

Running head: IMPACT OF HELICOPTER PARENTS

Helicopter Parents: Examining the Impact of Highly Involved Parents  
on Student Engagement and Educational Outcomes

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### Abstract

Parental interest and support for their student is generally considered positive. But in recent years highly-involved parents have been portrayed in the popular media as "helicopter" parents, hovering over their student in ways that could interfere with learning and development. This study uses data from the 2007 administration of the National Survey of Student Engagement to assess the frequency and quality of students' interactions with their parents while in college, and the impact of highly involved parents on student engagement and educational outcomes. Contrary to popular belief, students with highly involved parents excelled in many areas, including higher levels of engagement, deep learning activities, reported educational gains, and satisfaction among others.

## Helicopter Parents: Examining the Impact of Highly Involved Parents on Student Engagement and Educational Outcomes

Parental interest and support for their student is generally considered positive. But in recent years highly-involved parents have been negatively portrayed in the popular media as “helicopter parents,” hovering over their student in ways that some believe could interfere with learning and development (Colavecchio-Van Sickler, 2006; Lipka, 2005; Taylor, 2006). Student affair professionals have decried this level of involvement, which they report is happening at increased levels of intensity and minutiae (Carney-Hall, 2008; Wartman & Savage, 2008). Highly-involved parents may present challenges to college officials and make great media fodder, but little is known about the impact their behavior has had on student success. Despite few scholarly studies regarding the issue, colleges and universities have moved in recent years to intervene with parents programmatically in order to reduce conflict (Coburn, 2006; Cutright 2008).

Fully 93 percent of student affairs professionals reported an increase in interaction with parents in the last five years (Merriman, 2007). Parental involvement with the college choices and experiences of their sons and daughters is not new, but some identify the new intensity as a cultural shift (Wartman & Savage, 2008). The college environment in which students and parents find themselves is changing rapidly, and different than it was even a few years ago. Several issues and factors that help to explain this change include the historical shift in the institution’s role from *in loco parentis* to one that respects student rights and privacy, rising tuition costs and the perception of college choice as consumerism, the accountability movement in higher education which seeks evidence-based value for its stakeholders, advancements in technology

which have made frequent communications between campus and home cheaper and more accessible, and the arrival of the “Millennial” student generation on campus (Carney-Hall, 2008; Wartman & Savage, 2008).

The laws protecting student privacy rights, the relationship between an institution and its students, and the nature of institution-parent communication is murky and constantly changing (Cutright, 2008). For many years *in loco parentis* was the model used to define the relationship between colleges, students, and parents (Henning, 2007). Under this model, colleges and universities assumed supervisory rights for their students. This doctrine met its demise in the 1960s, when courts ruled that colleges did not have the power or ability to regulate students’ off-campus conduct (White, 2005). In the absence of *in loco parentis* other models have emerged leading to greater independence of students from institutional control (Bickel and Lake, 1999; Henning, 2007; White, 2005). Alongside statutes like the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) that limit what institutions are able to tell parents, parents receive mixed signals about what they are permitted to do. As Cutright (2008) relayed, “It is no wonder then, that parents assert rights that they may or may not have when laws are conflicting and basic circumstances so different from those of the parents’ college days.” Parents become involved as advocates for their students, looking to ensure the college meets what they believe to be its obligations (White, 2005).

Rising tuition costs may also be a factor. The rising cost of college has consistently outpaced general inflation for decades. Combine this with popular magazines reviews and rankings that treat education as a commodity and it is understandable to see why college education is considered a personal investment (Cutright, 2008, Taylor 2006). Understandably, parents want to get the greatest return on their investments, and may assert something akin to

“property” or purchasing rights or expectations of services, even if not offered by the institution (Cutright, 2008). Along the same lines, some parents perceive less than desirable outcomes in terms of academic and workplace readiness (Taylor, 2006). As the Spellings Report of the Commission on the Future of Higher Education (2006) states, “many students who do earn degrees have not mastered the reading, writing, and thinking skills we expect of college graduates.” In the face of mounting criticism of the accountability of higher education, it may be that more wary parents seek ways to monitor the quality of the students’ education.

Advances in technology have made it much easier for parents to remain in close contact with their students, tracking developments in their lives (Lipka, 2005). Today most colleges have removed phones from residence hall rooms, now that virtually all students have a cell phone or prefer to communicate by e-mail, text messaging, and other networking technologies. A survey by the College Parents of America (2006) found that 74 percent of parents communicate with their college student children at least two to three times weekly, with fully a third communicating *daily*. They further found that 90% frequently used a cell phone to stay in touch compared with 26% using a landline or 7% using regular mail.

The final factor contributing to increases in parental involvement is the arrival of a new generation of students born after 1982 labeled “Generation X” or “Millennial.” Higher education researchers and student affairs practitioners describe the Millennial generation as closer to their parents and more sheltered than students from past generations. Their childhoods are said to have been highly programmed and supervised, and this close parental monitoring is believed to continue into the college years with almost constant contact from their parents (Howe & Strauss, 2003; Taylor, 2006). The parents see no reason to change their hands-on approach just because the student has moved out of the house and onto campus (Lum, 2006). With the aforementioned

advances in technology, these parents expect detailed answers immediately. Equally, Millennial students arrive on campus with more choices than any prior generation (Coburn, 2006). Feeling pressure to always make the “right” decision, and having so much of their lives structured in the past, these students often turn back to their parents for advice with the tap of a computer key or speed dial on their cell phone (Coburn, 2006).

## Parental Involvement Research

### *K-12 Research*

Parental involvement in the K-12 literature, defined by one researcher as “parental participation in the educational processes and experiences of their children” (Jeynes, 2007, p. 83), is widely accepted as critical to a student’s intellectual and emotional development, and academic success (Eccles & Harold, 1996; Epstein, 1995; Jeynes, 2007). In practice, K-12 researchers and practitioners view parental involvement not as a single construct, but rather as a range of activities that span both at-home and in-school activities. Epstein’s (1995) often-cited explanation describes six types of school-parental partnerships: (a) assisting with child-rearing skills, (b) school-parent communication, (c) involving parents in school volunteer activities, (d) involving parents in home-based learning, (e) decision making - involving parents in school decision-making, and (f) involving parents in school-community collaborations. Epstein describes a model of overlapping spheres of influence among schools, parents, and community. In the center of the overlapping spheres is the student, recognizing that students are the main actors in their own learning and development. According to Epstein (1995), “With frequent interactions between schools, families, and communities, more students are more likely to receive common messages from various people about the importance of school, of working hard, of thinking creatively, of helping one another, and of staying in school” (p. 703).

The involvement of parents in the child's learning is associated with academic achievement, persistence in school, and student attitudes and behaviors about their learning (e.g., Jeynes, 2005; Lew, 2009; Lin & Yan, 2005; Ma, 1999; Xu & Corno, 1998). What's more, studies find that these effects are consistent across demographic groups defined by class, race, ethnicity, gender or age. Parental involvement in the learning of their children is particularly important in urban areas because of the concentration of lower income students, students of color, and those lacking in opportunities for quality education. While fewer parents from urban high schools are involved in their children's learning activities, where parents do become involved, it is conclusively positive for the students (Jeynes, 2007). Therefore, virtually all stakeholders in elementary, middle school, and secondary education – teachers, parents, researchers and policy-makers – tout the value of school-family partnerships as an important remedy for school education (Eccles & Harold, 1996; Epstein, 1995). Such solid support has been used to gain federal, state, and local funding for parental involvement initiatives within the schools, and in fact both the 1994 Goals 2000: Education America Act and the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act required federal education dollars to be spent on parent participation and partnership programs.

Of course, not all parents are active in their schools or with their child's learning activities. K-12 researchers find that mothers are more likely than fathers to get involved in their child's education, and parental involvement is more likely among more educated and wealthier parents (Epstein, 1995). In addition, the amount of parental involvement decreases as children get older, and it particularly drops off at the secondary level (Epstein, 1986).

Parental involvement is a particularly critical element in high school because it increases the likelihood that students from all backgrounds will aspire to attend and enroll in college

(Hossler, Schmit & Vesper, 1999; Perna & Titus, 2005; Swail & Perna, 2000) though some research indicates that even when they are involved, parents are only minimally included in college preparation programs (Tierney, 2002).

Not all K-12 research has shown conclusive support for parental involvement on all outcomes however (Fan & Chen, 2001; Mattingly, Prislin, McKenzie, Rodriguez, & Kayzar, 2002). A meta-analysis of the literature on the relationship between parental involvement and academic success found stronger effects for parental aspirations and expectations of their schoolchildren, but weak effects for parental home supervision. Effects for global measures of learning like grade point averages were stronger than for subject-specific effects such as math grades (Fan & Chen, 2001). Another meta-analysis of parent involvement program evaluations found that empirical evidence supporting the notion that parent involvement programs improve student achievement or academic behaviors was lacking (Mattingly, Prislin, McKenzie, Rodriguez, & Kayzar, 2002). To be clear, the researchers could not claim that the programs induced no improvements, but only that the evaluation studies lacked sufficient quality, rigor, use of control groups and so on, to reach reliable conclusions.

Parental involvement may be more associated with engagement than with direct outcome measures. In one study the connections between parent involvement practices and educational outcomes of high school seniors show mixed results. On one hand, high expectations, encouragement, and enhancing the child's learning opportunities were predictive of enrolling in an academic high school program and with higher level coursework in core academic subjects, but no parental involvement indicators were associated with the student's growth in achievement between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades (Catsambis, 2001). Parental involvements such as volunteering at



school, discussing academics at home, and communication between home and school had effects on students' persistence in advanced mathematics courses (Ma, 1999).

### *Postsecondary Research*

After the college search and preparation process is complete and the student goes away to college, the influence of parents may continue substantially. Scott and Daniel (2001) note that parental involvement now extends into the college years. In fact, with cell phones, e-mail communication, and other networking technologies, parents are never really out of touch with their college-going sons and daughters (Braskamp, Trautvetter, & Ward, 2006). As school-family partnerships are promoted and reinforced throughout elementary, middle, and secondary schools, it may be expected that parents would seek the same type of partnerships with the colleges and universities their children attend. On the other hand, the noted decrease in parental involvement for older school-age children is relevant to the present study because it is logical to assume the decrease would continue into the college years, given the student's adult status, the likelihood that they have moved out of the house, and other aforementioned factors.

At the college level, research of the effects of parental involvement is limited, but a recent review by Carney-Hall (2008) found studies noting positive impacts in student development areas such as alcohol decision-making, health issues, and career development. Others have shown that parental and family support and encouragement, including financial, positively affects student persistence (Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon 2004; Cabrera et al. 1992; Swail et al. 2005). A related study of parents' expectations of the teaching and caring experienced by their sons and daughters at the institution reported that mothers expected significantly more from the university with regard to these two functions, but that in general

parents considered the caring functions to be of greater importance than the teaching functions (Young, 2006).

### *Partnerships with Parents*

The perception of higher levels of parental involvement has raised concerns of some in higher education, particularly those in the student affairs profession, who worry that the increased interactions and interventions on the part of parents may be detrimental to their growth and maturity (Carney-Hall, 2008). In response, several recent publications have addressed these concerns by offering frameworks for understanding the phenomenon, advice for programming, and even some analysis using psychosocial development theory that says such close contact with parents is not necessarily detrimental and may in fact be supportive (Taub, 2008).

In the K-12 sector, it is understood that good school/parent relationships are able to withstand questions, conflicts, debates, and disagreements, and provide adequate structures to solve problems (Epstein, 1995). In the higher education sector however, in response to the popular media's characterization of "helicopter" parents and concern about a potential negative impact on students' development, some writers emphasize the notion of community-building, managing partnerships, communication, and programming with parents and families (Donovan & McKelfresh, 2008; Carney-Hall, 2008; Wartman & Savage, 2008). Indeed, colleges and universities have included parents in orientation programs since the 1970s in order to provide information to them during this transitional time for their family. Recognizing this transition as a significant event in their lives, the institutions' approach has grown in sensitivity about the issues and concerns of parents and families with a student entering college (Austin, 1987).

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was twofold. First, we intended to document the frequency, nature and quality of the support college students receive from their parents. How often do college students communicate with their parents? What is the preferred means of communication? What topics are discussed? Because advances in electronic communication have made it much easier to today's students to stay in close contact with their parents, we anticipate finding that most students are in frequent contact with their parents regarding a wide variety of issues. The second purpose of this study was to expand our understanding of the relationship between parental involvement and student engagement, and in particular to estimate the relationship of high involvement by parents with the students' participation in effective learning processes. Therefore, two research questions guided the study:

- (1) What is the frequency and nature of college students' communication with their parents?
- (2) What effect do interventions by highly involved parents have on student engagement, learning and development during college?

### Methods

#### *Data Source and Sample*

The data for this study come from the 2007 administration of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), an annual survey of first-year and senior students that measures students' participation in educational experiences that prior research has connected to valued outcomes (Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Kuh, 2001, 2003; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). In general, participating institutions randomly sample equal numbers of their currently enrolled first-year and senior students for the survey, with the size determined by the number of

undergraduate students enrolled at the institution. NSSE administers the survey for the institution and students may respond via paper or web modes.

Each year, NSSE appends to the web version of the survey several different sets of additional questions that address emerging topics in higher education. In 2007 a set of items were added to address the support received from family and friends. The additional items were asked at a subset of randomly-selected participating institutions that agreed to field the items.

The sample for this study consists of 4,532 first-year students and 4,652 seniors from 24 selected institutions who participated in the 2007 NSSE. These students completed both the NSSE and the additional family and friends items. First-year and senior students are examined separately in this study because of the different educational experiences present at these two stages of the undergraduate education.

Out of the first-year sample, approximately 65% were female, 81% were White, 5% African American, 3% Asian, 3% Hispanic, <1% Native American, 95% were 24 years old or younger, and 98% were full-time students. In addition, 45% were first generation college students (defined as neither parent has attained a Baccalaureate degree), 82% lived on or near campus, and about 10% were members of a social fraternity or sorority. Similarly, of the respondents in the senior sample, approximately 65% were female, 83% were White, 4% African American, 2% Asian, 3% Hispanic, and 1% Native American, 91% were full-time students, 11% were members of a social fraternity or sorority, and 46% were first generation college students. Understandably, this group differs in some ways from the first-year sample. For example, only 53% lived on or near campus and 79% were 24 years old or younger. All of the students in this study completed the online version of the NSSE survey and additional items. Online completers differ in some ways from those students who fill out the paper survey.

### *Variables*

The NSSE questionnaire, *The College Student Report*, focuses on student participation in effective educational practices. For example, students are asked to identify how often they make class presentations, participate in a community-based project as a part of a course, and work with faculty members on activities other than coursework. In addition, students identify the degree to which their courses emphasize different mental processes (e.g., memorizing, evaluating, synthesizing), how many hours per week they spend studying, working, or participating in co-curricular activities, as well as how they would characterize their relationships with people on campus. The survey is available at the NSSE website, [www.nsse.iub.edu](http://www.nsse.iub.edu). The additional questions that explored the advice and support they received from friends and family are listed in Appendix A.

This study classifies parental involvement using two features of their interaction with the student:

- (1) Frequency of communication with parents: Students who were “very often” in contact in-person or electronically with a father, mother or guardian were classified as having frequent communication.
- (2) Frequency of parental intervention: Student whose parents or guardians contacted college officials “very often” or “often” to help solve problems the student was having at the college were classified this as frequent intervention.

Using these features we identified three categories of involvement: (a) low parental involvement (infrequent contact and intervention), (b) moderate parental involvement (infrequent contact or intervention), and (c) high parental involvement (frequent contact and intervention).

The parents of the students in the high parental involvement group was our attempt to

operationalize the phenomenon of “helicopter” parents because of their very high frequency of contact with their student and their frequent interventions with the campus to solve the students’ problems. Of all respondents, ten percent of first-year college students and seven percent of seniors had a highly-involved parent.

The outcome measures used in this study fall into two categories – self-reported educational outcomes and student engagement scales. Because some of these measures combine items that have different response sets and value ranges we converted each item into a scale of 0 to 100. Afterward, scale scores were computed by taking the mean of the component items as long as the student had answered at least three-fifths of the items.

The self-reported educational outcomes include (Appendix B):

1. Gains in practical competence: A five-item measure ( $\alpha = 0.81$ ) of the student’s ability to be economically independent in today’s post-college job market
2. Gains in personal and social development: Seven items ( $\alpha = 0.86$ ) that represent outcomes that characterize interpersonally effective, ethically grounded, socially responsible, and civic minded individuals.
3. Gains in general education: Four items ( $\alpha = 0.84$ ) that are earmarks of a well-educated person.
4. Grades: A single self-reported item that ranges from C- or lower to A. Self-reported grades correlate well (.8 or so) with actual grades (Olsen et al., 1998).
5. Satisfaction: A two-item measure of students’ satisfaction with their collegiate experience ( $\alpha = 0.77$ ) represented by students’ rating of their entire educational experience at their institution and the likelihood that they would attend the same institution if they were to start over again.

The student engagement scales included two of NSSE's benchmarks of effective educational practice and three deep learning subscales (Appendix C):

1. Student-faculty interaction: A six-item measure ( $\alpha = 0.75$ ) of the degree to which students work with faculty members inside and outside the classroom
2. Supportive campus environment: A six-item measure ( $\alpha = 0.77$ ) of students' feeling that their college is committed to their success.
3. Higher-order learning: A four-item measure ( $\alpha = 0.83$ ) of the extent to which a student feels their courses emphasize advanced thinking skills.
4. Integrative learning: A five-item measure ( $\alpha = 0.71$ ) that centers around the amount student participate in activities that require integrating ideas from various sources.
5. Reflective learning: A three-item measure ( $\alpha = 0.80$ ) of students' investigating their own thinking process.

Control variables include student characteristics such as gender, race, and first generation college student status (Appendix D).

### *Analysis*

We conducted two analyses in this study. First, we documented the nature, frequency, and quality of the contacts students had with their parents by level of parental involvement. We were also interested in describing the overall patterns of parental contact. Consequently, we calculated means for each involvement sub-group and for the overall group on each of the items that addressed the pattern and quality of parental communication. Separate analyses were conducted for first-year and senior students.

The second analysis examined differences between the three parental involvement groups (as defined above) on self-reported educational outcomes and student engagement processes.

Means were calculated for each involvement subgroup on the measures listed in Appendix B and C. These analyses were also conducted separately for the first-year and senior samples. To test the significance of differences between the involvement groups and gauge how meaningful the differences were, we calculated effect sizes for the mean difference both with and without the addition of control variables (See Appendix D). The high involvement group was selected as the comparison group, enabling us to examine whether the other two groups scored significantly above or below this group. Regression analyses were run first without and then with controls on each item and measure in order to estimate if the effects of the covariates influenced the basic relationships between parental involvement and the dependent measures. In the regression models, all non-dichotomous variables were standardized prior to entry. As a result, in each model, the unstandardized coefficient was an estimate of the effect size. Again, separate sets of models were run for first-year and senior students.

### *Limitations*

This study has at least four limitations that should be considered before drawing conclusions from the data. First, from the questions asked we cannot determine the extent parental interventions were related to academic matters or to other issues such as personal or financial concerns. This might otherwise have allowed us greater insight into the grades finding. Perhaps it is the support and encouragement from their highly involved parents that keeps these lower performing students engaged in educationally purposeful activities. Second, most students reported they were “very often” in contact with at least one parent or guardian. Although we anticipated finding high levels of communication, this facet of our definition of parental involvement did not discriminate between students as well as would lesser levels of contact. Third, using communication and intervention we divided the respondents into three categories of



parental involvement. Ideally we would have preferred to have used a continuous scale of parental involvement in our regression models but the data did not permit this. Finally, our study was limited to a sample of 24 institutions that agreed to field the additional question set. Although students at these institutions were randomly sampled to participate in the survey and the number of respondents was acceptable, the limited institution sample requires caution when generalizing these results to the students at other four-year institutions.

### Results

Most college students had regular contact with family members (Table 1). We found that seven of ten students communicated ‘very often’ with at least one of their parents or guardians during the academic year. Understandably, students stayed in contact via electronic media (phone, e-mail, or text messaging) more often than by meeting in person. Students were also in contact more often with mothers than fathers. Finally, students with more involved parents reported communicating with them more often than other students.

Students who reported they had at least “sometimes” contacted specific family members were asked which topics were most often discussed (Tables 2 and 3). All topics were more frequently discussed with mothers, and personal issues, academic performance and family matters were most common. Academic performance was the most common topic discussed with fathers. Students with highly involved parents reported speaking with them about all topics at a significantly higher rate than students with lesser involved parents.

Relatively few students reported that any of their family members were unsupportive, distant or uncaring (Table 4). On a scale of 1 to 7, the average response for both parents was at least a 6. In general, students reported that mothers were the most supportive, close and caring family member. Although a significant difference in reported quality of parental relationship

existed between the high and low parental involvement groups, the quality of relationship reported for the moderate involvement group was not significantly different from the high group. First-year and senior students reported similar levels of support quality. About three-quarters of all students reported that they frequently followed the advice of their parents and guardians. Not surprisingly, students with highly involved parents were more likely to follow their advice (Table 5).

Tables 6 and 7 contain the results of the mean comparisons for the self-reported educational outcomes and engagement measures by level of parental involvement. In each table, effect sizes with and without controls and significance levels are presented for the low and moderate parental involvement groups in comparison to the high parental involvement group.

Students with highly involved parents reported significantly higher engagement (Table 7). This difference was most evident with the low involvement group. The moderate involvement group was significantly different from the high group as well on all but the higher-order learning and reflective learning measures in the senior sample.

There were mixed findings with respect to self-reported gains (Table 6). On one hand, students with highly involved parents reported significantly greater gains in personal competence, personal and social development, and general education ( $p < .001$ ). The difference between the involvement groups was slightly more pronounced for the first-year sample. The high parental involvement groups also reported significantly greater satisfaction with their college experience than students with low parental involvement ( $p < .001$ ). Running counter to these encouraging results, both first-year and senior students with highly involved parents reported significantly lower grades than students with lesser amounts of parental involvement.

A defining characteristic of helicopter parents is that they interacted with college officials on behalf of their child to solve problems. Of all surveyed students, 13% of first-year and 8% of senior students reported their parent/guardian frequently (very often or often) intervened on their behalf. An additional 25% of first-year and 21% of senior students indicated their parent/guardian sometimes intervened.

Do these interactions and interventions by family members blunt learning and development during college? Our analyses suggested this may not be the case as students with the most involved parents - those very often in contact with the student and frequently intervening on their behalf - reported higher levels of engagement, greater self-reported gains, more frequent use of deep learning activities and greater satisfaction with their college experience. This level of involvement appeared to be welcomed by most students. In fact, students whose parents intervened on their behalf with college officials reported higher levels of support quality.

### Discussion

Several observations that are instructive for researchers and practitioners can be drawn from these results. First, with regard to the frequency and nature of parental involvement with college students, three points are evident:

- (1) *Student interaction with parents while in college is frequent.* Although we do not have comparable data for past generations, we believe this level of interaction has not always been so common. The growth of electronic means of communication such as e-mail, cell phones, text messaging, and social networking appears to be partly responsible for keeping parents and students well connected and communicating frequently.

(2) *Topics discussed with parents were diverse.* Students discussed with high frequency all topics asked on the survey form and were likely to follow parental advice. Topics varied from academics to situations with the campus administration, to personal and family matters. This suggests that the concerns of students' upon entering college are not limited to academics and college matters, but rather the students have issues, questions, and information on all aspects of their lives to continue sharing in their relationship with their parents. Indeed, the parents have the same issues and remain eager to discuss them with their students.

(3) *Parents and families continue to be an important support network for students.* College officials may be well-intentioned in following student development theories which stress autonomy, separation, emotional independence, and individuation, but our finding suggests that students continue to rely on their parents for helpful guidance and support. This is not to say that the theories are wrong. Although the nature of the student-parent relationship has gone through a transition, those who apply student development theory need to consider that students and parents continue to communicate about important events in their lives, and that students may be well-served in their growth and maturation by maintaining close, parental ties.

With regard to the estimates of the effects of parental involvement on student engagement and self-reported gains, three additional points are evident:

(1) *Parental involvement is associated with higher levels of engagement and self-reported gains in college.* Consistent with the research in K-12 and college findings with regard to retention, the effects of parental involvement appear to be

well associated with the student learning processes. Students who have highly-involved parents are more engaged in effective educational practices in college, perhaps because their parents give them encouragement, high expectations, and support to stay in school and do well.

- (2) *High parental involvement is associated with lower grades.* This finding is counter to the others which show more affirmative results for high involvement. However, because high involvement is partly a function of the frequency with which parents intervene with the institution on the student's behalf, it is likely that one of the primary reasons for the interventions is that students are struggling with their academic progress. What is not known is whether or not the students with highly involved parents are ultimately more successful than students with poorer grades but non-supportive parents.
- (3) *Results show no evidence that high parental involvement is problematic for students.* Though faculty, campus student affairs professionals and the popular media may fret about an increase in parental contact and associated conflicts, the students seem to benefit from the additional support and encouragement they receive. So, these results suggest that those who advocate community building and partnerships with parents (Donovan & McKelfresh, 2008; Carney-Hall, 2008; Wartman & Savage, 2008) appear to be on the right track, and those who recommend "managing" parents or seeking ways to limit their involvement with students are off-base.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this study was twofold. First, we intended to document and describe the nature of student-parent interaction using data in terms of both the frequency and mode with which students communicate with their parents and of the subject of those contacts. Our second purpose was to estimate the relationship between parental involvement and two types of measures from the National Survey of Student Engagement – (a) students engagement in effective educational practices and (b) students' self-reported gains of their learning and growth. Contrary to popular belief, and perhaps alleviating the concerns of some about potential detrimental effects, we found that students with highly involved parents excelled in many areas, including higher levels of engagement, deep learning activities, self-reported educational gains, and satisfaction.

Does this mean more parents should approach college officials on their student's behalf? Perhaps, but important questions remain unanswered. What types of interventions are problematic? Do some students with intervening parents receive undeserved special treatment? Is there a tipping point—a level of contact and family involvement in their student's college life that negatively affects development and learning? More research is needed to sensitively get at these issues. The results of this study suggest there is a need to examine the issue of highly involved parents in greater detail before making sweeping statements about this group. This may involve tying parental involvement to outcome measures such as persistence and information from college transcripts, asking additional questions specific to the topic, and other research that enables us to better define how this group affects student learning and development.

Students today may well be more closely connected to their families than their predecessors. This high level of interaction is a pattern that started long before the students

entered college. The key challenge is for faculty and staff to figure out how to work productively with both students and families in order to maximize the desired effects of college while allowing family members to support and encourage their student to perform at the highest possible level.

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## Appendix A

## Friends and Family Support Items

During the current school year, how often have you talked in person (i.e., face-to-face) with each of the following? (1 =Never, 2=Sometimes, 3=Often, 4=Very Often, 9 =Not applicable)

Mother

Father

Guardian

During the current school year, how often have you communicated via phone, e-mail, text messaging, or another electronic medium with each of the following? (1 =Never, 2=Sometimes, 3=Often, 4=Very Often, 9 =Not applicable)

Mother

Father

Guardian

Thinking about contacts during the current school year with your father, how often have you talked about each of the following? (1=Never, 2=Sometimes, 3=Often, 4=Very Often)

Personal issues (e.g., satisfaction with college, eating habits, health)

Academic performance (e.g., grades)

Academic advice (e.g., choosing courses, major field choice, study habits)

Social issues (e.g., friends, roommates)

Career plans

Finances

Family matters

Thinking about contacts during the current school year with your mother, how often have you talked about each of the following? (1=Never, 2=Sometimes, 3=Often, 4=Very Often)

Personal issues (e.g., satisfaction with college, eating habits, health)

Academic performance (e.g., grades)

Academic advice (e.g., choosing courses, major field choice, study habits)

Social issues (e.g., friends, roommates)

Career plans

Finances

Family matters

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Appendix A (continued)  
Friends and Family Support Items

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Select the circle that best represents the quality of your relationships with the following:  
(1=Unsupportive, Distant, Uncaring to 7=Supportive, Close, Caring)

Mother

Father

Guardian

How often do you follow the advice of the following members of your family? (1 =Never, 2=Sometimes, 3=Often, 4=Very Often, 9 =Not applicable)

Mother

Father

Guardian

How often do your parents/guardians contact college officials to help solve problems you may be having at this college? (1 =Never, 2=Sometimes, 3=Often, 4=Very Often, 9 =Not applicable (I have not had problems at this college))

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Appendix B  
Self-Reported Educational Outcomes and Component Items

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Gains in Practical Competence (5 items;  $\alpha = .81$ )

- Acquiring job or work-related knowledge and skills
- Analyzing quantitative problems
- Using computing and information technology
- Working effectively with others
- Solving complex real-world problems

Gains in Personal and Social Development (7 items;  $\alpha = .86$ )

- Voting in local, state, or national elections
- Learning effectively on your own
- Understanding yourself
- Understanding people of other racial and ethnic backgrounds
- Developing a personal code of values and ethics
- Contributing to the welfare of your community
- Developing a deepened sense of spirituality

Gains in General Education (4 items;  $\alpha = .84$ )

- Writing clearly and effectively
- Speaking clearly and effectively
- Thinking critically and analytically
- Acquiring a broad general education

Grades

What have most of your grades been up to now at this institution?<sup>a</sup>

Satisfaction (2 items;  $\alpha = .77$ )

How would you evaluate your entire educational experience at this institution?<sup>b</sup>

If you could start over again, would you go to the *same institution* you are now attending?<sup>c</sup>

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Note: Except where noted, variables were measured on a 4-point scale (1=Very Little, 2=Some, 3=Quite a Bit, 4=Very Much)

<sup>a</sup> Responses for this item were 1=C- or lower, 2=C, 3=C+, 4=B-, 5=B, 6=B+, 7=A-, 8=A

<sup>b</sup> Responses for this item were 1=Poor, 2=Fair, 3=Good, 4=Excellent

<sup>c</sup> Responses for this item were 1=Definitely No, 2=Probably No, 3=Probably Yes, 4=Definitely Yes

Appendix C  
Engagement Scales and Component Items

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Student-Faculty Interaction (6 items;  $\alpha = .75$ )

- Discussed grades or assignments with an instructor
- Talked about career plans with a faculty member or advisor
- Discussed ideas from your readings or classes with faculty members outside of class
- Received prompt written or oral feedback from faculty on your academic performance
- Worked with faculty members on activities other than coursework (committees, orientation, student life activities, etc.)
- Work on a research project with a faculty member outside of course or program requirements<sup>a</sup>

Supportive Campus Environment (6 items;  $\alpha = .77$ )

- Relationships with other students<sup>b</sup>
- Relationships with faculty members<sup>c</sup>
- Relationships with administrative personnel and offices<sup>d</sup>
- Providing the support you need to help you succeed academically<sup>e</sup>
- Helping you cope with your non-academic responsibilities (work, family, etc.)<sup>e</sup>
- Providing the support you need to thrive socially<sup>e</sup>

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Note: Except where noted, variables were measured on a 4-point scale (1=Never, 2=Sometimes, 3=Often, 4=Very Often)

<sup>a</sup> Responses for this item were coded 1=Done, 0=Have not Done

<sup>b</sup> Responses for this item were 1=Unfriendly, Unsupportive, Sense of alienation to 7=Friendly, Supportive, Sense of belonging

<sup>c</sup> Responses for this item were 1=Unavailable, Unhelpful, Unsympathetic to 7=Available, Helpful, Sympathetic

<sup>d</sup> Responses for this item were 1=Unhelpful, Inconsiderate, Rigid to 7=Helpful, Considerate, Flexible

<sup>e</sup> Responses for this item were 1=Very little, 2=Some, 3=Quite a bit, 4=Very much

Appendix C (continued)  
Engagement Scales and Component Items

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Higher-Order Learning (4 items;  $\alpha = .83$ )

Analyzing the basic elements of an idea, experience, or theory, such as examining a particular case or situation in depth and considering its components<sup>a</sup>

Synthesizing and organizing ideas, information, or experiences into new, more complex interpretations and relationships<sup>a</sup>

Making judgments about the value of information, arguments, or methods, such as examining how others gathered and interpreted data and assessing the soundness of their conclusions<sup>a</sup>

Applying theories or concepts to practical problems or in new situations<sup>a</sup>

Integrative Learning (5 items;  $\alpha = .71$ )

Worked on a paper or project that required integrating ideas or information from various sources

Included diverse perspectives (different races, religions, genders, political beliefs, etc.) in class discussions or writing assignments

Put together ideas or concepts from different courses when completing assignments or during class discussions

Discussed ideas from your readings or classes with faculty members outside of class

Discussed ideas from your readings or classes with others outside of class (students, family members, co-workers, etc.)

Reflective Learning (3 items;  $\alpha = .80$ )

Examined the strengths and weaknesses of your own views on a topic or issue

Tried to better understand someone else's views by imagining how an issue looks from his or her perspective

Learned something that changed the way you understand an issue or concept

---

Note: Except where noted, variables were measured on a 4-point scale (1=Never, 2=Sometimes, 3=Often, 4=Very Often)

<sup>a</sup> Responses for this item were 1=Very Little, 2=Some, 3=Quite a Bit, 4=Very Much

Appendix D  
Control Variables

Name	Description
Gender	0 = Male; 1 = Female
Age	0 = 24 or over, 1 = 23 or younger
Ethnicity <sup>a</sup>	African American, American Indian, Asian American, White, Mexican or Mexican American, Puerto Rican, Other Hispanic or Latino, Other, Multiple Ethnic Identifications , I prefer not to respond
Parent's Education Level	0 = Either father or mother completed at least a baccalaureate degree, 1 = Neither father nor mother complete a baccalaureate degree or higher
International Status	0 = US National, 1 = International student or foreign national
Transfer Status	0 = Did not transfer; 1 = Transferred
Enrollment Status	0 = Part-time; 1 = Full-time
Live on campus	0 = Live off campus; 1 = Live on or near campus
Fraternity or Sorority Membership	0 = Non-member; 1 = Member of a social fraternity or sorority
Student Athlete	0 = Non-athlete; 1 = Student athlete on a team sponsored by the institution's athletic department
Major <sup>b</sup>	Arts and Humanities, Biology, Business, Education, Engineering, Physical Science, Professional, Social Science, Other
Institutional control	0 =Public; 1 = Private

<sup>a</sup> Coded dichotomously (0 = not in group, 1 = in group), White was the reference group

<sup>b</sup> Coded dichotomously (0 = not in group, 1 = in group), Arts and Humanities was the reference group



Table 1.  
*Frequency of Contact by Level of Parental Involvement*

	First-Year %				Senior %			
	Low Involved	Mod Involved	High Involved	Overall	Low Involved	Mod Involved	High Involved	Overall
<b>Mother - In-Person Contact</b>								
Never	7	2	3	4	6	2	1	3
Sometimes	60	25	17	34	61	24	13	33
Often	33	23	19	25	33	21	17	24
Very Often	0	49	62	37	0	54	69	41
<b>Mother - Electronic Contact</b>								
Never	3	2	2	2	6	2	1	3
Sometimes	27	6	4	12	30	5	4	12
Often	69	8	7	25	64	8	6	22
Very Often	0	84	87	61	0	85	89	63
<b>Father - In-Person Contact</b>								
Never	10	7	6	7	10	5	3	6
Sometimes	62	32	19	39	61	30	21	37
Often	28	25	23	25	29	23	19	24
Very Often	0	37	52	28	0	43	57	33
<b>Father - Electronic Contact</b>								
Never	8	6	7	7	12	6	4	7
Sometimes	40	16	10	22	35	14	12	20
Often	52	20	17	29	53	17	9	26
Very Often	0	57	67	42	0	63	76	47

Table 2.

## Topics Discussed with First-Year Students by Level of Parental Involvement

	Overall		High Involved		Moderate Involved		Effect Size w/o Controls		Effect Size with Controls		Low Involved		Effect Size w/o Controls		Effect Size with Controls	
	N	Mean	N	Mean	N	Mean		p		p	N	Mean		p		p
<i>Father</i>																
Personal issues	3706	2.730	380	3.110	2322	2.840	-.272	***	-.273	***	1004	2.340	-.780	***	-.787	***
Academic performance	3706	3.000	380	3.320	2322	3.090	-.256	***	-.245	***	1004	2.680	-.691	***	-.700	***
Academic advice	3706	2.550	380	2.980	2322	2.620	-.341	***	-.337	***	1004	2.220	-.720	***	-.739	***
Social issues	3706	2.540	380	2.990	2322	2.640	-.351	***	-.335	***	1004	2.140	-.845	***	-.850	***
Career plans	3706	2.610	380	3.050	2322	2.700	-.363	***	-.349	***	1004	2.260	-.812	***	-.813	***
Finances	3706	2.740	380	3.140	2322	2.800	-.337	***	-.313	***	1004	2.450	-.673	***	-.655	***
Family matters	3706	2.780	380	3.140	2322	2.860	-.286	***	-.277	***	1004	2.450	-.724	***	-.727	***
<i>Mother</i>																
Personal issues	3517	3.363	357	3.748	2214	3.546	-.245	***	-.238	***	946	2.789	-1.162	***	-1.087	***
Academic performance	3517	3.261	357	3.695	2214	3.414	-.333	***	-.318	***	946	2.738	-1.135	***	-1.078	***
Academic advice	3517	2.951	357	3.515	2214	3.120	-.383	***	-.374	***	946	2.345	-1.134	***	-1.060	***
Social issues	3517	3.185	357	3.639	2214	3.369	-.288	***	-.278	***	946	2.585	-1.125	***	-1.034	***
Career plans	3517	2.878	357	3.420	2214	3.042	-.401	***	-.381	***	946	2.292	-1.195	***	-1.083	***
Finances	3517	2.894	357	3.353	2214	3.032	-.324	***	-.298	***	946	2.399	-.961	***	-.871	***
Family matters	3517	3.231	357	3.616	2214	3.379	-.277	***	-.261	***	946	2.738	-1.025	***	-.959	***

\*p&lt;.05, \*\*p&lt;.01, \*\*\*p&lt;.001

Table 3.  
Topics Discussed with Seniors by Level of Parental Involvement

	Overall		High Involved		Moderate Involved		Effect Size w/o Controls		Effect Size with Controls		Low Involved		Effect Size w/o Controls		Effect Size with Controls	
	N	Mean	N	Mean	N	Mean		p		p	N	Mean		p		p
<i>Father</i>																
Personal issues	3881	2.647	257	3.109	2624	2.769	-0.345	***	-0.327	***	1000	2.208	-0.913	***	-0.888	***
Academic performance	3881	2.830	257	3.237	2624	2.951	-0.311	***	-0.302	***	1000	2.409	-0.899	***	-0.863	***
Academic advice	3881	2.365	257	2.953	2624	2.477	-0.449	***	-0.434	***	1000	1.920	-0.974	***	-0.924	***
Social issues	3881	2.367	257	2.825	2624	2.482	-0.340	***	-0.318	***	1000	1.949	-0.869	***	-0.831	***
Career plans	3881	2.920	257	3.315	2624	3.037	-0.284	***	-0.264	***	1000	2.513	-0.818	***	-0.789	***
Finances	3881	2.809	257	3.226	2624	2.913	-0.307	***	-0.274	***	1000	2.431	-0.780	***	-0.730	***
Family matters	3881	2.864	257	3.233	2624	2.976	-0.270	***	-0.261	***	1000	2.475	-0.795	***	-0.769	***
<i>Mother</i>																
Personal issues	3697	3.292	239	3.724	2515	3.491	-0.282	***	-0.277	***	943	2.652	-1.298	***	-1.184	***
Academic performance	3697	3.094	239	3.439	2515	3.274	-0.197	***	-0.191	***	943	2.528	-1.081	***	-0.987	***
Academic advice	3697	2.763	239	3.364	2515	2.953	-0.398	***	-0.387	***	943	2.105	-1.219	***	-1.105	***
Social issues	3697	3.049	239	3.536	2515	3.244	-0.312	***	-0.297	***	943	2.408	-1.204	***	-1.053	***
Career plans	3697	3.100	239	3.527	2515	3.275	-0.267	***	-0.250	***	943	2.524	-1.063	***	-0.966	***
Finances	3697	2.928	239	3.439	2515	3.085	-0.357	***	-0.337	***	943	2.379	-1.068	***	-0.978	***
Family matters	3697	3.266	239	3.657	2515	3.437	-0.257	***	-0.258	***	943	2.714	-1.100	***	-1.022	***

\*p<.05, \*\*p<.01, \*\*\*p<.001

Table 4.

## Quality of Parental Relationship by Level of Parental Involvement

	Overall		High Involved		Moderate Involved		Low Involved		N	Mean	Effect Size w/o Controls	p	Effect Size with Controls	p	
	N	Mean	N	Mean	N	Mean	N	Mean							
<i>First-Year Students</i>															
Quality of relationship with mother	3731	6.534	391	6.742	2164	6.681	-0.057	-0.040	1009	6.114	-0.587	***	-0.597	***	
Quality of relationship with father	3731	6.046	391	6.246	2331	6.111	-0.089	-0.085	1009	5.817	-0.285	***	-0.344	***	
<i>Seniors</i>															
Quality of relationship with mother	3874	6.519	265	6.736	2613	6.684	-0.049	-0.023	996	6.029	-0.661	***	-0.662	***	
Quality of relationship with father	3874	6.067	265	6.332	2613	6.207	-0.083	-0.058	996	5.629	-0.467	***	-0.478	***	

\*p&lt;.05, \*\*p&lt;.01, \*\*\*p&lt;.001

Table 5.  
Likelihood of Following the Advice of Parents by Level of Parental Involvement

	Overall		High Involved		Moderate Involved		Low Involved									
	N	Mean	N	Mean	N	Mean	Effect Size w/o Controls	p	Effect Size with Controls	p	N	Mean	Effect Size w/o Controls	p	Effect Size with Controls	p
<i>First-Year Students</i>																
Mother	3736	3.174	391	3.570	2333	3.299	-.326	***	-.311	***	1012	2.733	-1.004	***	-.975	***
Father	3736	2.995	391	3.299	2333	3.055	-.275	***	-.264	***	1012	2.737	-.633	***	-.675	***
<i>Seniors</i>																
Mother	3880	3.084	272	3.537	2629	3.210	-.393	***	-.361	***	979	2.622	-1.098	***	-1.044	***
Father	3880	2.968	272	3.335	2629	3.046	-.325	***	-.291	***	979	2.656	-.765	***	-.752	***

\*p<.05, \*\*p<.01, \*\*\*p<.001

Table 6.  
Self-Reported Educational Outcomes by Level of Parental Involvement

	High Involved				Moderate Involved						Low Involved			
	N	Mean	N	Mean	Effect Size w/o Controls	p	Effect Size with Controls	p	N	Mean	Effect Size w/o Controls	p	Effect Size with Controls	p
<i>First-Year Students</i>														
Gains in Practical Competence	427	68.634	2598	63.120	-.249	***	-.235	***	1187	56.297	-.558	***	-.560	***
Gains in Personal and Social Development	427	58.581	2598	50.325	-.346	***	-.318	***	1187	44.502	-.590	***	-.579	***
Gains in General Education	427	73.361	2598	69.226	-.185	***	-.177	***	1187	61.675	-.524	***	-.505	***
Grades	427	3.166	2598	3.275	.195	***	.172	**	1187	3.251	.154	*	.121	*
Satisfaction	427	76.151	2598	74.929	-.052		-.047		1187	70.065	-.259	***	-.276	***
<i>Seniors</i>														
Gains in Practical Competence	296	73.806	2935	69.915	-.176	***	-.174	***	1215	63.070	-.486	***	-.485	***
Gains in Personal and Social Development	296	59.295	2935	51.725	-.317	***	-.296	***	1215	45.276	-.588	***	-.567	***
Gains in General Education	296	76.464	2935	73.930	-.114	***	-.112	***	1215	68.214	-.370	***	-.360	***
Grades	296	3.286	2935	3.380	.169	**	.159	**	1215	3.347	.109		.168	**
Satisfaction	296	76.295	2935	74.753	-.066		-.073		1215	69.877	-.274	***	-.284	***

\*p<.05, \*\*p<.01, \*\*\*p<.001

Table 7.  
Engagement Scales by Level of Parental Involvement

	High Involved		Moderate Involved				Low Involved							
	N	Mean	N	Mean	Effect Size w/o Controls	p	Effect Size with Controls	p	N	Mean	Effect Size w/o Controls	p	Effect Size with Controls	p
<i>First-Year Students</i>														
Student-Faculty Interaction	427	40.619	2598	34.316	-.317	***	-.297	***	1187	30.661	-.501	***	-.499	***
Supportive Campus Environment	427	66.478	2598	62.400	-.233	***	-.195	***	1187	57.979	-.465	***	-.464	***
Higher-Order Learning	427	68.423	2598	64.906	-.160	***	-.162	***	1187	59.899	-.387	***	-.387	***
Integrative Learning	427	58.345	2598	52.906	-.290	***	-.284	***	1187	49.492	-.472	***	-.480	***
Reflective Learning	427	59.979	2598	54.820	-.218	***	-.220	***	1187	53.852	-.259	***	-.280	***
<i>Seniors</i>														
Student-Faculty Interaction	296	50.563	2935	45.925	-.233	***	-.224	***	1215	40.512	-.506	***	-.518	***
Supportive Campus Environment	296	64.611	2935	60.345	-.233	***	-.217	***	1215	54.897	-.532	***	-.522	***
Higher-Order Learning	296	71.959	2935	70.541	-.064		-.072		1215	65.185	-.308	***	-.305	***
Integrative Learning	296	64.527	2935	61.267	-.174	**	-.196	**	1215	56.584	-.424	***	-.462	***
Reflective Learning	296	60.923	2935	59.228	-.072		-.085		1215	55.510	-.229	***	-.263	***

\*p<.05, \*\*p<.01, \*\*\*p<.001