



AHEPPP Journal

VOLUME 1, NUMBER 1 • SPRING 2010

About the AHEPPP Journal

The AHEPPP Journal is a twice-yearly journal that publishes scholarly essays, research-based articles, personal essays, and reviews that address important issues related to parent/family services and that make an original contribution to the knowledge base about parent/family programs and services in higher education. The guiding editorial policy is that articles are of high standard, while including practical information of interest to parent/family professionals.

Membership and subscriptions

The Journal is provided online at no cost to members of the Association of Higher Education Parent/Family Program Professionals. Subscription rate for non-members is \$70 annually. For membership information, contact AHEPPP at 3800 Arapahoe, Ste. 210, Boulder, CO 80303, or send a request to Sarah Schupp at sarah@ahheppp.org.

Journal submissions

To submit a manuscript or article for consideration for publication, please refer to the guidelines at <http://www.ahheppp.org/ahheppp-journal/>.

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We are pleased to welcome you to the inaugural issue of The AHEPPP Journal, a publication produced by the Association of Higher Education Parent/Family Professionals (AHEPPP) to provide scholarly essays, research-based articles, and information about the history, development, and delivery of parent and family relations in higher education.

In this first issue, you will notice that the authors of the lead article, "The Denver Manifesto," are also the board members of AHEPPP. We assure you, we do not intend to use the Journal routinely as a venue for board opinions and discussions, but we concluded that it was important to publish "The Denver Manifesto" in its entirety in this inaugural volume, as an introduction to the founding principles of the association.

As the article explains, nine parent and family program professionals gathered in Denver, Colorado, in the fall of 2007 to discuss among colleagues the principles behind providing services to parents and family members of college students. Over the course of a long weekend, the Manifesto was outlined as a way to define the theory and context for college-parent/family relations. As a complement to the Manifesto, a comprehensive set of best practices for parent and family services was developed, and a clear need was identified for the establishment of a professional organization representing parent/family professionals.

Discussion continued over the course of the following 15 months, and AHEPPP was formally established as a non-profit organization in January 2009 with the nine Manifesto participants serving as the founding board of directors.

During the first year of the association, more than 40 colleges and universities became inaugural members of AHEPPP, a website and member listserv were developed, and the board established a timeline for its first national conference, to be held in Boulder, Colorado, in November 2010. The AHEPPP Journal rounds out the first year of AHEPPP accomplishments.

In addition to the Manifesto, this inaugural issue of the Journal includes a research report of a study on communication patterns between college students and their parents, as well as an article on the history of one of the nation's longest-running parent programs, Miami University Parents & Family Programs.

We encourage parent/family practitioners, researchers, and graduate students to submit articles for future issues of the Journal. Please see the guidelines at <http://www.aheppp.org/aheppp-journal/>

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The Denver Manifesto: A document supporting intentional programs designed to serve the parents and families of undergraduate college and university students

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Purpose of Document

In the fall of 2007, nine parent program practitioners agreed to convene and consider, from a strategic perspective, parent and family services at the college/university level. The participants, representing a diverse cross-section of colleges and universities, proposed to define principles and policies for working with parents of college students. These definitions were based on their experience in developing parent and family services for their constituencies, their knowledge and expertise from working with students and parents, and their observation and validation of student success when family members are committed to providing students with well-informed guidance and support.

“The Denver Manifesto” is intended as a rationale for providing services and information to parents and family members of college students. It also serves as a contextual framework for an associated list of best practices and standards for the field of parent and family programs and as the framework for the formation of a professional organization for parent/family program professionals within higher education. It may also function as a guideline for new practitioners and a source of insights for veterans.

Philosophical Statement

“When we treat parents as valued partners and give them information about student development, they can be our best allies in student success, retention, and graduation.”
(Savage, 2007)

Parents and families of undergraduate students are important stakeholders in institutions of higher education, and they have a significant emotional and financial investment in their student’s success. In this document, the authors have cited evidence demonstrating that students continue to seek and benefit from the involvement of their parents in their education during the college years and beyond. Additionally, recent research is showing that parental involvement has a positive impact on students’ transition to and success during the college years. Increasingly, higher education administrators are recognizing that many parents are influential, not just as supporters of their students, but also as local, state, and national opinion leaders who discuss with friends, prospective students, donors, voters, and taxpayers the effectiveness and quality of the institution. When an institution commits to involving parents in appropriate and effective ways, it produces an outcome of parental support for student success and a group of life-long advocates eager to promote and support its vision and mission.

Brief History of Parents Programs

Parental involvement at the college level is not a new concept. Parent programs can be traced to at least 1916 at Miami University of Ohio and to the 1920s when “Mothers’ Clubs” and “Dads’ Clubs” were part of the traditions at Texas A&M University, Southern Methodist University, Stanford University, and other higher education institutions. Whether programs were initiated by parents themselves to provide support and activities for students on the college campus or whether students were taking the initiative to plan activities to honor their parents and families, parents have held a place of importance on college and university campuses for nearly a century (Wartman & Savage, 2008).

From In Loco Parentis to In Consortio Cum Parentibus

Institutions of higher learning historically acknowledged a need for a form of parental influence through *in loco parentis*, a central tenet of colleges in the United States

throughout the history of higher education by which colleges and universities understood their role as including a responsibility to monitor the behavior of their students (Wartman & Savage, 2008). Not until the 1970s were college students formally acknowledged as adults with the introduction of the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and what may be called the “interruption years of college parenting.” That interruption was short-lived, however, as parent information sessions, parent orientation programs, and other practices emerged slowly during the 1980s with an increasingly rapid expansion during the 1990s and into the 21st century (Wartman & Savage, 2008).

FERPA, which was introduced in 1974, is not strictly a higher education act. It applies to educational records throughout a child’s academic life, and it provides three basic rights to parents of students under 18 in public schools and to college students of any age:

1. The right to inspect and review the student’s educational records;
2. The right to challenge the content of the records;
3. The right to consent to the disclosure of the records.

From the higher education perspective, FERPA was an acknowledgment that college students should be regarded as adults, and therefore responsible for sharing academic and financial information at their discretion. The arguments heard on college campuses across the country were validated: “If we can be drafted, serve in the armed forces, and die for our country, we should be treated as adults.”

That perspective, however, has shifted over time. The choice of whether and where a student will attend college is often a family decision. Many parents feel that they have a significant financial and emotional investment in their student’s education and should have access to academic and financial records, and there is evidence their students agree. Students are involving their families in many of the decisions they make about majors and college choices, and they willingly consent to institutions sharing academic and financial information with their families (College Board and Art & Science Group, 2007). Additionally, FERPA guidelines allow for a wide variety of interpretation and implementation by colleges and universities. While many administrators work with families to arrange for students to release information to parents or to help families establish practices for sharing information, some administrators stand on the side of not sharing any student information.

In recent years, colleges and universities have rejected a return to *in loco parentis*, but they have increasingly adapted a form of *in consortio cum parentibus*, or working in partnership with parents (Henning, 2007). Even FERPA has adapted to reflect family expectations. As Manning notes (2008), recent changes in the Family Educational Rights & Privacy Act allow, but do not require, colleges and universities to contact parents about underage alcohol and drug use. This shift in policy, utilized by many institutions at the first offense, encourages parents to be involved and constructive with life-altering decisions about college.

Theory and Assessment

Parental Involvement

Research about the K–12 years shows that parental involvement is encouraged by schools, and that students whose parents are involved perform better in the classroom. Similarly, the research shows that the more intensively parents are involved in their children’s learning, the more beneficial are the achievement effects. This holds true for all types of

parental involvement in children's learning and for all types and ages of students. In fact, "educational research over the past three decades has established a direct correlation between increased parent involvement and increased student achievement" (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Innovation and Improvement, 2007, p. 2). Henderson and Mapp (2002, p. 7) report that:

Many studies found that students with involved parents, no matter what their income or background, were more likely to:

- earn higher grades and test scores, and enroll in higher-level programs
- be promoted, pass their classes, and earn credits
- attend school regularly
- have better social skills, show improved behavior, and adapt well to school
- graduate and go on to postsecondary education.

Recent data supports the notion that parental involvement has similar benefits during the college years, indicating that when parents are intervening in their children's college experience, the students are more likely to engage in activities that promote student success (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2007).

In addition, research on social capital has proven that parent/family involvement is an important resource that can actually improve a student's productivity (Astone, Nathanson, Schoen & Kim, 1999; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Coleman, 1988; Lareau, 2001; Lin, 2001; Perna & Titus, 2005). Students bring social capital to their college experience that is banked from their involvement with family, school, community, friends, and high school teachers. Some of the positive influences include engagement with their school and community, availability of supportive families, and trust in the institution (Goddard, 2003). Successful college admittance rarely occurs without a structural network that includes a high level of commitment and involvement from a student's parents and family (Perna & Titus, 2005). It holds that creating an environment for overall student success should include a mutually beneficial and appropriate parent/family program.

While family involvement can positively affect student success, the ability to support that involvement is impacted by parents' own educational experience, socioeconomic class, and cultural background. A study of Black students whose parents did not attend college showed that the lack of personal experience with higher education meant that parents did not understand the college application process, financial aid options, admissions procedures, or college life (Smith, 2001). Students who are the first in their family to apply to college often find themselves not only seeking out college information on their own, but also explaining the steps and costs to their parents (Ceja, 2006). When creating parent/family services, then, it is important to consider the diverse needs of families from different backgrounds, cultures, and financial circumstances.

Researchers now predict that as Generation X parents, those born between the early 1960s and 1980, become the majority population among college parents, they will demand increased accountability on the part of institutions. They also will be as concerned, if not more concerned, than Boomer parents about the quality of experiences available to and encountered by their sons or daughters (Howe & Strauss, 2007; Strauss, 2005).

According to the 2007 Pew Research Center's report, "How Young People View Their Lives, Future & Politics: A portrait of 'generation next,'" Gen Nexters, also called Millennials, (born 1981-1988) rely on parents for advice and assistance. Gen Nexters are more likely than any other age group to say they turn to their families—primarily their mothers—for advice when they have a serious personal problem. Gen Nexters also rely on family for

more concrete types of assistance—46% depend on their families for financial assistance, and 64% report that parents have helped with errands, housework, and home repairs (Pew Research Center, 2007).

The 2007 Pew Research Report also notes that 38% of Gen Nexters have parents who are divorced or separated. As a result, the number of blended families has grown, and younger generations are more likely than older ones to have step-parents and step-siblings who play important roles in their lives (Pew Research Center, 2007). With this in mind, college/university-based parent programs need to be broad based in scope and must direct their communications to a larger base of parents and families to include traditional two-parent families, single-parent families, blended families, and extended families that extend to caregivers, close relatives, and friends.

The current levels of parental involvement do not appear to be disconcerting to students. According to a 2008 annual survey of college freshmen released by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at the University of California at Los Angeles, 84% of freshmen that responded think their parents had the “right amount” of involvement in their decision to go to college.

Communication

Parents and students are communicating on a weekly basis—daily for some families. Technology makes this easier than ever before, with cell phones in nearly every student’s backpack or pocket. New communication methods between family members range from e-mails and texting to Twitter and Facebook updates. Built-in cameras on phones and laptops mean that parents are not only hearing from their student regularly; they’re also able to see them daily. In summer of 2006, Kennedy and Hofer presented findings from a Middlebury College study at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association that revealed the following findings:

- Prior to going to college, students anticipated talking to their parents/family once a week; research revealed that they actually communicated 10.4 times a week through techniques that included cell phones, e-mail, Instant Messenger, residence hall phones, texting, and U.S. postal service mail
- Satisfaction with parent communication was reported by students, with 28% actually wishing for increased communication with their fathers
- 75% of parents reported a closer relationship with their sons and daughters than they had with their own parents (Hofer, 2005).

The Pew Research Center confirms the high level of communication, noting that roughly eight in ten young adults say they talked to their parents in the past day; nearly three in four see their parents at least once a week, and half say they see their parents daily. One reason: money. About three-quarters of Gen Nexters say their parents have helped them financially in the past year. Students also rely on parents, especially their mothers, for advice. “A Portrait of Generation Next” notes that 64% of young adults turn to family for advice and assistance (Pew Research Center, 2007).

Student Engagement

According to the 2007 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), which surveyed 9,000 students from 24 campuses, students with intervening parents are more engaged in college life, happier, and reported getting more from their campus experience. George Kuh, director of the NSSE, told the Boston Globe, “We speculate maybe these students are

persisting and taking advantage of a lot of opportunities in college, when they might not have done that if their parents weren't prodding" (Pope, 2007).

Moreover, Brigham Young University family scientist Laura Padilla-Walker led a study which found that parents' knowledge or awareness of what's going on in their child's life at college is associated with fewer risky behaviors. In addition, the study's findings continue to confirm that the relationship between college students and their parents remains important during the student's transition into adulthood (Padilla-Walker, Nelson, Madsen, & Barry, 2008).

Academic Achievement

A critical question, however, is whether there is a connection between the student-parent relationship and attachment on student retention and academic success. According to Tinto (1993), strong relationships with members of their community before coming to college facilitate adjustment and retention. To date, there is not significant research that specifically explores the effects of parental attachment on retention or academic success, but this is an area in which more exploration is needed.

Student Development

Although college students are fully grown in some senses, their brains and thinking capacities are still developing. Major changes are taking place in the prefrontal cortex of the brain, its relationship to other parts of the brain, and patterns of thinking and emotional regulation. These changes profoundly affect students' skills in problem-solving, long-term planning, risk-taking, relationship-building, and more (Simpson, 2008).

Padilla-Walker and her colleagues (2008) agree that delaying adulthood results in an extension of parents' period of service to their children. Their findings show that the relationships between parents and children continue to be important during the transition to adulthood. The assumption too often is that delaying adulthood is automatically a negative thing, dominated by exploration with risky drinking, drug use, and sex. However, these findings suggest that young people are also exploring positive behaviors and participating in society to the same degree as those who have already established their identity (Padilla-Walker et al., 2008).

Intentional Programs

Because of the education they receive in parent orientation programs, parents may be less likely to have high anxiety about their students' college experience, or to call or visit campus as frequently. University of Minnesota parents who attended parent orientation reported higher satisfaction with the university, and their contact with their students was actually less than those who did not attend parent orientation. Parent orientation attendees were slightly less likely to communicate with their students on a daily or weekly basis; more notable, though, is the fact that parents who attended orientation were considerably less likely to come to campus on a frequent basis. Among those who attended parent orientation, about one fourth visited campus one or more times a month; if the parents did not attend orientation, more than 40% visited their student on campus one or more times a month (Savage & Pierce, 2006).

Parents report that they have more meaningful conversations with their student as a result of purposeful programs and communications. As a Vincennes University parent explained to the Vincennes Parent Services coordinator:

Having a son, communication was not all that good about campus activities. Since we communicated on the more important things, I did not push, which made me appreciate your letters even more. Thanks to your e-newsletters, when he calls, I know of activities and events as well as the different helps your campus has to offer. This has helped our conversations flow freely with so much to talk about and that is a good thing.

Colleges and universities increasingly are establishing intentional parent/family programming. A longitudinal study, the National Survey of College and University Programs, has been conducted by the University of Minnesota since 2003 to determine “best practices” among college parent programs, emerging trends related to services and program structure, the influence of departmental placement within the institution on services provided to parents, and any discernible trends in the qualifications, experience, and pay scale of parent staff/administrators. The 2009 survey indicates that of the programs responding to the survey, nearly two-thirds (64%) were started between 2000 and 2009 (Savage, 2009).

Definition of Appropriate Involvement

Popular media and even the online Wikipedia define terms such as helicopter, bulldozer, and stealth parents that promote sweeping generalizations of family members as meddlesome and problematic (Helicopter parent, 2010). Practiced professionals who work with parents of college-aged students, including the authors of this article, argue that examples of inappropriate behavior are isolated incidents and do not represent the majority of families of college and university students. Most higher education professionals would avoid characterizing students with generalized and derogatory terminology; therefore, the authors believe that college personnel should not do so for parents. Respect for the families of students is central to building healthy, productive, and lasting college-family relationships. As higher education professionals consider students and their relationships with their families, they need to acknowledge student development theory, cultural and ethnic experiences related to families and community, and the individual needs and characteristics of students. What may be appropriate involvement for one student may be too much or too little for another. With appropriate educational intervention and consideration of both cultural and individual circumstances, colleges and universities can assist students and families in discovering a level of mutual involvement that leads to student success.

It is the assertion of the authors that parents who are appropriately involved:

- Participate in campus events and activities created for families
- Respond to their student’s questions and concerns with support and an appropriate level of guidance
- Help their student understand his/her responsibilities as a citizen of the campus and community
- Stay informed about campus resources, timely student issues, and current campus issues
- Encourage their student to take advantage of campus resources, activities, and leadership development opportunities
- Contact the university in a timely manner when there are concerns about the student’s mental and/or physical well-being, personal financial situations, and when academic eligibility or conduct puts the student at risk
- Understand and support the institution’s policies, procedures, and code of conduct
- Allow their student to learn from the consequences of his/her actions
- Discuss expectations with their student about how information on grades, attendance,

- and finances will be shared with parents
- Serve as advocates of the institution and higher education in their communities

The authors advocate that institutions can be expected to work with parents by:

- Responding in a timely manner to concerns about student's mental and/or physical well-being, personal financial situations, or when academic eligibility or conduct puts the student at risk
- Making information about the institution's interpretation of The Family Educational Rights & Privacy Act (FERPA) easily accessible
- Communicating efficiently, effectively, and with compassion and patience when a campus crisis arises
- Providing programs and services to nurture a long-term relationship with families
- Acknowledging the value of cultural and ethnic family relationships
- Providing important information consistently and in a timely manner

Benefits of an intentional Parent Program

The authors believe that a parent/family program that is established on a foundation of appropriate involvement and expectations provides significant benefits to students, parents, and the institution itself. The benefits include:

To students

- A comprehensive network of support for student success
- A means of providing and articulating credibility to the student's experience
- Validation of the relationships of family and culture

To parents

- Opportunities for continued support, education, and success
- Validation of their investments
- Assistance in the transition of the parent/child relationship

To the institution

- Support for the institution's mission of student success
- Support for retention and graduation rates
- Creation of community advocates—nationally and internationally

Current Inventory of Existing Parent/Family Programs

It is challenging to identify a precise number of institutions that currently have a formal program, but the trend for offering parent services is clearly on an upward trajectory.

- Of 261 offices responding to a 2009 national survey, just 10% indicated that they had been in existence since the 1970s or earlier. Another 9% began offering services in the 1980s. The number of new programs nearly doubled in the 1990s, when 17% of the schools responding began services. From the year 2000 until early spring 2007, nearly two-thirds (64%) of the respondents first started offering services. (Savage, 2009).
- More than 70% of the nation's four-year colleges and universities have parent positions or offices (Lum, 2006).

Growth of Programs Internationally

Parent programs and services have also seen growth internationally, as noted by participation of institutions from Canada, United Kingdom, and Mexico at Administrators Promoting Parent Involvement (APPI) conferences. When British universities began charging tuition a few years ago, administrators reported parents showing more concern and involvement in their children's college selection process. As a result, according to Dr. Paul Redmond of Liverpool University, "several universities have...appointed 'family liaison officers' to help new parents 'settle in'. Others have produced 'parents' packs' to be distributed prior to the start of term" (Redmond, 2008, p.1).

Organizations Promoting Parental Involvement

A number of organizations have been formed to promote and support appropriate parental involvement during the college years:

College Parents of America (CPA)

www.collegeparents.org

College Parents of America (CPA) was established in 1997 as a national advocacy group to lobby for lower tuition and for other causes that benefit college students and their parents. Today, CPA advocates on behalf of current and future college parents, but its membership includes not only parents, but also colleges and universities, local school systems, corporations, associations, and other organizations.

College Student Educators International (ACPA)

<http://www.myacpa.org/>

Established in 1924, ACPA is headquartered in Washington, D.C., at the National Center for Higher Education. Its vision is to support college student educators, the higher education community, and other stakeholders in providing outreach, advocacy, research, and professional development to foster college student learning. ACPA has 18 Commissions and six Standing Committees that focus on functional areas of expertise (e.g., Career Development and Housing and Residence Life) and in several advocacy and educational and personal identity areas (e.g., Standing Committee for Disability and Standing Committee for Multicultural Awareness). As parent and family issues and concerns have emerged on campus, ACPA has included presentations on the topic at its professional conferences.

Administrators Promoting Parent Involvement (APPI)

Established in 1998, APPI provides an annual conference dedicated to the topic of parent programs and services. Participants attend from institutions across the country and in recent years, from Canada, Mexico, and the United Kingdom. Its mission is to promote the work institutions do to involve and improve relationships with parents. Sponsored by Northeastern University, the conference is held in Boston, Massachusetts, and hosts approximately 75 institutions each year.

Association of Higher Education Parent/Family Program Professionals (AHEPPP)

www.aheppp.org

Incorporated in January 2009, AHEPPP's goals are to help colleges and universities constructively involve parents and families in the higher education experience and to

serve as a resource center for parent/family programs and the professionals who staff them. AHEPPP has established a national support network to provide the following programs and services:

- AHEPPP National Conference: held in different cities throughout the United States every two years to provide a forum for “best practices” among college and university parent programs, emerging trends related to services and programs, and networking opportunities for current and emerging leaders in the field;
- Regional Associations: provide a regional forum to exchange information on a more local and intimate level;
- Research and Publication: provide relevant information to support professionals in parent and family programs;
- Speakers Bureau: a full-service speakers bureau providing information on the wide-range of parent involvement topics;
- Career & Networking Opportunities: help advance the career goals of administrators, staff and other professionals working in the field of parent and family services, and to discuss discernible trends in the qualifications, experience, and pay scale of these professionals;
- Internships: provide internship opportunities for college and university students so that they may understand the importance of maintaining and sustaining parent involvement and that they may advance the field through service and research.

Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA) - Parent and Family Relations Knowledge Community

<http://naspa.org/kc/pfr/>

NASPA, a professional association for student affairs administrators, sponsors 20 Knowledge Communities, which provide opportunities for NASPA members to access information and resources relating to specific topics or areas of concentration and to come together through common interests in ways that support the NASPA mission, vision and goals. The Parent and Family Relations Knowledge Community was organized to accumulate, identify, and share best practices and research on the involvement and expectations of parents of college students, with an understanding that these practices assist university administrators, faculty, and staff in facilitating college student success, satisfaction, and increased retention.

National Orientation Directors Association (NODA): Parent & Family Network

<http://www.nodaweb.org/networks/parent-a-family-network.html>

The purpose of the Parent & Family Network within NODA is to identify and address the orientation and transition programming needs of parents and family members of new college/university students. NODA’s network represents a recognition that parents and families play a critical role in the matriculation of students, and that they frequently turn to university staff for information and support. Parent & Family Network members seek to develop orientation and transition programs to introduce and connect parents and families with university information, services, and programs.

Higher Education Professional Consulting Organizations

A number of companies and organizations serving higher education and student services have added to the discussion by presenting printed publications in addition to phone, internet, and in-person workshops on the topic of parent services. PaperClip, Magna Publications’ Student Leader, University Parent Media, Academic Impressions, and

Innovative Educators are among those that have developed programming on the topic during the past five years.

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What are they talking about?

Barriers to parent-college student communication on critical topics

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Young adults are in frequent contact with their parents. According to a report released by the Pew Research Center (2007), 82% of 18-24 year olds were in touch with their parents yesterday. In addition, 64% of 18-24 year olds say they turn to their families, primarily mothers, for advice, and they rely on family for material support such as financial assistance (73% in the past 12 months) and help with errands (64% in the past 12 months).

Moreover, there is evidence that positive parent-student communication is critical to college student success. The National Survey of Student Engagement (2007) reveals that frequent contact with parents leads to more student engagement in meaningful college activities. Other studies reveal that first-year college students' adjustment is influenced by the parent-child relationship (Wintre & Yaffe, 2000) and parental social support (Cutrona, Cole, Colangelo, Assouline, & Russell, 1994). More specifically, positive parent-child communication and parental support is a protective factor for risky behaviors among college students (e.g., Holahan, Valentiner, & Moos, 1994). When family involvement and support is not present, students are at greater risk for problems with alcohol, drugs, and other behaviors that interfere with success.

With all the communication going on, however, there is little research exploring parent-college student communication; most literature around parent-child communication focuses on younger adolescents. The limited research that does exist focuses on communication about sexual activity and alcohol use during the college years. This research reveals that when parents discuss their values, students are more likely to delay sexual activity and use contraception when they are sexually active, and they are less likely to drink alcohol (Dilorio, Dudley, Lehr, & Soet, 2000). Unfortunately, no research was found that explores barriers to parent-college student communication.

Although the college transition and the college experience are highly significant for young adults, we know little about the ways in which the parent-child relationship evolves during this time. Evidence suggests that stronger parent-child relationships are linked to

adjustment to college and academic achievement (Wintre & Sugar, 2000; Wintre & Yaffe, 2000). Additional research to better understand the changing parent-student relationship and communication in particular is critical to supporting students and families.

Present Investigation

Despite the evidence that parent-college student communication has many benefits, we do not know what parents and students are talking about, what their communication needs are, or what their barriers to communication are. Without this information, our ability to encourage communication on critical topics, support families, enhance parent-student communication, and ultimately promote student success is limited. This study fills a gap in the literature by exploring what topics are most challenging for parents of college students to discuss and identifying barriers to communication. Further, because of our large sample size, we were able to explore differences by both topic and demographics.

Method

This online survey was conducted at one large, urban, public, Midwestern university. Parents were recruited through a listserv for parents. Parents of undergraduates elect to receive the university's parent listserv, which provides information about campus events as well as about normative student development. An invitation to participate in the online survey was included in a regular listserv message delivered to approximately 7,500 email addresses, describing the project and including a direct Web link. By participating, parents could enter a drawing for a gift card to the university bookstore. The drawing information was not connected to parents' responses.

Survey questions asked parents to identify the topics they found most challenging to discuss with their student. It included questions about barriers to communicating and what would make it easier to discuss these topics. In addition, parents responded to a series of demographic questions.

Participants

One thousand parents responded to the survey. Since these analyses focus on topics that are challenging for parents and students to discuss, parents who did not identify challenging topics (missing; $n=54$) or who reported that none were challenging ($n=28$) were removed from the data. This resulted in a final sample size of 918.

Most respondents were the biological mother (83.0%), 14.3% were the biological father, and 1.9% were the adoptive mother. Participants were primarily White (96.3%). About half (51.6%) of parents reported that this was their first child in college; about half (50.1%) were reporting on a female student; and the mean student age was 19.44 years. Most parents reported having earned a Bachelor's degree (39.7%) or higher (25.7%). Nearly half of students (46.1%) were living in a residence hall, 45.0% were living in an apartment, 4.7% were living in a fraternity or sorority house, and 4.3% were living at home.

Results

Parents reported that the most challenging topics to discuss with their student (see Table 1) were sex (29.0%), romantic relationships (16.8%), finances (14.6%), mental health (7.0%), academics (4.5%), and religion (4.5%). There were significant differences in the topics identified as challenging, based on students' gender ($\chi^2=36.213$, $p=.01$), students' age ($F=2.711$, $p=.000$), and parents' education ($F=1.686$, $p=.033$) (see Table 1).

Table 1: Most Challenging Topics to Talk About

Topic	% Most Challenging	Mean Student Age	% Male (n=449)	% Female (n=460)	Mean Education (Scale 1-7)
Sex	29.0	19.44	31.2	26.7	4.63
Romantic Relationships	16.8	19.22	20.3	13.5	4.72
Finances	14.6	19.57	12.2	17.2	4.23
Mental Health	7.0	19.47	6.5	7.4	4.73
Academics	4.5	19.29	4.0	4.8	4.83
Religion	4.5	19.78	4.7	4.1	4.27
Friends	3.8	19.10	2.4	5.2	4.49
Politics	3.1	19.21	2.0	4.1	3.80
Alcohol	2.9	19.81	2.9	2.8	4.85
Safety	2.8	19.46	2.2	3.5	4.38
Sexual Assault	2.8	18.96	1.6	4.1	4.38
Other	2.0	20.11	1.5	2.2	4.44
Parties	1.9	19.12	2.4	1.3	4.41
Health	1.6	19.40	1.3	2.0	4.20
Drugs	1.4	20.00	2.2	0.7	5.46
Crime	1.0	20.67	1.1	0.9	5.00
Family Values	0.4	21.25	0.7	0.2	5.25

Respondents identified the number one barrier to communication as concern that the discussion would make their student uncomfortable. Parents also cited the following barriers to communication: being worried the conversation would turn into an argument, making themselves uncomfortable, the student not wanting to talk about the topic, lack of information, and not wanting to upset their student. These barriers differed by student gender ($\chi^2=36.152$, $p=.021$), but not by any other variables (see Table 2).

Table 2: Barriers to Communication

Barrier	% Most Significant Barrier	% Male (n=479)	% Female (n=512)
Makes student uncomfortable	15.8	16.7	12.9
Worried it will turn into an argument	12.9	10.0	13.7
Makes me uncomfortable	10.8	11.7	8.2
Student doesn't want to talk	9.7	10.6	7.6
Lack of info	8.0	8.4	7.0
Don't want to upset my student	7.8	6.1	8.4
Multiple reasons	7.1	7.3	6.8
Fear of embarrassing student	5.9	6.7	4.3
Don't want to frighten my student	4.1	2.9	5.1
Different ideas, opinions and values	3.2	2.5	3.5
Respect my student's privacy	3.1	1.6	3.7
Fear of embarrassing self	2.3	1.0	3.1
Student has all info they need	1.7	2.9	1.6
Time	1.1	0.8	2.3
We talked about it in high school	0.9	0.6	1.0
Don't know how to bring it up	0.8	1.0	0.4
Distance	0.5	0.6	0.6
Lack of University support	0.5	0.2	0.8
Someone else is talking to my student	0.4	0.6	0.2
Not a priority	0.4	0.6	0.2
Rather my student not know too much	0.3	0.0	0.6

When asked what would make it easier to communicate about these topics, the most common responses were: if the student brings it up, having a list of talking points, or hearing an expert speak on the topic (see Table 3).

Table 3: What Would Make it Easier to Communicate With Your Student? [Check all that apply]

Strategy	Frequency (%)
Student brings it up	61.1
Talking points	25.4
Hearing an expert speak on the topic	17.4
Reading a book or article on the topic	11.5
News coverage	10.0
Website	7.1
Use of technology	6.6
Talking on phone	4.0
National attention	3.9

Most Challenging Topics

The following analyses focus on the six topics parents identified most frequently as difficult to discuss: sex, romantic relationships, finances, mental health, academics, and religion.

A series of chi-square analyses were computed to determine differences by demographic characteristics in terms of what topics were most challenging to discuss. Results revealed significant gender differences ($\chi^2=11.472$, $p<.05$), but there were no differences in whether or not the student was their first child in college, or by whether or not participants were White. There were also no differences based on mean student age, or by parents' gender. However, there were differences by parent education ($F=2.375$, $p<.05$). While these findings were statistically significant, on average, parents across all groups reported having an Associate's degree or Bachelor's degree (see Table 1).

Next, a series of chi-square analyses were computed to determine differences in the barriers to communication by key demographic characteristics. Again, there were significant gender differences ($\chi^2=36.152$, $p<.05$) but no differences if the student was their first child in college, by whether participants were White, by mean student age, by parents' gender, or by parent education level (see Table 2).

We then explored whether barriers to communication differed by topic (see Table 4). Concern about an argument was a top barrier for four out of the six topics; making the student uncomfortable was a top barrier for three out of the six topics. None of the following were significant barriers to communication: fear of embarrassing self, preferring that the student not know too much about the topic, knowing that someone else is talking to the student about the topic, believing the student has enough information on the topic, confidence that the topic had been covered earlier (in high school), distance, time, not knowing how to introduce the topic, lack of university support, and feeling the topic was not a priority (see Table 4).

**Table 4: Number One Barrier to Communication by Topic
[for top 6 most challenging topics]**

Barrier	Topic					
	Sex (n=266)	Romantic Relationships (n=154)	Finances (n=134)	Mental Health (n=64)	Academics (n=41)	Religion (n=41)
Lack of info	0.8	7.8	4.5	10.9	39.0	7.3
Fear of embarrassing self	3.8	0	3.0	1.6	0	0
Fear of embarrassing stud	10.9	6.5	2.2	6.2	0	2.4
Makes me uncomfortable	25.2	4.5	8.2	9.4	0	2.4
Makes student uncomfortable	24.8	26.0	6.7	7.8	7.3	12.2
Worried it will turn into an argument	6.4	11.0	18.7	6.2	14.6	24.4
Rather my student not know too much	0	0	2.2	0	0	0
Don't want to frighten my student	0.4	0	6.7	9.4	0	0
Don't want to upset my student	1.5	5.2	17.2	26.6	7.3	12.2
Someone else is talking to my stud	0.8	0.6	0.7	0	0	0
Student has all info they need	2.6	0.6	3.0	1.6	0	4.9
We talked about it in high school	1.5	1.3	0	0	0	0
Different ideas, opinions & values	2.3	3.2	1.5	0	2.4	14.6
Distance	0.4	0.6	0.7	0	0	0
Student doesn't want to talk	3.4	20.8	6.0	9.4	9.8	7.3
Respect my student's privacy	1.5	5.2	2.2	3.1	4.9	7.3
Time	1.5	0	3.7	0	0	0
Don't know how to bring it up	0.4	1.3	0	0	0	0
Lack of University support	0	0	0	0	2.4	2.4
Not a priority	0.4	0.6	0.7	0	0	0
Multiple reasons	9.8	2.6	10.4	4.7	12.2	0

Note: Columns add to 100%

Discussion

Understanding the barriers to parent-college student communication is a critical first step toward providing practical support for college students and their parents. More specifically, these data show clearly that parents need help communicating with their college students. Results reveal that if parents have talking points on sensitive issues and ideas for dealing with discomfort and potential arguments, the conversations are likely to be less difficult.

However, different topics have different barriers. This means we cannot just work on improving parent-college student communication in general; topic specific information for families is essential. For instance, lack of information was the most common barrier to talking about academics; suggesting that providing parents with information on this topic would help them better communicate with their student. In contrast, concerns that the parent and student would be uncomfortable were the most common barriers to talking about sex; this suggests that to increase communication, supports for families should focus on strategies for making both parents and students more comfortable.

In addition, supporting parents means working with students as well. Parents indicated the primary way to overcome barriers to communication was for students to bring up the topic. Colleges and universities may contribute to family discussions by empowering students to seek out the advice and support they need from trusted individuals, and family in particular.

Although there were significant differences in parents' responses, based on student gender, age, and parent education, these differences were primarily a product of a large sample size, and do not necessarily indicate a need for different approaches in working with families based on these factors. For example, although 16.7% of parents of male students and only 12.9% of parents of female students identified concern over making the student uncomfortable as the greatest barrier to communication, this was the top barrier for both genders. In addition, suggestions for overcoming barriers were similar for both male and female students.

Limitations and Future Directions

While this study sheds light on a critical aspect of college student development and sets the groundwork for future research, it is limited. First, these data represent parents who elected to be on the email list at one large Midwestern university. Participants were primarily well-educated, White mothers. Moreover, these data do not capture the full range of ways families communicate. For example, research has found that Asian American parents use implicit and nonverbal techniques to communicate their sexual values to their children, and these strategies are quite effective (Kim & Ward, 2007). Future research should take a more inclusive approach, recognizing that explicit communication is not the only way in which parents and college students connect around important topics. Future research should also explore students' perspectives and further consider the demographic differences that emerged here.

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History of the Miami University Parents & Family Programs

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Miami University of Oxford, Ohio, chartered in 1809, derived its name from the Miami tribe of Native American Indians that migrated from Green Bay on Lake Michigan to Ohio in the eighteenth century. The war of 1812, waged largely in Ohio waters and on Ohio land, delayed the beginning of classes until 1824.

By 1916 the tradition of honoring fathers and mothers with sporting events, serenades, smokers, breakfasts, luncheons, and dinners had already been established and was documented in the Miami University yearbook, *Recensio*. These events served to recognize the importance of parents and the support they provide while also raising awareness about the university. Events such as Dad's Day and Mother's Day merited a written invitation from Miami's president encouraging parents to visit classes. Because many parents of these Miami students were alums themselves, school spirit was high among the parent constituency, even during wartime and economic uncertainty.

In the early years, Miami professors, coaches, and staff fulfilled the role of *in loco parentis* by offering advice and mentoring students. In return, students showed their respect for these surrogate parents by honoring them as "Ideal Father" or "Mother of the Year." This tradition, later named "Parents of the Year" continued until 2001. Students now honor their own parents through an essay contest, which culminates with awards and recognition during Family Weekend.

In the early 1980s, the Director of the Student Counseling Center was asked to speak to parents during orientation about the transition from high school to college and its effect on students and families. From that time forward, orientation programming for parents and family members has expanded. Today, parent involvement in the college experience begins with the admission process, with electronic communication throughout the application, acceptance, and confirmation stages. After a student's acceptance, the Parents Office picks up with myMiami for Families, a web-based portal which allows students to grant parental access to portions of their student record (grades, bills, financial aid records, etc.), and continues with a twice-monthly electronic newsletter throughout the

student's first year. Orientation at Miami is a family experience. In both joint and separate sessions, parents and their students are introduced to the first-year experience and receive information on making the transition to college a success.

A Parents Association at Miami University was authorized in 1971, with all Parents Association activity and programming handled by Alumni Affairs until 1980. In 1981, the Association established a Parents Council and a Parents Fund as a collaborative effort between the Division of Development & Alumni Affairs and the Division of Student Affairs. The two primary objectives of the Council were to discuss, prioritize, and recommend how funds contributed by parents were to be used, and to serve the university through alumni and non-alumni parent involvement in university/community affairs that directly impacts students.

To support the Council, a modest office was established to coordinate communications between Council members and the administration. Staffing the office was assigned to Student Affairs staff as an "extra" assignment and passed from person to person for a number of years. Eventually, a part-time position was established which in 1997 became full-time with the title of Assistant to the Vice President for Parent Programs & Divisional Initiatives. Collaboration increased with the orientation staff as well as with the Alumni and Parent department in University Advancement. Eventually, the responsibility for the Parents Fund was transferred to Student Affairs, and in 2000, a new position was created: Director of Development for Student Affairs, which included oversight of parent solicitations.

In 2002, after a great deal of research and campus visits to aspirational institutions, a decision was made to enlarge the Parents Council and to adopt increasingly aggressive fund-raising strategies for the Parents Fund. Between 2002 and 2008, contributions to the Parents Fund nearly tripled (\$150,000 to \$430,000), and Parents Fund grant proposals and opportunities to fund additional student initiatives and Student Affairs departmental initiatives grew accordingly. To assist with the larger Parents Council, Parents Fund, and the newly-introduced myMiami for Families initiatives, a Program Associate position was added to the Parents Office staff.

Current Miami University Parents Office initiatives include outreach efforts to first generation and underserved populations within the state as well as to potential out-of-state applicants. The national scene continues to challenge today's college students and influence their families and the decisions made about the future of higher education. Families continue to look to Parent & Family professionals on the Miami University campus for guidance and reassurance about their sons' and daughters' education. To ensure that our programming reflects the best practices for retention and success, we continue to be on the cutting edge of assessment, communication, and student development theory and practice.

