



# AHEPPP Journal

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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.

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# AHEPPP Journal

VOLUME 1, NUMBER 1 • SPRING 2010

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Just as AHEPPP is a work in progress, so is the AHEPPP Journal. We are learning as we go, and we hope we're on an upward path of professionalism and research to enhance the development and delivery of parent/family relations in higher education.

This second issue of the Journal features two research articles and a program history. The first article looks at parental involvement from the student perspective. While much of our work in parent/family services encourages family members to understand the student's point of view and to view attitudes and behaviors in terms of normative student development, this article turns the discussion upside down. The researcher, a Family Social Science professor, asked students to consider their parents' perspective on the behaviors the students are practicing.

In the second article, a master's degree student assesses parents' role in learning abroad, examining family influence on destination and program selection as well as how parents might support the transition, on-going international experience, and the re-entry process. The author talked to specialists in the learning abroad office of a large, Midwestern public university, and also interviewed the parent program staff and parents themselves.

Both articles underwent peer review before being accepted for the Journal, and we're most grateful for our volunteer reviewers: Todd Adams, Duke University; Leslie Banahan, The University of Mississippi; Colleen Heykoop, Biola University; and Chris Hall Lynch, Florida Atlantic University. The suggestions, edits, and ideas they provided strengthened the articles for our AHEPPP audience.

The final contribution for this issue comes from Baylor University, and it describes the development of The Baylor Parents League. Baylor is among the relatively rare examples of a university initiating parental involvement during the mid- to late-1960s, a time when more institutions were probably ceasing parent clubs than introducing them.

We are grateful for feedback from readers about the Journal, and we encourage parent/family practitioners, researchers in related fields, and graduate students examining parent/family involvement to submit articles for future issues. Please see the submission guidelines at [www.aheppp.org/aheppp-journal](http://www.aheppp.org/aheppp-journal).

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# Parents' Perceptions of Experimentation in College: Students' Perspectives

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## Abstract

A positive parent-child relationship facilitates healthy youth experimentation and adjustment to college. To better understand this, a stratified sample of 32 college students was interviewed about their perceptions of their parents' experience raising a college student. Students explained that they and their parents have divergent views of their behaviors; but they felt confident that a strong parent-child relationship would help prevent them from crossing from healthy experimentation to dangerous risk taking.

## Parents' Perceptions of Experimentation in College: Students' Perspectives

Researchers' conceptualizations of the period between childhood and adulthood have changed, and the term adolescence is no longer sufficient to describe this period. In the past 50 years, demographic changes (e.g. later marriage, delayed parenthood, and prolonged education) have created a distinct life stage between adolescence and young adulthood (Arnett, 1994, 2000). Arnett (2000) named the period from 18 to 25 years old "emerging adulthood," and other scholars have recognized this time as a meaningful transitional period (Hogan & Astone, 1986; Staples & Smarr, 1991). This life stage is characterized by having survived the dependence associated with adolescence but not yet having earned all of the responsibilities of adulthood (Arnett, 2000). Consequently, emerging adults experience new levels of independence and personal responsibility and face the challenge of figuring out how this might be incorporated into their developing sense of self. Experimentation is a critical part of this process (Erikson, 1959, 1965), and college creates a context for experimenting that is longer than that experienced by previous generations, and perhaps longer than experienced by youth who do not attend college full-time immediately following high school. The college culture also has been described as a time when youth have few "real" responsibilities and the freedom to make their own decisions with relatively few consequences to their actions (Dworkin, 2005).

During emerging adulthood, experimentation allows young people to approach the adult world and work towards accepting an introductory adult identity, make commitments to interpersonal relationships and occupational undertakings, and identify a value system that is consistent with both self and society (Hauser & Greene, 1991). In fact, many scholars consider experimentation normal, even necessary behavior, because it serves developmentally appropriate functions, such as facilitating peer interactions, teaching youth to negotiate behaviors that become legal post-adolescence, and facilitating identity achievement (e.g., Baumrind, 1985; Jessor & Jessor, 1977; Maggs, Almeida, & Galambos, 1995; Silbereisen, Noack, & Reitzle, 1987).

## College Students and Experimentation

When adolescents move out of their parents' house and enter the transitional stage of emerging adulthood, parental monitoring is likely to be low. This may begin to explain why emerging adults participate in risk behavior to a higher degree than either adolescents or adults (Bachman et al., 1997). Without parents or spouses to provide social control, risk behaviors are more likely (Sampson & Laub, 1994). Thus, it is not surprising that rates of participation with most substance use, alcohol use, and unprotected sexual activity have been found to peak during emerging adulthood, and college students are more likely to be binge drinkers than their same age non-college counterparts (Johnston, O'Malley, & Bachman, 2003). However, parental support and a positive parent-child relationship can facilitate healthy youth experimentation (Holahan, Valentiner, & Moos, 1994), adjustment to college (Holahan et al., 1994; Rice, Cole, & Lapsley, 1990; Wintre & Yaffe, 2000), and high academic performance in college (Cutrona et al., 1994). College students continue to rely on their parents for emotional support (Kenny, 1987). When parents share students' interests and concerns, students perform better academically (Cutrona et al., 1994).

College students' relationship with their parents is an understudied aspect of students' transition to university (Wintre & Yaffe, 2000). The present study addresses this limitation

by speaking directly with students. Although multiple researchers have explored whether parents and their offspring have a similar view of their relationship and whether they can accurately identify how the other perceives them, these findings are not conclusive. For instance, Cook and Douglas (1998) found that in general, college students are accurate about how they are perceived by their parents. Aquilino (1999) concluded that about half of parent-child dyads were characterized by high agreement, but at the aggregate level, parents provide an overall more positive view of the parent-child relationship. Thus, to truly understand the parent-college student relationship, we must consider the perspective of parents and the perspective of students. This investigation starts with the latter, using in-depth interviews.

Allowing college students to describe their perception of what their parents are experiencing, in their own words, provides the clearest understanding of their construction of the family relationship during the college years (Jones, 1985). This study explored three questions.

- From the perspective of college students, how do parents experience and respond to students' experimentation behavior?
- How can parents distinguish between things they should and should not be concerned about?
- What are the implications of these findings for research and for practice?

#### Method

To obtain a more holistic view of experimentation, a dual interpretive methodology was used. First, a phenomenological perspective (van Manen, 1984) guided data collection and analysis to provide access to the meanings college students assigned to their experiences with their parents (Morse, 1994). Phenomenology assumes that the data provided by participants corresponds to their actual experiences and to the meanings they apply to these experiences. Second, grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) provided a method for building a theory of the parent-college student relationship (Morse, 1994), without being limited by preconceived notions (Glaser, 1978). Grounded theory is a rigorous research process of systematically collecting and analyzing data, then allowing theory to emerge from that data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Consistent with this approach, after data analysis was complete, the author went back to the literature to improve her understanding of the findings, not to support, discount, or provide additional data, but to help explain the findings and to put them in a context (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

#### Participants

A stratified sample of 32 college students was interviewed (see Table 1). The sample was stratified across institution, gender, age, and ethnic group. Twenty students were recruited from a large Midwestern university, and 12 students were recruited from a Midwestern community college. Incorporating student experiences at different types of institutions allowed for both a sample and an experience more representative of college students. To assist with stratification, students were recruited through student organizations on each campus, including cultural, ethnic, arts, academic, and athletic organizations.

To recruit university students, an electronic mail message was forwarded to at least 1500 students who were involved in registered student organizations. Students who already had participated in the study recruited a few students through word of mouth. Interested participants were asked to contact the author directly to learn more about the study and arrange a time for an interview. Students were selected for interviews based on gender, academic year, and ethnicity; every student selected for an interview participated.

To recruit students at the community college, the director of student life provided a list of student organizations. Due to a student body that is much smaller than at the university and the limited number of student organizations, an electronic mail message describing the study was sent to the 15 faculty advisors who were responsible for active student organizations. Three advisors agreed to forward an electronic mail message to group members. The electronic mail message described the study and requested that interested students contact the author directly to learn more about the study and arrange a time for an interview. Two advisors agreed to allow the author to speak to their groups. In these groups, flyers were distributed and interested students were asked to provide contact information. The sixth advisor who responded was responsible for an inactive organization, but agreed to mention the study to students with whom she still had contact. In all, approximately 100 community college students were contacted either via electronic mail or in person about the study. Again, a few participants were recruited through word of mouth by students who had already participated in the study, and by the director of student life. All but one student (due to numerous scheduling conflicts) who expressed an interest in being interviewed participated.

There was diversity among the community college students interviewed, reflecting the diversity of community college students in general. The majority of participants were planning to transfer to a 4-year college. One student attended a state university and attended classes at the community college only in the summer. Three students attended the community college because they had academic difficulty at a 4-year university but decided they wanted to remain in college; one of these students planned to return to the university to earn a baccalaureate degree.

At the time of the study, all participants were full-time students. Of those students interviewed, half reported using alcohol at least every weekend, half reported having been drunk in the past month, just over 25% reported engaging in unprotected sex in the past month, and approximately half reported having ever smoked marijuana. Rates of participation in risk behaviors did not differ by institution.

#### Data Collection

Students were interviewed individually. Interviews were in-depth and semi-structured. Questions were developed from a thorough review of the literature and were designed to explore student experimentation during college (Dworkin, 2005) and students' perceptions of their parents' experiences raising a college student. This article's focus is on the latter. Interviews lasted 50-90 minutes, were audio taped, and were conducted on the university campus or on the community college campus. Following the interview, participants completed a brief background questionnaire and a checklist assessing how frequently they participated in a variety of experimentation behaviors. Students received \$10 for their participation.

## Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the constant comparative method of interpretive analysis. This method of analysis encourages systematic generation of theory through inductive coding and analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

The data were analyzed under the assumption that data provided by participants corresponded to their experiences and to the meanings they attached to these experiences. In addition, interpretation of the data included distinguishing between solicited and unsolicited statements and considering how the author's background affected the direction of the interview and impacted the data (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998).

Consistent with the constant comparative method of interpretive analysis, data analysis consisted of six steps, using two levels of coding. First, the author transcribed the interviews verbatim, noting salient features such as long pauses and laughter (Riessman, 1993). To preserve participant confidentiality, the interviews were transcribed using pseudonyms (these pseudonyms are used in the results) and eliminating any identifying information. To ensure accuracy, the author checked the transcripts against the tapes. The second step was to read the transcripts many times, looking for themes, patterns, and concepts, and each interview was summarized. Third, the interview data were sorted by the interview question. Fourth, to categorize and sort the data, data were coded into conceptual categories within empirical question representing the first level of coding (Charmaz, 1988; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998).

Fifth, the author performed axial coding, the second level of coding. Axial coding is a more intense form of coding centered on a specific phenomenon or category (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). It is used to identify the properties of the already identified categories, thereby providing more specificity. The author labeled specific events and experiences within each phenomenon, generating subcategories (Strauss, 1987). This allowed the author to identify shared experiences between individuals and those experiences that were unique (Patton, 1990; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). Finally, the author identified the cases that did not fit this coding as a way to either discount subcodes or for suggesting additional relationships (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998).

Following grounded theory procedures (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), after the data were coded, the author diagramed the relationships between constructs. Diagrams allow the visual depiction of relationships between concepts to move from coding to defining the emerging concepts. After data analysis was complete, the author returned to the literature to interpret the findings, rather than to support, discount, or provide additional data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

The relationships that emerged from students' descriptions of their experiences and that were diagramed are described below, and direct quotes from students are used to exemplify these relationships. Consistent with this process of data analysis, the results and discussion are presented as one section.

## Results and Discussion

The parental perspective is critical to understanding college student experimentation and

risk-taking behavior. In this study, students' impressions of their parents were used instead of interviewing the parents themselves. Consequently, it is acknowledged that these findings focus on what college students believe parents should do. Although there may be discrepancies in how parents and college students view their relationship (e.g. Aquilino, 1999), there is good reason to believe that college students can identify parenting practices that will be effective with them. Specifically, many students acknowledged that their parents passed along values, religiosity, and decision-making skills that influenced the decisions they made around risk-taking and experimentation behaviors. Talking with college students provides insight into how parents might accomplish these tasks.

First, a general description of how college students believe their parents view their behavior is presented. Next, how students believe parents can distinguish between their safe or positive behaviors and their risky behaviors are discussed, and the discrepancy between when students believe parents do become concerned and when they believe parents should become concerned and act on their concern are presented. Finally, advice for parents that was offered by participants for negotiating this discrepancy and maintaining a strong parent-child relationship is considered.

Although the terms parent and parents are used, students in this study were raised in diverse family structures: by two biological parents, by one biological parent, by one biological parent and a stepparent or grandparent, and by grandparent(s). Thus, an accurate definition of parent is adult caregiver, thereby including stepparents and grandparents.

### Relationship between Parents' and College Students' Views of Student Behavior

To explore the relationship between parents' and college students' views of student behavior, students were asked, "What kinds of things do you do that adults think is positive/risky?" Next, students were asked, "How do you view those things?"

#### *Positive behaviors.*

Describing those behaviors that parents view as positive was challenging for students, many paused before answering, or said, "I don't know" or "I guess," suggesting first, that college students are somewhat uncertain about what behaviors their parents view as positive, and second, that many parents are not intentionally encouraging or supporting youth participation in positive or healthy behaviors. Students described agreeing with their parents that certain behaviors were positive: performing well in school and other academic activities, being employed, participating in extracurricular activities, performing community service, participating in religious activities, associating with positive peers, demonstrating independence, having strong morals, being open-minded, and having goals for the future. However, although they said that their parents were proud of their participation in these activities, students also said this did not influence their decisions to participate in these behaviors. Students described experimenting with these behaviors for their own reasons. For instance, Abbey said, "It's totally for me but it's just kind of a benefit for them." Students described being happy with their activities and proud of their accomplishments, noting that their participation in these activities provided critical opportunities to learn about themselves and work to figure out who they are.

In addition, students said that their parents felt that not engaging in risky behaviors, such as going to parties, drinking alcohol or using drugs, was positive. Contrary to the previously described behaviors, they described considering what their parents would think before making decisions about whether to participate in these potentially risky behaviors. For example, Robert described the factors he considered in deciding whether a behavior was too dangerous for him. "First of all, would I embarrass my parents...If my parents can look at it and be like, you're just crazy, I can accept that. As long as they don't look at me like...I don't know who he is."

#### *Risky behaviors.*

In contrast to their descriptions of the behaviors their parents view as positive, students were able to easily articulate the behaviors in which they participate that their parents view as risky. Overwhelmingly, students said their parents thought sexual activity, going to parties, using drugs, and drinking alcohol were risky. However, students were adamant that they did not agree with parents' perceptions of these behaviors. They described feeling extremely confident in their ability to greatly reduce or eliminate the risk associated with participating in adult-defined risky behaviors and to deal with negative consequences when they did arise. In fact, they described steps they took to actively reduce the potential risk associated with their participation in these behaviors. For instance, students explained that they did not view sexual activity as risky, because they were aware of the precautions they needed to take to protect themselves against pregnancy and infections, regardless of whether they actually took these precautions. The same sentiment emerged regarding going to parties, using drugs, and drinking alcohol. They described not attending parties alone, monitoring their substance use, and taking many other precautions to reduce the likelihood that they would experience a negative outcome.

Research has found that there is a difference between what people expect will happen generally and what they think will happen to them (Staple & Velthuisen, 1996). Individuals tend to perceive they have an above average chance of avoiding negative consequences and experiencing desirable outcomes (Weinstein & Klein, 1996). More specifically, for college students, the perceived benefits of an outcome have been found to be more predictive of participation in risky behaviors than students' assessment of the perceived risks (Parsons, Siegel, & Cousins, 1997). Consistent with previous research, these youth felt confident that they would experience a positive outcome to their risk-taking (Weinstein & Klein, 1996).

Overall, college students described their participation in these behaviors as experimentation - just a few of the many experiences one is likely to encounter while growing up. Students were convinced that sexual activity, going to parties, and using drugs and alcohol have a place in college as part of the college culture, and that the college culture promotes participation in risk behaviors as developmentally appropriate experimentation (Dworkin, 2005). This image is consistent with the college culture that Sperber (2000) described, a subculture unregulated by adult authority that is centered around parties and alcohol. Emilio said, "You got your parties, you got your alcohol, there's drugs, and I think it's just a whole environment of people trying to search for themselves and have a good time before they have to hit the real world." Students explained that their parents could not appreciate this viewpoint, and consequently, their parents overreacted to their participation in these behaviors.

#### **Distinguishing Between Things Parents Should and Should Not Be Concerned About**

When asked, "How can parents distinguish between things they should, and should not be, concerned about?" the majority of students said that parents simply need to have an innate trust in their children, trusting their judgment and allowing them, possibly even encouraging them, to make their own decisions. For instance, Gabriel said, "If you talk to your children, you really don't have much to worry about." Other students said that parents could not distinguish between the positive and the risky behaviors, and that parents need to recognize that college is just a temporary period of experimentation and accept behaviors that they might not approve of later in life. Carla, a community college student supported this point. "You go through the experimentation phase, and then you'll just wanna naturally move on and go to a higher level of thinking and doing things." Shalie, a university student also supported this when she said,

Parents should come to an understanding, my kid is at this age, they're more autonomous now, they're more independent, I gotta let 'em do their own thing. I as a parent need to stop worrying about my child. I have raised them to a point, given them all my beliefs, raised them how I think they should be; now it's up to them to make their decisions.

This is consistent with Schulenberg's suggestion that college drinking is simply a developmental disturbance for many youth, reflecting "developmentally limited deviance that is statistically normative, culturally sanctioned, and time prescribed" (Schulenberg et al., 2001, p. 474). Unfortunately, this does not provide parents with the specificity they need to be able to identify behavior they should be concerned about from a geographic distance. However, students also described external or more concrete factors that parents might use to identify behaviors about which they should be concerned. Students' responses clustered into four groups of factors: situational, parental values and behavior, students' past behavior, and the parent-child relationship.

First, college students explained that situational factors related to the behavior might serve as a cue for parents to become concerned. For example, they said that parents should be concerned when participating in a behavior might cause them harm, either physically or emotionally, or might interfere with their goals for the future. However, they described the importance of parents viewing harm from the perspective of their student. For example, many students said that minor physical harm (e.g. breaking an arm) was a minimal consequence; thus, it should not cause parents to become concerned. However, life-threatening situations should be cause for concern.

The second group of factors was parents' personal values and their own experiences during adolescence and college. Students recognized that as a result of having had many more experiences, parents have insights into situations students will encounter. Further, students believed that this provides parents an ability to foresee problems that, as students, they may not be able to see on their own prior to experiencing it. Students explained that this anticipation may cause parents to become concerned. When deciding when to act on their concern for their child, students explained that parents must also consider their child. Jason described this, "I think parents don't give students enough credit, not necessarily to make the right decisions because everybody will make wrong decisions...but I think parents underestimate students' ability to have reasons for what they do." Third, students said that their past behavior is an excellent predictor of their future

behavior. Amanda said, "Because I've never gotten in trouble before...they really trust that I'll do good, have good judgment on different things."

Finally, students said that the parent-child relationship provides the most insight into how parents can distinguish between those behaviors they should be concerned about and those they should not be concerned about. Students explained that parents should look for changes in students' mood or behavior and watch students' friends' behavior, looking for cues that might indicate they should act on their concern. For instance, students were clear that failing one test or changing groups of friends might not be indicative of trouble. Jason said, "I've very carefully contemplated some things, came to the conclusion that they should be done, been totally confident in that and been wrong, and well, that happens, you learn from it, and parents need to respect that more." It is larger changes, such as a shift in priorities, which should rally parents' concern. They said failing every test or avoiding all their friends may be an indication that parents should be concerned about their child and act on that concern. Emillio provided an extreme example.

If your priorities are in order I don't think they should be worried. For example, my friend's a heavy pot smoker but he makes sure that he studies for his tests and he pulls good grades and everything. School comes first before anything, and he doesn't let the pot get in the way. That's just something that he relaxes from the stress and stuff like that, after taking care of the priorities.

Together, these factors might be termed "long-distance monitoring," with a critical component of that being communication. When parents could not question their child about every outing or wait up for their child to return home, there were other ways parents could monitor their behavior. Long-distance monitoring not only means maintaining a strong parent-child relationship; it also includes promoting values, morals, skills, and competencies that will carry with young people and help them to behave responsibly and deal with undesirable consequences of their decisions. This is similar to the concept of distal monitoring used by others to describe phone calls and rules (Dishion & McMahon, 1998), and similar to descriptions of parental monitoring during adolescence. This suggests that the underlying process of monitoring remains consistent through the college years, but that the behaviors that exemplify this process change in response to changing conditions, such as increased independence or a different living situation.

Overall, these students felt confident that a strong parent-child relationship would help prevent them from crossing from healthy experimentation to dangerous risk-taking. This supports previous research that has found that college students who feel good about their relationship with their parents adjust better to college, both socially and academically (Rice et al., 1990). Further, this challenges parents to encourage independence while continuing to provide emotional support (Kenny, 1987). Gabriel articulated this sentiment. "If you talk to your children, you sort of have this base that no matter how crazy they get, they'll come back and talk to you. I think that's the biggest thing." Also evident in this quote is the importance of communication as a critical part of the advice for parents that emerged from these data.

#### *College students' advice for parents.*

Participants articulated advice for parents to reconcile when college students believe

parents should and should not be concerned. The advice they offered was: stay involved with your student, know them, and guide them. "No matter how far away they [your kids] are, stay involved." For instance, students noted the importance of regular phone calls, electronic mail, and visits. Perhaps more important were their descriptions of what happened during these interactions. Consistent with their understanding of how parents could distinguish between things they should and should not be concerned about, whether in voice, in writing, or in person, students noted how important it was for parents to pay attention to cues. They advised that parents should: follow up on things their child revealed during a previous interaction, look for big changes in their child's mood or behavior, listen closely to their child's tone of voice, monitor their grades, and ask about their friends and extracurricular activities. Abbey described how her father continued to monitor her behavior when she started college.

When I first got to school, I went out kind of a lot. I remember I went out one week straight, like every night. And my dad called me, cause I would e-mail him; 'oh we went out again last [night]'. He was like, 'what are you doing'? I probably never would've thought this could get kind of addictive...He's like, 'don't you have work to do'?...This was not even the second month of school. Hadn't quite balanced everything out, hadn't quite learned when I could go out and when I couldn't.

In fact, some students explained that they should not be given complete responsibility for their life during the first two years of college, and that parents should still have some say in their decisions. Although they described feeling grown as soon as they entered college, they also described the absurdity of being a child one day and an adult the next. However, they advised that attempting to enforce too many limitations or providing too much advice would force students to rebel. They explained that a little leeway gives them room to experiment and test their limits, hopefully without going over their limit too far or too often. For example, Robert, a university student said, "She [my mom] kept the tight reins on for the first year and a half, to make sure I was doing okay because I've never been out of my house."

Community college students who were still living with their parents expressed a slightly different perspective. They explained that their parents had more say in their decisions and that they felt obligated to follow their parents' rules. Amanda, a community college student said, "Things might be different if I didn't live with my parents, but I feel that I should have respect in them since I'm still in their household and through their rules." Still, whether students were living with their parents or not, they noted the importance of their parents working to remain connected to them without attempting to control their behavior, thereby allowing them, and in some cases even encouraging them, to experiment.

#### **Implications**

To fully understand the parent-child relationship when emerging adults are in college, and to determine parent education needs for parents of college students, it is critical that we speak directly with young people. While these data present parents with an extremely challenging task, they also provide the foundation for future research, both from the perspective of students and from the perspective of parents, and for outreach efforts for both students and parents.



Although past research has suggested that during adolescence there is a profound renegotiation of the parent-child relationship, results of this investigation suggest that college is another period of renegotiation. College students are transitioning to greater independence, and parents are working to remain connected to their children during this time (Smollar & Youniss, 1989). Both are faced with the challenge of balancing their needs and desires with the needs and desires of the other. This requires establishing a relationship such that parents trust students to experiment, to behave independently and make responsible decisions, and students live up to that expectation.

From the perspective of college students, the present investigation suggests that communication and monitoring are just as critical when students are in college as during adolescence. These data reveal that students listen to their parents and often consider their parents' perspective before making a decision about participating in a potentially dangerous behavior. Even though monitoring their child's behavior and communicating with their child becomes much more challenging, communication enables parents to identify the cues students described as being indicative of trouble. Parent education for parents of college students must work towards providing parents with the skills to long-distance monitor, and to identify and differentiate between healthy experimentation and dangerous risk-taking. This might include helping parents: develop a realistic understanding of the college culture and normative college student development, develop skills for talking with their college student about challenging issues, develop skills for accessing resources for themselves and their student when necessary, and develop skills necessary to respond to a crisis.

More specifically, these data suggest a comprehensive approach to student support, which includes supporting parents, is essential to improving student outcomes. However, because parents of college students are not in a confined geographical region (particularly parents of residential college students), we must think creatively about reaching parents, and perhaps using technology to facilitate that. Many institutions provide a parent orientation, a website with information for parents, even a newsletter, or the opportunity to join an electronic mail list serv. There also are many excellent popular press books available to parents (e.g. Savage, 2009). Arizona State University has gone one step further and developed a course for parents of college students (Carr, 2000). Other institutions might follow a similar tactic, by providing parents not only with concrete information, but also skills and the opportunity to practice and develop those skills for parenting their college student. For instance, the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, has developed online resources for parents of college students (see: <http://www.cehd.umn.edu/fsos/Centers/Alcohol/>; <http://www.cehd.umn.edu/fsos/Centers/Finance/>; Dworkin & Savage, 2008) and found evidence that providing parents with resources and information can be effective in changing student behavior (Dworkin, Koh, & Savage, 2009).

### Limitations and Future Directions

Although the findings of the present investigation are not entirely surprising, by speaking with college students, we are better able to understand these phenomena from their perspective as well as identify specific behaviors and tactics that might prove useful for parents. While these findings provide a strong foundation for future research on the family system when a young person is in college, this study is limited. First, the present investigation only explored the experiences of a small sample of college students. This

study was not designed to produce generalizable findings but rather to provide a glimpse into students' perspectives. Research with larger samples, using quantitative research methods would allow for the exploration of gender, socioeconomic, and racial and ethnic differences in students' experiences. Quantitative data also would allow for the exploration of within-group differences, for example, high academic achievers versus low academic achievers, students with various goals for the future, and students who were raised in various family environments. Even though Aquilino (1997) concluded that past relationship patterns persist when families enter a new life stage, longitudinal data would elucidate the trajectory of the parent-child relationship when young people make the transition to college. Second, future research should consider the perspective of parents of college students. Questions to consider include: are their perspectives the same or different than students', what is their understanding of their college students' behavior, and how do they transition into their new parenting role? Third, future research on experimentation during emerging adulthood should include the "forgotten half" (The Forgotten Half, 1988), emerging adults who do not attend college immediately following high school.

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Table 1: Description of Participants (Frequencies)

Demographic Characteristics	Community College (n=12)	University (n=20)
<b>Age (in years)</b>		
• 18	2	1
• 19	4	5
• 20	3	4
• 21	2	7
• 22	1	3
<b>Gender</b>		
• Female	6	10
• Male	6	10
<b>Ethnicity</b>		
• Latino	0	6
• African American	3	6
• White	8	8
• Asian (not U.S. born)	1	0
<b>Hometown</b>		
• Urban	2	8
• Suburban	4	7
• Rural	6	5
<b>Family Structure</b>		
• Two-parent family	7	14
• Single-parent family	4	5
• Grandparent(s)	1	1

Note. Cells=n

# Parental Involvement in Study Abroad: A Case Study from the University of Minnesota

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## Abstract

Parents have become key stakeholders in the university study abroad experience. This study constructively examined how parents shape their role through relationships with the institution and their student. Specifically, this study focused on the case of the Learning Abroad Center on the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities campus. Using multiple methods, the researcher gathered perspectives from both the institution and parents of study abroad students to analyze how the office conveys a role to parents and whether the Learning Abroad Center's and parents' expectations align. Findings suggest that cultivating a relationship with the Parent Program Office, keeping communication open and establishing a parent role has been critical to the Learning Abroad Center's success with parent relations. Parents recognize the importance of study abroad and students' independence, but still appear uncertain as to what their role should be and how to utilize parent-specific resources.

## Introduction

Ensuring a successful study abroad experience for undergraduate students requires careful orchestration and planning. Key actors include not only students and the study abroad office, but also parents as stakeholders in the process. Indeed, parents are emotionally, as well as financially invested in their student's experience (M. Johnson, personal communications, 2009). Parents today have closer relationships with their children and keep in touch more frequently than in previous generations, lessening the impact of separation at college (Cutright, 2008). In fact, the director of the Parent Program and the director of the Learning Abroad Center posit that studying abroad may be the new "going-to-college" experience (M. Savage, M. Johnson personal communications, 2009). The physical distance between students and parents is often much greater, and internet or other cost-effective methods of staying in touch are not always readily available abroad. While the increase of communication technologies, such as Skype, are allowing for more frequent contact, the student is left more to his or her own devices. Furthermore, studying abroad introduces added layers of complexity that neither student nor parent may be familiar with, such as a foreign language and a new culture. If parents are to be recognized in the process, the challenge for study abroad administrators is to be able to encourage parents to stay behind the scenes, allowing students to take ownership of their experience.

Parents may have many reasons for wanting to get involved and to be informed of the study abroad experience. Safety matters are typically parents' primary concern during a sojourn abroad (Savage, 2009). Prominent events, such as the September 11 attacks and SARS epidemic, highlighted the need for study abroad offices to focus more attention on the safety of their participants (Luegthe, 2004, p. 24). Additionally, if a parent takes a consumer stance as Bolen (2001) discusses, study abroad may be seen as a "prepackaged consumer experience" (p. 186). As a result, "parents feel that they have purchased knowledge of and responsibility for the safety, living conditions, and cultural experiences of their children by paying the program tuition" (Bolen, 2001, p. 194). Study abroad administrators must work simultaneously to satisfy parents' concerns, while also establishing boundaries to parental involvement. Moreover, study abroad offices must strive to encourage parents to see study abroad beyond the consumerist lens for the true purpose of study abroad, a valuable learning experience in and of another culture.

To better understand how study abroad offices can adjust to an increase in parental involvement, the overall context of higher education must also be examined. As Kennedy (2009) notes, today, "the increase in parental involvement (or interference, depending on your point of view) has been a topic in nearly every facet of higher education" (p. 16). Consequently, many universities have established parent offices. Around 70% of four-year institutions have parent coordinators (Lum, 2006; Merriman, 2006). While parent outreach has increased in response to parents' need for information, research also shows that parental involvement is indeed beneficial for scholastic achievement in higher education (Wolf, Sax & Harper, 2009). Moreover, it appears that students want interactions with their parents and often request involvement (Wartman & Savage, 2008).

Traditionally, legal policy has guided university administrators. The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) states that students assume legal rights of their educational records when they enter college (Weeks, 2001). With this policy, many higher education

administrators can use FERPA to keep parents from being overly involved (Kennedy, 2009). Each institution, and even an individual office on a campus, has the ability to interpret FERPA as it wishes. On the one hand, a more conservative interpretation allows institutions to refuse to release any information pertaining to a student's academic record. On the other hand, many schools recognize that "the institutional relationship with parents is too important to alienate them" (Kennedy, 2009, p. 17).

While these frameworks for parent relations may be extrapolated to study abroad, the challenges and circumstances involved in a study abroad experience shift parents' needs. However, there is limited research for study abroad professionals to look to for guidance. Administrators often share anecdotal stories within offices or at professional conferences, but the negative and extreme occurrences with parents often are the most memorable, not the most representative. Consequently, there is a lack of beneficial information and practices related to parental involvement for study abroad offices to utilize.

The current study highlights the Learning Abroad Center on the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities campus. The purpose of this study is to constructively examine the parent's role as it is shaped by parents' relationships with the institution and the student, capturing both parents' and administrators' perspectives.

### Methodology

This study assumed a highly qualitative approach in the form of an embedded case study, with two bounded units being analyzed (Yin, 2009, p. 50): the University of Minnesota (i.e., the Learning Abroad Center and Parent Program Office) and parents of study abroad students. First, the researcher conducted interviews with staff members in the Learning Abroad Center and the Parent Program Office and observed parent study abroad orientation sessions. Second, a nineteen question survey was administered to parents listed as general contacts in students' study abroad applications in the Learning Abroad Center database. This survey sought to understand how parents engage with the institution through available resources, as well as how parents engage with their students during the study abroad process. Additionally, the researcher conducted a focus group with parents to elaborate on the survey findings. The following research questions shape this study:

1. How do study abroad offices establish and then convey the parent's role?
  - What are study abroad offices' expectations for parental involvement?
2. How do parents' engage with their students and the institution during the study abroad process?
  - How do parents shape their role in the study abroad process?

### Participants

Various staff members within the Learning Abroad Center participated in interviews, answering a different set of interview questions based on the extent of their interactions with parents. These positions included: three resource center (non-student) staff, four associate program directors, the parent liaison, and the office director. Additionally, the

director of the Parent Program participated, who—while from an outside unit—has made a concerted effort to identify learning abroad concerns for parents.

To select participants for the parent survey, the researcher received permission from the university's FERPA office and the Learning Abroad Center to use the student database to collect parents' email addresses from students' applications. The researcher drew a stratified simple random sample based on three categories: students returned from studying abroad, students currently abroad, and students confirmed to study abroad in the Spring 2010 semester. To determine sample size, a confidence interval of 95% was used with error limits of 0.05. The question used for determining the population variance is a key survey question:

*Did your student directly request your involvement at some point in the study abroad process? Answer: Yes or No*

$$[1.962 \times (0.5 \times 0.5)] / 0.052 = 384$$

Of these 384 emails, 46 bounced back, or were undeliverable, and counted as un-administered surveys, resulting in a final sample size of 338. The final number of returned surveys was 135, resulting in a 40% response rate.

This study utilized two different methods for finding focus group participants. At three parent orientation sessions, the researcher passed around an interest sheet to parents to collect their emails. An invitation was then sent to these parents for the focus group sessions for parents who had attended the orientation sessions. Also, the Parent Program director, Marjorie Savage, placed announcements for both focus group sessions in her bi-weekly e-newsletter. The resulting focus group consisted of two sets of parents from the same families and one individual mother. An additional focus group of eight parents, who had not attended a parent orientation session, was cancelled due to inclement weather and could not be rescheduled. All members of the cancelled focus group participated by email, answering the questions that would have been asked during the sessions. Many of the themes and concerns these parents mentioned in their email responses echoed those brought up in the "live" focus group.

### Limitations

It should be noted that having only one focus group with a small number of participants is a significant limitation of this study to provide transferable insight to other institutions. In general, there are criticisms of single-case studies, as they may be unique to that case and consequently, ungeneralizable to other populations (Yin, 2009). Nonetheless, the dynamic discussion that took place in the focus group is insightful and should be considered as an impetus to conduct further research on the under-researched topic of parental involvement in study abroad. The next section presents the findings by research question, first by the institution and second, with the parents' perspective.

## Findings

### Establishing and Conveying a Parent Role

#### *Learning Abroad Center staff interviews*

When establishing a parent role, it is important for the office staff to understand where parents are positioned in this experience. As noted earlier, study abroad might be considered the “new ‘going to college’ experience”... making the [Learning Abroad Center] very important” in guiding parents through the process (M. Johnson, personal communications, November 2009). By helping parents be informed and know how to talk to their students about issues pertaining to study abroad, the Learning Abroad Center can “empower parents as advocates,” consequently helping, rather than hindering, the students’ experience (M. Johnson, personal communications, November 2009). The director acknowledged that there are many areas where parents can have a greater influence on students than university staff. For instance, parents should have a conversation on alcohol, as students are more likely to listen to their parents than staff members about making decisions while abroad with regard to alcohol. This is an important matter from the Learning Abroad Center staff’s perspective, as alcohol abuse is the cause of most problems that students experience while studying abroad (M. Johnson, personal communications, November 2009).

The parent role is further established based on communication restrictions due to FERPA policy. Learning Abroad Center staff members are trained in FERPA guidelines, which shapes the interactions staff can have with parents. Resource center staff communicate with parents less frequently than associate program directors (APDs). It is typical for the former position to receive a few calls or emails per week. It is even less common for resource center staff to interact with a parent who actually comes into the Center (C. Churma, personal communications, November 2009). Frequency of communication with parents varies among all APDs, ranging from receiving a handful of calls/emails per month to one call/email per day during a busy week. One APD referred to having at least one “serial” parent per semester, meaning one parent calls and/or emails many times throughout the semester (S. Tschida, personal communications, November 2009).

When parents call, they often ask direct questions about the student pertaining to billing matters or other logistical matters. APDs answer more program and country-specific questions regarding housing abroad, safety, arrival, and departure information. To avoid conflict with FERPA policy while still giving parents the information they seek, the staff member speaks in generalities regarding programs, particularly if the information can be found on the website (B. Titus; S. Daby; B. Cherny, personal communications, November 2009). If a parent wants more concrete information regarding his or her student, the student must have signed a FERPA waiver to give the parent permission to access information. When staff members explain the legal restrictions, parents do not usually push back (Z. Mohs, personal communications, November 2009). Whenever possible, however, staff members try to convey to parents the need for students to take initiative with logistics or problem solving by redirecting communication back to the student.

In addition to legal guidelines, staff members learn how to interact with parents through informal discussions around the office and talks coordinated with the Parent Program.

These discussions include trends in parental behaviors and characteristics of Millennial<sup>1</sup> students (Z. Mohs; S. Daby; S. Tschida; B. Titus, personal communications, November 2009). Through this informal and formal training, APDs have come to recognize the parent role as encouraging and supportive, but they emphasize that this support should take place behind the scenes. From the staff’s perspective, it is important for parents to understand boundaries and acknowledge the student’s responsibility for preparing for the study abroad experience.

#### *Working with the Parent Program*

The collaboration between the Parent Program and the Learning Abroad Center began around 2001 to take a step towards being more proactive with parents. Moreover, this relationship has aided the Learning Abroad Center in effectively establishing and conveying a role for parents. One individual, Antonia Lortis, assumed the position of parent liaison, communicating directly with the Parent Program director, Marjorie Savage. As Savage states, “when the Learning Abroad Center began its curriculum integration project [around 2000] and one of the key barriers for students was identified as family, I saw I had a responsibility and a role” in this process (personal communications, November 2009). The parent efforts began with the website and later a brochure to show parents, “we’re thinking about you” (A. Lortis, personal communications, November 2009). The information on the parent website seeks to establish the parent’s role as a supporter, but asserts immediately on the parent welcome page that “the Learning Abroad Center is student-centered” (*Parents*, September 3, 2009). The website information’s purpose is “to be informative before being defensive,” which reinforces the office’s desire to remain student-centered (A. Lortis, personal communications, November 2009).

Several years later, the current director of the Learning Abroad Center, Martha Johnson, and other staff worked with the Parent Program to develop parent orientation sessions, which are offered before the student leaves for their study abroad program. The Parent Program also offers a learning abroad workshop during Parents’ Weekend (available online as well) and a few articles related to learning abroad that were placed in the Parent Program print newsletter (*Study abroad and graduation*, Winter 2008; *When students go abroad, should parents visit?*, Winter 2008; *Parents can help make study abroad more successful*, Winter 2008).

#### *Parent orientation observations*

Parent orientation sessions play an important role in conveying an appropriate role to parents. After parents started showing up at the students’ orientation several years ago, the Learning Abroad Center acknowledged that parents had their own questions and concerns (M. Johnson, personal communications, November 2009). The researcher observed four sessions as part of this study. Parents attended a 45-minute orientation session that coincides with the students’ own pre-departure orientation sessions. First, the staff member discussed how his or her own experience was drastically different compared to programs of today. By using their own experiences, the session leaders were able to emphasize how much more support today’s students receive in a study abroad program, particularly with the University of Minnesota programs (*Parent “Breakout” notes*, March 2008). The staff then explained what parents can expect during their students’ experiences. After their own meeting, parents joined their students for the second half of the program-specific orientation sessions.

<sup>1</sup> For a description of Millennial students, see Howe, N. & Strauss, W. (2003). *Millennials go to college: Strategies for a new generation on campus, recruiting and admissions, campus life, and the classroom*. Washington, DC: American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers.

## Expectations for Parental Involvement

### *Learning Abroad Center staff interviews*

Parent-student communication is an issue that influences staff members' expectations for parental involvement. Staff expect that communication with parents should never reach a point where the parents know more information than the student. To some of the Learning Abroad Center staff who participated in interviews, it appears that "parents are concerned that their students aren't doing what they should be doing. [These parents] are more intent on making sure the student is doing things in the 'correct' manner" (B. Cherny, personal communications, November 2009). Moreover, it appears that many students are the ones asking their parents to call or complete tasks for them, and "have no shame in having their parents do the work for them" (S. Tschida, personal communications, November 2009). Staff members see the parent's role as being supportive, but they believe students should be taking responsibility for some of the tasks that parents are calling and asking about. Sometimes, APDs have to "make a conscious effort (in a polite way) to say the student needs to [take care] of this" (E. Volden, personal communications, November 2009). In addition to having expectations for parents, staff members must manage their expectations of parents. It can be expected that parents are not always familiar with the cultural complexities of living abroad. Therefore, as one APD acknowledged, sometimes it becomes necessary for the parent to call a staff member directly, particularly when the parent has safety concerns or the well-being of the student is in question. Often, the "chains of communication can break down going back and forth with the student" (personal communications, November 2009). This concern is not necessarily due to the student's lack of ability, but staff recognize that there is an overwhelming amount of information for both students and parents to process. For instance, parents with students who are going to a country under travel warning, such as Kenya, frequently call inquiring about crime statistics (B. Titus, personal communications, 2009). However, this APD pointed out that students going to Kenya will be hyperaware of safety, as the student may perceive that more precaution is necessary. In a country such as Italy, on the other hand, a student might be less aware and less cautious, possibly having a greater chance of being pick-pocketed. The APD in charge of this Kenya program utilizes conversations with parents as an opportunity to inform and educate parents not only about the precautions the Learning Abroad Center takes to ensure students safety, but also to point out the less obvious realities of study abroad.

It is important to recognize circumstances that contribute to parental involvement when creating expectations. When asked if there is an expected "type" of parent that might utilize parent resources, Lortis suggested the concept of a "highly involved consumer," those parents who plan, talk to someone about the purchase, and then buy it (personal communications, November 2009). This term does not generalize to all parents, as some simply want to be informed of a process they know little about. Both Lortis and Savage point out that the K-12 experience is very different from higher education, as parents are expected to be involved in their child's early school experiences. During college, the expectations shift and parents do not know what to do (personal communications, November 2009). Giving parents information and resources on what they can do (i.e., a defined role) to support their student in the study abroad process can thus alleviate some of parents' concerns and most likely, the volume of parent inquiry at the Learning Abroad Center.

The director of the Learning Abroad Center emphasized the importance of the office managing expectations that result from the student's (and parent's) background, especially to "understand the cultural issues behind these students" (personal communications, November 2009). For example, despite expressed interest, Somali female students were not allowed to participate in a Morocco program because their parents would not let them live alone while overseas. Once this information was known to the staff, the Learning Abroad Center was able to identify housing options which would allow two participants to live together, effectively addressing the parents' concerns (M. Johnson, personal communications, November 2009). Consequently, the Learning Abroad Center now provides a place on an advising checklist form where students can indicate if they have concerns regarding family and parents, including needing assistance in how to talk to them about study abroad due to cultural values. While Johnson acknowledges that she would ideally like "more tools on the front end for underrepresented students," time and money currently prevent the office from doing so. The office is, however, in the process of developing an online parent orientation to try to reach a broader audience.

### *Parent orientation observations*

During the parent orientation sessions, the Learning Abroad Center staff outlined the expectations the office has for parents. There was a brief discussion of today's generation of students and parents, followed by suggestions on areas where parents' involvement and support is important and where it is problematic. For example, the Learning Abroad Center director mentioned to parents how students might undergo "form fatigue" with all of the paperwork students must fill out, but that it is important for students to complete this, not the parents (personal communications, November 2009). As part of the orientation program, parents heard about the benefits of visiting students abroad, and they were given suggestions for the appropriate time to visit students (i.e., a midterm break or at the end). The staff members also explained why students might call in an apparent state of crisis within the first few days of arriving abroad, but that parents should give students 24 hours to adapt and adjust to their new culture. In most cases, the staff member assured, students will be fine (C. Huber; M. Johnson, B. Blahnik personal communications, November 2009). Session leaders concluded sessions by acknowledging the help parents give students overall.

## Parent Survey

Through the parent survey, the researcher sought to better understand parents' relationship with the institution, as well as with their student to then examine how parents perceive their role in the study abroad process. First, the survey questioned parents' awareness and usefulness of resources<sup>1</sup> provided by the Learning Abroad Center and Parent Program. In part, this portion sought to learn to what extent parents are in direct contact with the institution. The second part of the survey pertained to parents' contact with their student at all stages of the study abroad experience (i.e., before, during, and after). This section presents the key findings from the survey, drawing from the four open-ended questions, which were the core questions of this survey:

1. Survey Question 8: *Did your student directly request your involvement during the study abroad process? If yes, please explain.*

2. Survey Question 13: *If there was a particular resource that would better assist you in being informed about your student's study abroad experience, what would that be?*
3. Survey Question 14: *In a few sentences, please describe your role in your student's study abroad experience.*
4. Survey Question 15: *How, if at all, has your student's study abroad experience impacted you?*

First, a couple of demographic details should be noted with regard to the parents who responded to the survey. Question 16 asked parents if they had studied abroad. As Table 1 displays, 86.7% of parents who attended college did not study abroad. This high percentage supports the notion that parents may not know how to navigate the study abroad process.

Table 1. Parents' Own Study Abroad Experience

Did parent study abroad?	Count	Percent %
Yes	11	8.2%
No	117	86.7%
N/A	7	5.2%

Questions 18 and 19 in the survey asked parents two additional demographic questions, gender and ethnicity/race, which indicated a majority in the type of parent who answered this survey. As Table 2 and 3 demonstrate, roughly twice as many mothers than fathers (68.2% vs. 31.9%) responded to the survey, and 93.3% of the respondents consider themselves Caucasian.

Table 2. Parents' Gender

Gender	Count	Percent %
Female	92	68.2%
Male	43	31.9%

Table 3. Parents' Ethnicity and Race

Item	Count	Percent %
American Indian or Alaska Native	1	0.7%
Asian or Asian American	2	1.8%
Caucasian	126	93.3%
Hispanic, Latino, or Chicano	1	0.7%
Other, please specify.	3	2.2%
American	1	0.7%
French	1	0.7%

The lower percentages of the ethnic groups listed above are representative of national percentages of racial/ethnic groups of study abroad students. According to the 2009 *Open Doors Report*, in 2007-08, Caucasians made up 81.8% of students studying abroad, 6.6% were Asian or Pacific Islander, 5.9% were Hispanic or Latino(a), 4% were Black or African American, and 0.5% were American Indian/Alaska Native (*Profile of U.S. Study Abroad Students, 1998/99-2007/08*).

#### Responses to open-ended questions

It appears that parents shape their role and their involvement based on their relationship with their student, as well as their knowledge, or familiarity, with traveling abroad. Question 8 asked: *Did your student directly request your assistance at any point during the study abroad process?* 58.2% of parents stated that, yes, their students directly requested their parents' involvement at some point during the study abroad process. One caveat of this question is that involvement was not defined for parents, leaving it up to the parents' discretion to determine whether they were involved or not. Parents listed a range of reasons as to why their students asked for their advice and/or assistance. Some parents saw their involvement as extending little beyond paying for the experience. Others indicated that their students wanted them to be kept in the loop and students sought their parents' insight to work through the process together.

In question 14, parents were asked to describe their role during the study abroad process in their own words. Many parents discussed their role as a hands-off, supporting role based on how independent parents perceived their students to be and how involved the student wants them to be. Primarily, parents serve as a source of emotional and financial support. A large percentage of parents indicated financial support (~40%). Additionally, many parents indicated that they acted as a sounding board to students' concerns.

With regard to resource usage during the study abroad process, a relatively low percentage of parents contacted or went to the Learning Abroad Center (28.6% and 14.4%, respectively). The student studying abroad was the clear top source of information and advice, with 83.5% indicating that they went to their students for information. Although the majority of parents did not study abroad when they were in college, 85.2% of respondents felt they had the information to be able to respond to their students' questions and concerns. In question 13, when asked about possible resources, many parents indicated that their student was the key informant or they simply would have liked to be aware of current resources.

Lastly, question 15 asked: *How, if any, has your student's study abroad experience had an impact on you?* Parents (118 out of the 135) described how their students' study abroad experiences have impacted them. The majority of parents focused on the positive outcomes of a study abroad experience. Some lamented at the need to "let go," or a struggle with distance, but few indicated a negative impact. Parents mentioned the growth and capabilities they witnessed in their students as a result of the study abroad experience (~17%). Parents also discussed engaging in the experience themselves, particularly by visiting and having their child share their life abroad with the parents (~15%). In addition to visiting, several parents mentioned learning more about the country in which their child was studying, or in general, learning through their student. Thus, it can be inferred that many parents saw their students' study abroad experience as an educational opportunity for themselves as well.



## Parent Focus Group

The intent of the focus group was to expand on the results of the survey. Indeed, the focus group provided more in-depth information on questions in the survey, particularly regarding how frequent and in what ways parents and students kept in touch. Additionally, parents were able to better explain what led them to be directly involved in their student's experience, i.e., why they wanted to come to parent-specific events or the circumstances leading them to contact the Learning Abroad Center. Although additional focus groups would have enhanced the conclusions drawn, the cancelled focus group and limited response from parents prevented this possibility. The information that follows reports the results of the focus group of five parents, all of whom attended a Learning Abroad Center parent orientation. Table 4 provides parents' pseudonyms with a brief profile.

Table 4. Focus group parent profile

Pseudonym	Race/ethnicity	Student's status	Previous international experience
Harry and Sarah Dune	Caucasian	Two study abroad students, one currently abroad (a junior), one returned	Hosted 4 high-school age exchange students, previous international travel. Sarah studied abroad as a college student.
Patricia Carmichael	Caucasian	One student (a sophomore) currently abroad	No previous international experience
Carla and Josh Peterson	Caucasian	Two study abroad students, both returned (most recent was a junior when she studied abroad ) (older did a study abroad and then worked abroad)	Hosted 1 exchange student, previous international travel

## Themes

For this group of parents, previous international experience and parents' knowledge (or lack thereof) the host culture appeared to be the two major influences on their direct involvement and engagement in the study abroad experience. In addition, the following categories relate to how parents shaped their roles during their student's study abroad experience:

1. Perceived levels of student independence
2. Available or desired resources
3. Uncertainty about the parent's role
4. Managing expectations

## Parents' engagement in study abroad and knowledge of the host culture

Two families had fairly extensive travel experience as the profile in Table 1 indicates. Throughout the session, parents made frequent references to their past experiences and how certain situations influenced the current study abroad experience of their students. For instance, because of Sarah's own study abroad experience, the level of contact between parent and child as a result of new technologies, such as Skype, concerned Sarah:

I have mixed feelings about [Skype]. When I studied abroad, I had one phone call (to my parents) on Christmas Eve. That was the only contact besides letters. It makes me wonder, you know, about the kind of attachment issues and what differences there are.

Conversely, Patricia did not discuss any previous traveling experience stating, "This is new to us. We were always excited for it. She did the preparation herself, but I wanted to know what was going on. I was curious about so many aspects."

It appeared that the parents with previous international experience were knowledgeable and understanding of cultural differences, as well as adjustment issues and culture shock. Such experience encouraged parents to utilize their knowledge as a platform to be even more interested in connecting with and being informed of their students' study abroad programs. All parents seemed to recognize that through their students' experiences, they too were engaged in a learning experience.

Concerns and knowledge, or lack thereof, of the host cultures also contributed to parents' involvement. Harry mentioned using non-university resources to reassure the parents about the conditions of Kenya where his daughter was traveling, noting that Kenya is currently under travel warning by the State Department. Harry stated:

If you go to the State Department website, you don't feel good after you read it. In the orientation, I think it could have been brought up that this is what the State Department says [since] two weeks before the orientation, the Times was saying kidnapping was going on there. Response was that they were foreigners. If we hadn't met with our travel agent, that got me over the hurdle. It doesn't sound good and you're sending your kids there. If you state it, then it's out there and we make our own decision.

As Sarah pointed out, while the majority of their concerns pertained to in-country safety issues, some crises have nothing to do with safety, but with cultural differences. The Dune's daughter had been experiencing difficulties with her host family—at times having to share a bed with other family members and sharing the apartment with upwards of 50 relatives, according to Sarah. While it was an extreme situation, Sarah and her husband expressed concern: "I struggle with how much we're supposed to be having control over our kids. Should we be intervening at all?" Other parents' concerns pertained both to student's adaptation to the host culture and how much they should be communicating with their students. The parents were concerned that by talking too much with family, students may not be immersing themselves in the local environment. As Carla stated, "You want them to be used to where they are and adapt."

One component of students' adaptation was coping with the housing arrangements; specifically, living with a host family. All parents in the group thought there was value in staying with a host family. The Dunes recognized their situation as being unique and had done research on cultural norms of their daughter's host country, but they still grappled with determining at what point to intervene. Often, the Dunes would precede a statement with "In that culture," or "In Kenya" to indicate recognition of possible cultural difference. Other less frequently mentioned concerns included homesickness, the destination of the student's study abroad program, and alcohol consumption.

#### *Perceived levels of student independence*

Frequently, parents made direct references toward their students' levels of independence, citing students' desire to manage the experience on their own. For instance, Harry commented that "Lydia was very independent, she just handled it. She wanted to do it all herself." These parents expected their students to grow and mature from a study abroad program. Consequently, parents viewed their role in a supportive function, allowing students to take charge of the experience, but being available for advice and encouragement. Parents felt that at college age, students should manage their experience. As Carla stated, "At that age, they're able to control how much they want to talk to you. I mean she's talking to you often because she needs to, but if she didn't need to, she wouldn't." Nonetheless, the parents still expressed concern for students' choices while abroad, such as with regard to alcohol or independent traveling.

#### *Resources*

These parents seemed eager to be engaged in their students' study abroad experiences, having attended the parent orientation sessions and wanting to know about anything offered to parents, both University-wide and related to study abroad. Carla stated, "Thank goodness he told us about [the parent orientation session]. He told us, 'next week, there's a meeting you can go to.' Ok, well where it is? He didn't realize we really wanted to go." When asked, all families acknowledged familiarity with FERPA policy, but were still confused about what kind of information they could and should receive regarding the study abroad experience. Sarah suggested, and others agreed, that it would be helpful for parents to directly receive a checklist stating the information students receive from the Learning Abroad Center.

To keep themselves informed, these parents sought out information, including non-university sources as mentioned above, such as a travel agent or friends. Additionally, Sarah and Carla indicated that they had been able to get contact information from other parents who were sending students to either the same program or at the least, to the same country. While these mothers agreed that it would be useful for parents to be able to contact one another, they were uncertain how to orchestrate such a task to include everyone that was not able to go to the parent orientations and whether it really was necessary. Both the Dunes and the Petersons said they had their students give them the phone numbers of the students' closest friends to have peace of mind and in case of an emergency. As Josh stated, "You don't need it, but it's nice to have it."

Patricia noted that the "study abroad folder"—a list of documents to keep at home while the student is away—was a useful resource discussed in the parent orientation. Patricia

also indicated that she read a "Know Before You Go" guide twice that she received at the parent orientation session. Additionally, parents cited that it would be helpful to provide cultural overviews, or sources to find descriptions of cultural norms before the students go abroad. The parents also noted that the most helpful part of the student orientation sessions were the testimonials from past participants who had experience with the host culture. Furthermore, parents indicated they would have liked to hear from parents of veteran students.

Prior to the focus group, parents received a link to Cavallero's (2002) parents' guide to re-entry. None of the parents knew about this guide before receiving the link for focus group participation. All parents agreed that the information and issues to consider included in this guide were very useful, indicating that they had not considered many of the issues presented to them. Patricia stated: "I'm glad to have it ahead of time. I wondered if she is going to come back a different person. Is home going to be mundane?"

#### *Uncertainty about parents' roles*

The aforementioned topics appeared to shape the parents' role and involvement in their students' study abroad experience. Based on the conversations parents had with their students, parents shifted their roles as the students needed them to—financer, supporter, motivator, confidant, etc. In a sense, parents serve as their students' "rock" of support, as all families appeared to have close relationships with their students. All had visited (or were planning on visiting) their students at some point. Visiting provided a strong sense of engagement in the experience. The Petersons explained that when their student was abroad, they rented an apartment for a short time in the destination city and invited the student's friends over for a party to get to know who she had been studying with overseas.

Nonetheless, parents noted obstacles to knowing what to do in certain situations, i.e., how involved they should get. Understanding cultural norms and student adjustment processes contributed to these uncertainties. Sarah noted,

What made it hard was we didn't know what to do, if we should call because maybe [the challenge she was facing] is the norm and they're expected to live in this kind of situation. We didn't have the information; we couldn't make the good judgments. Do we need to do something?

Additionally, Patricia stated: "It's a trade-off because am I being too motherly, or not doing enough? What if it's really important? I wanted to be sure. What if they didn't know? She's really quite capable."

Although this particular group of parents appeared to feel comfortable with the idea of study abroad, as well as seeing the value of international experiences, knowing how to handle the student while abroad (or recently returned) still seemed to present certain challenges due to both the nature of the relationship with the student and the university. An understanding of FERPA seemed to help overall, but parents indicated that they would have liked more clarification about their role.

#### *Managing expectations*

Due to the nuances of a study abroad experience and the uncertainties mentioned

above, a large component of the study abroad experience for parents is managing expectations. This might involve expectations about the students' capabilities, the host family experience—both on the part of the student and the host family—and what changes may occur for the student upon return. This final theme is, in a sense, the intersection of all the above mentioned themes. For example, parents felt that their students were independent and capable of handling themselves overseas. Nonetheless, these parents had major concerns about students' safety and their choices, particularly with independent travel during their program. Patricia struggled between accepting her student as capable of making her own decisions, while acknowledging that taking a trip to Morocco was not something the mother was comfortable with, suggesting that "Maybe I'm just too much of a worrier."

Re-entry difficulties were one area where expectations needed to be managed for both student and parent. Josh specifically stated that both parents and students need to expect challenges when returning from such a long time away from home, but that the struggle will pass for everyone. Carla elaborated on their daughter's issues with re-entry: "When she came back, she felt a little alienated from her friends who hadn't experienced the same thing... She's pretty critical of her friend from high school. I told her to take it easy."

### *Conclusion*

Based on the group's discussion, these parents seemed to manage their questions and concerns by obtaining information on their own to guide themselves through the study abroad process. However, four out of the five parents had significant international experience, which allowed them to navigate challenges better, such as dealing with culture shock and general travel concerns. Nonetheless, it appears that these parents would have liked more resources and tips upfront, particularly on how to handle re-entry, what to expect with living with a host family, and advice on appropriate levels of contact while the student is abroad. As mentioned above, the parents from the cancelled group—who had not attended a parent orientation session—indicated similar concerns in the session that took place. Re-entry adjustment, for example, appeared to cause difficulties for some of these parents. As one mother explained, after her son came back from a semester abroad "he felt he had moved on from the partying atmosphere of (his) house and didn't have a lot in common with them anymore." This particular student ended up moving back home, suggesting that the relationship between parent and child is more steadfast through such a possibly life altering experience.

### **Discussion and Implications**

The Learning Abroad Center appears to have had success with parent relations overall. On the one hand, findings show that there are many areas in which the Learning Abroad Center staff and parents have a mutual understanding regarding the importance, principles, and objectives of a study abroad experience. Moreover, staff members expect to and are willing to interact with parents, even though they purposely direct all communication and action steps to students. Misalignment may occur between the Learning Abroad Center and parents because parents struggle with knowing how much involvement is too much. However, it is difficult to say whether parents are inappropriately involved with direct assistance, such as filling out paperwork, helping the student complete a task, or contacting the study abroad office. In part, this uncertainty arises

as students actively seek their parents help with such tasks. Moreover, parents are not given explicit guidelines about what the institution expects for parents' involvement due to FERPA restrictions. Rather, parents must seek out such information on their own through the website or at parent-targeted events, but parents might not have received this information until after they have interacted with the university.

Additionally, the office faces a challenge with an apparent disconnect between students' and parents' communication and sharing of information. As discussed in the institutional findings, the Learning Abroad Center is concerned that students do not always share information with their parents. Based on the findings from the survey and focus group, parents do indeed rely on their students to convey pertinent information. In part, this challenge stems from generational trends and current expectations of both students and parents with regard to the amount of effort it takes to accomplish tasks on a college campus today (see Howe & Strauss, 2003). Cultural environments, however, are difficult, if not impossible to change, which staff recognize. Consequently, Learning Abroad Center staff strive to seek a balance between informing parents and getting students to take ownership of the study abroad experience.

### **Recommendations**

To some extent, staff members' contact with parents is reactionary. Although the Learning Abroad office has made efforts to be proactive with their parent-specific resources, staff admit that they do not consistently direct parents to the parent-specific information, and parents indicate they would benefit from more proactive contact. FERPA restrictions must be considered, as the office may not even be allowed to send parents direct communications when a student confirms for a study abroad program. Perhaps, however, a checkbox could be placed onto the confirmation for students to waive the restrictions and allow information to be sent to their parents. Because many students already list their parents as a general contact on their applications, they would most likely allow parents to receive a checklist or something similar.

More resources could be distributed or pointed out in the orientation sessions. Staff provide parents with a few materials to take home, including information on power of attorney, the Parent Program newsletter articles, and a checklist of materials to keep while the student is abroad. One critique, however, is that the staff members did not mention the NAFSA: Association for International Educators' guide, "What Parents Need to Know!" (Hulstrand, 2007), Hoffa's (1998) "Parent's Guide to Study Abroad," or Cavallero's (2002) "Surviving Re-entry: A Readjustment Manual for Parents." Providing parents with resources might inform parents in a broader context outside of the University of Minnesota.

Collaborating with the Parent Program is an important characteristic of the Learning Abroad Center's parent relations. Savage, the Parent Program director, is able to provide up-to-date information regarding parent trends, which aids Learning Abroad Center staff in better understanding their stakeholders' needs. This relationship has the possibility of being utilized even further. For instance, perhaps a system could be developed to streamline more parent communications through Savage. Presently, the Parent Program offers a bi-weekly e-newsletter to parents who self-select to receive it. A similar, less frequent option could be offered to parents strictly pertaining to study abroad, with information coming through the Learning Abroad Center staff to the office's parent liaison

and then to the Parent Program. Additionally, one suggestion that emerged from the focus group was to collect parents' tips and thoughts about their learning abroad experiences. This information could be provided through the e-newsletter, but could also be made available through the Learning Abroad Center. As noted above, however, parents seem to have a more difficult time knowing where parent-specific information is located, thus some promotion of these materials may be needed.

### Implications and Future Research

There is potential to extend this research further, as there is a limited knowledge base with regard to parent relations for study abroad administrators to utilize. For instance, this study gathered both the parents' and the institution's perspective, but it is also important to obtain students' viewpoints. As discussed, parents shape their roles based on their relationship with their students and the students' requests. It would be worthwhile to conduct a more in-depth triangulation of all three perspectives. More focus groups with parents, as well as with students, in addition to a student survey would increase the qualitative depth of research. Furthermore, it would be worthwhile to take a deeper look into the demographic variables that the literature review examined, such as socio-economic status, parents' education, and ethnicity, especially because there is a foundation of research with which to work.

Additionally, study abroad offices from different classifications of institutions should be examined. A main criticism of single-case studies is that the circumstances may be unique to that case and consequently, not pertinent to other populations (Yin, 2009). Although this is a limitation of the current study, it is worthwhile for other institutions to be aware of the findings from this study about the approach the Learning Abroad Center takes with parents and consider them in the context of their own practices. It should be noted that the Learning Abroad Center does conservatively interpret FERPA, meaning they disclose little information to parents unless the student has signed a waiver. However, staff members still take an open approach to communicating with parents, viewing interactions with parents as a time to educate parents about the study abroad experience.

The parent orientation sessions and collaboration with the Parent Program are key components of the Learning Abroad Center's success with parent interactions. These elements, in turn, offer parents a wealth of information and resources to further assist them in understanding, as well as appreciating, the study abroad experience. If they are not already doing so, institutions can learn from the Learning Abroad Center's example by utilizing connections with their parent offices. Working with parents to enlist them as advocates for study abroad could work to study abroad offices' advantage, but it is important to understand how to handle these interactions and appropriately assign the parent's role. A parent coordinator or office might have more direct experience, knowledge, and resources to work with parents. If the study abroad office has established a plan for how to communicate the role and boundaries they believe are necessary for the student's success, the next step is to proactively communicate this to parents.

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### Focus Group Questions

1. What did you do to prepare yourself for your student's study abroad experience? Was there particular information you were looking for (e.g. program-specific, broad study abroad information)? What were your main concerns? What else would you have liked to see specifically for parents?
2. *(For those that went to the PO; for those that didn't go, ask why not and would it have made a difference-explain format briefly if necessary)* How helpful was the parent orientation session? Is there a format that would have been more helpful?
3. Did you contact the University before your student went abroad? During? Why?
4. Did you understand FERPA before your student signed up for a study abroad program? Or if you Did FERPA create any difficulties? If so, what would have made it easier to understand/get through?
5. Overall, how would you rate your experience with the Learning Abroad Center (Great, good, so-so, poor)? Is there something you wish they would have done differently?
6. How would you describe your role in the study abroad process?
7. Did your student directly ask you to do something for them (e.g. help with paperwork, contact the U, etc) during the study abroad process (application, while abroad, after)? For advice?
8. What about your student's experience has had the greatest impact on you?

Parent resources offered by the Learning Abroad Center: Parent Orientation, Parent-specific Learning Abroad Center website, Learning Abroad Center Parent Brochure, Program-specific Learning Abroad Center website. Offered by the Parent Program: Online parents' Learning Abroad Workshop, Parents' Weekend workshop

# Past, Present, and Future of The Baylor Parents League Baylor University, Waco, Texas

*By Judy Maggard  
Director, Parent Programs  
Baylor University*

The idea of a parent organization at Baylor University began not with University personnel but in the hearts and minds of two Baylor parents who were seeking a way to help the University financially and to ensure that parents of Baylor students had opportunities to learn about the University's mission and to receive information from campus.

When their son, Stephen, enrolled at Baylor University, Herbert and Mary Beard of Austin, Texas, approached the University administration about how they could serve the University. Their idea to form an organization dedicated to parent outreach garnered attention from the University, and under the direction of Judge Abner V. McCall, the tenth president of Baylor University, and Tom Z. Parrish, Vice for President for University Development, a Parent's Program Committee was formed as a part of the Baylor University Council for Institutional Development. Mr. Beard served as chair of the founding committee, and members were invited to discuss a name for the organization, its purpose, objectives, scope, responsibilities, implementation and publicity. The main objective of the committee was to have the organization functioning by the fall of 1968.

On May 10, 1968, the Parent's Program Committee met in the Williamsburg Room of the Student Union Building where the Baylor Parents League was officially organized. Several names for the organization were proposed, including Parent-Student Foundation and Baylor Parents' Association, but the name Baylor Parents League was the unanimous choice of the committee. It was decided that all parents would be members of the newly formed organization, but a paid membership of five dollars per family would be offered if parents wanted to receive additional benefits. The practice of charging dues continued until the mid-1980s when it was discontinued and all parents were considered members and received the same information from the University.

During Parents Weekend 1968, the Baylor Parents League was officially introduced on Saturday, September 28, at a General Meeting of Parents. This event included information about the organization as well as a style show featuring fashions from Neiman-Marcus of Dallas modeled by members of Pi Beta Phi, a women's social club; a sports report by Baylor coaches; and conference football highlights of 1967. Tragically, Herbert Beard died of a heart attack on June 30, 1969 in Austin, Texas at the age of 52, less than a year after the official launch of the Parents League organization. Parrish was quoted in the obituary,

He has left us with this new organization of 1,200 members to carry on his work. No man ever gave more fully of himself to any work he undertook than Herbert Beard. Baylor University will remember him in a very special way.

From its inception and throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, Mrs. Daphne Herring, a University development staff member, was instrumental in organizing and executing University plans to communicate with and engage parents. She prepared brochures, enlisted volunteers, and organized parent meetings across the nation. Mrs. Herring's work during these early years laid the groundwork for the organization as it is known today.

In 1985 the Parents League moved from under the umbrella of the Division of University Development to the Office of School Relations whose main function was to recruit students to the University. An emphasis continued on increasing membership in the Parents League organization and communicating regularly with parents through a newsletter and area meetings.

The Parents League returned to the area of University Development in 1995, its original home at the University and where it resides today. The organization currently serves the parents of more than 11,000 students through a network of local chapters, distribution of an online e-newsletter, an interactive website, a toll free Parents Helpline, a Student Emergency Fund, publication of a university calendar, and a series of more than 50 send-off events held each summer to welcome new students and their families to the University community.

The work of the Parents League has been further enhanced by becoming a component of the Baylor Network in 2005. The Network is the University's outreach to alumni, providing social networking opportunities for business, women, parents, young graduates, sports, and global communities. Partnering with the Network has had a positive and productive outcome for our work with parents.

What Herbert Beard proposed in 1968 to help Baylor University has evolved into a university program dedicated to informing and assisting families in their Baylor journey. The path to a college education can be rocky at times for both students and their families. Through parent organizations, college and universities have the opportunity to make the journey a more pleasant and rewarding experience. The Beards desire to help financially has also been realized. Today there are two endowed scholarship funds associated with the Parents League organization. The two funds have a combined market value of 1.6 million dollars with more than 35 students receiving scholarship assistance each academic year. One of the endowed scholarship funds bears the name of Herbert Beard to honor his memory and to recognize his contributions to the parent programming initiative at Baylor.

For more than four decades the Baylor Parents League has been a resource for parents providing an array of information and services. We are proud of the fact that the work we do today still closely supports the founding principles of the organization as envisioned back in 1968.

