I. And in those thirty seconds of silence I realized that graduation is not just a passage for our children but a passage for ourselves as well. Haven't we too been basking in denial that our son or daughter is on a trajectory of independence from us? Don't we feel anger and depression toward a world structured so that after we produce and nurture children, they leave us? And bargaining? The lawn party on Founders Green after the ceremony is a festival of bargaining — Oh, let's sit here in the sun just a minute more, take one more photo of our little boy, our baby girl. We linger on the perimeter of the campus and take it all in for another moment or two, the serene, pastoral, exquisite beauty of it all. Why can't this last forever?

But because we are adults we know that it cannot. And as we manhandle the last duffle into the trunk of our car and insert key into ignition, there is that breathtaking epiphany that our child is an adult too and knows the same thing. And so do the ducks as we drive past their pond for the last time. “Accept,” they quack at us as we roll down the window and bid them farewell. “Accept!” We acknowledge their message with a brave wave, then turn onto Lancaster Avenue and go forth into a future filled, as one speaker told us that morning, with unlimited promise.

— Richard Curtis P'04

A MOM’S POINT OF VIEW: The first day of senior year, so different from that first day three years ago, epitomizes my son’s metamorphosis as this time Keith drives off on his own, so calm and confident about what lies ahead: GRE, grad school applications, senior thesis, grad school responses (okay, maybe not totally confident), and graduation. As a mother in my usual position on the sidelines, I experience a panoply of feelings—happiness, excitement, vicarious anticipation, and pride. Haverford has been ideal for Keith, as he has made full use of the opportunities provided—academic, social, and extracurricular (intramural fulfillment of his basketball fantasies). So, is it surprising that a month later, when a letter arrives from Haverford asking if we want to order a yearbook and place an ad for Keith, as I review the touching collection of sample ads, I burst into tears?

It’s a collage of feelings I am experiencing, with surface images obscuring underlying layers that suddenly pop into focus unexpectedly, not unlike the picture of the old crone who suddenly morphs into a young woman as you stare at it. There is the simple image of driving through the campus to meet Keith on a brilliant fall afternoon and feeling thoroughly contented; then I recognize the image in the larger context of time—that this is the last time we would see Haverford in the fall, and I am already nostalgic. Listening smugly to friends talking about the agonies of the college application process, I feel relief that I have two years’ respite before revisiting the process for my daughter; then it hits me that I am in the middle of the parallel process as Keith applies to grad schools, and I feel a sense of shock that I accept this emotional distance so easily.

It’s all about his metamorphosis from childhood into adulthood and my parallel metamorphosis as a mother. I hold the image of my 21-year-old son with his goatee, sipping wine on his birthday, and I can just as easily picture him as the curly-haired baby in a stroller. Up until now, I have been in the audience or on the sidelines for all of his major life events—sports events, concerts, award ceremonies, and all those first days (kindergarten, high school, and then college). It was with that first day of college that the major shift began, and the sidelines became increasingly farther away from the events, as he called from his hotel room on his graduate school interviews. On a day-to-day basis, I am fine with the changes, but it is only when I let the images morph into nostalgia for the past or to projections into the future that I feel the tears start.

Tonight was Keith’s last radio show. The past few weeks, he has been mentioning a number of “last times,” but he says it with a different tone than I hear it. For me, it is an ending of his childhood, but for him it is more a beginning. He is now heading toward the first day of something entirely new where he will step off on his own. How do I feel?

When I can stay in the present, I feel thrilled, excited, and proud—and a little worried that I will embarrass him by crying at his graduation.

— Ann Summer P’04
Tom King: Safety! We do our best to keep students and the rest of the community safe. Coming to college is a big change and can put a lot of pressure on young adults. Most students handle this remarkably well. A few — perhaps 5 percent each year — have some difficulty adjusting. We’re here to help channel them all through the passage to honorable adulthood by reducing the risk of misbehavior turning into something that follows them the rest of their lives. Students learn as much outside the classroom during their time here as they do in class, and we consider ourselves teachers, albeit outside the classroom.

FG: How do you do all that?

TK: We try to provide a scaffold for them. We’re the most visible college personnel on campus who have to say no to students once in a while. What they call the “Haverbubble” is a challenging environment for us here at Security. It’s secluded, it’s beautiful, the students feel very comfortable and protected, which is all good — but then they’re not always as careful as they might be. Sometimes they leave laptops or wallets lying around the gym or a lab; they see strangers wandering around campus and think nothing of it.

Much of our job involves communication. We have to walk a fine line between raising students’ awareness and not alarming them. We meet and dialogue with students every chance we get — giving presentations during Customs Week, meeting with the Honor and Students’ Councils, and meeting regularly with the Safety and Security Committee (made up of student, faculty, and staff representatives). We’ve instituted a bike patrol, which lets us interact more with the students and also improves response time. We’ve also augmented our website (http://www.haverford.edu/security/).

Most important, we want the students to feel we’re approachable and user-friendly, that they can call us any time they need help or sense something’s wrong. We can’t always give them the answer they want to hear, but they know we’ll treat them with professional courtesy. It sounds clichéd, but I’m really big on reasonable accommodation. If we can do something to help, we do it; if not, we try to explain why.

We are perceived as part of this community because we emphasize the importance of treating everyone like you would want members of your own family treated.

FG: Can you say more about the Haverford community?

TK: Sure. The students, staff, and faculty here are among the best and the brightest, and the Social Honor Code and the tradition of self-governance put a lot of personal responsibility on the students themselves. Frankly, when I first came here, that idea made me really nervous. I wouldn’t have believed it if I hadn’t seen it for myself, but it works brilliantly! The students really do watch out for each other, and the tremendous amount of responsibility they learn here serves them very well in the real world.

More often than not, we find that when there’s a problem we can kick it back to the students and they’ll resolve it themselves. This can be anything from disrupting the card-access system to ignoring the Alcohol Policy. For example, the students here are brilliant and some figured out ingenious technological ways to disable the card system just after it was installed. Instead of being heavy-handed, we asked them how they felt about the issue — adding that it’s an open campus and they’re potentially endangering others in their dorm. This prompted a discussion about why interfering with the card system is a bad idea, and the tampering stopped.

Communication is important. For example, if a problem develops at a party, we typically get a call before serious trouble starts. Students have to help us help them by being our eyes and ears and watching out for each other. If someone is nodding out at a party, they know it’s better to call us and have someone else assess the situation. A simple phone call can avert a serious problem.

FG: But it isn’t ‘anything goes,’ right?

TK: Not at all. The legal age for drinking alcohol in Pennsylvania is 21, but we have to exercise discretion and common sense. Totally banning alcohol is not the answer — students who are inclined to drink underage would just drive off campus, into cars and bars, and that would make the situation far worse. If we have to, we call the local police and students are cited. But we almost always get voluntary compliance with the Alcohol Policy, which speaks volumes about the quality of the students as well as the effectiveness of self-control and self-governance.

A couple of years ago, the police were called to a party on campus, and an intoxicated student told an officer that, although she was only 19 years old, she was allowed to drink here because it was private property. The next sound she heard was the click of handcuffs, and she was led away. This was a public gathering, so the incident was highly educational for a lot of students. Haverford is private property, but the laws of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania still apply. (The student received a citation for underage drinking.)

FG: How safe is the campus? Can someone walk home at three in the morning?

TK: It’s very safe, but not perfectly safe. We tell everyone if they have any trepidations walking around campus to please call for an escort. Most of our reported crime involves theft. The thefts that occur here are mostly targets of opportunity — typically something lying around in plain view.

FG: What about the gate arm?

TK: Students aren’t always responsible for the breakages [breaking the gate arm to the apartments is considered a Haverford tradition], but we tell them that the gate arm has a serious function, which is to keep cars off the path. In addition, the money spent repairing the broken gate arms could be going to something useful. Sometimes the message gets through and the gate arm goes unbroken for a while. Then it starts up again. There’s always a new challenge on campus!