



*"Don't Tell Me What to Do:
Just Send Money"
2nd edition*

Helen E. Johnson and
Christine Schelhas-Miller
St. Martin's Press, 2011

Review by Jo Calhoun

Every fall, Helen Johnson's conversation with parents at DU's family orientation is the highlight of the program. Helen is bright, funny, accessible, and REAL, as is her and Schelhas-Miller's seminal book for parents of college-age students. All of us in the business of relating to parents were excited to see this classic updated, and it does not disappoint.

Many of the topics of interest to parents of college students are timeless. Johnson and Schelhas-Miller address them beautifully. The "Big 3" are still the big 3 -- drinking, drugs and sex. Although college students' "substance of choice" may vary over time, the kind of exploration that students engage in during college can cause emotional and physical risk for them and significant anxiety for their parents. It's important for parents to educate themselves about the nature of these risks and to have direct conversations with their students about expectations. Johnson's and Schelhas-Miller's suggestions are right on the mark. Parents are well-advised to learn how students are supported at their college or university. Enrollment in college represents a legal "sea change" in terms of students' records, which are now owned by the student, regardless of who is paying the bills. Federal privacy laws place some constraints on parents' unconditional access to student information. Nevertheless, most student services operations are happy to partner with parents on issues related to their students' well-being. Parents need to know who and when to call.

Students' search for identity and autonomy will always be a crucial topic for parents to understand. If anything, in the decade since the Johnson/Schelhas-Miller book was first published, this issue has become even more challenging for college students. Jeffrey Arnett's groundbreaking research on "emerging adults" will be helpful to parents of "20-somethings," and "Don't Tell Me What To Do" is a good starting point as well. The reality of the "emerging adult" model -- which describes the extended period of years of uncertainty and searching that our students experience -- and the weak economy and

job market combine to make college graduation a much less predictable gateway to the establishment of a profession -- or to securing ANY first job, for that matter. This is hard for students. It is even harder for their parents, who have traditionally seen college graduation as a secure launching pad to professional success and financial independence.

In this second edition, Johnson and Schelhas-Miller have added an important new chapter on "The Electronic Umbilical Cord," which tackles how parent-student relationships have changed with the 24/7 connection that technology has enabled. Parents should think through how they want to establish communication patterns with their students that do not inadvertently create an ongoing, unhealthy dependence on the part of the students. This is a huge challenge that the authors address repeatedly in their book.

An additional change from 2000 to 2011 is symbolized by the title of one chapter, which has been revised from "One Thousand Dollars a Week for a College Education" to "\$2,000 a Week for a College Education." So noted!

If the hypothetical parent-student dialogues in the book are a bit stilted and unnatural, know that the points they illustrate are on target. In the end, we all have to communicate with our children in ways that work for our own families. What the book's dialogues have in common is emphasis on parents not rushing in to do problem-solving that should belong to the student.

Through the years, what remains constant for parents of college students is the need to identify and clarify the balance between unconditional support for our growing child-adults and insistence on accountability, responsibility, natural consequences, and high ethical standards for them. If you read one book on parenting college students, read this one. Johnson and Schelhas-Miller are experienced professionals and successful parents. Their advice is "right on the money." Being a parent of a college-age student can be one of the most satisfying stages of parenting. But it requires a real relationship shift -- as the authors say -- "from supervisor to consultant." Be prepared -- and enjoy!

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