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About the AHEPPP Journal

The AHEPPP Journal 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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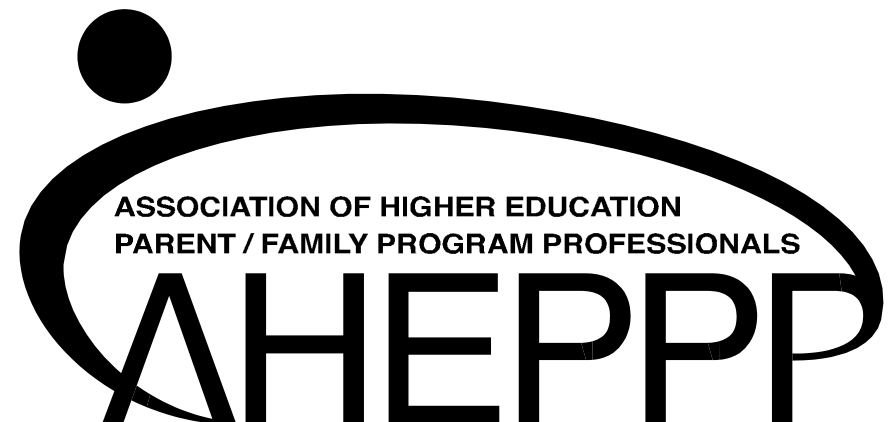
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Editors' Note

During the past two decades, we have seen college campuses throughout the U.S. and Canada increase their focus on the role of parents and family members in promoting student persistence, graduation, and overall success. The two peer-reviewed articles included in this issue of the AHEPPP Journal provide insights into ways that Parent/Family professionals can provide effective services that promote appropriate parenting during the college years.

The first article, by Andrew Sonn, Toby Davidow, Anna Whiston, and Arianne Wilt of George Washington University, includes a comprehensive literature review of family engagement at the college level. The authors apply current theory and research in recommendations for adapting parent/family orientation programs and other services to meet the needs of contemporary college students and families in all their rich diversity.

In the second article, by Ryan W. Lovell, D'Arcy J. Oaks, & Susan L. Kline of The Ohio State University, a comprehensive study of e-communications assesses parents' use of institutional messages and the potential of e-newsletters to encourage family dialogue on critical topics. The authors include a sample newsletter and questions that can be adapted for surveys by other institutions.

The AHEPPP Journal welcomes submissions of scholarly essays, research-based articles, 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. Submission guidelines are posted on the AHEPPP website: www.ahppp.org/guidelines-for-article-preparation-and-submission.

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Ongoing Engagement and Orientation: A Literature Review of Collegiate Family Engagement Models

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Abstract

Given recent research and commentary on the effects of highly-involved parenting and changing generational and family demographics, four-year colleges and universities should consider altering family orientation models and family engagement activities. These revamped models should feature in-person and online family engagement activities throughout the student lifecycle with differentiated instruction for family members to understand how to provide appropriate support to ensure student efficacy as evidenced by student acquisition of problem-solving skills, autonomous holistic development, and ultimately a diploma and a clear career path. This literature review will discuss the historical context for family engagement, recent research on highly-involved college parents, and current family engagement practices before critiquing family engagement models and practices and putting forth recommendations on promising practices for family engagement and areas for future research.

Introduction

The image of the “helicopter parent” has become ubiquitous both in the higher education literature and in the popular press. Commentators have decried highly-involved parents and their deleterious influence on students’ college experiences, resilience, mental health, maturity levels, creativity, and career prospects (Brown, 2015; Grant, 2016; Havrilesky, 2015). While this trend warrants attention, it does not tell the whole story of contemporary college parents. When higher education institutions paint all parents with the same broad brush, they neglect the perspectives and needs of the many college parents who do not fit this mold. As higher education researcher, practitioner, and college parent Merrily Dunn (2015) points out, there are a myriad of stories among college parents and family members, and this heterogeneity needs to be examined.

As higher education enrollments have diversified in recent years, with increasing numbers of international, first-generation, and low-income students, among many other special populations, college families and parenting practices have also changed. With many of the existing parent engagement models predicated on more homogenous populations, it is time to examine the relevance of these models for current and future student and parent populations. At the same time, higher education institutions should not exclude family members from campuses under the belief that all involved parents inhibit student holistic development. In fact, research has shown that college students and higher education institutions benefit when family members are engaged with their students and higher education institutions in productive ways (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). As Coburn (2006) observes: “The challenge in higher education is not whether to involve parents. The challenge is to figure out how to enlist these already involved parents in our mutual goal of helping students” (p. 11).

Given recent research and commentary on the effects of highly-involved parenting and changing generational and family demographics, colleges and universities should consider altering existing family orientation models and ongoing family engagement activities. These revamped models should feature in-person and online family engagement activities throughout the student lifecycle (defined as the duration of a student’s interaction with a higher education institution, including the time from the creation of a college admissions application to alumni standing). These models should support differentiated instruction for family members to understand how to provide appropriate support to ensure student efficacy as evidenced by student acquisition of problem-solving skills, autonomous holistic development, and, ultimately, a diploma and a clear career path. This literature review will discuss the historical context for family engagement, recent research on highly-involved college parents, and current family engagement practices before critiquing prevalent family engagement models and putting forth recommendations on promising practices for family engagement and areas for future research.

Background on Highly-Involved Parents

Before critiquing existing models for collegiate family engagement, it is important to put today’s undergraduate parent population in context. In the 1990s, when today’s traditionally-aged college students were growing up, parents spent more time with their children than did parents in the previous three decades (Howe & Strauss, 2003). Due to the high level of parental engagement, many periodicals began labeling parents as “helicopter parents.” Helicopter parents are defined as parents who continually “hover” over their children as they watch protectively for any emergency. In times

of emergency, parents “swoop down” to come to their children’s rescue. When the emergency has been rectified, the parents then go back to a hovering state until the next emergency arises (Fay, 1981). More recently, “helicopter parenting” refers to “a form of over-parenting in which parents apply overly involved and developmentally inappropriate tactics” (Segrin, Wozildo, Givertz, Bauer, & Murphy, 2012, p. 1).

Scholars attribute the rise of highly-involved parenting of young adults to several factors, including technology and episodes of mass violence. Furthermore, scholars have also studied the correlation between overbearing parents and their student’s mental health. Part of the trend stems from modern communication technology: email and cell phones make it easy for parents and grown children to stay in touch regularly, even if the child is far from home (Cutright, 2008). Richard Mullendore (2005), an expert on helicopter parents, claimed that the cell phone is the “world’s longest umbilical cord” (as cited in Shellenbarger, 2005, p. D1) connecting parents and their students. Unlimited minutes on cell phones or smartphones enable college students to incorporate parents in their daily lives. Studies show that parents and college students are speaking on a regular basis using a cell phone (Lee, Meszaros, & Colvin, 2009; Sorokou & Weissbrod, 2005), communicating at least 13.4 times a week (Hofer & Moore, 2010; Lourgos, 2010). A 2013 Clark Parents poll showed that 67% of mothers and 51% of fathers have contact with their young adult child almost every day, a marked difference from a 1986 poll in which roughly half of parents reported speaking with their grown children only once a week (Raphelson, 2014). Communication is also more instantaneous than ever before, as students and parents become versed in email, text messaging, and social media outlets (Education Advisory Board, 2010).

Tragic episodes of violence in educational settings in recent years have increased many parents’ vigilance around their children both young and old (Cutright, 2008). Events, such as the massacre at Columbine High School in Colorado in 1999, the terrorist acts in New York City and Washington, D.C. in 2001, the deadliest shooting on a United States college campus at Virginia Tech in 2007, and the shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut in 2012, have caused many parents to become extra vigilant with their children. Due to this enmeshed bonding from birth to high school, parents and their students created tight bonds (Howe & Strauss, 2003) and often find it challenging to break ties when the student begins college.

As many authors have pointed out, these tight bonds can prove problematic for college students. As Julie Lythcott-Haims (2015), a former dean of Stanford University and author of *How to Raise an Adult: Break Free of the Overparenting Trap and Prepare Your Kid for Success*, writes in “Kids of Helicopter Parents are Sputtering Out”:

When seemingly perfectly healthy but over parented kids get to college and have trouble coping with the various new situations they might encounter...they can have real difficulty knowing how to handle the disagreement, the uncertainty, the hurt feelings, or the decision-making process. This inability to cope—to sit with some discomfort, think about options, talk it through with someone, make a decision—can become a problem unto itself. (para. 17)

Lythcott-Haims’ assessment aligns with several studies looking at the effects of highly-involved parents of college students. Through an online survey, Jill Bradley-Geist and Julie Olson-Buchanan (2014) found a correlation between over-involved parents and college students’ low self-efficacy, or one’s ability to trust himself or herself to carry out goal-directed behavior. Students with low self-

efficacy had trouble dealing with setbacks, such as a low grade on a test or a disagreement with a roommate, because they did not have faith in their ability to address these issues independently.

Expanding on the correlation between heavily-involved parenting and low self-efficacy, some scholars suggest a possible connection between the rise of helicopter parenting and increasing mental health concerns among college students. In the 2013 Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors (AUCCCD) Annual Survey, 95% of directors reported that the number of students with significant psychological problems is a growing concern on their campuses (AUCCCD, 2013). Some researchers argue that these high rates of psychological issues can be attributed, in part, to the effects of highly-involved parents. For example, researchers (Schiffrrin et al., 2014) found that students whose survey answers indicated the presence of an over-involved mother reflected higher levels of depression and lower levels of life satisfaction, the mediating factor being low self-efficacy.

History of Parent Services Offices

Collegiate parent involvement can begin with parents attending admission tours, sometimes in lieu of their student (Cole, 2010; Jacobson, 2003; Lange & Stone, 2001; Moll, 1985; Sanoff, 2006). Once the student enrolls, parents might call administrators, with or without the student’s permission, to request something for the student (Holder, 2005; Nemko, 2005) or to assist with the student’s decision of major (Howe & Strauss, 2007). Parents might also call university offices seeking information and advocating on behalf of their student (Cole, 2010; DeBroff, 2007). In extreme examples, parents might go to classes and job interviews, sometimes with or without the student (Damast, 2007; Weiss, 2006).

Many higher education divisions have shifted resources to accommodate the needs of parents seeking information from the university. Many administrators see the value of keeping parents happy by providing learning opportunities and sharing resources to help both the parent and the student. Because of these conditions, there is a trend of establishing parent service offices to accommodate their needs. Thirty years ago, only a handful of colleges had parent service offices (Savage, 2007), but the number of those offices has increased exponentially as administrators have shifted resources so that staff can work directly with parents. Over 70% of the nation’s four-year colleges and universities have a position known as “parent coordinator” (Lum, 2006). Colleges employ a number of different names for parent service offices: parent programming, parent service office, and family relations, just to name a few. A university can choose to promote parent services in different ways (Cohen, 1985; Davidow, 2014; Wartman & Savage, 2008):

- Services to the institution. These organizations focus on what the parent can do for the university. Typically, universities look to parents to help with recruiting new students, fundraising, and mentoring current students/alumni. One office usually supervises a parent organization such as a “Mom’s Club.” When the service includes fundraising, the development office usually oversees the efforts.
- Services to the parent. These organizations focus on what the university can do for the parent. Modern parents want to be in communication with the college. The organizations typically provide newsletters, updated websites about university services, and parent programming such as a parents’ weekend. Typically, the oversight group is a compilation of various university offices. For example, an Associate Dean of Students could juggle freshmen orientation and disperse information to parents.
- Liaison. Some universities opt for one office to champion services to the institution and provide services to parents. These offices do not have a visible, public connection to any

other offices and usually have independent names such as the Office of Parent Services. Typically, they serve as a liaison between parents and other university departments, such as the Office of Student Services and the Advancement Office.

Many parent offices opened as a response to the increase in parents wishing to engage with the college or university. Subsequently, schools have continued to find ways to not only engage parents appropriately, but also to educate them about their student's college experience. At the same time, the stigma of the exceedingly hovering parent continues to permeate university culture.

Background on Changing Demographics and Perspectives

While many scholars have pointed out the drawbacks of so-called helicopter parenting, others argue that painting all modern parents as hyper-involved creates a generalization that does not acknowledge the great diversity amongst parents of today's college students. Merrily Dunn (2015) suggested that not all parents are highly involved in their students' lives, and those who do take an active interest are not necessarily worthy of skepticism or scorn. Just as college students are becoming increasingly diverse, so too are their parents. In "On Being a Parent," Dunn, the parent of a college student and a student affairs educator at the University of Georgia, borrows author Chimamanda Ngozi's concept of the "single story" to point out the dangers of reducing modern college parents to an over-simplified stereotype. Dunn writes:

As we work to understand our students and move beyond our own cultural stereotypes (those single stories) and listen to each of their beautifully complicated stories, why do we believe or assume all parents are helicopter parents? This becomes the stereotype of a single role—parent. While we may think some of the things they do are overprotective and over-involved, that doesn't necessarily mean they're hovering and defining one end of a broad continuum. Being the parent of a college student isn't just about behavior. It's also about the rich array of cultures and life circumstances these families represent; the multitude of stories they wrote. (p. 11)

Additionally, some experts argue that closer relationships between parents and their college-aged children provide an important source of emotional support for young adults. According to Pew Research Center researcher Karen Parker, the generation gap is closing: the separation between younger and older generations is not what it was during a period such as the 1960s. As a result, more young adult children are viewing their parents as allies, not enemies (cited in Raphelson, 2012). Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, a research professor at Clark University and director of the Clark Poll for Emerging Adults, says "I think it's a great thing overall that there's this wonderful closeness between parents and emerging adults today, and I really think it's unprecedented in human history" (cited in Raphelson, 2012, para.4). This bond is especially important considering that many young adults are delaying marriage. Young adults who are not receiving emotional support from a spouse or significant other are instead finding this support from parents (Raphelson, 2012). From this perspective, heavily-involved parents are crucial to young adults' emotional well-being.

Family Orientation Models: Content and Purpose

Research shows that family support is among the key components of college student success and productivity (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Wells, 2015). Among the college activities that frequently engage family members are parent and family orientation programs. Parent and family orientation programs (hereafter referred to as family orientation programs) typically invite parents and caregivers, and sometimes siblings, to campuses to learn more about the institution, institutional

services and resources, and meet other parents, students, faculty, and staff members (Mullendore & Banahan, 2005). Family orientation programs are typically one to two and a half days in length. Most family orientation programs occur immediately before the beginning of an academic semester.

Researchers and practitioners have identified core objectives and components for family orientation programs. Mullendore & Banahan (2005) discuss four categories of family orientation content: institutional services and resources, social activities, institutional engagement opportunities, and student and family transitions. The authors organize orientation objectives along Maslow's hierarchy of needs in addressing parent questions about such core student services as dining, housing, safety and security, and financial aid before turning to student engagement activities and academic resources. Coburn & Woodward (2001) also posit that the purpose of family orientations is to support the student and family members' transitions while also providing the family members resources to support students while connecting family members to the institution and defining that relationship. Therefore, family orientations are a widespread activity at four-year colleges and universities and furnish important information about services and resources at a critical juncture in the student lifecycle and family members' life spans.

Critique of Current Family Orientation Models—Family Demographics

Given changing college family demographics, there are flaws in many family orientation programs today. First, many of the existing theoretical frameworks applied in the design of family orientation are not adequately addressing the changing needs of today's families and students. Today's collegiate family member identities, like their students, are diversifying in terms of race, ethnicity, country of origin, socioeconomic level, among many other factors (Institute of International Education, 2015; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2016). Therefore, the holistic needs of today's family members are not being met. An example is the term "parent" itself. Many college students come from family structures that transcend the nuclear family; students, thus, may associate with an extended family network instead. Thus, a focus on "parents" rather than "family members" would not accurately reflect many students' dynamics at home.

Second, existing models, delivered in-person, preclude many parents and families from receiving the benefits of orientation programs. Cost, work schedules, and basic understanding of a college campus structure and/or experience can inhibit many parents and family members from low socioeconomic backgrounds from attending orientation. Similarly, many international families, due to cost, time, or work schedules, also cannot attend on-campus family orientation sessions.

Last, many orientation models make assumptions about the existing knowledge of participants, and this may make orientation an unsatisfactory experience for many attendees. Some orientation programs do not address baseline information that is needed for some families; for example, international families may need sessions on academic culture, sometimes in native languages, to understand the differing expectations for students in United States colleges and universities compared to institutions abroad.

Critique of Family Orientation Models—Family and Student Needs

There is also evidence that many current family orientation models are not addressing the changing needs of college families, students, and higher education institutions. First, the generational shift in parents from Baby Boomers (people born between 1943-1960) to Generation X (people born between 1961-1981) and in students from Millennials (people born between 1982-2004) to Homeland Generation/Generation Z (people born between 2005-present) have produced differing

attitudes toward education, technology practices, and worldviews (Williams, 2015). For example, technology use and parenting practices of the current family generations have changed the dynamics of college parenting. With smartphone technology, family members and students have close contact with each other. This makes it crucial for family members to define the nature of their relationship from the start. Current orientation models tend to separate students and family members from each other at many points of the sessions, yet students and their families remain a text message away and many stay in constant contact during orientation. This separation only magnifies the significance of web-delivered content and it becomes a missed opportunity to encourage student-family member dialogue regarding when, how, and how often to communicate during college.

Second, as the literature on highly-involved parenting indicates, there are deleterious effects on college student holistic development when family members' actions inhibit student autonomy. While many orientation models separate students and family members to symbolically foster autonomy, not every family orientation model is deliberate in relating the reason for doing so. This neglects the real rationale: the findings of student development theory and highly-involved parenting research that show the negative effect of such practices on student holistic development. Third, in the last decade, higher education institutions have seen a dramatic increase in the number of students who have reported anxiety, depression, or having suicidal thoughts (Novotney, 2014; Scelfo, 2015). This requires orientation sessions to focus on wellness resources to a greater extent than in the past as well as regulations overarching family notification in times of crisis such as Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and Health Information Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) policies.

Last, there are benefits to the institution, family members, and students when family members are productively engaged with the student's higher education institution. Some orientation models do not define appropriate and inappropriate family member interaction with the institution. This sometimes results in family members overstepping boundaries in contacting professors to appeal student grades, calling a resident advisor to try to mediate a roommate conflict, or even being present at a job interview. Total family member exclusion from the campus community is not the answer either. For the student, institutions not engaging family members may be excluding an important support network from the student's life. For the institution, not engaging family members may mean the lost opportunity of excluding a future intern host, employer, or donor.

Recommendations for Family Orientation Based on Family Demographics

To address the deficiencies in many orientation models relating to family demographic shifts, there are several recommendations based on promising practices in the field. First, higher education institutions should recognize the diverse family structures present among today's students and rename parent orientations "family orientations." Another step is to supplement Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and other traditional models by viewing activities and events through the lens of racial/ethnic campus climate models (Chang, Milem, & Antonio, 2011; Hurtado, 1992; Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Peterson, & Allen, 1999; Milem, Chang, & Antonio, 2005) as well as student engagement models for diverse populations (Quaye, Harper, and Associates, 2015). These models offer empirically-based perspectives and practical interventions to engage diverse student and family populations to create more relevant engagement models. Applying the framework used in Quaye, et al. (2015), institutions should consider the needs of families with students with the following identities: students of color, multiracial college students, international students, lesbian, gay, and bisexual students, trans* students, religious minority students, low-income students, first-

generation college students, transfer students, commuter and part-time students, returning adult learners, and military students, among others. Practitioners should first gather information on family demographics and then consider the needs of the represented special populations in orientation design. For instance, questions to ask to consider the needs of first-generation and low-income family members include: would a family orientation session scheduled for a weekday preclude certain family members from attending? Would a two-day orientation preclude family members from attending who could not afford to pay for lodging? Therefore, there are several tangible actions to take to address changing collegiate family members' demographics.

Second, to provide resources for family members unable to attend orientations in person because of cost, distance, and other factors, institutions should consider online modules and written materials to deliver timely information for family members. One promising practice is Duke University's (2016) online resources for new family members that covers "just-in-time information" and offers a comprehensive series of handbooks and orientation information for family members. Another example of web-delivered family resources is a family orientation course offered by Virginia Commonwealth University (2016) that provides first-year parents with comprehensive information on how to support their students' holistic development. However, online modules and written resources for those families without internet access provide family members unable to attend orientation with critical information.

Last, to address the critique that family orientation content may not be relevant for all attendees, there are several steps to consider. One is to introduce a differentiated instruction model for family members that take into consideration family members' diverse learning needs (Sternberg & Zhang, 2005). One practical way to structure this model is to have differing options during family orientations for parents who have already sent students to college versus first-time parents. Another action is to provide content for international parents. International students and parents have unique needs related to four main factors: visa process, career options during enrollment and after graduation, cultural differences, and unique United States academic and campus cultures. There are several examples of such customized international family member resources. Michigan State University (2016) offers both online and in-person orientations. Other institutions, including The George Washington University (2016), offer international family member resource pages with important information on immigration, international family and student resources and services, safety and security, FERPA and HIPAA, career services/employment, and health insurance requirements.

Recommendations for Family Orientation Based on Family and Student Needs

To address the deficiencies in many family orientation models relating to changing family and student needs, there are several recommendations based on promising practices in the field. First, rather than separating students and families during orientation sessions, institutions should offer sessions that model how students and family members can engage in substantive conversations about transitional issues. At George Washington University, students and family members watch current students perform scenes that address diversity and inclusion, wellness, time management, alcohol and other drugs, family member-student communication patterns, and other issues. Before the presentation, the director of these scenes encourages students and family members to use the production's content as a starting point for important and sometimes difficult, family conversations on these critical topics.

Second, to counteract the effect of the so-called “helicopter parents,” orientation programs should raise family members’ awareness of relevant student development and parenting theories that call for productive family-student relationships during college. These relationships encourage dialogue about communication expectations and family member actions that support student autonomy and development. At the same time, families should be guided to discuss the student’s definition of success and understand the value of healthy risk taking, and even failure, in fostering the student’s resilience and grit.

Third, with mental health issues occurring more frequently among college students, family orientation sessions should emphasize the wellness resources available on campus, including critical conversations families, especially those whose students have mental health issues in high school, should have in advance of college. A promising practice is offering pre-college programs and checklists for students with mental health issues that could be adapted for family members to support student wellness in college (Petersen, 2015).

Last, family orientation models should define the relationship family members should have with the higher education institution, including what is and what is not appropriate behavior. In many cases, this definition may differ from one institution to another and be affected by such factors as institutional size, mission, student demographics, etc. However, one good example of an institution with such a definition is the University of Wisconsin’s Parent Program’s (2016) purpose statement, which defines goals for Wisconsin students’ parents. Family orientation models are also well-served to engage parents as partners in the educational process. This partnership should begin when the student is admitted to the institution and continue until graduation. Family members can help their individual student, as well as the larger campus community, in such areas as career development and philanthropic support.

Ongoing Engagement and Orientation

Another critique of traditional family orientation models is the finite nature of the education, outreach, and communication associated with the programs. Parents and families often return home from summer orientation reassured in their child’s college decision, confident in their student’s ability to navigate the university, and excited for their student to embark on a new journey. However, in the first few months of college, students are apt to encounter unexpected challenges, feel nervous or anxious about their decision, and, sometimes, experience homesickness. Many parents report also feeling these emotions within the first several months of their student leaving for school, a stark contrast to the positive emotions and excitement they were feeling just after summer orientation (Weiss, 1989). By making continual resources available for parents and families, universities are effectively creating a model of ongoing orientation. Ongoing orientation models are effective because they allow for parents to make a positive and lasting connection to campus (Wardell, Rothenberg, Strawn & Tisdale, 2010). There are many ways for a university to facilitate a model of ongoing orientation. Scholars have outlined the different programs universities have developed that are useful in providing ongoing orientation and support to parents and families. These programs include, but are not limited to: parent and family weekends, parent newsletters, parent advisory groups, and upperclassmen seminars (Mullendore & Banahan, 2005; Wardell, et al., 2010; Weiss, 1989).

Parent and Family Weekends

Parent and family weekends, while widely used by higher education institutions, are a vital component of ongoing orientations and support for parents. Within the first few months of school,

parents have likely been asked questions by their student about where to go for specific resources or assistance, and parents may have either long since forgotten the answer, or were never given the answer at summer parent orientation. Parent and family weekends offer a way for parents to not only reconnect with their students but to reconnect with the school. It gives the university a valuable opportunity to ensure parents are reminded of the resources available to both students and parents. Karen Coburn (2006) uses Parents Weekend at Washington University in St. Louis to discuss student development and identity frameworks through an enjoyable skit that, she asserts, always leaves parents amused, educated, and better prepared to handle situations of receiving “that call” from their student. Coburn argues that Parents Weekend is an optimal time to dig deeper into issues such as autonomous and holistic student development because parents already feel overwhelmed by much of the basic information they receive during summer or fall orientation sessions.

Parent Advisory Groups

There has been a major shift in recent years from the university as a purely academic institution to the university as a company. Much of this shift can be attributed to the rising cost of tuition, increasing market competition amongst universities, and the growing necessity of a college degree in the job market (Fullan & Scott, 2009). As a result, students and parents are viewed by administrators, and view themselves, as consumers of a business service. Since parents are investing such a vast amount of money in the university, parent advisory groups have become more commonplace in colleges and universities. While parent advisory groups serve different functions within different institutions—from acting as a university ambassador to hosting events in regional areas to providing administrators with suggestions on how to improve student life—it is apparent that parent advisory groups are a key part of the parent experience at many prominent universities. A prime example of the successful use of a parent advisory group is at Elon University (2016). Simply called, “The Parents Council,” this group of parents strives to “share observations, suggestions, or concerns about Elon programs and student life,” “keep parents informed,” and “maintain close relationships with parents of current and former Elon students” (Elon University, 2016). Modeling Elon University’s Parents Council, parent advisory groups serve as an effective ongoing orientation tool in the sense that staff members can ensure a small group of parents obtains vast knowledge about the university, which can then be conveyed to a larger base of parents. In addition to parent advisory groups working to help better the university, parent advisory groups serve as ambassadors of the university in their communities—sharing with current and prospective parents a wealth of knowledge and resources.

Upper-Division Collegiate Family Seminars

Higher education institutions have long-acknowledged the necessity of orientation for first-year students and parents; however, the types of resources parents need to successfully support their student change drastically through the college years. Wardell, et al. (2010) assert that one-time parent orientations just don’t cut it anymore; first-year parents need different resources and information than junior and senior parents. Offering upperclassmen parent seminars should be the norm at all colleges and universities. For example, first-year parents want to know about where their student should go if they are having a hard time adjusting, how their student can make friends, what activities their student should be involved with, and what classes to take in order to choose a major. Upperclassmen students and parents already have these answers. This constituency is more concerned with how their student can secure an internship, whether their student will have a job in their field upon graduation, what resources are available for students continuing in graduate study, how to pursue senior thesis research, and so on.

Orientation should be targeted and differentiated, but it should also be ongoing. Parents are unlikely to remember three years later if they were told about career fairs during orientation. Offering timely information to parents at critical junctures of their student’s college experience develops a parent engagement model that educates and informs parents at times when the information is most valuable. Targeted and timely dissemination of information and resources allows for parents to better support their student’s growth and development by relieving much of the anxiety surrounding college milestones. “The less anxious parents are, the more likely they are to support their child’s growth in appropriate and meaningful ways—and the less likely they are to intervene inappropriately” (Coburn, 2006, p.10).

Recommendations for Further Research

This literature review comes amidst two major shifts that warrant additional research on college families. First, with the generational shift in parenting, from predominately Baby Boomer parents to predominantly Generation X parents, and in the 17-22-year old college population, from the Millennials to Generation Z, there is a need to reassess college parenting models (Williams, 2015). One example of the effect of this generational shift is in the ways these new generations of parents and students use technology. Research has shown that the smartphone and other technologies (such as Skype, text messaging, social media, etc.) have contributed to new communication patterns between students and their families (Hofer & Moore, 2010; Lee, Meszaros, & Colvin, 2009; Lourgos, 2010; Sorokou & Weissbrod, 2005). This is an important attribute, but only one among this changing population of students and their family members that needs to be studied in more detail.

Second, with the increasing number of international students (Institute of International Education, 2015) and the growing diversification of student enrollments in terms of first-generation, low-income, and students from other special population groups (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2016), there is also a need to re-examine researchers’ assumptions about college parenting that, overall, were predicated on studies that used less diverse populations. Based on these two factors, this literature review calls for additional research in several areas relating to family engagement:

- Application of lifespan and student life cycle models to family engagement.
- Examination of the diverse experiences of international college parents.
- Examination of the diverse experiences of special population parents.
- Examination of how college family-student interactions affect student success in terms of academic achievement and career development.
- Survey research on comparative parenting patterns across higher education, and as differentiated by institutional type, mission, and student enrollment.
- Evaluation of the effectiveness of family orientation and engagement models and activities, especially those that are delivered via the web or other electronic means.

Recommendations for Practice

Higher education professionals should also consider addressing changing student and family demographics as well as generational shifts among students and family members by taking decisive action. This article puts forth the following recommendations for family engagement activities:

- Rename orientations for family members “family orientation” to recognize diversified family structures among today’s college students.
- Apply racial and ethnic climate and special student population theoretical frameworks in addition to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs as a lens to evaluate family orientation models.

- Augment in-person family orientation with online modules and other engagement activities throughout the student lifecycle (pre-admission to alumni standing).
- Utilize in-person opportunities, such as parent and family weekends, to provide ongoing orientation programming that supports student development.
- Introduce a differentiated instruction model for family members with diverse learning needs.
- Offer customized orientation resources for international families.
- Evaluate family orientation models in terms of special populations.
- Question whether specific family orientation activities may be producing a “chilly” campus climate for special populations, especially low-income families, first-generation families, and families of color at predominantly white institutions.
- Model the critical conversations families should have on defining student success, addressing challenge versus support, budgeting, drugs and alcohol, among other issues.
- Evaluate whether family orientation provides ample information and resources on wellness issues and the overarching federal, state, and local regulations that overarch student privacy (i.e. FERPA and HIPAA).
- Define what is appropriate in the family member-student and family member-institutional relationships during college.
- Engage family members in productive ways throughout the student lifecycle.

Conclusion

There is certainly much more work to be done in terms of understanding and working with changing collegiate family populations. Based on recent articles and books on college families, as well as promising practices in the field, we suggest courses of action for practitioners at colleges and universities on ways to engage, educate, and communicate with collegiate family members as well as for researchers to study this diverse population. This literature review calls for differentiated instruction for collegiate family members to respect their differing learning needs. In addition, the paper argues that collegiate family members can be productively engaged throughout the student lifecycle. The authors hope that this work will enable higher education practitioners to have a better understanding of collegiate family members and consider changes to existing parent orientation and engagement models to address this population’s learning needs. In many respects, Merrily Dunn’s (2015, p. 8) call to transcend “the single story” of collegiate parenting is a fitting and timely charge for collegiate family practitioners and scholars.

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Landing the Helicopter Parent: Assessing University Family e-Newsletters as a Communication Tool

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Abstract

With the proliferation of parent involvement on college and university campuses, parent programming and communications are increasingly important considerations for operations and functions of institutions of higher education. As resources are devoted to developing meaningful communications for families, determining how families utilize these resources has become important to determine. In this study we present and assess a university Family e-communication strategy that involves sending regular email newsletters to parents and students. Two web-based surveys of university parents in 2012 (n = 202) and 2014 (n = 835) examined whether parents read the e-newsletters and perceived them to be effective. Across the two years, at least 68% of parents read the newsletters at least monthly, 82% evaluated the newsletters as effective, 54% believed the newsletters provided information and advice, 74% felt informed about university resources for their student and 66% felt included by the newsletters. These results were not affected by parental income or education level. An example of the Family e-Newsletter is provided, and implications for parental involvement are discussed.

Introduction

The emergence of the Millennial student (children born between 1981 and 2000) on today's college campuses has meant changes to the services and programs that are offered to meet the needs of these students. One of the biggest changes college campuses have seen is the level to which parents are involved in and connected to the daily lives of their students. The Millennial student has been raised in an environment where family involvement has been an expectation since a young age. Many were educated under the edicts of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, which contains the word "parent" 300 times and has a segment, Section 1118, specifically devoted to parent engagement. The evolution of technology through mobile devices, email and text messages has simplified how contact can be made. Where college was once seen as a time to separate from parent engagement, enrollment in the university setting is not altering the expectations families have for involvement. Such expectations of families have dictated that colleges and university develop parent programming and communication offices to address the increased demands. In many ways, college campuses are no longer simply about the student experience, but about the family experience.

In order to best address these needs and expectations, colleges and universities have made changes to existing services and developed new programming and communications necessary for parents and families to stay involved and connected with their student. These efforts are time and resource intensive. Although college campuses are increasing the focus on the experience of a student's family members, the overriding mission remains ensuring that students succeed and are satisfied with their college experience. Graduation rates, retention rates, involvement opportunities, academic successes and the ability to find employment after graduation still dictate how students and families feel about the higher education experience. In today's environment of reduced funding and shrinking budgets, devoting resources to programs or communications that are not proven to correlate with student involvement, satisfaction, or success are difficult to justify. An implication of this current environment is that colleges and universities are likely to benefit from developing a communication strategy that enables families to stay involved with their students, and to routinely assess the communication strategy for its success. Education scholars have called for universities to promote parental engagement through their communications such as newsletters (e.g., Ward-Roof, Heaton, & Coburn, 2008; Wartman & Savage, 2008). Surprisingly, however, there is little research on the effectiveness of university communications that target parents and their students. To fill this gap, this study reports an example of a university family e-newsletter, and an initial evaluation of its success in meeting parents' needs.

Parental Involvement in Student Higher Education

Education, family studies, and communication scholars are developing a literature on the effects of parental involvement and parent-child communication on undergraduate student success. Parental involvement occurs when parents show an "interest in the lives of their students in college, gaining more information about college, (and) knowing when and how to appropriately provide encouragement and guidance to their student connecting with the institution" (Wartman & Savage, 2008, p. 5). Such engagement, encouragement and support is positively related to a variety of positive student outcomes (see the review of Wolf, Sax, & Harper, 2009).

One theoretical explanation for the importance of parental involvement comes from explication of the separation-individuation process (Grotevant & Cooper, 1998). As young adults establish their

autonomy and identity, successful separation occurs with the support of and strong relationships with family members, which positively affects adjustment to college (Kalsner & Pistole, 2003).

Parental involvement affects the amount and kind of communication parents have with their college students, which is linked to student success. For instance, Shoup, Gonyeah, and Kuh (2009) found that parental involvement is related to gains in student learning and higher engagement in educational practices associated with deep learning. Agliata and Renk (2008) found that communication reciprocity between college students and their parents is also a predictor of students' adjustment to college life. Small, Morgan, Abar, and Maggs (2011) have found that parental communication with college students actually confers protective effects in the domain of alcohol, in that the amount of communication parents and students had on weekends predicted less alcohol consumption by students. Small and her colleagues (Small, Morgan, Bailey-Davis, & Maggs, 2013) have also found protective effects for dietary and physical activity behaviors, with more frequent communication between parents and their student predicting increases in physical activity and consumption of fruits and vegetables. Small et al. advocate that parents should be encouraged to talk more frequently with their college students.

Given the positive function of parental communication and involvement with their students, universities have been encouraged to create the conditions for more effective parent-child communication by officially sponsoring institution-parent (and subsequent parent-student) communication. For instance, Small et al. (2011) suggest that universities encourage parents to communicate with their college-age student to help reduce dangerous alcohol behaviors. Similarly, Napper, Grimaldi, and LaBrie (2015) found that parents are more likely to discuss alcohol with their students when they perceived the likelihood of negative consequences, which led Napper et al. to advocate that universities provide parents with information about drinking norms and consequences.

Daniel et al. (2009) suggested increasing the frequency and volume of official communication may be effective with parents but not for students. Yet Scott and Daniel (2001) have noted that many parents expect to be involved, which result "from a combination of factors, including the high cost of attendance, changing role of higher education in society, and their own regard for their students as children rather than adults" (p. 84).

Finally, scholars have delineated the need for and best practices for communicating with parents (e.g., Taub, 2008; Ward-Roof, Heaton, & Coburn, 2008; Wartman & Savage, 2008). Some argue that conventional institution-parent relationships should be reassessed, and a model of interdependence be implemented (Daniel, Evans, & Scott, 2001). With the ease of communication as a result of cell phone, email, text, and social media, as well as the promotion of parent-student interactions in elementary and high school settings, it is not unreasonable to think that parents would have similar expectations for communicating with their students in their college years.

The idea of the helicopter parent, the parent who hovers over their child's college experience to provide direction, has been given attention for at least a decade (e.g., Lipka, 2005; Taylor, 2006). Colleges and universities have not typically viewed helicopter parenting in a positive light, for parent involvement has been seen as interfering with student success by stunting student independence. In recent years, however, this view has shifted, and many colleges and universities have responded to the increased expectations of family involvement by creating parent and family engagement opportunities. Although parent and family orientation programming has existed since the 1970s to

assist in the transition to college, increased family expectations have necessitated the need for expanded resources beyond parent orientation to allow for more directed efforts for engagement. By providing such avenues for engagement, universities have been better able to guide the helicopter parent how he or she can be best involved, including programming like parent, family, and grandparent weekends.

Universities have also made more concerted efforts to educate parents on campus resources and events through direct communications via electronic or print newsletters (Wartman & Savage, 2008). Colleges and universities have also increased their professional staffs through the creation of parent programming or outreach offices whose responsibilities include directing parent involvement to help their students succeed. Although some have delineated the need for benchmarking, assessing, and gathering data on parental programs (Savage, 2008), there are surprisingly few examples in the literature of the strategies universities have for communicating with parents and families, or evidence of their effectiveness. An exception is Harris and Jones (1999), who have described the strategies that the University of North Carolina uses to educate parents and students about career planning. These strategies include providing newsletters, a career services website, and providing specific encouragement to parents to provide internships and jobs for students. However, no evidence was provided to show the effectiveness of these communication strategies.

Development of a University Family e-Newsletter

Today's students communicate often with their parents; one study found that students communicate with their parents 13.4 times per week on average (Hofer, 2011). Such frequent contact provides families an opportunity to provide input on and potentially affect student behaviors. At Ohio State, we have nearly 56,000 parent email addresses on a listserv associated with our Parent and Family Relations Office.

The design of the Family e-Newsletter was developed at the onset of the Ohio State's Parent and Family Relations Office in 2010. To assess the needs of the students' families, an electronic survey was distributed to 3,000 parents and family members. The objective of this initial study was to provide baseline data regarding family preferences for communication frequency, communication channels, and topical areas of focus. There was minimal information in the literature that discussed how a university should communicate with parents, so the study was a first step in that direction. The basic research question revolved around the potential needs of this large population. The data gathered from this first study informed decisions regarding the communication strategies of the office moving forward.

Subsequently the Parent and Family Relations Office designed a communication strategy to leverage the student/family relationship to positively influence students' success and satisfaction with their college experience. The strategy includes family programming as well as e-newsletters that are sent to parent/family email addresses obtained from the student's admission's application. Family e-newsletters are sent both weekly and monthly resulting in roughly five newsletters sent to families each month. There is also an outlet for special communications to be sent outside of those regularly scheduled. Although each newsletter serves a slightly different purpose, all newsletters have two primary goals: providing information and resources for families and providing families with points of pride about the university. Content for communication is gathered from across the institution through a network of communications specialists embedded in various departments. Each month a "call for content" is sent to these individuals to gather

events, resources and other important information for parents. Content is chosen based upon those preferences supplied by parents and families in the original survey distributed in 2010. A screen shot of part of one newsletter is presented in the Appendix.

Weekly communications focus on activities, events and other relevant information for students and families for that week. These "OnCampus e-newsletters" for parents and families are adapted from similar e-newsletters students receive each week. "Buckeye Parent," the monthly e-newsletter, is written in a narrative format focusing on event recaps, points of pride, and other story driven pieces. Additional resources are devoted to produce a Chinese language version of Buckeye Parent for parents and families in China. "Buck-i-Briefs," the vehicle for special communications, are used when families need to be informed about a specific event or issue.

Resources and information provide families with a common language to empower their students to take advantage of the resources available through the university that help students feel satisfied and succeed. The points of pride give families general highlights about the university so that families may feel they are making a good investment by having a child attend the university. These points of pride also provide families with talking points to become brand ambassadors for the university as they interact with individuals not associated with Ohio State.

Although colleges and universities have increased parent and family outreach, limited research exists on the impact of parent involvement on student satisfaction with their college experience. Some research has shown that parent and family engagement can have a positive impact on areas such as health issues, career development, and decision making around alcohol use (NSSE 2007). This research provides a basis for parent and family relations professionals to be able to justify the expenditure of resources to engage families in the college or university experience. What is not entirely clear, however, is how families affect student behaviors based upon communications provided directly by the institution.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to report an initial assessment of the university's Family e-Newsletters for their effectiveness in meeting parents' needs. Two formative research surveys (2012 & 2014) were conducted to determine how parents viewed regular communications from the university. Survey questions focused on five topic areas: safety on campus from crime and physical danger; remaining healthy and well; career-related information; student involvement with campus events, clubs, or social activities; and academics such as courses, schedules, majors/minors, grades, and fees. The focus of this report is on parents' assessments of the weekly and monthly communications they received. We first wanted to learn if the e-newsletters were read by parents, under the assumption that reading the e-newsletters would help establish a basis for helping parents engage in productive communication with their students:

RQ1: How often do university parents read about topics relevant to their student's success (i.e., safety, health/wellness, involvement, career, academics) from the University's Family e-Newsletters?

We also wanted to examine parents' perceptions of the overall effectiveness of the University's Family e-Newsletter, and the utility of the newsletter to increase parents' understanding of various topics as well as increase their ability to provide advice to their students:

RQ2: Are Family e-Newsletters considered by parents to be valuable in terms of the e-newsletters' (a) overall effectiveness, and (b) perceived utility to provide information and advice relevant to student satisfaction and success with their college experience?

Finally, we wanted to examine parents' perceptions of the Family e-Newsletter, specifically in regard to feeling informed and included by the university:

RQ3: Are Family e-Newsletters considered by university parents to be helpful in keeping them (a) informed and (b) included by the university?

Method

Participants and Procedures

Two university offices, the Parent and Family Relations Office and the Center for the Study of Student Life, collaborated in 2012 and 2014 to survey parents and guardians about the regular communications distributed by The Ohio State University. Surveys were developed separately for students and parents. The analysis presented here focuses on the parents' assessment of the University's Family e-Newsletters.

Two random samples parents were generated: for the 2012 sample, 2,500 parents were drawn from the advancement data base; for the 2014 sample, 4,400 parents were drawn from the list of parents that had opened an email from the Parent and Family Relations Office.

The parent and student surveys were administered using survey software in the spring of 2012 and in the spring of 2014, using three reminders over approximately a 14-21 day window. The Parent and Guardian surveys had 11.64% and 24.3% response rates, respectively, for 2012 and 2014, producing *n*s of 202 and 835 for the measures used in this report.

The survey measured the overall effectiveness of the university e-newsletters with parents. The survey began with demographic questions on gender, educational level, household income, ethnicity, and country, state, and county of residence. Parents were then asked questions about the university's e-newsletters, and how frequently these newsletters were read with respect to five topics: safety, health, career, student involvement with campus activities, and academics.

Instrumentation and Measures

Participants' evaluations of the Family e-Newsletters were assessed with five measures. Except where indicated, all assessments were made on scales with either a four-point (2012) or five-point (2014) Likert response format (i.e., *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*).

First, participants indicated how much they read about the five topics covered in the e-newsletters, by indicating how frequently they read about each topic on six-point scales that varied from never (1), once per school year (2), quarterly (3), monthly (4), twice per month (5), to weekly (6). This assessment was adapted from another parental contact measure (Brint, Douglass, Flacks, Thomson, & Chatman, 2007). These frequency ratings were averaged across topics to form a measure of e-newsletter *reading frequency* (2012 *M(SD)* = 4.50(1.13), $\alpha = .925$; 2014 *M(SD)* = 4.65(1.05), $\alpha = .902$).

Participants then assessed the general effectiveness of the e-newsletters with four items, "trustworthy," "important," "relevant," and "useful." This measure was adapted from other communication effectiveness measures (e.g., Dillard, Shen, & Vail, 2007; Goldsmith, Mcdermott, & Alexander, 2000). Items were averaged to form a general communication effectiveness measure (2012 & 2014 α s = .942, .926). See Table 1 for means and standard deviations.

Table 1

Parents' Evaluations of University e-Newsletters

Evaluation Measure	Year	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean (SD)
General comm. Effectiveness	2012	2.0%	6.4%	--	69.5%	22.2%	3.23 (.640)
	2014	.60%	1.0%	15.6%	62.6%	20.1%	4.15 (.564)
Specific comm. Utility	2012	2.2%	21.7%	--	70.0%	6.2%	3.03 (.451)
	2014	.60%	3.3%	42.1%	49.7%	4.4%	3.84 (.558)
Informed by Univ. comm.	2012	3.1%	14.8%	--	59.5%	22.6%	3.23 (.640)
	2014	.40%	1.0%	23.9%	56.0%	18.6%	4.17 (.575)
Included By Univ. comm.	2012	4.5%	17.4%	--	64.0%	14.0%	3.05 (.700)
	2014	2.2%	4.3%	27.2%	54.4%	12.0%	3.95 (.726)

Participants also evaluated the regular communications for their functional effectiveness in helping parents and their children understand the topics better. Items were constructed that were similar to assessments of advice messages (Feng & Burleson, 2008; MacGeorge, Feng, Butler, & Budarz, 2004). Five items assessed the usefulness of the newsletter content (e.g., "gives advice that is relevant to my student/child," "summarizes knowledge on important topics," "clarifies what potential problems and issues are," and "proposes effective ways to help my student/child address problematic situations") that were averaged to form a measure of newsletter communication utility (2012 & 2014 α s = .942, .884).

Finally, participants indicated if the e-newsletters enabled them to feel informed (three items, e.g., "I read ... to keep myself informed about resources and useful information for my student"), and involved in the university community (three items, e.g., "I feel a part of the Ohio State community"). Items were averaged to form two measures: feeling informed (2012 & 2014 α s = .760, .721); and feeling included (2012 & 2014 α s = .896, .720).

A factor analysis (principal components with varimax rotation) of the four assessment measures produced distinct factors that collectively accounted for 75.39% (2012) and 73.41% (2014) of overall assessment variance. There were no cross loadings and all coefficients were above .62.

Results

The research questions were answered with descriptive statistics, correlational analyses, and analyses of variance. Table 2 presents the demographic characteristics for each sample.

Table 2
Demographic Characteristics of the Samples

Characteristic	2012	2014
Sex		
Female parent/guardian	77.0%	72.7%
Male parent/guardian	22.3%	27.3%
Unidentified	0.8%	--
Household Income		
Under \$74,999	26.5%	13.9%
\$75,000-\$99,000	17.2%	12.2%
\$100,000-\$124,000	18.8%	15.0%
\$125,000-\$149,000	11.8%	9.9%
Over \$150,000	25.7%--	24.6%
Prefer not to answer		24.4%
Education Level		
High school or less	6.4%	5.6%
Some college	22.1%	10.8%
Associate Degree	--	6.4%
Bachelors' Degree	44.0%	42.1%
Masters' Degree	19.9%	26.4%
Doctoral/Professional Degree	7.9%	8.7%
Race		
Caucasian	82.5%	70.6%
African American	3.0%	2.4%
Asian American	3.0%	3.2%
Hispanic	2.7%	2.2%
Native American	0.4%	.8%
Multiracial	1.5%	--
Not indicated	6.8%	20.8%

As can be seen, three-quarters of the respondents in each sample were mothers or female guardians who were Caucasian. Half the respondents had a household income of at least \$100,000, and two-thirds had attained at least a bachelor's degree in their level of education.

The first research question (RQ1) asked if the Family e-Newsletters were read by university parents and guardians. In 2012, 68.4% of parents had read the e-newsletters at least weekly (16.1%), twice a month (24.4%) or monthly (27.9%); the remaining parents had read the newsletters only four times per year (20.6%), once a year (7.3%), or had never read the newsletters (3.4%). Similarly, in 2014, most parents read the e-newsletters at least weekly (30.4%), twice a month (24.5%) or monthly (21.0%); other parents had read the newsletters only four times per year (18.5%), once a year (4.6%), or had never read the newsletters (1.0%). Hence, two-thirds to three-quarters of parents had read the e-newsletters, at least monthly, across the two survey years.

Whether or not parents' reading of the newsletters differed as a function of the topic was determined with a repeated measures analysis of variance, which detected a significant difference for topic for 2012 and 2014, respectively: $F(4, 1044) = 23.402, p < .001$; $F(4, 3876) = 45.635, p < .001$. Contrast analyses for 2012 found that parents read significantly more often about safety and academics ($M(SD) = 4.55(1.26), 4.61(1.29)$), and less often about health/wellness and career information than other topics ($M(SD) = 4.17(1.41), 4.13(1.51)$). Similarly, the 2014 contrast analyses found that parents read significantly more often about involvement and academics ($M(SD) = 4.73(1.23), 4.82(1.18)$), and less often about health/wellness and career information compared to other topics, respectively ($M(SD) = 4.47(1.31), 4.44(1.35)$).

RQ2 asked if the Family e-Newsletters were considered by university parents to be valuable. This question was answered in two ways: through participants' assessments of the overall credibility and effectiveness of the e-newsletters, and through assessments of the specific utility of the newsletters to provide advice and understanding about specific topics. Table 1 shows that in both 2012 and 2014, at least 82% of the participants considered the Family e-Newsletters to be effective in terms of their trustworthiness, usefulness, relevance and importance. In further analyses, perceptions of the newsletters' effectiveness was not significantly correlated with parents' household income or educational level for either 2012 or 2014 ($r_s = .063, -.077, -.008, -.062, ns$, respectively). RQ2b asked if the Family e-Newsletters were considered by university parents to provide specific insights, advice and understanding on the topics (e.g., safety, academics). Table 1 shows that at least 76% of 2012 parents and 54% of 2014 parents agreed or strongly agreed that the e-newsletters were effective in this regard. The utility of the Family e-Newsletters was not correlated with either parental income or education level for 2012 or 2014, respectively ($r_s = -.082, -.047, -.003, .000, ns$).

Finally, parents considered whether or not they felt informed and included by the university's Family e-Newsletters (RQ3). Table 1 shows that 82% of 2012 parents and 74% of 2014 parents reported feeling informed by the Family e-Newsletters. Feeling informed was significantly correlated with parents' level of household income for 2012 ($r = .152, df = 242, p < .05$), but not correlated with household income for 2014 ($r = -.004, ns$); feeling informed was also not correlated with education level in 2012 or 2014 ($r_s = .082 \& -.004, ns$, respectively). In terms of feeling included by the Family e-Newsletters, 78% of 2012 parents and 80% of 2014 parents felt included by the university through the e-newsletters. Feeling included was not significantly correlated with parents' level of household income or education level in either 2012 or 2014 ($r_s = .004, -.031, -.003, -.063, ns$, respectively).

Discussion

We posed three research questions to assess how a university's Family e-Newsletters are succeeding with respect to parents' needs. Across two years, parents considered the Family e-Newsletters to be successful; parents or guardians read the newsletters, regarded them as credible and effective, saw the newsletters as providing information and advice relevant to their students, and felt informed and included by reading the newsletters.

In regard to the first research question, how often did parents read about topics related to student success in the e-newsletter, over 68% of parents read the e-newsletter at least monthly. Parents read significantly more about safety, involvement, and academics than other topics.

Regarding the second research question, to what extent is the e-newsletter considered effective and useful, at least 82% of parents found the e-newsletter to be important, trustworthy, useful, and relevant

and at least 54% found it to be specifically useful for providing understanding and advice to their children about topics related to student success.

Finally, in regard to the third research question, is the Family e-Newsletter perceived as helping parents feel informed and included by the university, the results showed that it is was seen as such; at least 74% of parents reported feeling informed by the Family e-Newsletters, and at least 66% reported feeling included by the institution by way of the e-newsletters.

Taken together, this assessment validates the efforts being made about this particular type of university family newsletter. Parents and families not only indicated that they regularly read the newsletters, but they also indicated that they gained knowledge about the identified topical areas. As Parent and Family Relations at Ohio State is the department coordinating family outreach at the university, the newsletters being sent from this area serve as a primary point of information about resources and events at the university. These efforts are providing families the information they need to not only be informed citizens of the university community but also be better positioned to support their student's successes.

Another reason why this assessment of the University's Family e-Newsletter is significant is because of the nature of the assessment measures used. Four measures assessed distinct and different validity claims about the effectiveness of the Family e-Newsletters for satisfying parents' needs. The general effectiveness measure assessed the credibility of the information provided in the newsletters, while the feeling informed measure assessed the participants' understanding of the information provided by the newsletters. The communication utility measure assessed the efficacy of the information provided for student success, while the feeling included measure assessed the positive social relationships created by the university with parents. Because the four measures evaluated different claims about the validity of the Family e-Newsletter, together they form a convincing evaluation framework.

Still, the findings were not completely consistent across the two years. As can be seen in Table 1, agreement responses to the 2014 survey were generally lower than agreement responses to the 2012 survey. These differences are likely due to differences in the response format, for the 2012 response format lacked a neutral midpoint, which was included in the 2014 response format with a Likert response format. The 2014 responses found that fewer participants found that the e-newsletters provided specific communication utility despite finding the newsletters to be credible. These findings suggest that more work could be done to determine what specific resources might be added to the current e-newsletters to provide parents with the confidence they have all the resources they need to help their student.

Despite the limitations, however, the findings obtained from this assessment demonstrate the effectiveness of family e-newsletters from the parent's viewpoint. Colleges and university professionals who are contemplating the value of launching an e-newsletter communication strategy may consult the sample e-newsletter provided in Appendix A. In addition, for those colleges and universities who already employ an e-newsletter strategy but who may not have assessed of effectiveness of their e-newsletters, the assessment survey items employed in this study are provided in Appendix B. Parent/family professionals could potentially use their survey instrument for evaluating their e-newsletters and compare their results with these results. Together, the e-newsletter template, processes, and assessment tool provided here form a model to draw upon for any program considering an e-newsletter communication strategy.

As the millennial student continues to populate colleges and universities throughout the United States, the reality of family involvement in their day to day lives is ever apparent. The desire of students and families to remain connected throughout the American higher education experience continues to emphasize that a student's attendance at college is truly a family affair. In an era where cost of attendance and affordability are driving conversations regarding access to higher education, resource allocations are at the forefront of conversations regarding office goals and how budgets support those goals.

As colleges and universities find creative ways to stretch fewer budget dollars, parent and family involvement and how universities cultivate and potentially leverage parent-student relationships can be key components in improving students' college experience. However, we must determine what parents and families need from university outreach to best support their students. If communications that require resource allocations to perform effectively are going to be a key component to family outreach and involvement, tools should exist that not only assess how connected families feel to the university but also what topical areas remain the most important for maintaining university-family relationships. In sum, if universities are going to devote resources to these communications endeavors, we must assure their effectiveness in this mission.

This study has limitations that should be considered when reviewing its outcomes. Although the sample somewhat reflects the demographics of The Ohio State University with 76.2% being from Ohio, 69.7% being female, and 84.7% being Caucasian, the sample is not representative of all colleges and universities. There is also a selection bias because the sample includes parents who had already received the parent communications. Additionally, we sampled from parents who regularly open email communications. This sample is more likely to take the survey, respond favorably about their experience and be receptive towards the Parent and Family Relations office. Moreover, although topical areas of the survey were specified, parents and students may have different ideas and definitions of each topical area. Finally, the response format for some of the measures differed across the two years, which makes comparing some of the findings more difficult, but the changes likely improve the assessment measures moving forward.

Regardless of these limitations, this survey affirms the important role that communications play in educating and connecting parents and families with their student's university. There has been no communication tool like this described in the literature. The next step in this assessment research is to determine whether the University's Family e-Newsletters affect the way parents actually communicate with their students, and how students perceive the effectiveness of the Family e-Newsletters they receive. Since surveys were simultaneously administered to students as well as to parents, future work could compare both parent and student surveys to determine the overall role university e-newsletters have in parent-child conversations. The role of e-newsletters for first-generation families can also be examined.

As university parent and family relations offices look for measures to justify the efforts taken towards parent and family outreach, this communication tool is available to use to communicate with families. The study provides initial support for the value of parent and family outreach through email newsletters. In so doing, the study contributes to the understanding of the effectiveness of communication strategies and a way to measure effectiveness in the context of institutional efforts to communicate with parents, demonstrating that such efforts are considered valuable, useful, informative, and helpful in keeping parents included. The evidence suggests that university-parent communication strategies such as these are a worthwhile part of university endeavors to promote a quality experience for college students.

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