UNDERSTANDING THE FREQUENCY, MODE, AND IMPACT OF PARENTAL COMMUNICATION AND INVOLVEMENT WITH STUDENTS ON FOUR YEAR COLLEGE CAMPUSES

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Background of the Study

Student affairs professionals are likely to have interesting stories about interactions with parents. In a 2006 national survey of student affairs professionals, ninety-three percent of respondents indicated that their interactions with parents had increased in the previous five years (Merriman, 2006). The field of higher education has not only seen increased in parental interactions with administrators, but also with their students. The College Parents of America (2006) surveyed parents and found that thirty-four percent of respondent reported communicating with their children either daily or more than once a day. This increased involvement is driving an examination by colleges and universities of the benefits and disadvantages of having parents as a more substantial influence on collegiate processes.

The frequency and method of communication between parents, students, and administrators is of particular interest. Much of the increased involvement stems from a prevalence of new technology such as cell phones, e-mail, and Skype. Ninety percent of College Parents of America’s (2006) respondents communicated frequently through cell phone and fifty-eight percent through e-mail. With more opportunities to talk to their students daily, parents are able to receive immediate updates on happenings with classes, roommates, and other day-to-day situations than in the past.

Recent developments in the history of parent and institution relations have also created an avenue for parents to be more involved at the postsecondary level. The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), for example, has been modified in current years to allow institutions to communicate with parents in certain cases of drug and alcohol use as well as violence or safety concerns (Higher Education Amendments, 1998).
With increased issues of safety and security on campuses following school shootings and an increased prevalence of mental health issues, parents are even more inclined to stretch and test their ability to procure information and create change on behalf of their students.

There is no doubt that with these changes, institutions must find ways to partner with parents in order to find a balance between their involvement and the development of autonomy for their students. College administrators may fear the recurrence of “helicopter parents”, but must also understand the benefits that parents can provide in assisting their students with the transition to college and adulthood.

**Research Questions**

1. What is the history behind the role of parents in the lives of traditional-aged college students?
2. How often are parents communicating with students and administrators, and what does this communication look like?
3. How can institutions effectively partner with parents?

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to understand current trends in parental involvement in higher education and explore ways to effectively partner with parents without sacrificing student autonomy development.
Introduction

The following sections will be used to address the research questions proposed: 1) history of the college-student-parent relationship, 2) frequency of communication between parents, students, and colleges, 3) types of communication between parents, students, and colleges, 4) subjects of communication between parents, students, and colleges, 5) the influence of parental communication, and 6) effectively partnering with parents.

History of the College-Student-Parent Relationship

Throughout the history of colleges and universities, parents have handed over certain rights and responsibilities to the institutions their children attend. As these responsibilities have changed over time, so have the responsibilities of parents and students for learning and growth in higher education.

In Loco Parentis

One of the earliest relationships between parents and universities was the doctrine of “In Loco Parentis,” originally based on English common law. This concept suggested that a father could “delegate part of his parental authority…to the tutor or schoolmaster of his child; who is then in loco parentis, and has such a portion of the power of the parent committed to his charge…of restraint and correction…as may be necessary” (Blackstone, 1765, p.413). This philosophy allowed parents to all but relinquish any involvement they had with their students while they were at university; the traditional role of parenting fell upon college faculty instead.
The Fall of In Loco Parentis

In the 1960s, higher education saw the fall of “In Loco Parentis” as other relationships began to form between colleges, parents and students. Edwards (1994) describes five factors which guided the exit of “In Loco Parentis”: the lowering of the age of legal majority from twenty-one to eighteen, a rise in civil rights, rebellion against authority, a liberal shift in student thinking, and an increase in the number of older students on college campuses. Bickel and Lake (1999) also theorized that a rise in student economic rights was a sixth factor in this changing relationship. “In Loco Parentis” saw its official exit in case law through Dixon v. Alabama Board of Education (1961).

Since the fall of “In Loco Parentis,” case law has demonstrated various shifts in the relationship between parents and colleges and a number of models were proposed to qualify these changes. Shortly after Dixon, a “bystander/no duty model” formed between colleges and students. At this time, colleges no longer had a duty to act outside of the classroom and students were considered fully responsible for their own behavior and safety. Several instances of case law solidify this model. The legal culture of higher education has shifted such that colleges and universities no longer held the responsibilities of a parent; instead, these responsibilities fell solely to the student.

Interestingly, a few years after the bystander model began to rear its head in case law, so did a regeneration of “In Loco Parentis.” College students were still assumed to be responsible adults but were effectively asking, by way of bringing lawsuits, that the colleges protect them (Szablewicz & Gibbs, 1987). This created a culture in which institutions were once again taking on some responsibilities previously held by parents.
This model has also been described as the “Bystander/Duty” model by Bickel and Lake (1999) because the college was still a bystander in regard to students’ out-of-classroom activities, but also had a responsibility to protect them.

The “Contract Model,” described by Edwards (1994) and Bickel and Lake (1999) describes colleges and students as being under a contract whereby both parties have agreed to set terms. These terms were not necessarily equal between both parties, nor did students have the ability to negotiate the contract (Stamatakos, 1989). They simply agreed to the contract for the school to which they were admitted and chose to attend.

The “Fiduciary Model” was proposed as another way of looking at the college-student relationship. This model “imposed a duty on colleges to act in the best interest of students in all matters” (Henning, 2007). The fiduciary model “minimized students’ responsibilities while maximizing the responsibilities of the college” (Henning, 2007).

Soon after the “fiduciary model” came into play, a “facilitator model” was proposed in which colleges and students “defined shared responsibilities and rights” (Henning, 2007). Colleges and universities provided rules and consequences for student actions, but students were allowed to make their own decisions (Henning, 2007). Like the other models, the “facilitator model” did not include the direct involvement of parents. However, entering the new millennium, “millennials” reached the age to enter higher education and this model of college-student responsibility found itself negotiating with parents as a third party stakeholder.

This is evident in some of the most recent changes to FERPA in 1998, which now provides institutions of higher education the option to notify parents of their students’ “violation of any law or institutional rule or policy governing the use or possession of
alcohol or a controlled substance if the student is under 21 and the institution determines that the student has committed a disciplinary violation with respect to the use or possession” (Legislative History, 2002).

**In Consortio Cum Parentibus**

In Henning’s new model, “In Consortio Cum Parentibus,” he proposes that the current relationship between colleges, students, and their parents is such that parents are viewed as partners in the educational process (Henning, 2007). Instead of parents directly delegating their power and responsibility to colleges as was the case in “In Loco Parentis” or being out of the picture completely in the post-“In Loco Parentis” years, colleges now add in parents as a third communicating factor in their process. The primary relationship remains between colleges and students, but parents communicate both with their students and the institution and are much more involved in the exchange (Henning, 2007).

Henning’s model depends on six assumptions in order to make sense. The assumptions are: 1. College students learn from the decisions they make, 2. College students also learn from becoming autonomous, 3. Students have certain rights that colleges must acknowledge and uphold, 4. Today’s students seem more connected to their parents, 5. Parents and guardians can be a significant influence on college students’ behavior, and 6. Colleges can provide a supportive yet accountable training ground for student decision-making (Henning, 2007).

Henning’s theory is described in more detail with a series of tenets that provide a “foundation for its implementation” (Henning, 2007). The first tenet is that colleges, students, and parents are partners in education and all parties are responsible for upholding basic legal and ethical principles (Henning, 2007). Each partner is responsible for promoting these principles which include “due process, fundamental fairness, students’ right to self-determination, and the provision of a safe learning environment” (Henning, 2007). This also requires that each partner understand and agree on what each of these principles mean and how they could be implemented. The second tenet is that while colleges are not able to know all and ensure students’ safety at all times, they do have a reasonable duty to keep their students safe (Henning, 2007). Colleges are required to act reasonably to protect the safety of their students, especially when faced with foreseeable risks, but are not able to control the actions of every student and those they interact with (Henning, 2007). The third tenet is that “there should be a focus on decision-making, accountability for decisions, and implications of decisions” when colleges engage in processes of addressing student behavior (Henning, 2007). Lastly,
colleges can help the parent-student relationship by teaching both parties how to properly communicate and facilitate appropriate levels of autonomy (Henning, 2007).

Some of the implications of this model are that student affairs practitioners must “educate parents and students regarding expectations for parental involvement and student independence” as well as consider what impact such a model has on non-traditional students. In order for institutions to effectively set expectations, they must understand some of the recent data centered on communication between parents, students, and college officials.

The literature reviewed provided a background in case law and proposed a new model called “In Consortio Cum Parentis,” which asserts that parents are now an integral third party in the educational process (Henning, 2007). Henning’s (2007) model operates with a number of inherent assumptions including that students learn from their decisions and becoming autonomous, have rights that colleges must uphold, and are more connected to their parents. Student development theory, case law, and studies previously discussed show that these assumptions are reasonable (Chickering and Reisser, 1993).

Henning’s model also operates by specific tenets which argue that colleges, students, and parents are partners and while colleges are not omnipotent insurers of students’ safety, they do have reasonable safety duties and can provide assistance by teaching students and parents how to facilitate communication and autonomy. Based on much of the data discussed, we can see that these tenets are reasonable by case law, student development, and current trends in colleges providing assistance to parents.
Frequency of Communication

One of the most shocking pieces of evidence to the changing role of parents in the college experience is how often parents communicate with their students. According to Junco and Mastrodicasa (2007), students speak with their parents an average of one and a half times per day. Even more surprising, perhaps, is that students initiate more than half the contacts. This suggests that not only is communication frequent and ongoing, but students are welcoming this communication with open arms.

This study was administered over two semesters via a SurveyMonkey survey sent to all enrolled students at seven institutions. 7,705 participants responded, with an overall response rate of 8.7%. While this response rate seemed low, smaller institutions had much better rates than larger institutions, possibly because students at larger institutions receive more survey requests and are less likely to check their e-mail (Junco & Mastrodicasa, 2007).

Other studies support the trend of increased communication between parents and students; College Parents of America (2006) found that 34% of the parents they surveyed reported communicating with their children either daily or more than once a day. Though this survey was anonymous, the SurveyMonkey platform only allowed one response per IP address. This could have created a discrepancy between parents filling the survey out together, separately on different computers, or only one parent filling out the survey. 839 parents provided responses to the survey and it is hard to tell whether these parents are representative of the overall population. The survey was also open for only 11 days.

In another study, 24.9% of students spoke with their parents every day and an additional 30.7% spoke with their parents a few times a week (Wolf, Sax, & Harper,
2009). This data is from the 2006 University of California Undergraduate Experience Survey (UCUES), which is a longitudinal survey across all nine UC campuses. There was little non-response bias and Chatman (2007) found that the sample was a good representation of the UC undergraduate population. Unfortunately, the survey did not allow students to distinguish between the involvement behaviors of their mother versus their father or indicate whether they were from a single-parent home. As a result of the survey demographic, the results are mainly representative of white males and females. It is also important to note that this survey only focuses on students of the UC system, which consists of only public four-year colleges.

NSSE data shows that 70% of students communicated ‘very often’ with at least one parent during the academic year (Schoup, Gonyea, & Kuh, 2009). Savage (2008) attains that as a result of this increased communication, parents can be a college’s best ally in student development and retention if the college is able to guide the care, concern, and advice that parents are providing their students. This data came from the 2007 National Survey of Student Engagement, which randomly sampled approximately equal numbers of first year and senior students from 24 institutions. For the Shoup, Gonyea, and Kuh analysis, only survey data from students who completed the main NSSE as well as the additional Family and Friends items was included (4,532 first years and 4,652 seniors). The first year and senior year samples were 65% female and 81 and 83% white respectively; because the majority of participants were white women, it may be especially difficult to apply the resulting data to men and racial minorities.

Increased interaction is not only happening between parents and their students, it is happening between parents and their students’ institutions as well. In a survey of
student affairs administrators at 127 doctoral research institutions, 93% said that the number of interactions they had with parents had increased in the previous five years (Merriman, 2006). This data was collected from a survey of 310 mid and senior level student affairs professionals at doctoral research universities in positions related to parent service or who had frequent contact with parents in their position. Since this survey was only conducted at research institutions, we are unable to generalize any of this data to other types of colleges. It is also very questionable how the author defined professionals who had “frequent contact with parents.” It would have also been helpful to find out more from entry-level professionals about their experiences with parents, in order to provide applicable tips for those entering the field during this time of high parental involvement.

Types of Communication

One major reason why parents and students are in communication more often is because of the rise of modern technology such as e-mail, instant messaging, cell phones, and Skype. In a College Parents of America survey (2006), 90% of respondents communicated frequently through cell phone, 58% through e-mail, and 29% through instant messaging compared to a measly 26% over landline or 7% using snail mail. In another survey by Wolf, Sax, & Harper (2009) 62.3% of students reported communicating by e-mail, 23.5% over text messaging, and 14% reported seeing their parents at least a few times each week. With the use of cell phones, students can easily call parents between classes or at a moment’s notice after (or even during) a crisis. Communication through electronic means is more popular than face-to-face
communication for today’s college students and parents (NSSE, 2007). It is easy, fast, and circumvents boundaries such as distance.

Subjects of Communication

While it is clear that the majority of traditional-age college students are communicating more often with their parents and often utilizing new technologies, researchers were also interested in what students and parents are talking about during these interactions. In Connecting to the Net Generation: What Higher Education Professionals Need to Know About Today’s College Students, Junco and Mastrodicasa (2007) report topics of conversation in order of frequency of discussion such as checking in (82.9%), academic success (75.7%), social life (66.5%), work (59.3%), money (55.4%), health (55%), class complaints (48%), living complaints (30.1%), and meetings with advisors (20%). The sample size of the study was large enough to validate the results though possibly more representative of students from small universities as they had a higher response rate.

In another study, 66.6% of students “agree” or “strongly agree” that their parents were interested in their academic progress, 59.7% stressed good grades, and 54% “agred” or “strongly agree” that their parents were interested in their out-of-class experiences, specifically friends at the university and nonacademic activities (Wolf, Sax, & Harper, 2009).

Because parents are having these conversations with their students, they expect much more notification from colleges regarding similar issues. According to Forbes
Influence of Parental Communication

Parental communication is having a varied influence on the decision-making of traditional aged college students. Parents are known to influence academic achievement, university adjustment and retention, decision making about alcohol, financing higher education, dealing with health issues, and developing a career (Carney-Hall, 2008). Parents often have an increased influence in the decisions their students make in part because they are the ones paying for their students’ education. A study of 6,800 students in grades 6 through 12 from the 2003 Parent and Family Involvement in Education Survey (PFI) of the National Household Education Surveys Program (NHES) found that 82% of parents who expected their students to continue their education after high school planned on helping pay for their child’s college education (Lippman, et.al., 2008).

In the 2007 NSSE, 75% of students said they frequently follow their parents’ advice (Shoup, Gonyea, & Kuh, 2009). Wolf, Sax, and Harper (2009) found that 3.4% of students agreed or strongly agreed that their parents influenced their academic major and 11.8% agreed or strongly agreed that their parents influenced their class choices. 13% of first-year and 8% of senior students also reported that their parents often or very often intervened on their behalf (Shoup, Gonyea, & Kuh, 2009). However, in another study by Pearson and Dellmann-Jenkins (1997), students ranked a variety of other things including personal work, class work, and teachers over parents as most influential in their choice of major. The 2007 NSSE showed that students with highly involved parents reported
higher levels of engagement, deep learning, and greater gains in “personal competence, personal and social development, and general education” but had significantly lower grades (Shoup, Gonyea, & Kuh, 2009).

Another study found that when students perceived parental involvement and support, they were more likely to perform well and stay in a program of science. Students’ perceptions of parental autonomy led to feelings of autonomy and competence in their field (Ratelle et al., 2005). This longitudinal study followed 729 young adults (373 females, 356 males) in their last year of high school in Quebec until their third year of college. 97% of participants were French speaking and 71% lived with their parents at the beginning of the study. The mean age of participants was seventeen years. The authors of this study concluded that perceived parental autonomy support predicted students’ persistence in a science program in part through the medicating role of students’ feelings of autonomy and competence. The study, however, is potentially biased because it used students’ perception of parental dimensions instead of parents’ self-evaluations. However, according to Schwartz, Baron-Hentry, and Pruzinsky (1985), students’ evaluation may be more objective than parents’.

One study by Cutrona, et. al (1994) found that parental support predicted GPA across a heterogeneous sample group of varying majors and abilities, but in another by Wintre & Yaffe (2000), parents did not play a direct role in predicting students’ academic adaptation to college. In Wintre and Yaffe’s (2000) study, data was collected from participants at a large, commuter university in a major metropolitan Canadian city. Participants ranged in age from 17 to 27 years, with a median of 19. 79.3% of their families were intact, 75.6% lived at home with their families, and 17.3% lived in
residence halls. The authors noted that although the percentage of students living at home seems high, students commuting to university have become the norm in North America (Slade & Jarmul, 1975; Stewart, Merrill, & Saluri, 1985). The sample was representative of a wide range of students, with 60 different areas of study identified as majors by the participants. The conflict in survey data between Wintre and Yaffe’s study (2000) and Cutrona et.al. (1994) shows that much research is still needed in this area.

**Effectively Partnering with Parents**

As a result of increased communication between parents and their students and parents and institutions, many colleges and universities have developed parent programs of varying purposes and missions. Approximately 53% of these parent offices reside in student affairs, while 30% reside in development or alumni services (Wartman and Savage, 2008). Where a parent program is housed often affects its mission and goals; offices in student affairs may be more focused on student development and working with parents to promote autonomous students, whereas offices in development or alumni services may be more concerned about appeasing parents in order to retain their students and their tuition dollars (Savage, 2008). Carney-Hall (2008) argues however that it is unimportant where these services reside as long as institutions promote appropriate parent involvement and send a clear message to parents from every department in the institution. As of 2006, more than 70% of the nation’s four-year colleges and universities had parental positions or offices (Lum, 2006).

Savage (2008) argues that the key to productive parent involvement is to focus on “appropriate involvement,” but that this differs depending on an institution’s mission and
goals, types of students attending, cost, and size of the campus. Most institutions follow one of two models that have been proposed for the field of parent services: the “student development” model and the “financial development” model (Savage, 2008). Often, universities may attempt to utilize both philosophical models in their work with parents. When different departments on campus utilize different models, there can be conflict and confusion on both ends of the table.

Kennedy (2009) points out that many students and parents find universities more responsive when parents call to complain or get things fixed as opposed to their students, which could seriously hinder student autonomy development. Cutright suggests that parents be educated about appropriate involvement during orientation sessions and be guided through hypothetical situations to ensure that they will not later hinder collegiate processes. All of these suggestions for best practices make sense within the framework discussed throughout this entire literature review regarding the parent-student-college relationship today.

**Implications and Best Practices**

Despite mixed feelings among student affairs professionals about the benefits and disadvantages of the current trends in parent involvement, parents are investing time and money into their students’ educations and, from a business perspective, cannot be ignored (Carney-Hall, 2008). Universities must remember that appropriate parent involvement can positively influence student success, and that their involvement is often welcomed and requested by the student (Carney-Hall, 2008).
In order to promote “appropriate involvement,” colleges and universities can aim for a series of best practices. First and foremost, colleges must ensure that they are sending a clear message to parents, from all corners of the institution, on what the appropriate parental role looks like for that particular campus (Carney-Hall, 2008). Many times, parents are encouraged to be heavily involved during the recruitment and orientation process, but find themselves cut off after move-in day. Other times, residence life departments work to create a culture of independent, “adult” students but find themselves under pressure to fix issues after parents call another office (Carney-Hall, 2008). As Kennedy (2009) states, parents “feel a sense of duty to be involved with their college-going child’s life...[because of] the fact that they believe the interference works”.

Students and parents find that institutions are more responsive to their needs when parents intervene than when students try and get things fixed or make changes themselves (Kennedy, 2009). As institutions, it is imperative that we don’t encourage unwanted behavior by rewarding parent intervention more than we do independent problem-solving by students.

Oftentimes, parents must also be taught how to be independent just as their students are when they enter college. Orientation sessions can provide parents with the knowledge of “the behaviors and approaches that contribute to students’ accepting responsibility” as well as those that “inhibit independence and the acceptance of personal responsibility” (Cutright, 2008). Parents may not yet understand the educational role of many out-of-classroom functions such as housing and orientation and therefore expect service above learning values (Kennedy, 2009). Spending time explaining the
institution’s role to parents and guiding them through hypothetical situations can ensure that they will be partners and not hindrances to the process later (Cutright, 2008).

Colleges and universities should also be clear with parents regarding the institution’s approach during times of crisis. This way, parents will know exactly when and how they will receive communication from the college if there is a problem either with their student or in the campus community (Carney-Hall, 2008). In these and other situations, it can also be helpful to have a designated person that parents can contact with questions and concerns. This way, parents are clear about whom to call and the institution is able to send out a clear and consistent message through the appointed contact person (Carney-Hall, 2008). This also helps avoid the often-told story of a parent calling the dean or another inappropriate person about a specialized issue. As often as these calls involve parents diving straight to the top to try and get things done, many parents are simply unsure of the appropriate channels to field their concerns (Cutright, 2008).

The last and most important way that colleges and universities can effectively partner with parents is to ensure that students understand how their parents will be treated at that particular institution. “If students perceive that parents ‘get things done’ on campus, the institution is treating the parent as a customer and negating the commitment to the student as an adult problem solver” (Carney-Hall, 2008). Students must understand both their role and the role of their parents in problem-solving at their institution so that they can support the relationship established by their college and not be searching or unintentionally fighting it through their actions.
Conclusions

“Helicopter Parenting” has become a well-known term and proponents of student development theory continue to search for a threshold of appropriate parental involvement for college students. In order to better understand this phenomenon by summarizing current literature on the topic of parental involvement and communication, three research questions were proposed:

1. What is the history behind the role of parents in the lives of traditional-aged college students?
2. How often are parents communicating with students and administrators, and what does this communication look like?
3. How can institutions effectively partner with parents?

A review of the literature identified a variety of conclusions regarding the dynamics of parent-student communication. We know from a variety of studies that over half of today’s college students are communicating with their parents at least once a week. College administrators can be proactive in teaching parents and students how to make the most of these conversations while promoting student autonomy through their work with parents at various stages in the college process. It is also evident that a major catalyst in the increased communication between parents and students is the advent of new technologies such as e-mail and Skype, which allow simpler, easier, and faster contact between parties. Administrators should realize that this technology will continue to advance moving into the future, and we need to prepare for what parental communication will look like five, ten, or fifteen years from now.
The literature also shows that parents influence their students’ decisions in college but appropriate parental support can lead students to greater autonomy and success. Students often turn to their parents for advice on classes, choosing a career, and dealing with other personal issues, but at the same time students are weighing parental advice against that from their peers.

In order to assist parents in promoting student autonomy, institutions should aim to proactively work with parents. Parent programs can be an effective way for institutions to partner with parents, but must be adequately tailored to the mission of that institution. If a university highly values student development and autonomy, they may place parent services in a student affairs office and encourage students to take control of their own needs on campus. If the institution looks to parents more to provide funding for the college, parent services may instead be placed in an alumni or development office and parents more often appeased in order to satisfy their customer service needs.

Ultimately, colleges must provide consistent and clear messages to parents and students regarding privacy laws, department policies, and paths for getting things done. Otherwise, institutions risk inappropriate involvement of parents in student concerns.

**Recommendations for Practice**

Based on the research found in this literature review, more colleges and universities need to work to improve their own communication with parents as well as implement creative ways to promote student learning and autonomy while supporting the natural current state of communication between parents and students. One thing institutions can do is form a committee with representatives from each of the major areas
on campus who deal with parent concerns, such as the Dean of Students’ Office, Residence Life, Admissions, the health center, etc. If these constituents work together to create basic guidelines for parent interactions as well as standard practices, the institution will better communicate consistent expectations to parents and their students.

Another way to address some issues of parental over-involvement is to provide opportunities during orientation for parents to ask questions and learn how the institution will regard their later involvement on campus. Institutions should consider hosting at least one session that discusses re-negotiating relationships with students and finding an effective balance between support and encouragement to solve problems independently. It is clear that in some cases, parents are not receiving these learning opportunities elsewhere and may benefit from being educated on how to undergo the transition of their child leaving the nest and becoming a functioning adult. By providing this opportunity, colleges may minimize later confusion and conflict with parents.

Institutions must also follow through with agreed-upon policies, especially when educating parents and students about these policies early in the process. For example, if your housing handbook states that students must contact the housing office for a room change, do not allow room changes facilitated by parents. This will not only solidify the importance and steadfastness of all campus policies themselves, it will circumvent parents calling offices on behalf of their student in instances where students have been asked to communicate their own needs.

Lastly, institutions must continually assess how effectively they are handling parent concerns. Are parents satisfied with the service provided? Are professionals explaining the college’s values and policies well? Are parents understanding the concepts
of student autonomy and independence as described by individuals at the institution? If
the goals of the institution regarding parents are not being reached, then more creative
changes must be made at a departmental and college level in order to continually make
improvements.

**Recommendations for Research**

Although there is a variety of literature on the topic of parent involvement and
communication, much of the data is drawn from a few questions on long running surveys
such as the NSSE and the UCUES. Much more research is needed in this area that is
specifically focused on parental involvement and communication, and that collects
information from both parents and students within the same study. If parental perceptions
of communication could be compared with their respective students’ perceptions, we
might better understand which side is driving the more frequent patterns of
communication that current research demonstrates.

We must also find out how often parents are communicating with individuals at
an institution and for what reasons. Understanding parent to student communication is
important, but many student affairs professionals are most concerned with the
interventions they experience when parents call the institution. Do parents simply have
questions, or are they trying to act in place of their students? Are they contacting the
Dean’s office or housing for housing issues? How is this communication different from
parent-student communication and what can we, or should we, do about it?

More research must also be done at differently-sized institutions in similar areas
to discover whether there are differences in parent involvement due to institution size.
Many current studies mix institution sizes within the same sample set, so there is little to no differentiation between trends at vastly different institutions.

The world of research centered on parent involvement and communication with both students and campuses is small, and lacks the clarity and facets of what is needed to improve parent services on campuses. More studies need to be conducted and more data needs to be parsed out to find differences between institutions, types of family backgrounds, race, gender, and much more. Based on the current research and questions still left unanswered, it is likely that research on parent involvement will continue to grow and break new ground in coming years.

**Summary**

Parents are interacting with their students and with college administrators more now than ever in the history of higher education. As professionals in the field of student affairs, we are responsible for providing consistent services that help parents understand their role in the collegiate process and empower their students to be independent learners. Without intentional thought in developing these services, we risk a generation of students who are unable to function as adults without the involvement of their parents. Further research in this area is needed to better understand parents’ role in their students’ lives and create best practices for mediating a careful balance between parental engagement and helicopter parenting.
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