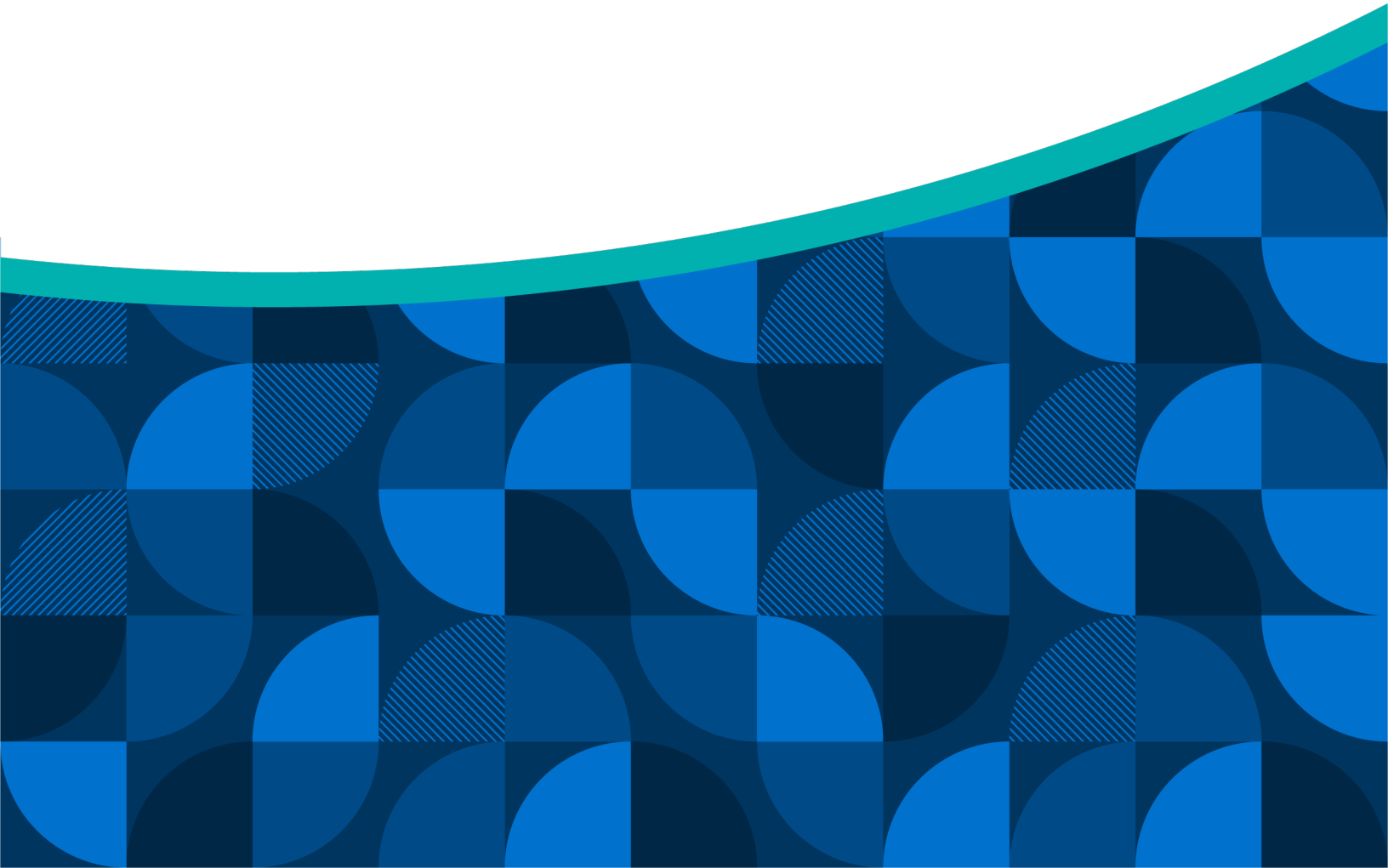




CASE STUDY

Parent and Family Affinity Groups

How the University of Alabama Brings Black Families
Together to Share Resources and Community



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The Limits of Typical Parent and Family Involvement

Students Relying on Under-Informed Parents

Parents and families offer students critical support during transition times in their college lives. But colleges fail to fully include parents in their students experience once students are enrolled in school. Typically, parents and families attend an orientation session and a campus visit during parent and family weekend and receive semi-regular updates via newsletter. These brief interactions and reactive resources fail to provide an ongoing sense of community for parents and often require them to seek out information on available resources to aid their student.

Some colleges have informal groups on Facebook for parents and families that can provide a sense of community for them, but these spaces may not provide the best forum for accurate sharing of campus resources and Black families may not feel centered in these groups.

This is especially important given that roughly 45% of students rely on their parents and families for emotional support when stressed, according to a survey by College Pulse. Some students don't want to use resources such as Counseling and Psychological Services or crisis help lines and prefer to lean on their parents for support. But if students are turning to their parents in times of need, and their parents are underinformed about campus resources, students may not receive adequate support.



Typical Parent and Family Practices Lack Community Building Opportunities

Email newsletter to parents/families sent quarterly, in English

Parent/family coordinator shares **personal contact info** for 1:1 support

Black and Latine families convene **once, typically at first-year orientation**

Large Portion of Students Looking to Parents for Support



45% Of students say they **turn to parents/family for support** when stressed

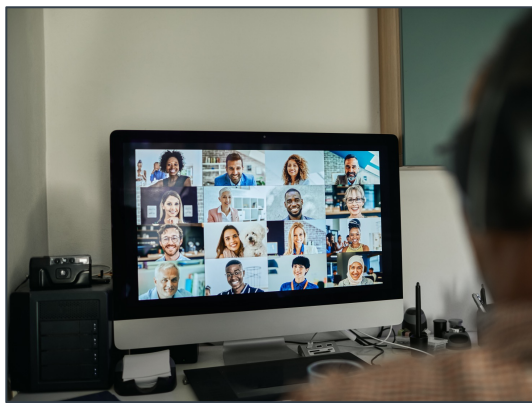
Three Channels for Communicating with Families

Affinity Groups Combine News, Expert Conversation, Informal Discussion

The University of Alabama developed [affinity groups](#) where parents and families build community and learn about campus resources. Using [CampusESP](#), a third-party vendor for parent and family engagement, the University of Alabama provides parents and families with a platform to interact with posts, ask questions of staff, and receive personalized newsletters – keeping parents informed about deadlines and campus news.

Parents get an email that invites them to join CampusESP when their student starts at the institution. Once signed up, parents and families can opt-in and self-identify to join affinity groups for single parents, military families, parents of LGBT students, or members of a specific race or ethnicity. This process allows them to receive tailored information about their affinity group and connect with people from similar backgrounds or whose children are a part of the same community. The affinity groups provide parents and families with a wider community to lean on when they have questions and concerns that campus staff may not be able to answer. CampusESP itself is the first channel where parents and families connect and communicate. On CampusESP, the University of Alabama provides personalized newsletters and email announcements, which help parents and families to stay informed about what's happening on campus.

The office of Parent and Family Programs hosts Zoom meetings once or twice per semester for each of its nine affinity groups, and these provide a second channel for parent/family communication. During the Zoom meetings, parents and families learn about campus resources, connect with other families, and hear from faculty, staff, and speakers. Recent guest speakers for the Black UA Zoom sessions have included the Black Staff and Faculty Association. Meetings are typically held in the evening to accommodate parents' work schedules and different time zones and are spread throughout the semester. Organizing the parent and family Zoom sessions takes one staff member less than an hour per month.



1 hour video chat meetings held 1-2 times per semester



Afternoon/evening timing is convenient for most time zones and schedules



Mix of casual chat and guest speakers (e.g. Black Faculty/Staff Association)



Meetings use Zoom so families can access by computer or phone

The third communication channel the University of Alabama uses is Facebook. One of the most successful affinity groups for parents at the University of Alabama is the Black UA group. On the Black UA Facebook page, parents and families post pictures of their students, connect their students with each other, and broach difficult topics that may impact their community more than other affinity groups, such as bias incidents. Other topics on the Black UA Facebook page include how to find a campus resource, campus safety for Black students, anti-racist efforts on campus, and posts celebrating student 'wins.'

By utilizing CampusESP, affinity group Zoom sessions, and Facebook groups, parents at the University of Alabama form connections with each other, introduce their students to each other, and create a sense of community online and on campus.

Connecting Both Families and their Students

As Membership Grows, Black UA Participants Build a Sense of Belonging

Affinity groups for parents and families can be a relatively light lift for institutions as they don't require significant resources. But they have a large impact on how parents and families relate to the school and their ability to support their students.

The CampusESP page for the Black UA Affinity Group has roughly 750 members, and open and clickthrough rates for posts on the page are 68% and 10%, respectively. Participation in the Black UA affinity group's Zoom meetings has increased from 15 participants to over 60 participants at the most recent Zoom meeting.

These virtual connections show that families can build communities online that translate to campus and that when parents form relationships, they help students feel a sense of community too. Parents use the Black UA Facebook group to coordinate tailgates and share information about when they plan to visit campus, share personal experiences with the school, and connect their students with each other, creating a wider sense of belonging for their students.

Participation in Black UA Continues to Grow

750+

Family members joined Black UA as of August '22

60+

Family members joined Black UA's most recent Zoom meeting

Black UA's Facebook Group Fosters Sense of Community



"Because the families are connected, **students are connecting as well**... so outside of the parent connections, that helps them matriculate to graduation and just stay connected."

*Tawanna Brown
Assistant Director, Parent & Family Programs
University of Alabama*



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