UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON PARENT INVOLVEMENT:
EXPERIENCES BEYOND THE FIRST YEAR

By
TERESE A. KING

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To the Faculty of Washington State University:

The members of the Committee appointed to examine the dissertation of TERESE A. KING find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

________________________________________
Kelly A. Ward, Ph.D., Chair

________________________________________
Jennifer LeBeau, Ph.D.

________________________________________
Christian Wuthrich, Ph.D.

________________________________________
Xyanthe Neider, Ph.D.
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Chair: Kelly A. Ward

Over the past two decades, the level of parent involvement on college campuses has increased (Janosik, 2004; Merriman, 2008; Wartman & Savage, 2008; Wolf, Sax, & Harper, 2009). The purpose of the qualitative study is to understand the experiences, perceptions, and attitudes of college students with regard to the involvement of their parents during their college experience. The study contains a review of the existing literature on parent involvement in higher education and is guided by attachment theory (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1973) and the theory of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000). The study includes data from twenty-four undergraduate students gathered through semi-structured interviews. The interviews include questions about student’s college experience and the role their parents play throughout the experience. The data in the study was coded and analyzed for themes. The study adds to the body of literature on college student development and emerging adulthood by examining how traditional aged college students experience and perceive the relationship with their parents as they transition from adolescence to young adults. The study also informs the practice of designing services aimed at college students and their parents/families.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

I began my career working with parents of entering college students over twenty-three years ago when I was hired to coordinate and direct programming for parents within the Office of New Student Orientation at Washington State University. What began as a summer appointment grew into a full time position less than four years later as the number of parents attending orientation programs with their college aged children more than doubled; at the same time, parent involvement in other aspects of college life began to flourish. Parents of new college students were no longer helping their son or daughter move-in to their residence hall at the start of the academic year, and saying goodbye at the end of the day. Instead, they were staying for a few days or in some cases the entire week in an effort to help their student get settled. As parent involvement grew beyond the selection and start of college for their sons and daughters, and crept into other areas of university life, my role in designing, implementing, and evaluating programs targeted for parents continued to expand.

I have often thought about how different my college experience had been from what I was now observing. I remember waiting at the end of the hallway outside my dorm room for the pay phone to ring; my parents called once a week at our pre-arranged time to see how I was doing. Had I been more mature and self-reliant than today’s college student? I doubt it. Had my parents prepared me to move away from home and figure things out on my own? Maybe. Had I left for college knowing that whether I succeeded or failed, I always had the support of my parents? Yes, and as I look back on my college days, I know that as a first generation college student, my parents did not know how to help me through the college maze. They had however,
built a sense of security through their love and support that made all the difference as I encountered multiple obstacles throughout my journey.

As I continued my career, my interest in the topic of parent involvement in the lives of college students took shape when my own children began elementary school. When my eldest daughter entered first grade, I decided to return to graduate school as a part-time student while continuing to work full time and raise a family. At the end of each day, my husband and I would sit down and review what our daughter had brought home from school, making sure we had checked her backpack for progress notes, homework, or forms that needed to be completed and returned in a timely manner. By the time our second daughter entered elementary school, we had established a system for daily review of homework, event calendars, teacher communications, and invitations from the Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) to get more involved. At the beginning of a new academic year, we attended the school’s open house, met our children’s teachers, and left with a parent manual in hand that described our role and responsibilities in the educational process. The manual touted research on parent involvement and its link to children’s success. We were being conditioned through data driven parent manuals, communication plans, homework assignments, school websites, and the like to get involved so our children would succeed. While I have vowed to not be an over involved parent when my daughters enter college, I wonder if six years from now, I will be able to keep that promise.

My personal and professional journey has led me to where I am today and solidified my research interests. For more than twenty-five years, working with college students and their parents has been my passion, and it is with profound respect that I explore the role of parent involvement in the lives of today’s college students.
Research Purpose

Forbes (2001) writes: “the last decade has brought about a significant increase in the extent of parental involvement in the lives of college students” (p. 12). In a 2006 national study of student affairs professionals, 93 percent indicated an increase in interaction with parents over the last five years (Merriman, 2007). In another study, when parents of the current generation of college students were asked to compare their level of involvement with that of their parents when they were in college, “81 percent said that they were more involved, 15 percent said about the same, and only 4 percent said that they were less involved than their parents had been” (Janosik, 2004). Reasons for increased parent involvement over the past fifteen or more years are a blend of societal, cultural, technological, and economic factors. Students identify parents and family members as a significant source of support during the period between high school and graduation from college and research shows students often extend an invitation to parents and encourage their involvement in various aspects of the collegiate process (Carney-Hall, 2008; Donovan & McKelfresh, 2008; Taub, 2008; Trice, 2002). Whether it is contacting a residence hall staff member to address a roommate conflict or speaking to an academic advisor about a course transfer, students often benefit from parent involvement and advocacy. While anecdotal advice, opinions, and best practices on parent relations continue to grow within the higher education literature, little research exists on the impact of parent involvement on college students (Wartman & Savage, 2008). The purpose of the study is to examine the nature of parent involvement in the lives of college students and to develop an understanding of the impact of the involvement as perceived by the students.

As a professional working in higher education over the past twenty-five years, I have worked closely with college students and their parents and experienced first-hand the increase of
parent involvement in the lives of their children attending college. Rather than simply completing registration forms, providing medical history, and helping with transportation to and from the college campus I have watched parents become active supporters and advocates for their sons and daughters. With each passing year, I have often contemplated the impact of parent involvement in the lives of college students. As an administrator, instructor, and advisor, I have observed a multitude of interactions between students and their parents during pre-college visits, new student orientation programs, or through attendance at other university sponsored programs and wondered if students welcome their parent’s involvement or even expect them to be involved. I have questioned if college students perceive their involved parent(s) to be a help or hindrance in their transition and development into adulthood. Further, I have wondered if parent involvement has an impact on student persistence in college. My passion for my on-going work with college students and their parents has led me to this study and my quest to understand more about the on-going relationship between college students and their parents. Through the study, I seek to explore the role parents’ play and to develop an understanding of the impact parent involvement has on today’s college student as seen through the eyes of the students.

**Research Design and Approach**

I approach my learning, and therefore my research, from a constructivist perspective. I believe that reality is socially constructed, complex, and ever changing. Throughout my research, a social constructivist perspective has guided me in understanding the ideas, actions, and interactions of college students with their parents. My perspective allows me to view the students in my study as learners who along with myself as researcher, are actively engaged in making meaning of their parent’s involvement in their lives as college students and their perceptions of its impact. Given my perspective, a qualitative approach is best for the study as it allows a
cooperative and deeper exploration in collecting and analyzing data, challenging assumptions, and writing a reality that represents truth for the individual students.

While no one theory or theoretical framework offers the quintessential explanation of what is being researched, a theoretical framework has the ability to focus a study, reveal and conceal meaning, place the research in a scholarly conversation, and reveal its strengths and weaknesses (Anfara & Mertz, 2006). The study examines the role parents play in the lives of college students beyond the first year and students perceptions of and attitude toward their parent’s involvement by grounding it in the area of attachment theory (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1973) and the theory of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000, 2001, 2004). The theories provide insight into understanding how young people experience transitional times in their lives. By exploring theory from more than one discipline, a door opens to the existence of more than one truth when trying to understand parent involvement in higher education. As a researcher, I gain the opportunity to examine the phenomenon of parent involvement from multiple lenses, deepening my understanding. Further, I am better able to understand how these theories complement each other by enriching the understanding of the perceived impact parent involvement has on the lives of today’s college students beyond their first year.

Attachment theory and the theory of emerging adulthood offer different, yet complementary ways to view the phenomenon of parent involvement and the perceived impact of the involvement. Attachment theory and the theory of emerging adulthood along with my constructivist’s perspective inform the methodology throughout the study. My theoretical perspective, constructivism, combined with attachment theory and the theory of emerging adulthood also inform my methods, helping me know what to look for as I observe research participants and what questions to ask when conducting semi-structured interviews with students.
Finally, attachment theory and the theory of emerging adulthood guide how I analyze and make sense of the data throughout the study including analysis and future implications.

**Definitions**

1. **Emerging Adulthood**: Marked by experimentation and exploration, this is a period of time when young people, roughly ages 18-25 years in industrialized countries, transition from adolescence into adulthood. During this time, young people work toward greater autonomy in areas such as decision making, finance, and accepting responsibility for their actions (Arnett, 2000, 2001, 2004).

2. **Attachment Theory**: Based on studies which examine the relationship between humans, attachment theory promotes the importance of developing a secure relationship which influences normal social and emotional development (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1973).

3. **Socioeconomic status (SES)**: This rank or status refers to social class which includes educational and income level, along with occupational status. Typically, emerging adults have not yet established or earned their own social class therefore when referring to a students’ socioeconomic status, it is defined by their parents’ levels of education, income, and occupation.

4. **In loco parentis**: Meaning in place of parent, this term originated in Europe and allowed a father to delegate power to the institution to discipline his child (Bickel & Lake, 1999). This delegation of power was only meant to correct a student that did not follow the rules by way of restraint or corporal punishment (Melear, 2003).

5. **Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)**: Passed into law in 1974 and amended one month later by Senator Buckley, this act applies to all educational agencies and institutions that receive federal funding through the U.S. Department of Education.
Also known as the Buckley Amendment, FERPA gives students the right to access their educational records, challenge the content of those records including the opportunity to seek to have them amended, and exercise some control over the disclosure of information within the records to outside parties including parents.

Parental involvement in the lives of today’s college student is higher than at any other time in history (Carney-Hall, 2008; Merriman, 2007, 2008; Wartman & Savage, 2008). This trend has caused colleges and universities across the country to adapt their institutional staffing, communication plans, programs and services to address the needs of students and their parents. While anecdotal advice, opinions, and best practices on parent relations dominate the higher education literature (Carr, 2000; Daniel, Evans, & Scott, 2001; McInnis, 2001; Wartman & Savage, 2008), there is limited and sometimes conflicting research on the impact of parental involvement on students’ development (Carney-Hall, 2008; Mattanah, Hancock, & Brand, 2004; Ward-Roof, Heaton, & Coburn, 2008). As educators, we often share common goals with parents; that is to promote student growth, maturity, and success. “We who are in the business of working with students must not lose sight of the influence of the family system. Although our primary relationships will always be with students, we diminish our potential to enhance their development if we discount the relationships that can be initiated with their families” (Austin, 2003).

In the next chapter, I provide a review of relevant literature including a historical overview of parent involvement in higher education and reasons for the increased involvement as suggested by various researchers. In addition, an overview of student development theory is included along with an explanation of the reasons for grounding the study in attachment theory and the theory of emerging adulthood.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Parent Involvement in Higher Education

Throughout history, the university’s relationship with students and their parents has varied. As far back as Medieval Times, a teacher was known to solicit parent assistance by secretly informing them of their son’s behavior prompting the father to write a scolding letter of admonishment without revealing his source. In colonial times, colleges embraced the role of *in loco parentis*, earning a reputation for strict discipline and order. “English parents often elected to ship their wayward sons off” to be educated in the colonies rather than “entrusting them to the more relaxed atmosphere” that prevailed at Oxford or Cambridge (Lucas, 2006). In the sixties and seventies, the university’s role shifted from that of paternal delegate to one of service provider as student’s civil rights and economic power began to rise. In 1961, Dixon versus the Alabama State Board of Education served as a landmark case where the U.S. Court of Appeals rejected the notion of *in loco parentis* finding that Alabama State College could not expel students without due process (Bickel & Lake, 1999). Ten years later, the 26th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution was ratified standardizing the voting age across the country to 18 years. College students celebrated their new found independence from their parents as well as from the institutions in which they were enrolled. Further, with the passing of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) in 1974, students had the right to access their educational records, challenge the content of those records, and keep them private from outside parties including parents. As students continued to challenge the university and win case after case of violations relating to educational privacy, the university found itself in the role of spectator during relatively tumultuous times. It was not until the late eighties and nineties that the
pendulum swung back with parents demanding the university act not as a delegate of parental power to discipline, but as protector of their sons and daughters. A landmark case behind this directional shift was the 1990 passing of the Jeanne Clery Disclosure of Campus Security Policy and Campus Crime Statistics Act, requiring institutions to prepare and publicly distribute an annual security report. And with the Higher Education Amendment of 1998, universities were now allowed to notify parents with information regarding their student’s alcohol and drug use thus redefining their relationship as one of partners in student success.

As parent involvement in the lives of college students continued to increase throughout the late nineties and into the new century, the media began using the term *helicopter parent* to describe the growing phenomenon. Although originally intended for the overprotective parent who hovers above their son or daughter, ready to swoop in when things go awry, the term quickly spread to engulf all parents regardless of behavior. In fact, the term *helicopter parent* was used so often by the media that it became an entry in the dictionary in 2011 and can be increasingly found within the higher education literature (Merriam-Webster, 2011; Wartman & Savage, 2008). The term *helicopter parent* is limiting and has negative connotations which can limit broader understandings; unfortunately, Wartman and Savage (2008) point out parents themselves have accepted the term and are now using it in reference to themselves.

Researchers suggest one of the primary reasons for increased parent involvement on college campuses is the expectations established in the K-12 system (Carney-Hall, 2008; Daniel & Scott, 2001; Taub, 2008; Wolf, Sax, & Harper, 2009). For example, the *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001 lists parental involvement as one of six targeted areas, emphasizing the importance of parent involvement in the K-12 educational process. In addition, schools receiving Title I funding must spend part of that funding on parent participation programs. For years, parents have
been involved as classroom volunteers, field trip chaperones, sport team coaches, home tutors, fundraisers, PTO members, attendees at music concerts, and participants in parent teacher conferences. Some parents have actively advocated with schools for their children who have a history of disabilities, mental or physical health issues. Parents are recruited from the moment their child enters the K-12 system to become involved and groomed over thirteen years to stay involved throughout the educational process. With such strong messages, invitations, acknowledgements and rewards coming from federal, state, and local governments, in conjunction with school districts, it is no wonder that parents have a strong urge to continue to be involved during the college years. After all, a high school diploma does not grant adult status.

Parents also receive confusing and sometimes mixed messages as their children apply and matriculate into the university system (Wartman & Savage, 2008). The recruitment and admission processes encourage parent participation while the financial aid process requires parent involvement if the student applies for federal or state aid. In addition, students are now able to remain on their parents’ health care plan until the age of twenty-five and changes in federal legislation allow university officials to notify parents of any alcohol or drug violations in an effort to involve parents in addressing behaviors that may impede a students’ success in college. Given this, it is not surprising that parents are involved and that they expect to be notified as their student encounters health and safety issues, academic turmoil, and violations of federal or state laws and/or university policies.

Some researchers suggest parents’ consumer mentality as a contributing factor (Bickel & Lake, 1999; Carney-Hall, 2008; Daniel & Scott, 2001; Taub, 2008). Parents are not only invested emotionally in their students’ college process, but are also financial stakeholders. As college tuition rises across the country, much of the financial burden to support college students has
shifted from the state and federal government to the consumer. Because the average college consumer is seventeen or eighteen years old with no financial means to speak of, the burden falls squarely on the shoulders of the parents. As financial partners in the educational process, parents are paying customers who view everything as negotiable and expect a level of service commensurate with the rising cost of tuition.

Changes in family structures and campus environments have also contributed to an increase in parent involvement (Carney-Hall, 2008; Wartman & Savage, 2008). Families are more diverse with students coming from divorced or blended families, families with same-sex parents, or single-parent homes. Demographics are also changing with enrollments increasing among first-generation, low-income and underrepresented students. College programs and services for students are no longer a one size fits all approach. Events such as the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, Hurricane Katrina in 2005, and the tragedy at Virginia Tech in 2007 have resulted in parent involvement focusing on issues of safety and security. Over the last decade, college and universities have found themselves reviewing and revising protocols for crisis management that now factor in parental notification and involvement.

Another contributing factor to parent involvement is the advancement in technology which in turn has increased the popularity and use of various technological devices that allow instant communication (Carney-Hall, 2008; NSSE, 2007; Taub, 2008; Wolf, Sax & Harper, 2009). The cell phone is often referred to as a virtual umbilical cord with parents and students calling or texting each other daily allowing for constant contact and real time reporting (Carney-Hall, 2008; Ward-Roof, Heaton, & Coburn, 2008). Parents and students are able to communicate with each other twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week regardless of location, creating an interdependent relationship that is reinforced with each phone call.
Lastly, students are inviting and encouraging their parents to be involved in the collegiate process. Students identify parents and family members as a significant source of support during the period between high school and graduation from college (Carney-Hall, 2008; Taub, 2008). Whether it is contacting a residence hall director to address a roommate conflict, speaking to an academic advisor over a course transfer, or serving as a reference for a job application, students have come to expect their parents to be part of the educational process and often benefit from parent involvement and advocacy.

In the next section, student development theory is discussed along with the historical and cultural timeframe out of which it grew. The role of parents within many traditional models of student development is absent and I offer an explanation as to why I chose attachment theory and the theory of emerging adulthood to provide a theoretical grounding for the study.

**College Student Development**

The elementary and secondary sector of education offers a well developed body of research and theory regarding family engagement and its impact on the students’ educational development (Caspe & Lopez, 2006; Fan & Chen, 2001; Jeynes, 2005). Parental involvement is strongly encouraged and federal and state funds are tied to programs and initiatives that promote parent involvement. Wartman and Savage (2008) however, point out that “a tension exists in the body of literature on college students' psychological development as it relates to conclusions about the college student-parent relationship and its effects on students' identity formation” (p.21). Theorists who have addressed college student development, transition, and retention such as Erikson (1968), Chickering and Reisser (1993), and Tinto (1987, 1993), assume one thing: student’s separation from parents and family is a necessary step in student development and success.
Student development theory was born in the late fifties and sixties as a result of the institution’s relationship with the student changing from one of modern day *in loco parentis* to one where students were now treated as individuals that had rights. It was a time when students generally followed a traditional script of graduating from high school and going on to college, graduating from college, finding a job, getting married, and starting a family (Kingsmill & Schlesinger, 1998). In a 1966 study by the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California, Los Angeles, 84 percent of entering first-year students reported the primary reason to go to college was to “develop a meaningful philosophy of life” (Thomas, 2004). Initially built upon research involving white men from middle and upper-class backgrounds, many student development theories and their theorists have been criticized for failing to address a diverse student population including women, students of color, non-traditional students, and first generation college students (Cutchinna et al., 1994; Gilligan, 1982; Kenny & Donaldson, 1991; Taub, 1997; Tierney, 1992).

Tinto’s (1987, 1993) theory of college student departure is among the most cited work in higher education (Metz, 2004). Tinto (1987, 1993) provides an empirical model on what it takes to succeed in college; namely student integration. He asserts students must experience and pass through three stages during their college career in order to fully integrate academically and socially into the university community. These stages are separation, transition, and incorporation. Tinto (1993) stresses the importance of student to faculty and peer to peer interactions both in and outside of the classroom and believes students must separate from past associations and communities in order to transition and fully incorporate into the new community. Applying Tinto’s (1993) model today is problematic for a couple of reasons. First, it assumes movement from adolescence to adulthood occurs at the traditional college age. Second, the model does not
account for the change in communication patterns between students and their parents or family due to technological advancements. And finally as previously mentioned, Tinto’s (1986) theory was built on research involving white, middle and upper-class men of traditional college age and fails to address the experiences of non-traditional and under-represented populations on today’s college campus (Gilligan, 1982; Taub, 1997; Tierney, 1992). In spite of these limitations, Tinto’s theory of college student departure (1987, 1993) continues to be among the most cited models used to inform practice on college campuses (Metz, 2004).

The body of literature on identity formation through psychosocial development is the most relevant to understanding parent involvement in the lives of college students. Psychosocial theories look at how individuals grow and develop over their life span including how individuals see themselves and relate to others. Most theories in this area look at individual development as going through a series of developmental stages, tasks, or challenges. Often these stages are age related and chronological; in order for individuals to move from one stage to the next they must experience and address a challenge or crisis that creates dissonance. Resolving the crisis or challenge gives way to growth and development for the individual. Examples of psychosocial models of development include the theories of Erikson (1968) and Chickering and Reisser (1993). Like Tinto’s (1986) theory previously mentioned, theories developed by Erikson (1968) or Chickering and Reisser (1993) need to be updated to address the societal, cultural, and economic shifts that have taken place over the past few decades. Among the updates, the role of parent involvement in the lives of today’s college student and the impact on student development should be addressed.

As a body of work overall, student development theories born in the late fifties and sixties fail to fully address parent involvement in the lives of college students. In fact, most
models view parents as not having any role during their son or daughters college years. The emphasis is on “letting go” and allowing students to explore and make their own decisions with the knowledge that there are campus services available for the student should a problem arise (Coburn & Treeger, 2003). Given the limitations of traditional models of student development theory, specifically the theories failure to examine the role of parents in the lives of college students, I broadened my search in the literature to other disciplines including human development in order to find more holistic theories that support and recognize parents as having a role. These theories are introduced in the next section.

There are a growing number of psychological and holistic theories that contribute to the understanding of the role parents play in the development of their college-age children including: Sanford’s theory of challenge and support, Baxter Magolda’s theory of self-authorship, Arnett’s theory of emerging adulthood, and Bowlby’s attachment theory as extended by Ainsworth (1989). Sanford (1962, 1966) found that college students go through significant personal growth and development, much of which is influenced by the college environment both in and out of the classroom. He believed that for growth and development to occur, a student needs a balance of challenge and support as appropriate for the task. If the student receives too much support, he or she will not learn or experience what they need to in order to grow and develop. Opposite of this, if the student is challenged too much, he or she will likely become frustrated or overwhelmed and are more likely to quit. In addition to faculty and other college personnel, Sanford (1966) saw parents in the role of supporter.

Baxter Magolda (2014) offers a contemporary, holistic approach to examining student identity formation through her theory of self-authorship. She believes there is more to the college experience than choosing a major and developing the skills to be successful in a career. As
educators, college and university professionals must create environments and experiences that foster growth in young adults to prepare them for adulthood and life after college. In order for young adults to enter the workforce as productive citizens in a diverse and fast paced, global society, they must self-author or develop “the internal capacity to determine ones beliefs, identities, and socials relations” (Baxter Magolda, 2014, p. 25). Based on her longitudinal research study with young adults ages eighteen to thirty, Baxter Magolda (2005) found that in many cases, the transformation to self-authorship happens later, beyond the traditional college years, and is assisted “through connections with others in volunteer work, church, friends, and family” (p. 94). Her more recent work acknowledges the role parents play as an important and valued member of the student’s social network.

Both Sanford (1968) and Baxter Magolda’s (2014) more recent work acknowledges the role of parents in the student development process. Broader perspectives exist that go beyond acknowledgement and incorporate the parent’s role into the developmental process. These perspectives can be found among various theories found in the fields of psychology and human development which address individual growth and development over the lifespan. The next section introduces the two theories mentioned above, one from each respective field, that I use to ground the study.

**Theoretical Grounding**

**Theory of Emerging Adulthood**

The period of life between ages eighteen and twenty-five has been called “emerging adulthood” by Arnett (2000). Arnett’s work expands the knowledge base on life span development described by Erikson (1968) by adding a life stage he calls emerging adulthood between the stages of adolescence and adulthood. Over a number of years, Arnett conducted
research with college students through interviews, surveys, and focus groups in order to better understand what was happening during this phase of life. According to his findings, while very few people in their late teens and early twenties saw themselves as adolescents, they did not see themselves as adults either. Arnett believes late adolescents or emerging adults should have their own developmental stage that is more flexible, emphasizing development through experience and exploration which is characteristic of college students at this point in their lives. He identified five key features to this life stage including identity exploration, instability marked by possibilities, being self-focused, feeling in-between childhood and adulthood, and experiencing frequent transitions such as moving. Arnett’s theory includes research with non-college students too; while he admits non-college students are a more difficult population to access and sample, Arnett believes his theory applies in industrialized societies regardless of educational attainment or social class (Arnett, Kloep, Hendry, & Tanner, 2011). In general, the emerging adulthood life stage allows young people to develop skills such as problem solving and decision making that can be practiced and gradually developed over time (Arnett, 2000, 2001). The college environment is an ideal place for this practice and development to take place and Arnett’s theory of emerging adulthood is most relevant to the study as it expands upon traditional models of student development, recognizing the role parents play during this time of transition.

**Attachment Theory**

Another theory that contributes to understanding the college student-parent relationship and impact on development is attachment theory, based on the work of two leading scholars in the field of psychology, Bowlby (1973) and Ainsworth (1989). Attachment theory’s strength is that it focuses on a basic system of behavior (i.e. attachment) that is biologically rooted (Ainsworth, 1989). This implies functioning that is universal in human nature regardless of
differences in gender, culture, or individual experience. Bowlby’s (1973) early work initially focused on understanding the attachment of infant to mother or primary caregiver and the importance of developing a secure base. Throughout the first year, attachment is tested by increasing periods of separation between infant and caregiver, developing the infant's capacity for believing the caregiver exists even when not physically present. Slowly, the infant learns the ability to explore the world as a direct result of having developed a secure base. The infant slowly builds confidence in their relationship with the caregiver, enabling themselves to tolerate longer periods of separation with diminishing distress. Bowlby’s later work (1988) focused on trying to understand how children and adults experience and cope with loss or separation. 

Ainsworth (1989) extended attachment theory beyond infancy by examining differences in the qualitative nature of attachment. As the child becomes an adult and finds a new primary attachment figure (e.g., spouse, mentor or coach), the attachment bond to parents has not disappeared but continues to be meaningful (Ainsworth, 1989). Applied to college students, separation from the family or leaving home represents an important transition for late adolescence into early adulthood. Mattanah, Brand, and Hancock (2004) studied the separation-individuation process for college students and found that a relationship of secure attachment with parents and a healthy level of separation-individuation predicted positive academic, social, and personal-emotional adjustment to college. The study also found that students who had a strong sense of self were better able to handle the demands of independence that the college environment offers (Mattanah et.al, 2004).

Overall, research from the social sciences suggest college student personnel re-examine their view on “letting go” (Coburn & Treeger, 2003) and recognize the importance of staying connected throughout the life course (Ainsworth, 1989; Baxter Magolda, 2014; Bowlby, 1988;
Wolf, Sax, & Harper, 2009). Changes in family structure, culture, and economics have caused today’s college students to be more interdependent and family-centered compared to previous generations (Carney-Hall, 2008; Wartman & Savage, 2008). In order to address the development of the whole person, it is important to gain a better understanding of a student’s background, values, and relationships. Attachment theory and the theory of emerging adulthood provide a relevant lens to study the college student population and the importance of the relationships they have with their parents during this transitional time.

Summary

Student development theories (e.g., Erikson, 1968; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Tinto, 1993) that assume student’s separation from parents and family as a necessary step for their development grew out of research conducted at a time when the traditional life script involved transitioning from high school to college, followed by career, marriage, and family shortly thereafter. Further, the research supporting these theories was conducted primarily with white, middle to upper-class males attending highly selective colleges (Cutrona et al., 1994; Gilligan, 1982; Kenny & Donaldson, 1991; Taub, 1997; Tierney, 1992). These one-size fits all theories are not sensitive to the changing family structures and demographics of today’s college students and fail to consider parents as having a role in their development.

The purpose of the study is to explore the role parents play in the lives of college students. Many student development theories fail to address or even consider the role of parents in the lives of college students and therefore, remain stagnant in this area. Attachment theory (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1973) and the theory of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000) challenge the traditional student development models of separation-individuation and are used as a conceptual framework to focus the study. These theories offer two different but complementing
ways to look at the present phenomenon of parent involvement and provide a lens to more fully integrate student development and guide the research process.

The next chapter describes the research project including details on research design, selected methodology and methods, and the epistemological underpinnings of my approach. In addition, I address how attachment theory and the theory of emerging adulthood frame the study and are integrated throughout the research process.
CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the study is to examine the nature of parent involvement in the lives of college students and to develop an understanding of the impact of this involvement as perceived by the students. To enhance my understanding of the impact of parent involvement on today’s college students, the following research questions guide the study:

1. What role do parents play in the college student experience beyond the first year of college?

2. What is the college student’s perception of the role their parents play in their college experience?

3. What is the college student’s attitude toward their parent’s involvement?

Given the purpose of the study and the research questions outlined above, a qualitative study is an appropriate method with which to address and learn from the perspective of students. The methodological framework affords an opportunity to work with students as research participants in the construction of meaning through an examination of their individual experiences.

**Researcher Perspectives**

I approach my learning, and therefore my research, from a constructivist perspective. Rosen (1998) states:

A person’s knowledge can only exist by virtue of a vast range of past experiences which have been lived through, often with the most intense feelings. Through these experiences, including textual experiences (books, lectures, lessons,
conversation, etc), we have been taught to disguise so that our utterances are made to seem as though they emerge from no particular place or time or person but from the fount of knowledge itself (p.30).

I believe that reality is socially constructed, complex, and ever changing. Truth is constructed in different ways based on time, place, and the interactions of those looking for it. As a researcher performing qualitative research, I become part of the research design; a tool or instrument in the research process. I gather the data and in doing so recognize that by placing myself within the research, my interactions impact the outcome...consciously or unconsciously. My goal is to understand the experiences and interactions of parents and their college students within a specific context or culture (i.e., college). Vygotsky (1978) used the label social constructivism and this theoretical perspective shapes my understanding of the phenomenon of parent involvement in the lives of today’s college students.

As a professional working with students and their parents on college campuses for over twenty-five years, and as an involved parent of elementary and middle school aged children, elements of the study are naturally visible while others remained invisible to me. In addition, through my experience as a practitioner who has designed, implemented and assessed programs for college students and their parents and personally as a first generation college student, I possess an insider’s knowledge and understanding of the mission, goals, and best practices of parent programs as well as programs aimed at underrepresented students such as first generation college students. Knowing this, it is important for me to listen with a critical ear, attuned to hear new or different perspectives other than what my past experiences present or what my current view provides.
The entire research process is theory-laden therefore I use theory throughout all aspects of the study. Theory assists in guiding my positionality within the context of how parents are involved in the college student experience. As a social constructivist, I continually seek to understand the role of parent involvement in the lives of their children throughout the student’s (i.e., child’s) college years and how students receive and/or perceive this involvement beyond the first year. This is a difficult and complex issue to examine because there are multiple truths representing multiple student and parent experiences. In other words, there is not a single definition of parental involvement that serves as the standard for all college students. The definition may differ based on a variety of factors including age, gender, birth order, family structure, socioeconomic class, cultural background, and even parent’s educational background. Foucault (1988) once said, “I believe too much in truth not to suppose that there are different truths and different ways of speaking the truth” (p.51). It is naïve to assume this study brings forth one Truth as more than one truth exists in each student’s story. My goal in the interviews was to actively engage each student to tell their story in order to make sense of the role their parent’s play in their college lives and further, to explore their perception of or attitude toward that involvement.

Theoretical Perspective

Over the past several years as I explored the growing phenomenon of parent involvement in the lives of college students, I found myself looking for theories that acknowledged or considered parents as a part of the landscape during the college years. Although much of my professional history has involved designing transition programs for new students, I am keenly aware that as students settle into their new environment and progressively engage more fully with faculty, staff, and students in college, they do not appear to engage less with their parents or
families. Attachment theory and the theory of emerging adulthood provide a contextual lens to shape my understanding of why students choose this continued involvement. These theories serve as a guide throughout the research process. For example, because much has been written on the importance of student’s transition into college and the first year experience (Arnett, 2000; Kenny & Donaldson, 1991; Tobolowsky, 2008; Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005; Wintre & Yaffe, 2000), I felt it was important to look beyond the first year student. Bowlby’s (1988) and Ainsworth’s (1989) attachment theory addresses on-going attachment beyond times of transition and therefore, guided my interest in studying college sophomores, juniors, and seniors. Additionally, both theories influenced the make-up of my interview questions including the order in which the questions were asked. The formulation of such questions as ‘do you consider yourself an adult?’, ‘in what ways has your relationship with your parents changed since coming to college?’, and ‘describe your core values and in what way have your parents affected these values?’ directly ties to the exploration of attachment theory and the theory of emerging adulthood.

Overall, the research study utilizes attachment theory and the theory of emerging adulthood along with a constructivist perspective. Knowledge surrounding the college student-parent relationship is constructed throughout the study. Ultimately, the study contributes to the broader knowledge base relating to parent involvement in higher education.

Methodological Perspectives

In order to give voice to students’ experiences regarding the role parents play in their lives while in college, a qualitative method is best suited for this purpose. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) define qualitative research as:
a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations; qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (p.3).

The research process is emergent through constant exploration and meaning making. Interviews are exploratory in nature, allowing a person’s experience to be described in their own words “with all the uniqueness and richness that such descriptions make possible” (Arnett, 2001). Semi-structured interviews were the main tool used in the study. Specifically chosen, semi-structured interviews allow for a consistent set of questions to be asked among participants with room to probe and explore further within these predetermined questions. Lofland and Lofland (1994) discussed the flexible nature of qualitative research designs, stating interview guides can be modified over time to focus attention on areas of particular importance, or to exclude questions found to be unproductive for the goals of the research.

**Data Collection**

An overview of the data collection method along with information on sampling is provided in Table 3.1. Denzin and Lincoln (2011), discuss the importance of purposeful sampling when employing qualitative research methods. Purposeful sampling allows a smaller sample size to be drawn while still obtaining an information-rich sample that can add depth to a study. Maximum variation was employed to identify participants from among the nominees for the semi-structured interviews. The strategy encapsulates main themes common among diverse
participants. In addition, maximum variation sampling offers details on each participant such as their academic profile, socioeconomic status, geographical location, gender and ethnicity that add richness to the data.

Table 3.1: Overview of Data Collection

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Sample Size</th>
<th>Sample Type</th>
<th>Sample Frequency</th>
<th>Time/Location</th>
<th>Participant Criteria</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interview (semi-</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Purposeful/maximum</td>
<td>Once</td>
<td>▪ Spring term</td>
<td>▪ currently enrolled students attending the institutions main campus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>structured)</td>
<td></td>
<td>variation</td>
<td></td>
<td>▪ conducted at a mutually agreed upon time and location, convenient to the</td>
<td>▪ male and female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>participant</td>
<td>▪ sophomore, junior, or senior class standing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Institutions

The purposeful sample of students in the study came from three different universities in the northwest region of the United States. The locations were chosen based on my proximity to and familiarity with each institution and its student profile. Based on my professional networks within the region, I was able to gain access to each university’s student population by contacting the academic advising office as well as the office of the Dean of Students. A brief description of each institution follows.

State University

State University (SU) is a large, public, land-grant institution located in a small city in the Pacific Northwest. With an approximate enrollment of 20,000 students on the main campus, SU offers five satellite campuses for a combined enrollment of more than 28,000 students system
wide. There are eleven colleges and a graduate school offering over 200 fields of study including more than 150 majors in addition to several minors, options and certificate programs. As a Tier I research institution, students can earn degrees at the Bachelors, Masters, and Doctoral level. The university is one of the largest residential universities in the Pacific Northwest.

Flagship University

Flagship University (FU) is also a public, land-grant institution located in a small city in the Pacific Northwest. In addition to the main, highly residential campus, FU operates four satellite campuses throughout the state with a total enrollment of approximately 11,900 in the university system. FU offers more than 130 majors to students interested in pursuing Bachelors, Masters, and Doctoral degrees. The university is the oldest public university in the state.

Regional University

Regional University (RU) is a comprehensive public university located in an isolated rural area just outside a large city with nearly a half a million people. With the bulk of the student population attending the primarily nonresidential, main campus, RU boasts enrollment of approximately 11,300 students statewide. RU offers 135 fields of study, master’s degrees, graduate certificates and programs.

Participants

Much of the existing research on parent involvement and family support focuses on first-year students and their transition to college (Arnett, 2000; Kenny & Donaldson, 1991). Little is known about the impact of parents and family to college students beyond the first year, therefore the primary research participants for the study are traditional-age college students who have continued enrollment beyond their first year. For the purpose of the study, a continuing student is one who began college immediately after high school graduation with no prior college...
experience and who has completed at least one full academic year, two semesters or three quarters, of college regardless of the number of credits earned. All participants were enrolled full time, taking a minimum of twelve semester credits or fifteen quarter credits, within the current academic term.

In selecting participants for the study, a pool of students was created at each of the three institutions through a nomination process. During the academic term, I sent an e-mail to academic advisors as well as professional staff on the main campus who advise student clubs and organizations. The e-mail provided information about the study and asked advisors to nominate six to eight students who they felt would be good candidates for the study. Specific criteria that assisted advisors in the nomination process included: 1) the student must be currently enrolled and attending classes on the main campus, and 2) the student must be of sophomore, junior, or senior standing as defined by semester or quarter credits earned. For further details, a copy of this email can be found in Appendix A. Once an ample pool of candidates was generated through the nomination process, maximum variation was employed to purposefully select students from the candidate pool. An email was sent to each student selected, introducing the study and inviting them to participate. As a way to attract student participation, I incentivized the study. Students who participated in the interview were placed in a lottery to win one of two, twenty-five dollar gift cards to their campus bookstore. A copy of the email sent to purposefully selected students can be found in Appendix B. In a few instances, the student replied to my initial email indicating their willingness to meet with me for an interview and arrangements (e.g., date, time, location) were made at the convenience of the student. In most cases, I made a follow up phone call a day or two after the initial email invitation was sent to determine the student’s interest in participating in the study. During the phone call, I introduced myself, referenced the email sent
earlier, and talked through the pertinent details including who had nominated them, the nature of
the research study, and what their involvement would entail as a volunteer for the study. A total
of twenty-four students accepted the invitation and participated in the study. Table 3.2 provides a
glimpse into the background of each student interviewed. The participants have been given
pseudonyms to protect their identity.

Table 3.2: Overview of Interview Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Class Standing</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aden</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Kinesiology</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Callie</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Sociology</td>
<td>Latina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cesar</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Criminal Justice</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eva</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Elementary Education</td>
<td>Pacific Islander</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seth</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Business</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whitney</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>Multi-ethnic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yvette</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Hospitality Business Management</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ben</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Mechanical Engineering</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eli</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Economic Science</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grace</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Biology/Pre-Med</td>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harry</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Biology/Music Composition</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hope</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Political Science</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ingrid</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Food Science</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owen*</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Philosophy</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samantha</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Therapeutic Recreation</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sara</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cade</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Biology/Pre-Med</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lily*</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lissa</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Art/History Education</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Interview Process**

The purpose of an interview is to gain insight into the way another person views something. Through the interview process, I learned about the role parents play in the lives of college students and began to construct meaning by listening, clarifying, and observing as each student’s story unfolded. I established an interview protocol (Appendix C) and designed interview questions to explore four key areas: 1) background, 2) nature of parent involvement, 3) perception and attitude toward parent involvement, and 4) individual development and transition. A list of questions used to guide the interview is in Appendix D.

Interviews took place throughout the academic term based on the convenience and availability of the participant. Twenty-four (24) students, who voluntarily agreed to participate, engaged in one semi-structured interview on their home campus at a mutually agreed upon time and location. Participants were purposely selected by gender and class standing (e.g., sophomore, junior, senior); if known, other demographics such as academic profile, ethnicity, first generation status, and residency status were taken into consideration to add to the diversity among participants. With written permission from each participant, an audio recorder was used to capture the interview, allowing my focus to be on the participant. In addition, I created and used an interview coversheet (Appendix C) which allowed me to take notes on body language and other visual cues offered by the participant as well as the opportunity to write down follow up
questions that emerged during the interview for further exploration. The interviews ranged from 22 to 75 minutes in length with most interviews averaging around 42 minutes.

**Data Analysis**

In order to garner and cultivate findings that are rich and meaningful, data collection and analysis must be done simultaneously. Glesne (2011) states, “If you consistently reflect on your data, work to organize them, and try to discover what they have to tell you, your study will be more relevant and possibly more profound (p.188). Throughout the data collection phase of the study, I scheduled two to three interviews a day which made collection and analysis more manageable as well as kept the data at the forefront of my thoughts. The process allowed me to shape and refine interview questions and the overall study throughout the research process.

During each interview, I completed a cover sheet writing down interview highlights, memorable quotes, participant’s reactions or body language, and overall impressions of the interview. The interview cover sheet can be found in Appendix D, within the Interview Protocol. After the interview was complete, I wrote a memo describing my overall impressions and reaction to the interview and the student interviewed. As time spent on the research study entwined with a full time job and family responsibilities, I carried a research journal with me everywhere and wrote down thoughts, ideas, or questions that came to mind as the research process unfolded amid data collection, analysis, and writing.

In order to continue to keep the data fresh, I typed the majority of the interview transcripts myself and hired a fellow researcher to complete the final four. Working to reduce and interpret the data, I used a system of coding, categorizing, and searching for emerging themes. I created a journal of all codes and abbreviations along the way and used it when coding each interview, adding new codes as they were created. After the transcripts had been coded, I
collapsed the codes into categories and then began to look for themes, collapsing the categories down further. Glesne (2011) suggests identifying themes from the literature and theoretical lens used to frame the study. Arnett’s theory of emerging adulthood and Ainsworth’s attachment theory were used as a guide to form interview questions and continue to be used throughout the analysis process. The process of analysis is emergent as I integrate theory and existing literature with the data, blending it together and constantly refining my analysis before committing it to writing herein.

**Credibility and Trustworthiness**

In order to address credibility and trustworthiness, various research processes and procedures were established. The data that was gathered through the study was then corroborated, connected, and analyzed from multiple perspectives utilizing theory and relevant literature.

*Triangulation.* Glesne (2011) defines triangulation as the “use of multiple data-collection methods, multiple sources, multiple investigators, and/or multiple theoretical perspectives” (p.49). It is a way of checking the integrity of the inferences drawn by the researcher throughout the research process (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Upon IRB approval, I worked with either the nominator or the institution’s Office of Institutional Research (IR) to obtain a demographic profile of each student nominated in order to purposefully select and invite participants to the interview process. Each participant brought a unique background and set of experiences to the study which gave voice to the individual meaning that emerged through the interview and process of interpretation. It was assumed that the information provided prior to the interviews by the advisor/nominator and IR as well as the data collected during the interviews was valid and therefore reliable. To add to the credibility of the data, three different institutions were selected
for the research study and research methods were conducted during the academic term on each respective campus. Further, individual interviews took place throughout the day and evening hours, scheduled with the convenience of the participants in mind.

Data are drawn from semi-structured interviews, observations, field notes, memo writing, and journal entries throughout the study. In order to examine my assertions, the data is situated alongside existing literature and the theoretical framework for the study.

*Bias.* Schwandt (2007) defines bias as “individual preferences, predispositions, or predilections that prevent neutrality and objectivity (p.20). As a parent, educator, and administrator working with college students and their parents/families, I recognize my background and experiences have directly impacted my research interests and guided the selection of this particular research study. Given my history, I recognize that I most likely carry biases, assumptions, and expectations. In order to keep track of my personal reactions, I keep a journal in which I record my feelings, reactions, and insights into myself and my past. I also recognize that throughout the research process, I have taken on various roles or had these roles placed upon me by my research participants. Some of these roles include that of insider, outsider, parent, administrator, scholar, and advocate. As I negotiate these roles throughout the research process, the journal serves as a place to reflect on what I may be taking for granted.

*Member Checks.* Member checking is a way of soliciting feedback from participants in the study on data collection, analytical thoughts, and/or research findings (Creswell, 2012; Glesne, 2011; Schwandt, 2007). During the interviews, I worked to establish a rapport with the participants, encouraging them to share as much as they felt comfortable sharing and reminding them that the interviews were completely confidential and their identity would remain anonymous. Periodically I would summarize or restate what the participant had said in order to
check my understanding and make sure I was accurately representing their story. At the end of each interview, I gave the research participants my contact information in case they had any follow up questions or information and invited them to contact me if they wanted a copy of their interview transcript. When all transcripts had been created and coded, I contacted a few research participants and invited them to review their interview transcript and the analyzed data from their particular interview. The process of review provided the means for ensuring that the data and interpretation of the participant’s story adequately and accurately represented their perspectives and experiences, adding to the credibility of the study.

*Critical Friends Check.* Also referred to as peer review or peer debriefing, this technique invites “external reflection and input on your work” (Glesne, 2011, p.49). While collecting and analyzing the data, I invited peers familiar with the research process to review the data including transcripts, memos, codes, and written analysis in order to challenge my interpretation and research assumptions. Having peers review the study and data collected provides an additional perspective that adds to the rigor of the study.

Finally, Lincoln and Guba (1985) discuss the importance of “dependability” and “confirmability” as measures of credibility and trustworthiness (p. 53). Both are achieved through retention of records referred to as an audit trail. All written information including field notes, journal entries, transcripts, data memos, and the like, have been retained in a locked file cabinet and are available for review to the participants and my dissertation committee members in order to confirm that the research accurately and adequately represented the perspectives and conclusions presented in the study. After consulting with my dissertation chair, all audio recordings of the participant interviews were erased upon transcript completion.
Summary

Little is known about students in terms of their individual backgrounds and specifically their interpersonal support systems. Students arrive on campus with many significant relationships in place including relationships with parents, family, and friends. One might argue these relationships are as important to a student’s development as is their familiarity with the layout of the campus, curricular requirements, and support services. “Long before and long after attachments are made to new classmates, friends, and the institution’s faculty and staff, students rely on parents and family members for feedback, reassurance, and guidance” (Austin, 2003). Understanding the role parents play in the lives of their children as college students provides insight into why parents are more involved today than in past decades. Further, a primary purpose of learning is for an individual to construct their own meaning. Understanding student’s perceptions and attitudes regarding their parent’s involvement in college can give college administrators insight into the types of programs universities should offer for parents throughout their student’s years in college and potentially beyond. The next chapter discusses the results of the study and voice is given to the meaning that emerges from the data, existing literature, and the theories grounding the study.
CHAPTER 4
RESEARCH RESULTS

The purpose of the study is to examine the nature of parent involvement in the lives of college students. The study is designed to gain an understanding of how students perceive the role their parents play in their college experience and specifically look at student’s attitudes toward their parent’s involvement. The data analyzed in the study was collected through semi-structured interviews with sophomores, juniors, and seniors at three different universities in the northwest region of the United States. Twenty-four undergraduate students participated in the study and while each of them shared their own unique experiences and perspectives, four overarching themes emerged from their collective stories: parent’s roles, levels of involvement, student’s perceptions, and defining adulthood. The chapter presents the results of the study by presenting the four emerging themes.

Parent’s Roles

As mentioned in the opening chapter of the study, research shows that students identify parents and family members as a significant source of support throughout the college experience and invite or encourage their involvement in various aspects of the collegiate process (Carney-Hall, 2008; Donovan & McKelfresh, 2008; Taub, 2008; Wartman & Savage, 2008). The same is true for the participants of this study. Overall, students reported tremendous support from their parents throughout their college experience and this supporting role takes on different forms including practical, informational, emotional, protective, and tangible. Each type of support is explained further along with adding voice from the student’s stories.

Practical Support. As students talked about their communication and interactions with their parents, they acknowledged needing parent’s assistance in completing certain tasks or
solving problems they were unable to resolve on their own. A task common for many of the students was completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) when the time came to apply. Some students reported completing the FAFSA together with their parents while a few others relied on their parent(s) to initiate the application. Cesar, a college sophomore stated “College is stressful so stuff like that [the FAFSA] I don’t have to worry about; when she [mom] helps me out with things like that it’s really awesome.” Eli, a college junior, shared the practical reason he lets his parents handle this task for him. He stated, “financially, they [parents] always take over that part. They do the FAFSA form and turn the things in because it [FAFSA] requires all their information anyway.” Eli also shared that he has called his mom on more than one occasion when he is struggling with a math problem. He acknowledged that most students probably would not do this but states, “I know I could ask around or go to the learning center on campus, but she’s the chair of the Math Department at [institution named]; why not ask?”

Other examples of practical support include students needing and asking for documentation often kept by their parents such as a birth certificate, social security card, medical insurance card, immunization records or other medical history information. One student revealed her mom acts as her back up alarm clock when she is traveling or when she has an important appointment early in the morning.

**Informational Support.** The majority of students in the study reported seeking their parent’s advice and inviting them to share an opinion when trying to solve a problem. Parents were consulted on a variety of topics ranging from switching majors, studying abroad, seeking internships, and employment decisions to applying for a student leadership position or considering graduate school. Ingrid indicated she often turns to her parents for advice. She shared, “I know that I can always rely on them and always call them and you know, they’ll
always give me good, quality advice.” Cade, a graduating senior, stated, “I consult my dad on all the major decisions I make in college. He has a lot of life experience and always offers really good advice.”

Seth is a sophomore in college and the president of his fraternity. He talked at length about some of the difficult decisions he has had to make while in a leadership position within his fraternity. He shared why he turns to his parents at times in the midst of the decision making process. He stated:

Both my mom and dad (pause), those are the people I’ll call up and it’s kind of nice to have that outside perspective. They don’t know, they weren’t in the Greek system and they don’t know anything about that. It’s kind of nice because they’re kind of a little bit more neutral and un-bias where if I ask one of my buddies some advice that’s related to school or related to the fraternity he might kind of have his own stake in there. But they’re [his parents] always looking at what’s best for me and I talk to them on the phone pretty often. They’ve been a big resource just as far as advice because you know they are years older than me now and they’ve kind of been there and done that.

The students are not looking for an answer to the problem or task at hand, nor are they looking for someone to take over and resolve it. They are looking for someone to listen as they talk through different ways to approach and resolve the issue. They view their parents as a trusted resource with more life experiences to draw from.

Emotional Support. All but one of the students interviewed in the study indicated their parent’s main role in their college experience was to be emotionally supportive. Students reported knowing their parents were always available to listen, encourage, empathize, and offer
reassurance, especially when the student was experiencing stress or anxiety. Whether students were calling to talk about a difficult class, how far away they had to park the car from their apartment, or the woes of a relationship break up, students reported their parents always took time day or night to take their call. I asked students to tell me about a difficult decision they had made while in college and what role, if any, their parents played in that decision. Regardless of the circumstance shared, students described their parents playing a support role rather than assuming the role of decision maker. Eva, a college sophomore, talked about various decisions she has made since moving away from home, some of which conflicted with her parent’s opinions but nonetheless decisions she made independently. She talked about turning to her parents even when she knew they would disagree with her decision or course of action. Eva shared:

I definitely lean on them [her parents]. I called my dad, talked to them and vented about it and they told me to just follow my gut feeling and do what makes me happy. I knew they didn’t really want me to do it but it was my decision. (pause)
So I definitely lean on them during hard situations.

She goes on to share about a time when she lost a college scholarship.

I got a 3.48 and I had to keep a 3.5 to keep my scholarship and I was devastated. I was really, really, really upset but my parents you know, they weren’t mad about it. They felt bad for me that I was like crying and upset and they supported me and told me that everything would work out o.k.

According to Kenny and Rice (1995) “parents who support their college student, indirectly helps the student develop coping mechanisms which improve resiliency” (p.447). Grace talked about how her parents living out-of-state, support her from afar:
they’re just very comforting in a sense; they’re always like there for me and I can just (pause), I don’t ever feel uncomfortable coming to them for something or anything even if I know it will upset them because they’re usually like really chill about everything. And my mom is really big on what makes you happy more than anything else so like, if you’re like, oh my god I failed a class or failed a test she’s like, it’s fine, you’ll live; don’t stress out about it. I think it’s always just, I think I know the fact that they’ll just always be like on my side. I don’t think I’ve ever had a situation where they were not on my side.

Studies show that contact with a parent increases during times of stress (Bowlby, 1988; Samuolis, Layburn, & Schiaffino, 2001; Trice, 2002). Bowlby (1988) points out that attachment to a caregiver is more noticeable when fatigue or illness is present. As emotional supporters, students reported it was just as important for their parents to be available for the good times as it was in times of stress or illness. Students invited and expected their parents to attend recitals, award ceremonies, athletic or research competitions, and of course graduation. In general, students wanted their parents to share in the celebration of their accomplishments throughout their collegiate experience.

**Protective Support.** As students reflected on the role their parents have played thus far in their college experience, they talked about feeling a sense of security, knowing their parents would always be there to help if needed. Whether students lived two hundred or two thousand miles from home, knowing their parents loved and supported them created a virtual safety net which reportedly allowed them to explore, take risks, and make decisions without the fear of failing. In a study on autonomy development in traditional-age college students, Cullaty (2011) found when students felt parental support, they “perceived greater freedom to make their own
decisions and plan independently from the approval of others” (p.431). Parental support promoted self-assurance, encouraged self-governance, and fostered autonomy development among the college students in his study.

Students encounter parent protection in different ways. Grace, an out-of-state student who has not traveled back home for more than two years, feels her parent’s support and protection from afar. She recognizes her parents want her to try new things, make her own decisions and accept the consequences of those decisions yet feels secure in the fact that her parents will be there for her if she really needs their assistance. Grace shared:

I’ll tell them [her parents] what I’m doing and everything and they may not agree with it but they say, just know it’s your decision. I think they really stress the fact that like now it’s your time to make your own decisions and if they suck, you’re going to learn from it. Yeah, they’re really big on trial and error. (laughs) I know they would step in if I needed them to but I don’t need them to so I know they know to just like, stand aside and just kind of like, sit on the bench until they’re kind of like needed.

Other students feel their parents support and protection financially. Many of the students in the study reported having part-time jobs in order to pay for rent, food, entertainment, and other living expenses. Although students were contributing in varying degrees to the overall cost of college attendance, many of them acknowledged their parents offered a financial safety net in case they fell short. When talking about the role her parents played over her college career Zoey stated:

Every time I need something like, they will be there, even though I would never use it. But I know if today I called and asked them for a lot of money, they would
give it to me no questions asked. And so I guess it’s just that unconditional love and unconditional support that they have provided even though like I don’t have any concrete examples of it, like I know that it’s there. (pause) They are there when I need them but I do my best not to need them.

Finally, some students encountered parent support and protection when they were ill or physically injured, needing short term assistance or follow up care. Eli’s parents are university faculty and currently work at a different university in the state than the one he is attending. He spoke of how intentional his parents have been about not stepping in to handle things for him even though they are better prepared to navigate the university environment. He indicated his parents have been there for him when it really mattered adding:

I always feel loved; I always feel like they are here for me. You know if anything goes terribly wrong I can always go to them and they can help. If I’m sick you know, like really sick, they can come get me. I could call them right now and say I was in trouble and they would drop what they are doing and drive down three hours to help me.

The protective support college students receive from their parents is a feeling of security rather than a demonstrated action. Based on a life-time of physical and emotional support from parent to child, college students perceive a safety net to be ever present. The concept of a virtual safety net is a clear example of Bowlby (1973) and Ainsworth’s (1989) attachment theory. Parents have developed a secure base of attachment with their children, providing a trusted base of emotional and physical care. As students move away from home to attend college, the protection and support still exists even though parents are not physically present. All but one of
the students in the study expressed the feeling that their parents would always be there if needed which allowed students to try new things, take risks, and explore without the fear of failing.

*Tangible Support.* The majority of the students participating in the study acknowledged their parents play a very tangible role in their college experience, especially when it comes to financing the student’s college education. Beyond completing the FAFSA, many students spoke of the loans and debt their parents were taking on in order to financially support their college career and related expenses. Ingrid talked about her parent’s financial contribution to her education:

They [her parents] had told me that they would support me and pay for me to go if I went in-state, because out-of-state was more expensive so for me that cut it down to just a few schools. We don’t get any financial aid from school; we’re middle class and so…My dad had an agreement with his father that grandpa would pay for his education if my dad would pay for his kid’s education and so I will pay for my kid’s education because you know, I think that’s the best gift a parent can give is to graduate debt free.

For some of the students interviewed, their parent’s financial support extends beyond college tuition, textbooks, and room and board; students reported parent’s assuming other costs such as car payments, automobile insurance, cell phone charges, and gas/travel expenses. Most of the students interviewed spoke with great appreciation for their parent’s financial support. Sara, a college junior, shared:

They [her parents] help me fill out financial aid and all that; they’re co-signers on my private loans actually. But we talked about that before college. Like saying they are not going to be paying for all of it. After college I am paying back the
loans and they are not helping with loan payments and I was like yes I got that. I am lucky that I have parents who are willing to do that or have the ability to even co-sign so I am happy for that.

A few of the graduating seniors interviewed shared that their parent’s financial support will extend after graduation too. As Zoey talked about her plan to move to another state in a few months to begin her post-graduation career, she stated:

Since I have no money right now, they [her parents] were willing to pay all the down payments and all of that stuff and then once I’m at my job I can pay for everything else. I was talking to people about it and they told me you know, if your parents are offering, you should take it. And then I have a friend who was telling me that sometimes parents want to feel needed and if I say yes like, yah it might take a little hit to the ego but, they’re more than happy to help so I should take it. So I told them [her parents] I would and that I would pay them back and they didn’t really care much about the money.

Students shared other forms of tangible support to include assistance with transportation during academic breaks or at the beginning and end of summer and parents physically assisting students as they move from one place of residence to another. Tyree, a graduating senior, talked about his after graduation plans which include a trip to Europe and then moving back to his parent’s home at the end of the summer. He shared:

Yeah I am going to see my brother in Denmark and Sweden. We [Tyree and his parents] are going to be going there because they have holiday in the summer so he [his brother] doesn’t work in the summer. I have been looking for some jobs for when I graduate, but I am looking to go to grad school you know? But I
haven’t applied yet because I’m trying to see if I should go to [name of a public university] or [name of a private college] so right now I am looking for a job of course. Yeah, definitely looking for a job to be doing when I get back; I’ll be moving to [city] and living with my parents.

Not all tangible support was financial however. A few students reported their parent’s support came in the form of volunteering time to work at student organized events held on campus. Simone, a first generation college student, talked about ways her mom found to be involved.

Well she hasn’t really gotten involved too much because she doesn’t really know the process and that always scares her a little bit. But examples that I can remember would be my involvement in MEChA [Movimiento Estudiantil Chicana/o de Aztlan] and when we had a student conference my mom volunteered to make 500 tamales. And then just recently we had another conference and she volunteered to cook the food and so she tries to help out in ways such as that.

The majority of students in the study experienced their parent’s assistance in very concrete ways. While this tangible display of support was most often financial, parents also showed their support through volunteer work, co-signing a loan to prove financial stability, or offering physical assistance when moving in or out a place of residence.

Overall the students participating in the study receive a great deal of support from their parents throughout their college experience. The support takes on different forms depending on the students’ actual or perceived needs. Although parents are not ever present, hovering over their sons and daughters ready to act at the first sign of distress, much of the support provided allows students to experience their college years relatively problem free. Whether the parent’s
involvement or support of their student is practical, informational, emotional, protective, or tangible, the student may somehow be shielded from experiencing any real challenge or hardship from which to grow. On the other hand, the parent involvement and support described in the study may be helping students take risks, build self-confidence and prepare for the adult world post graduation.

As themes emerged from the participant’s stories, one question asked of the students drew an almost unanimous response. When students were asked if beyond their freshmen year, had their parent(s) ever contacted a faculty member, administrator, or staff at the institution concerning grades, academics, or any other area of university life, all but one of the students gave a resounding no. Reactions to this question were mixed; most students thought it quite ridiculous and laughed as they shared their response while a few others demonstrated surprise at the thought of this possibility by any parent.

Levels of Involvement

In a recent study, when parents of current generation college students were asked to compare their level of involvement with that of their parents when they were in college, “81 percent said that they were more involved, 15 percent said about the same, and only 4 percent said that they were less involved than their parents had been” (Janosik, 2004). How did the twenty-four college students in this study characterize the level of their parent’s involvement? The majority of students interviewed indicated their parent’s involvement in college was just right for them. When reflecting on his parent’s involvement, Aden, a sophomore, stated:

We stay in contact enough to the point where they know how I’m doing and stuff like that but it’s not to the point where it’s like oh, I didn’t call mom today, I better call her now. And it’s not like I never talk to them and don’t know what’s
going on. It’s like, they know what’s going on and are happy with what I’m doing and I know what’s going on back at home and so I feel like it is just right.

Samantha, a junior in college, shared:

They’re not over stepping their boundaries. They are always willing to be there for me when I need them and they take constructive criticism from their child whenever I feel they might be saying something wrong (starts laughing), as horrible as that sounds. But, I just cherish the relationship that we have so I would say that it’s just right.

Lissa felt her parent’s involvement has been just right and recognized how different she is compared to her best friend from high school who decided to live at home while attending a local community college. She talked with appreciation for the separation and autonomy this gave her and for what she has gained over her four years in college. Lissa shared:

Although I am independent, I do appreciate what I’ve learned. I love my friends and I love my family and I mean I have a big family, so I think if they had been any closer or any more involved, I wouldn’t have had all the experiences that I did have that I really, really grew from . . . My best friend from high school stayed home to play sports at the community college and I can see the difference between her and I every time I come home. I kept telling her you need to go away, just even for one semester. I grew up and it [moving away from home] has made a huge difference.

As many of the students reflected on their parent’s involvement, they seemed sensitive to how others may perceive the involvement they were describing. While ‘others’ most often meant
their peer group, in some cases ‘others’ referred to college faculty, administrators, or those that buy into the media’s portrayal of “helicopter parents”.

Hope characterized her relationship with her mom as “unconventional” due to a turbulent past. She indicated that her mom was not involved in her academic life, just her social life. She shared that she talks to her mom twice a day; once in the morning when her mom calls to wake her up and once in the evening when they discuss the day’s events and arrange a time for her mom to call the next morning. When talking about her mom’s involvement, Hope stated:

I would say it’s just right for me, however probably I guess, if someone else were telling me that they talk to their mom every day and they do this and that, I would probably say too much. But I don’t know, I think with our relationship and our past, it’s just right I guess.

Hope’s statement points out her ambivalence regarding the level of her mom’s involvement. She is keenly aware that talking to her mom twice a day is not the norm for most college students yet justifies the high level of contact by referring to her past history. Hope grew up an only child and spent most of her childhood in a home where domestic violence was pervasive. After her father was incarcerated, Hope and her mom moved frequently and she has had very little contact with her father as a result. Hope recognizes that from an outsider’s perspective, daily contact with her mom appears “over-the-top” but defends the behavior as something they have always done. Hope indicated that she is “responsible enough” to set an alarm each night and wake up on her own, but believes the arrangement she has with her mom provides a sense of security for both of them.

Hope’s relationship with her mom is clearly one of interdependence. Both Hope and her mom continue to rely on each other for emotional support and security which may be preventing
both of them from forming secure relationships with other adults. Hope’s mom is enabling her
daughter from having to take on adult responsibilities and of course Hope welcomes the high
level of involvement because it makes her life easier in the moment. Hope needs to learn how to
live independently, face challenges on her own, and deal with the consequences of her daily
actions and decisions. Practicing this now will help Hope prepare for her future when she will
need to navigate through life’s challenges without her mom around to assist.

None of the students interviewed felt their parent’s involvement in college was too much.
While the majority of the students felt their parent’s involvement was just right as previously
discussed, there were a few students who wished there had been more involvement from their
parents. Lily, a first generation college student, reflected:

I think it’s too little honestly. I wish that they had more knowledge and that they
were able to like, you know, if I’m ever in some sort of rut, like for them to be
able to say, oh maybe you should email your teachers and see what happens or I
wish that they were able to give me that type of advice sometimes. Because
sometimes my roommates will complain to their parents about things like that and
their parents will know exactly what to do or say. I feel like it’s bitter sweet you
know? I don’t know, I do everything on my own and wish that they were a little
bit more involved but it’s not their fault, they just don’t know.

As a first generation college student, Lily is looking for advice and direction in the college
environment, something with which her parents are not familiar. Even though Lily talks to both
of her parents a couple times a week and feels their support in other ways, she is looking for her
parents to play more of a student service support role. While Lily may feel disadvantaged due to
her parent’s lack of knowledge in the college arena, she has actually learned how to navigate the
university environment on her own, leaving her better prepared to face the transition into a new environment.

Another first generation student I interviewed, Yvette, entered the foster care system when she was five years old. She and her five siblings were raised by her great aunt and uncle and she referred mostly to her great aunt as her parent. Yvette shared:

I definitely think it’s too little. I don’t, like for me (pause) I would expect…you know I feel like all my roommates and their families with coming here and always like sending stuff in the mail like little care packages and just little reminders about stuff. For me I’m like, why doesn’t my parent do that or like you know a call just isn’t enough sometimes so…I don’t know. Like I would say it’s too little but at the same time for me it’s almost just right because I don’t expect that of them so it’s almost natural that they don’t. They’re not that involved and at the same time like if they were to come, like it would probably almost be like, like too hard to do. I don’t know.

As a first generation college student, Yvette isn’t looking for someone to help her navigate the university environment. She is sensitive to the fact that her roommates’ parents and family provide emotional support; something Yvette longs for and feels she is not getting. She tries to write it off as something that doesn’t matter but her words relay the importance she places on receiving emotional support from her parents.

Another student, Whitney, specifically selected a university that was closer to home. Living only a few hours away, her parents are employed at the local college where she grew up. Whitney talked about wanting her parents to be more involved.
I guess maybe just a little too little because, (pause) just because I feel like sometimes I don’t, I feel like maybe I can’t talk to them. I mean I do like to talk to them about what’s going on but at the same time I know that they’re busy and they’re doing their own things with work. They have always been their more to listen and maybe offer advice but not really to like tell me what to do and sometimes I wish I had someone who would tell me what to do. So I wish they could be more involved that way I guess.

Traditional models of student development would support the approach Whitney’s parents are taking. The current arrangement creates uncomfortable feelings for Whitney and she wants her parents more involved to perhaps manage the decisions she feels unprepared to make. Like many college students, Whitney is developmentally somewhere in between adolescence and adulthood. She has moved away from home to attend college but struggles with facing challenges and making decisions on her own. According to Sanford (1966), a critical tension must exist, striking a balance of challenge and support, for growth to occur. The balance may be uncomfortable but offers the greatest chance for growth and development.

Lily, Yvette, and Whitney may feel their parent’s involvement is too little because they have been socialized with higher levels of parent involvement in K-12 and have come to expect the involvement to continue. Perhaps they see higher levels of involvement continuing among their college peers and therefore in comparison feel their parent’s involvement is not enough. I would suggest the classification of too little used by the three students is not a measure of contact frequency with their parents but a measure of their individual needs not being met. The students are not seeking more phone calls,
texts, or visits; they are seeking their parent’s involvement as a way to comfort and support them through the uncertainty of life’s challenges. They are looking for the safety net they perceive is present for their peers.

The majority of students in the study classified their parent’s involvement as “just right” for them and a few others stated it as “too little”. In general, students reported frequent contact with their parents throughout a typical week most often initiating the contact themselves by phone, email, text, or instant message. The nature of the communication in general was social and absent of academic involvement or decision making. Students shared their parents would “check in” with them, not “check-up” on them. Students reported their parents were most interested in their student’s general success and wellbeing and only offered advice when invited.

Student’s Perceptions

Throughout the interviews, many of the students described experiencing a stronger, deeper relationship with one or both of their parents during their years in college. Ainsworth (1989) notes that “as college students develop their independent identity and expand social networks to include significant others, attachment to parents continues and in many cases grows stronger” (p. 710). Students reported participating in more meaningful conversations with their parents and described having an awareness that their relationship was shifting or had shifted throughout their time in college. As students talked about this phenomenon, some used the term friendship to describe the current relationship with their parent(s). Ingrid shared how her relationship with her parents changed since coming to college:

Now that I’m older they’ve stepped off, you know, really the parent side of things and they’re becoming more my friend. But you know, when they need to be my
parents they obviously will. But it’s more of a friendship now than a parent/daughter relationship. . . I would have defined them as friends before I left for college but it’s become more of a friendship than parents as I’ve spread my wings a little bit. They’ve never had to nag me about things so I think that’s helped the friendship. I’m pretty independent so (pause), Yeah, I would define them as friends but our friendship has grown stronger once I moved away.

Ingrid’s reflection adds support to Ainsworth’s (1989) theory that student’s attachment to parents continues and can become more meaningful as time passes. Ingrid is a junior in college and describes herself as independent; she comments on how her relationship with her parents has grown stronger and changed from a parent-daughter relationship to more of an adult relationship. The term friendship itself signifies this change and the importance of their evolving bond, giving Ingrid’s relationship with her parents added meaning. When I asked how she would characterize her relationship with her parents she replied, “We’re really close. I like hanging out with them. I’d rather hang out with them then my friends from home.” Ingrid gives preference to time spent with her parents over time spent with her friends. And Ingrid is not alone; Zoey, a graduating senior, shared similar sentiments:

I think I would say that they’re more friends than parents. I think that there are very rare times when I actually need something from them. I talk to them as much as I can. I would say it is very different to say that I love my parents because I love and like my parents. I wouldn’t change our relationship; they treat me like an adult and I feel like they’ve always treated me like an adult and so if I am going to make a dumb decision, they’re going to tell me that’s a really dumb decision but let me do what I want and wait for me to let them know how it worked out.
Zoey’s explanation of not only loving her parents but also liking them reveals a shift from the parent-child relationship to more of an adult relationship based on mutual respect. Arnett (2004) notes that changes occur in both the emerging adult and in their parents during this time “allowing them to establish a new intimacy, more open than before, with a new sense of mutual respect. They begin to relate to each other as adults, as friends, as equals, or at least as near-equals” (p.58).

The findings also indicate a relational shift occurring along gender lines. Many of the female students in the study reported communicating more with their fathers since leaving for college than they ever had when living at home. While they expressed an overall deepening of their relationship with both parents, they specifically commented on the increased frequency of direct communication and time spent with their fathers. They spent more time on the phone talking individually to each parent rather than simply talking to their mother and having her convey the conversation to their father at a later time. Some female students even arranged a separate day and time to call their fathers. Lily, an out-of-state senior, has been married for almost a year and maintains a long distance relationship with her husband who she identifies as her biggest support system. When commenting on how she characterizes her relationship with her parents, she shared:

It’s always been close and then when I came to college of course everyone got even closer because they miss me so much. My dad and I have gotten much, much, much closer recently. He’s like, (pause) I don’t even understand it honestly, like pretty obsessed (laughs). He calls me like every Monday and Friday and we talk for like a good forty minutes on every Monday and Friday. So twice a week I talk to him and tell him like everything and he’s just like, I think he’s
really proud of me because I’m about to graduate and so that’s why we’re like super, super close right now but yeah, we’re close and my mom is like a little bit jealous sometimes; not like actually jealous though.

Gilligan (1982) found the relationship between self and others to be different for females compared to males. Women are more relational than men because they have been socialized into feminine roles that model interdependence and care for others. Women not only focus on building relationships but are also concerned with sustaining them over time (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986). Men have been socialized to be strong and independent, rewarded for their ability to stand alone in the face of adversity.

Eva shared that she has noticed growing closer to her parents since coming to college and that they argue less. In particular, her relationship with her father has grown stronger and they are able to verbally express sentiments that had once been assumed. Eva talked about how her relationship with her parents has remained the same and how it has changed since moving away from home and going to college.

I don’t know, I guess our day to day contact, the topics we talk about for the most part. I feel like a lot has almost like changed because I feel closer, for example, I’m closer to my dad right now than I’ve ever been. We’ve just gotten really, really close and so I mean, all those things are normal but when you move out of the house and leave and when you’re not in high school and you don’t see them every day. We’ve [referring to her dad] really had good conversations and we say I love you now; we never really said that before but it was always (pause), it was never that we didn’t love each other it was just more of we are really, really close right now.
Belenky et al’s (1986) work suggests that while the campus culture for women is improving, most colleges and universities continue to be dominated by male authority figures and this can intimidate female students causing them to revert to existing relationships that are safe. One possible explanation is that females turn to their fathers as a way of exploring gender and power in a safer, more familiar way.

Student’s perceptions of their relationships with their parents changes during the college years. Both theory (Ainsworth, 1989; Arnett, 2004; Bowlby, 1988) and research (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Cullaty, 2011; Lefkowitz, 2005; Taub, 1997, 2008) suggest that students negotiate new relationships with their parents throughout the college years. The findings in the study echo past research. In addition, the findings suggest a difference in parent attachment along gender lines as female students reported a markedly stronger relationship with their fathers then they had prior to moving away to college. There was no mention by male students in the study of any difference in their relationship to the same or opposite gendered parent. The finding supports prior research which suggests females in college are significantly more attached to their parents then are men (Kenny & Donaldson, 1991; Taub, 1997).

**Defining Adulthood**

The distinction between adolescence and adulthood is socially constructed and therefore varies based on historical circumstance as well as cultural and societal expectations. Becoming an adult in western society today has become less about a biological process and more of a social process. Society treats emerging adults both as an adult and as a child. At eighteen years of age you earn the right to vote and can enlist in the military but cannot legally consume alcohol until age twenty-one. Arnett’s (2000) research on emerging adulthood outlines five characteristics of individuals during the period of life between ages 18 and 25: identity exploration, instability
marked by possibilities, being self-focused, feeling in-between adolescence and adulthood, and experiencing frequent transitions such as relocating from one place of residence to another. The definition of adulthood among the participants in the study varied and every student at some point during the interview referred to themselves as an adult or nearing the threshold of adulthood. Some students described graduation from college and entry into a career as a clear sign they had reached adulthood while others felt they were adults because they no longer lived at home with their parents, summers included. Cesar, a college sophomore, laughed when I asked if he considers himself an adult and replied:

Yeah, I’m getting there. It’s weird because I’m just being a student, like a full time student and not working, and at the same time I feel like a kid at school and then other times stuff happens and I go oh, I have to go and do big kid stuff for a while. So I’m just kind of getting use to being an adult I guess but, it will definitely, I will be working over the summer and once I’ve graduated it will definitely be setting in.

Cesar offers a clear example of feeling in-between adolescence and adulthood. He refers to adult behavior as “big kid stuff” and believes graduation from college is the time when he steps over the threshold into adulthood. But what constitutes adulthood for one student is viewed differently by another. Lissa is about to graduate from college and when I asked if she considered herself an adult, she replied:

Yes. Although sometimes I still feel like I’m a kid; I don’t know…(laughs) I don’t know, it’s like I’m at that weird age I guess. Like I have my job already for after college and I have things lined up for after graduation but I still feel because of the family that I have, like even though I can do everything by myself, I don’t
necessarily want to. I want my parents to be a part of it. I want them involved and I don’t know even when I’m forty if I’m going to feel like an adult. I mean, yes of course I’m going to feel like an adult but I’m still going to feel like a kid because if something happens, I’m still going to call my mom and talk with her about it. I don’t know.

In *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens Through the Twenties*, Arnett (2004) talks about the ambiguity and ambivalence of feeling in-between adolescence and adulthood. Becoming an adult is a gradual process filled with feelings of freedom, promise, and hope mixed with dread and reluctance as the stress and anxiety of uncertainty and responsibility begin to take hold. Often college students live in a liminal state between adolescence and adulthood and it is both uncomfortable and exciting to move through the in-between. Lissa’s comments demonstrate that she recognizes she can take responsibility for herself including making independent decisions and becoming financially independent from her parents; she is just unsure if she wants to fully transition, crossing the threshold into adulthood.

A few students focused on financial independence as the marker of achievement for adult status. For some students this included repayment to their parents of financial contributions given throughout their years in college. Arnett (2000, 2004) found financial independence to be one of three main features of reaching adulthood; accepting responsibility for oneself and making independent decisions were the other two. During her interview, Ingrid talked with a great deal of respect about her parents, viewing them as role models who instilled in her at an early age the importance of hard work, honesty and a strong sense of responsibility. When I asked Ingrid if she considered herself an adult she stated:
I feel like an adult in some ways. I feel like you know, when you’re an adult you pay your own bills; you can rely on just yourself. So I feel like I’m independent like an adult and I can make my own decisions like an adult but I only pay for my food and my parents pay for everything else. So in that way, I’m not an adult.

Throughout the interviews, students articulated how their relationship with their parents changed since starting college and how they were becoming adults in the process. They described new found freedoms in carrying on day to day acts such as attending class, if and when to study, what to eat or drink including the choice to consume alcohol, who to hang out with and where, and when to go to sleep or get up in the morning. They felt independent and delighted in the increased privacy which afforded them the choice of what to share or not share with their parents. As students spoke of their independence, many of them would waffle between feeling like an adult and at times feeling not quite an adult yet. Eli talked about what it means to be an adult:

In college you pretend you’re an adult because you’re living out here on your own and especially for me being somewhat independent. I don’t want to say independent because I’m not financially independent, but like no one’s telling me what to do you know; I’m making all these good decisions or some bad you know for myself and there’s really no consequence. I like have to take the brunt of the decisions I make and stuff. And now I think at times in that respect I’m an adult but in other respects I’m still just in school and I don’t have a professional career yet. I don’t have a wife and kids; I don’t have to deal with the same stresses that my parents have and so I just think to me like…I am an adult but I’m not like a real adult. I don’t have to you know (pause), I think part of being an adult is like
overcoming adversity that comes with adulthood you know, like whether it be financial or like your career and things like that. You come to have to make the really hard choices and do things that. You know college is really all about you. It’s all about yourself and it’s almost like a little bit selfish you know. No really, you know what I mean? Everything about college is about you becoming who you are or will be in the future. And as an adult, a real adult, I feel like everything is about everyone else. You know like whether it be your wife or kids or family or you know, whatever, you’re really having to do a lot of those kind of things so that’s really what kind of separates college kids from like full adults. That gap.

One student in the study has traveled a different road through childhood and toward adulthood than other participants. Yvette is a sophomore in college and entered the foster care system when she was five years old. As a senior in high school, she aged out of foster care when she turned eighteen and moved out of her foster home to live with an older sister. Life circumstances have forced her to tackle some aspects of adulthood that others her age have not experienced and Yvette has no sense of feeling in-between adolescence and adulthood. She considers herself an adult due in large part to her financial independence, her ability to make independent decisions, and her ability to take responsibility for her decisions and actions without the security of a safety net to catch her if she fails. Yvette admits wishing she had parents to turn to in times of stress or even to share in her success. She reports feeling her roommates or other college friends take things for granted stating, “People forget that it’s not simple all the time; that there are different lives out there. When I hear my roommate complain about her mom I literally tell her, I would die for a mom like that! Are you kidding me?” Yvette acknowledges her college
friends are her main support system and credits university faculty and staff as an important resource in her continued success.

Yvette’s experience and perspective is unique; her past experiences suggest that due to familial circumstances, she was forced at an earlier age to develop the physical and emotional resiliency to survive without the luxury of a safety net. While her journey toward adulthood has accelerated, forcing her to individuate earlier than her peers in some areas of development, she continues to show some characteristics of emerging adulthood as suggested by Arnett (2000) such as identity exploration, self-focus, and instability marked by possibilities. Yvette’s experience points to the importance of recognizing that parent involvement varies considerably depending on family structure and status, socioeconomics, race, and a variety of other societal, cultural, and economic factors.

Overall, the students participating in the study view the threshold for adulthood to be individually defined, a conclusion reached in similar ways by participants in previous studies (Arnett, 2000; Mattanah et al., 2004; Trice, 2002). Most students described feeling in-between adolescence and adulthood, believing their college years a time to explore who they are and who they want to become without the added responsibility of being an adult. The majority of students viewed financial independence as the number one marker of adulthood followed by the ability to make independent decisions and take responsibility for your own actions. The students spoke with ambivalence about wanting to become an adult feeling there is still time to enjoy the benefits of being partially dependent on their parents. A few students in the study mentioned their parents too are ambivalent as to whether they view their college age children as adults. This finding mirrors the results of a multi-campus study by Nelson et al. (2007), who found that like their college students, most parents did not yet view their student as an adult. Students and their
parents will most likely continue to define and redefine the definition of adulthood based on change in cultural and societal influences as well as federal and state legislation that either requires parental involvement in some aspect or further independence for college aged, emerging adults.

The findings from the study make clear the majority of students are not individuating during their college years and most remain closely attached to their parents. The students identify parents as a significant source of support during their college years and while the type of support takes on different forms including practical, informational, emotional, protective, and tangible support, the overall level of parent involvement is primarily non-academic in nature and viewed as just right by the majority of the students. None of the students in the study viewed their parent’s involvement as intrusive, hovering, or unwelcomed; in fact, parent involvement is often invited, encouraged, or expected and the three students in the study who described the level of involvement as too little wished their parents would be more involved. As these twenty-four college students moved away from home and into the college environment, they demonstrate some signs of individual development as they explore possibilities of self through their new environment, involvement, relationships, and thought processes. They recognize their own individual growth as well as a gradual shift in the relationship they have with their parents from one of parent-child to one they describe as more like a friendship. The findings support attachment theory as defined by Bowlby (1988) and Ainsworth (1989) and reinforce the idea that students need not separate from their parents and family in order to start to individuate and develop in the college environment. However, many of the students in the study still need to take the next step of forming new, healthy attachments to other adults in the college environment such as a faculty mentor, coach, or significant other. Further, the findings in the study make clear that
the threshold for adulthood is not marked by an individual event such as moving away from home, graduating from college, or starting a career, but by the gradual attainment of self-sufficiency over time. Arnett’s (2000, 2004) theory of emerging adulthood suggests the road toward adulthood is a long, gradual process which begins at approximately age eighteen but only concludes when an emerging adult can “stand alone as an independent person” (p.209) regardless of age. The majority of students in the study demonstrate an interdependent relationship with their parents. Their parents feel a need to continue a high level of involvement post high school and most students in turn welcome, rely on, and benefit from their parent’s involvement during the college years.

Summary

Guided by the theoretical framework while integrating existing research with the collected data, the findings of the study reveal four emerging themes: the roles parents play in the lives of their college student, the level of parent involvement, the student’s perceptions and impact of their parent’s involvement, and how student’s define adulthood in relation to their growth and development. These twenty-four college students came from diverse backgrounds and family circumstances and every one of them welcome and value their parent’s involvement in their college experience. Most students in the study feel the relationship they have with their parents is evolving and changing from one of parent-child to a stronger, deeper relationship marked by mutual respect and friendship. The findings depict pronounced links between attachment theory and the theory of emerging adulthood. The final chapter provides further discussion of the theoretical perspectives relating to student development. Further summary of the study is given along with the study’s limitations and recommendations for future research and practice.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of the study is to examine the nature of parent involvement in the lives of college students and to develop an understanding of the impact of this involvement as perceived by the student. Twenty-four undergraduate students, men and women of sophomore, junior, and senior class standing at three different institutions, were interviewed for the study. The focus of this chapter is a discussion of the findings that emerge from the study as revealed through the theoretical framework, existing literature, and my own experience working with college students and their parents. A summary of the study’s findings, discussion and conclusions are presented along with recommendations for future research and practice.

Summary of Findings

Over the past few decades, college and university personnel have seen a significant increase in the level of parent involvement in the lives of college students (Janosik, 2004; Merriman, 2008; Wartman & Savage, 2008; Wolf, Sax, & Harper, 2009). While some college and university administrators find aspects of parental involvement to be positive and advantageous, many others are concerned with the potential effect this involvement may have on the college student’s development (Carney-Hall, 2008; Gerdes, 2004; Wartman & Savage, 2008). College is a time of transition; a time for personal and intellectual growth. Students are on a journey toward self-discovery, developing intellectual competencies and skills that assist them in discovering who they are and where they fit in society. An assumption made by some in the college arena, and many outside higher education, is that students enter college to increase their knowledge and skills, build competencies, achieve learning outcomes of the baccalaureate, and emerge from graduation on the threshold of adulthood. The concern however, of many college
faculty and administrators, is that on-going parent involvement in the lives of college students
will somehow hinder the student’s ability to individuate or self-author during the college years,
compounding the personal and professional challenges individuals face post-graduation (Coburn
& Treeger, 2003; Cullaty, 2011; Daniel & Scott, 2001; Wartman & Savage, 2008). The findings
from the study clearly demonstrate the tensions associated with parent involvement in the lives
of the twenty-four college students.

One finding emerging from the study suggests college students are maintaining close
relationships with their parents while beginning to experiment with independence during their
college years. Students in the study report their relationship with parent(s) has grown stronger
since leaving home and starting college; many describe the relationship as more of a friendship
now than the parent-child relationship they had before departing for college. The renegotiation of
the relationship is particularly evident among many females in the study who report a significant
change in the relationship they have with their fathers. Most female students described the
relationship with their father as one of mutual growth. This comes as no surprise given that
women are often socialized into feminine roles that model interdependence and care for others
(Gilligan, 1982). As many of the women in the study are building new relationships they are
taking time to care for and sustain those already created. The shift in the relationship is
happening at the same time fathers are renegotiating their role as protector, especially toward
their daughters. Men have been socialized to be strong and independent reinforcing less need for
fathers to show similar concern toward sons and sons are less likely to turn to their fathers.

The study’s findings also demonstrate that change in the parent-child relationship cuts
across all three class standings used in the study with differences in growth and maturation most
noticeable when comparing sophomores to seniors. The findings suggest that during the college
years, contact between parents and their student transitions away from “checking up” on their sons and daughters in the first year or two of college to mutually “checking in” on each other’s overall wellbeing during the later college years. The finding presents a challenge to traditional models of student development including Erikson (1968), Chickering and Reisser (1993), and Tinto (1986, 1987, 1993), which promote separation as a necessary step in identity development. The students are not separating from their parents; they are renegotiating their role within the relationship while exploring their individual identity. Further, the finding supports growing evidence that continued parent involvement in the lives of college students can be healthy (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1988; Samuolis, Layburn, & Schiaffino, 2001). Students have begun the individuation process and report their parent’s involvement makes a difference in their overall self-confidence toward taking risks and self-exploration.

As previously mentioned, the term helicopter parent is an expression coined by the media to describe an overprotective parent who hovers over their child ready to swoop in at the first sign of trouble. The behavior exhibited by the helicopter parent is both overt and intrusive. Although the results of the study fail to find this particular style of parenting, the findings clearly indicate parents are highly involved through the various support roles they play in the lives of their college student. Some of the support roles parents take on appear practical and in some cases necessary for many of the participants in the study. For example, students in the study who complete the FAFSA are required to report their parents’ income and therefore seek their parent’s involvement. In general, college students in the United States are surrounded by ambiguity with society treating them both as an adult and as a child (Arnett, 2000; Lefkowitz, 2005; Wartman & Savage, 2008). At eighteen years of age students are able to vote, enlist in the military, or open a credit card in their own name, yet they cannot legally drink alcohol until age
twenty-one, rent a car until age twenty-five, and as mentioned, are required to report their parents’ income on the FAFSA (Wartman & Savage, 2008). The findings clearly show the students in the study are closely connected with their parents and often invite parents to be involved in various aspects of their college lives. While the involvement is not intrusive or overbearing from the perspective of the students in the study, there is a reciprocal relationship being played out as parents want to be involved in the lives of their college student and students in turn want their parent’s to be involved in some aspects of their lives, especially when it benefits the student. The reciprocal relationship appeases parents and enables students in occupying the space in between adolescence and adulthood, giving students the best of both worlds. Many student affairs practitioners and faculty would still view the reciprocal relationship as intrusive as it keeps students from fully separating from past communities in order to individuate and incorporate into the university community.

Another important finding of the study is the student’s characterization of their parent’s level of involvement. The students participating in the study do not see their parents as highly involved, in fact the majority classify their parent’s involvement as “just right” for them and the remaining few report their parent’s involvement as “too little”. Twenty-two out of the twenty-four students in the study report frequent contact with their parents, most often by cell phone, text, or email; often the contact is initiated by the student, especially in times of stress or illness. The finding mirrors results in other studies for example, Trice (2002) found that students exchanged an average of 6 emails a week with their parents and during periods of stress such as exam time, contact with parents increased. Students in the study report the nature of the contact between parent and student as one of checking in with each other versus checking up. The majority of students in the study view their parents as their primary support in college and report
feeling a sense of security, knowing their parents will always be there to help as needed but only when invited to assist. This sense of security is derived from what Bowlby (1973) and Ainsworth (1989) would describe as a secure base of attachment. Even when their parents are not physically present, the students in the study still feel their parent’s support from afar and know their parents are just a phone call away.

The final theme emerging from the study centers on the definition of adulthood. The definition varies among the participants in the study and throughout the interviews, most students referred to themselves as both an adult and at times as a kid. Note: none of the students interviewed in the study used the term adolescent to describe themselves as not quite an adult.

As previously discussed, Arnett’s (2000, 2004) research findings identified three main features of adulthood: financial independence, accepting responsibility for oneself, and making independent decisions. All of the students in the study consider financial independence a marker of adulthood and all but two of the twenty-four students in the study are financially independent. In fact, two out of three married students within the study chose to accept their parent’s financial offering to cover the cost of tuition rather than establish financial independence with their spouse. In general, students in the study seemed to take for granted the lengths to which their parents would go to ensure their college student graduates debt free. From taking out a second mortgage on their home to borrowing against their retirement, parents are willing to mortgage their own financial future in order to provide a debt free start for their college graduate. Although parents may feel they are helping their college student get off to a good start, they are actually contributing to the delay of adulthood for the students and risking their own financial security in the process. If parents experience a financial crisis in the future, how will their college graduates
help if they have never learned how to be financially independent themselves? Will this continue to perpetuate an interdependent relationship between parents and their college graduates?

As for the other two features of adulthood identified through Arnett’s (2000, 2004) research, accepting responsibility for one self and making independent decisions, the majority of students in the study are making some progress as they navigate living and learning in a new environment physically separated from their parents. For example, the students make decisions on a daily basis including going to class, when to study, how late to stay up, when to get up in the morning, who to socialize with, and what to consume. None of the students in the study mentioned consulting with their parents on these types of decisions or impending consequences however, students often consult with their parents on a range of other decisions such as changing their college major, attending summer school, applying for a leadership position, moving into an apartment, and exploring options to study abroad. Perhaps students turn to their parents to consult on these types of decisions because the decision often has a financial impact and consulting parents often garners financial support. This demonstrates once again that students often benefit from parent involvement and advocacy.

From a student development perspective that advocates for separation, independence, or self-authorship, the findings suggest that while students in the study are able to physically separate from their parents, they are not emotionally separating from them which is ultimately delaying students’ ability to accept responsibility for their decisions, finances, and future. As interdependence between college students and their parents continues to grow, when will it end? Will Arnett or other theorists continually expand the age range of the emerging adult life phase from what is now suggested as age eighteen to twenty-five to somewhere in the late twenties or early thirties?
The theoretical models for the study were chosen because both attachment theory and emerging adulthood recognize and address parents as having a role in the lives of college students. Traditional models of student development present difficulties in application as there is an expectation that students separate from past communities and social networks when starting college; for a variety of reasons including cultural, economic, societal, and technological, separation is clearly not taking place. College students’ reality is intertwined with their parents. Although the students in the study are beginning to explore their individual identity, most students demonstrate interdependence with their parents and therefore are not achieving independence as they begin life after college. Based on longitudinal research, Baxter Magolda (2005) found that the transformation to independence, or what she calls self-authorship, is happening beyond the traditional college years. The reality of a later achieved independence is the very reason Arnett (2000) argues for a life stage called emerging adulthood to be added between the stages of adolescence and adulthood.

Discussion

Having summarized the study’s findings, I grapple with the conclusions that emerge from the analysis. Research shows the role of parents in the lives of college students has changed over time due to changing family structures, combined with societal, cultural, technological, and economic realities (Arnett, 2000; Carney-Hall, 2008; Daniel & Scott, 2001; Donovan & McKelfresh, 2008; Nelson et al., 2007; Taub, 2008; Wolf, Sax, & Harper, 2009). Regardless of the reasons parents are more involved, questions remain regarding the impact of parental involvement in the lives of today’s college students. Does parental involvement have an impact on the development of today’s college student? Another question to consider, what is the nature of parent involvement in the lives of college students and does this involvement inhibit students’
individual autonomy? Erikson’s (1968) theory is built on the belief that individuation is the central task to complete during adolescence and the ability to separate and individuate from parents has been considered a major milestone in the formation of identity. Recent research on identity development challenges this assumption concluding individuation is a gradual process over a longer period of time and separation from caregivers can weaken a student’s support system during a crucial time of transition like college (Ainsworth, 1989; Arnett, 2000; Baxter Magolda, 2014; Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009). Further, the identity process an individual works through is not necessarily linear and therefore often needs to be revisited when dissonance occurs (Ainsworth, 1989; Baxter Magolda, 2014; Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009). One could argue that students who have a secure attachment with their parents, feeling parent’s presence by way of a virtual safety net as described earlier in the study, are somehow buffered from crisis and never fully experience its impact nor explore their own ability to address and resolve the crisis. Erikson (1968), along with Chickering and Reisser (1993), believe in order for an individual to develop and mature, he or she needs to encounter dissonance or a psychosocial crisis and explore various resolutions to the conflict on their own.

Students will no doubt face a plethora of challenges both large and small such as a relationship break up, roommate conflict, failing an exam or course, losing their student identification card, sleeping through an alarm, missing the bus, insufficient funds to make a purchase, and the list goes on. It is how these challenges are addressed and by whom that makes the difference. A parent who acts as a student’s alarm clock, deposits money into the student’s checking account, or pays for a private room in the residence hall to avoid future roommate conflicts is robbing their student of the opportunity to face and address challenges, learning more
about themselves in the process. If a challenge is avoided or handled by someone else, another challenge will most likely present itself in the student’s future.

While all of the students in the study have faced challenges of varying degree, very few have had to face a major crisis such as the death of a parent or sibling, bankruptcy, long term illness or the loss of a home. It is unclear how the majority of students in the study would respond to crisis because from what they have shared during their interview, they have never really encountered crisis. Yvette is an exception as her story is uniquely different than the other students in the study and unlike most other college students in general. Yvette has experienced a series of personal crises throughout her life including the death of a sibling and being taken away from her biological parents and put into foster care at the age of five. Circumstances have forced her to address crisis and she continues to readdress aspects of past crises not yet fully resolved. Yvette’s history of crises has catapulted her toward adulthood and she has gained varying degrees of independence at a relatively young age compared to her college peers. Even though Yvette demonstrates a great deal of maturity and independence she too will no doubt find herself facing future watershed moments that continue to give way to a reexamination of self.

So are college students too attached to their parents and does this attachment impact their ability to individuate? Ainsworth (1989) would argue that while college students have developed a secure attachment with their parents at an early age, a healthy attachment between parent and child should not be seen as an excuse for over involvement or unhealthy behavior demonstrated by the parent or the student. In other words, just because the parent is always available does not mean the student should always call upon them for their intervention or support; likewise, just because the student always turns to the parent for help or support does not mean the parent should always take action. A healthy, secure attachment formed during infancy between parent
and child helps the child build confidence and trust in forming new relationships throughout life. As indicated by Ainsworth (1989) and also evident in the findings from the study, attachment to parents does not disappear when students enter college but if a secure, healthy base exists, the student is more confident in finding a new primary attachment figure or figures such as an advisor, faculty member, or coach thus expanding the student’s support network. The expanded network helps the student face adversity and act to resolve challenges or crises without needing to turn to parents as their sole system of support. In the study, expanded support networks were more evident among college juniors and seniors compared to sophomores. Juniors and seniors within the study more often named faculty, advisors, administrators, and campus employers among their role models and supporters whereas most of the sophomores in the study continued to identify parents as their main source of support. The example provided does not indicate that only the juniors and seniors in the study happen to have healthy, secure attachments with their parents while the sophomore students in the study do not. The example is meant to demonstrate that most of the juniors and seniors participating in the study have matured and as a result of the healthy attachment with their parents and their maturation, students have been able to expand their social network of support.

Arnett (2004) believes, “College is a social island set off from the rest of society, a temporary safe haven where emerging adults can explore possibilities in love, work, and world views with many of the responsibilities of adult life minimized, postponed, kept at bay” (p.140). His statement provides insight into how he might respond to questions surrounding the impact of parent involvement on college student development. Arnett would suggest that delayed development in young people is the result of major demographic shifts over the past fifty years, and not only does parent involvement impact college student development, so too does college
and university structure and agency in industrialized countries. Baxter Magolda (2001) would agree as she suggests college students lack experiences that afford them the opportunity to independently solve problems or make decisions due to university faculty and staff solving problems for them. Pointing a finger toward the institution and its’ programs, faculty and staff is not easy as I suspect most student affairs practitioners and faculty put the blame squarely on the shoulders of involved parents. It is easier to see the interdependent relationship that exists between college students and their parents than to examine interdependent relationships that may exist between students and college personnel. Both should be addressed by educating parents and college personnel on student development theory in order to define, model, and promote a balanced approach of challenge and support with emerging adults.

As evident throughout the interviews, many students in the study recognized major differences between their college experiences today compared to what their parents were experiencing at the same age twenty-five or thirty years ago. Many students shared that their parents were already married and had started a family, deferring the prospect of attending college to a later time. Students in the study often commented on how much easier their life and college experience has been thus far in large part because of their parents support combined with the support and structure set forth by the university. Many students in the study recognize they are somewhere in-between adolescence and adulthood which allows them to explore who they are and who they want to be without the immediate responsibilities of being an adult. Although a few students in the study would argue that they are adults, they admit it is helpful to suspend their financial independence “temporarily” when their parents offer to take on the financial responsibility throughout their years in college. These students are privileged and feel it is their parent’s responsibility to pay the tuition bill and associated educational expenses.
Conclusions

Conclusions drawn from the study and supported by the findings are as follows. First, the data suggest that most college students participating in the study have a strong attachment to their parents and are able to maintain and even deepen this relationship while they explore and begin to develop their individual identity. The college students participating in the study welcome and invite their parent’s involvement in their lives and believe their parent’s involvement is healthy and appropriate. Student’s in the study demonstrate clear signs of progress toward separation and the beginning of individuation by moving away from home and living on their own, choosing what to share with their parents regarding their lives in college, and by working to progressively shift more of the financial support away from their parents to themselves. Although other examples exist, these three signs were the most common examples of progress shared by the majority of students in the study. In addition, all of the students are in the process of renegotiating the relationship they have with their parents and most report recognizing a shift from a parent-child relationship to more of an adult relationship or friendship. This demonstrates students can maintain a healthy attachment with their parents while still gaining a sense of autonomy.

Second, the nature of parent involvement in the lives of these twenty-four college students is primarily non-academic and has evolved over the student’s years in college from one of parents checking up on their son or daughter to that of checking in. Both males and females in the study stated they valued their parent’s support from afar and believe it has given them the confidence to explore and take risks. None of the students in the study perceived their parent’s involvement as intrusive or overprotective in fact, most often it is the students who initiate
contact with their parents and set the tone as to contact frequency and method. The findings are a good reminder that not all parents of college students are helicopter parents.

Finally, the definition of adulthood varies among college students participating in the study and there is no commonly shared age, event, or rite of passage that marks the threshold of adulthood for these students. Although a few students in the study define themselves as adults, the majority of students feel they are making progress toward adulthood but will not fully reach their destination until they have gained financial independence from their parents and are able to stand alone in the “real world”.

The findings clearly illustrate that the students in the study occupy a liminal space in-between adolescence and adulthood. Student’s development is beginning to take place but not separate or independent from parents but occurring interdependently with parents. Parents are still part of the developmental process as they have been conditioned in the K-12 system to be involved, want to continue their involvement, and are often invited by their college student and expected to be involved throughout the college years and beyond. Traditional models of student development call for students to separate physically as well as emotionally from their past relationships and communities (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Erikson, 1968; Tinto, 1993). Tinto would likely suggest that due to the rise of parent involvement in the lives of today’s college students, separation is clearly not happening and students are not transitioning into adulthood during the college years. Many faculty and student affairs practitioners would agree with Tinto’s conclusion. However, newer, more holistic models of student development would argue that the process of separation and individuation is more gradual, spanning a longer period of time and faculty and student affairs practitioners should let go of the notion that the individuation process begins and concludes during the college years. Further, the student population on today’s college
campus continues to change and as educators it is important to recognize the influence of family for many of the under-represented student populations such as first generation and students from ethnically diverse backgrounds. Individual autonomy or self-authorship is achieved for today’s emerging adults, just not in the traditional timeframe of the college years.

Limitations of the Study

Despite the study’s contributions, it is not without limitations. Even though research interviews for the study were conducted at three different institutions in the Northwest region of the United States, the universities are more homogeneous in nature than different. All three institutions are four year, public universities in rural settings with a traditional age, full-time student population; two out of three institutions are primarily residential and all three universities require freshmen to live on campus their first year in college. Given these similarities, the results of the study are not necessarily generalizable to institutions in different regions of the United States, institutions serving a large population of nontraditional students, or other institutional types such as private colleges and universities or community colleges. The nature of parent involvement may differ for students living at home and commuting, attending college part-time, attending a highly selective private school, or non-traditional age college students.

Another limitation to consider is the diversity among the participant sample. Although great care was taken to purposefully select a diverse group of students for the study including one Asian American student, three Hispanic American students, three multi-racial students, one African American student, one African student, and fourteen Caucasian students, the findings of the study should be closely examined as the lack of racial and cultural diversity in the student sample did not allow for a full analysis of parenting styles influenced by cultural expectations.
Privilege should also be considered when determining the applicability of the study’s findings to students from differing socioeconomic backgrounds. Most of the students participating in the study come from middle class backgrounds with a few from lower-middle class. Almost all of the participants grew up in a two parent household and less than a third of the students are first generation college students. All of the students participating in the study demonstrate privilege in one form or another. All students in the study have the means to attend a large public, four year, moderately selective university and are able to maintain a separate residence from their parents and families. Even the students who spoke of limited financial resources have their own computer, cell phone, and “spending money” for entertainment or extras beyond tuition and basic living expenses; the majority of students came to campus with a car which they use as their main form of transportation. With only two exceptions, all of the students in the study are able to maintain dependent status for the purpose of federal or state financial aid and none of the students seem to struggle monetarily on a day to day basis.

Regardless of the limitations mentioned, results of the study provide important findings as to the nature and impact of parent involvement on today’s college students, a topic that up to this point has largely been overlooked in empirical investigation. The next section provides suggestions for future research and as well as provide a basis for recommendations for future practice.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

As is the case with any study, more questions are presented than one study can responsibly address. In order to assist in offsetting the limitations presented, future research should be conducted in the following areas:
1. *Further research is needed on how parental engagement varies across diverse student populations.* Student populations to consider include first generation, underrepresented students, and students with socioeconomically diverse backgrounds. In researching diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, it is important to examine the role privilege plays in individual development. The majority of students participating in the study came from middle class backgrounds and a few from lower-middle class. There are distinct advantages for students to stay closely connected with their parents during and after college. For example, Tyree is able to travel through Europe with his parents the summer after graduation, move back to his parent’s home, and delay searching for a job until after he has taken time to decide if graduate school should be his next destination. Does privilege delay adulthood for emerging adults? Future research should examine parental engagement based on diverse socioeconomic backgrounds as well as consider other underrepresented student populations.

2. *Future research should examine differences in parent involvement by institutional type.* What are the differences in parental involvement for students attending public versus private institutions, community colleges versus four year schools, or primarily residential institutions versus institutions with a high population of commuter students? How do differences in parental involvement by institutional type inform the practice of creating and implementing programs as well as the delivery of student services?

3. *Future research is needed to determine differences in parent involvement among racial and ethnically diverse populations of students.* Parenting styles often vary based on cultural values and expectations and research is noticeably lacking in this area (Mattanah, Brand, & Hancock, 2004; Wartman & Savage, 2008). Issues of trust, family unity, gender roles, and
language barriers may intersect with parent support, adding an additional layer of complexity as to the impact of parent involvement.

4. Future research should explore the nature of parent involvement and student autonomy from the perspective of parents. How would parents describe their role in the development of their college-aged student? Examining parent’s perceptions of the role they play could provide a greater understanding of reasons behind their current patterns of involvement. In addition to this, both student and parent perspectives could be studied together to examine motivations of both populations and differences in intentions and outcomes could be addressed.

5. Future research should explore the perspectives of university faculty and staff toward the role of parent involvement. While the media’s portrayal of helicopter parents has carelessly spread to include all parents, it is important to remember that helicopter parents refers to a small, subpopulation of parents who draw attention to themselves by being the most vocal. Not all parents are helicopter parents. Exploring the perspectives and attitudes of university faculty and staff toward parents of college students may serve to create better partnerships between the institution and parents that can aid in student retention and success.

Recommendations for Practice

Based on the results of the study, the findings suggest parents are an integral part of students’ college experience and while many students feel their parent’s involvement is just right, some students wish their parents were better educated and informed with regard to the college experience. Student affairs practitioners and college and university faculty need to accept that parents expect to be involved and examine programs, policies and services that address the needs and expectations of all parents. Colleges and universities should develop a shared institutional philosophy and approach when working with parents that is intentional, systematic,
and addresses the values and expectations of all parents, not just those who are part of the majority culture. Current trajectories suggest that tuition costs will continue to rise and parents will be encouraged to be involved in various aspects of the educational process such as continued K-12 involvement, support for educational testing and reform, and future legislative development of policy and practice. As parent involvement increases in these areas, parents will continue to expect to be an active constituent in the higher education arena. Keeping this in mind, recommendations for practice include:

1. **Assessment of services for parents of first generation college students and underrepresented student populations.** Assess what is currently taking place at the institution with regard to services for parents of first generation college students and students from underrepresented populations. Programs and services for parents need to be inclusive of diverse student and parent needs which often are different from the majority culture at the institution. Services for parents of first generation college students and underrepresented student populations should be designed without the assumption that parents have prior knowledge of the college culture and language. Involving a diverse population of parents in the assessment plan will illuminate varying values, needs, and expectations, allowing services to be designed to meet the needs of all parents rather than the majority culture. Further, asking a diverse group of parents for their feedback will not only provide important information to shape services but also sends parents the message that they are valued members of the institutional community.

2. **Develop a communication plan for parents of first generation college students and underrepresented student populations.** It is important to examine the institution’s communication plan and specific policies when communicating with parents. Although parents are welcomed and encouraged to get involved during the recruitment phase of the college selection process, the
communication plan and mode of delivery such as printed newsletters or glossy brochures often changes or ceases to exist once the student has matriculated. It is important to develop a communication plan that continues to keep all parents informed and helps them feel connected throughout their student’s tenure at the institution. The communication plan must be clear, timely, and able to provide tailored messages delivered in favorable formats for different populations of parents. Research suggests that students and parents from diverse backgrounds, including race, ethnicity, and underrepresented populations such as first generation college students have different expectations of the institution than the majority student (Caspe & Lopez, 2006; Carney-Hall, 2008; Daniel & Scott, 2001; Wartman & Savage, 2008); relying solely on electronic newsletters, web sites, and social media groups to convey messages to parents assumes all parents have access to various forms of technology and/or are proficient or comfortable with using technology. Developing a one-size fits all approach when working with parents from diverse populations will most likely be ineffective.

3. **Student affairs practitioners need to update their models and perspectives of student development theory that inform practice.** Traditional models of student development theory such as those provided by Tinto (1993), Erikson (1968), or Chickering and Reisser (1993) are well known and often inform the delivery of student services throughout the many institutions across the country. The findings in the study make clear that for future policy and practice, student affairs professionals need to seek out and learn newer models of college student development which consider a more holistic approach that involves parents and family and addresses the diverse student population attending today’s college campus.
Closing

When examining the literature, it is clear that there has not been a great deal of empirical research on the impact of parent involvement in the lives of college students. The findings from the study clearly demonstrate parents are an integral part of the college going experience for many students. Parent involvement has the potential to affect many aspects of the student’s college experience including student development, institutional policy, programs and services. As is often the case, student affairs practitioners, faculty, and parents share the common goal of promoting student growth, maturity, and success. The findings make clear that there is a highly interdependent relationship between the students in the study and their parents. While an interdependent relationship has advantages for both students and parents, only time will tell if this type of relationship prepares these emerging adults to individuate and transition into adulthood.

It is important to remember that the college environment is an ideal place for students to explore, practice, and develop the various skills and competencies needed for adulthood (Arnett, 2004; Chickering & Reiser, 1993; Sanford, 1966; Torres, Jones, & Renn 2009). Moving forward, recognizing the roles many parents play in the lives of their college student and the importance students place on their relationship with parents is crucial in planning programs and services aimed at student development, retention, and graduation. Using more holistic models of student development, faculty and student affairs practitioners have an opportunity to reach out to parents of underrepresented student populations including first generation college students and educate parents on how to best support their student while encouraging exploration, independence, and self-discovery.
References


Dear [insert advisor name]:

This e-mail is an invitation to nominate students for participation in a study I am conducting for my doctoral dissertation in the Higher Education Administration program at Washington State University (WSU).

The study will help me learn more about the impact parent involvement has on the lives of college students. Students who agree to participate in the study will be asked to take part in an interview, approximately 30-45 minutes in duration, which will take place at a mutually agreed upon time and location. Students may decline to answer any of the interview questions or withdraw from the study at any time. With their permission, the interview will be audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. All information provided by the participants will be completely confidential. No personal or identifying information will be used in the dissertation however, with their permission anonymous quotations may be used. Information collected during the study will be retained for seven years in a secure location and then destroyed. Only my committee chair and I will have access to the data. There are no known or anticipated risks to students as participants in the study.

I am asking you to consider nominating 6-8 students who I can invite to participate in the study. Specifically, I am interested in interviewing current [insert name of institution] students who have completed at least one academic year of college post high school. I will only need their name, class standing (i.e., sophomore, junior, senior) and contact information (i.e., e-mail address and phone number) in order to invite them to be a part of the study. You can send your nominees information to my email which is taking@wsu.edu.

Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or comments in regard to the study. You may also contact my dissertation chair, Dr. Kelly Ward at kaward@wsu.edu. The study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the Institutional Review Board at Washington State University.

I appreciate your assistance in helping me find students to participate in this important study.

Sincerely,

Terese King
Doctoral Candidate, College of Education
Washington State University
509-335-1103
taking@wsu.edu
Dear [insert student name]:

This e-mail is an invitation to participate in a study I am conducting for my dissertation in the Higher Education Administration doctoral program at Washington State University. You have been nominated by your advisor, [insert advisor name] as a possible candidate for this study. Below is more information about the study and what your involvement would entail if you decide to participate.

What is the study about?
The study will help me learn more about the impact parent involvement has on the lives of college students.

What will I be asked to do if I agree to participate in this study?
- Participate in an audio recorded interview, approximately 30-45 minutes in length, that would take place at a mutually agreed upon time and location. My interview questions center around learning about your experience, perception, and attitude with regard to your parent’s involvement in your life as a college student.
- Your involvement in the study is completely voluntary and all information you provide will be completely confidential.

Are there any benefits to me if I am in this study?
- The potential benefits to you for participating in this study will include sharing your story and providing useful information to other researchers as well as college and university professionals across the country in an effort to better understand, engage, and plan programs and services for college students and their parents.
- Your name will be entered into a drawing for one of two, twenty-five dollar gift certificates to your campus bookstore. Chances of winning are 1 in 5.

I will contact you in the next few days as a follow up to this email to see if you are interested in learning more about this opportunity and participating in the study. Please know that while your advisor nominated you for the study, the final decision to participate is yours and I want to thank you in advance for your consideration.

Best,

Terese King
Doctoral Candidate, College of Education
Washington State University
509-335-1103
taking@wsu.edu
APPENDIX C
Research Study Summary/Consent Information Handout

WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY
College of Education

Study Title: The Impact of Parent Involvement on College Students

Researcher: Terese King, Doctoral Candidate
Department of Educational Leadership and Counseling Psychology
College of Education; 509-335-1103 (office) or 509-715-9804 (cell)

What is this study about?
This research study is being conducted to develop an understanding of the role parents play in the lives of college students. The study’s intent is to learn about the role your parent(s) play in your college experience and your perception or attitude toward that involvement.

What will I be asked to do if I am in this study?
• Meet with me at a mutually agreed upon place and time.
• Engage in an audio recorded interview for 30-45 minutes
• You will be invited to review the transcription of the interview at a later time if you would like.

Are there any benefits to me if I am in this study?
• Sharing your story and providing useful information to other researchers as well as college and university professionals in order to better understand, engage, and plan programs and services for college students and their parents.
• Entry into a drawing for one of two $25 gift certificates to your campus bookstore. Chances of winning are 1 out of 5.

Are there any risks to me if I am in this study?
• The potential risks from taking part in this study are quite limited. The questions I will ask pertain only to your perceptions of the role your parents play in your experience as a college student.

Will my information be kept private?
• The information collected during this study will be kept confidential and stored in a locked cabinet within my office.
• The information collected will be stored for a minimum of 3 years as required by Washington State University policy and then destroyed.
• Only my committee chair, Dr. Kelly Ward, kaward@wsu.edu, and I will have access to the information.
• The interview will be recorded, as a transcript of the data is necessary for this project. Once a transcript of the interview has been created, the interview recording will be erased.
• The results of this study may be published or presented at professional meetings, but the identities of all research participants will remain anonymous.
• If I am interested in using a particular quote from the interview, I will ask for your permission first and the quote will remain anonymous.

What are my rights as a research study volunteer?
• Your participation in this research study is completely voluntary.
• You may choose not to be a part of this study. There will be no penalty to you if you choose not to take part.
• You may choose not to answer specific questions or to stop participating at any time.
APPENDIX D
Research Consent Form

Consent Form

I have read the information outlining the research project on parent involvement that is being conducted by Terese King. I understand that my participation in this study is completely voluntary and I may withdraw from the study at any time. I understand the research purpose, process, safeguards, and that information about my interview will be kept confidential and presented anonymously. I agree to participate.

Name: ________________________________________________________________

Signature: _____________________________________________________________

Date: ______________________

I appreciate your willingness to be part of the study. If you have any questions or concerns about this research project, do not hesitate to contact Terese King at the following address.

Terese King
Doctoral Candidate
College of Education
Washington State University
(509) 335-1103
taking@wsu.edu

For more information about your rights as a participant in this study, you can contact the Office of Research Assurances at Washington State University, (509) 335-3668.
APPENDIX E
Interview Protocol/Cover Sheet

Impact of Parent Involvement on College Students

Thank you again for agreeing to participate in this interview. Now that we have reviewed the consent form, are there any questions you would like to ask before we begin the interview?

Date: _________  Time: _________  Location: ________________________________

Name: ___________________  Psyuedonym: ________________________________

Phone: ___________________  email: ________________________________

Demographic Information:  Age: _____  Gender: _____  Class Standing: __________

Race/Ethnicity: _______________  Academic Area of Interest: __________________

Hometown: _______________  State/Country: ________________________________

Interview Highlights: ___________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________________

Quotable Quotes: _______________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________________

For Follow Up: _________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________________
APPENDIX F
Semi-structured Interview Guide
Impact of Parent Involvement on College Students

Background:

1. Tell me a little about yourself and how you came to be a student at [insert name of institution].

2. Can you tell me about your family? Parents, siblings, etc.

3. Who served as role models for you before coming to college and why?

Nature of Parental Involvement:

1. What support systems do you have now and who has played a role in your college experience thus far?

2. How would you characterize your relationship with your parent(s)?

3. Can you think of times when your parent(s) have gotten involved in your college experience and tell me about them?

4. Has/Have your parent(s) ever contacted a faculty member or administrator at the institution concerning your grades or academics? (If yes) Please tell me more about the situation?

5. Has/Have your parent(s) ever interacted with a University administrator or staff member regarding any other area of university life? (If yes) Please tell me more about it?

6. Can you think of times you would invite or expect your parent(s) to get involved in your college experience? Please describe these.

7. Have you had any contact with your parents in the past week? If yes, can you tell me more about the nature of the contact(s). (e.g., frequency, method of communication, initiated by, etc.)

Perception/Attitude toward Parent Involvement

1. Can you tell me about a difficult decision you have made while in college and what role, if any, did your parent(s) play in that decision?

2. Can you think of a time in college that your parent(s) did not agree with a decision you made and tell me about it?
3. Do you think your parent(s) have confidence in your ability to make decisions and take care of problems that arise in college? Why or why not?

4. Would you describe your parent(s) involvement in your college life as too much, too little, or just right? Why?

**Individual Development/Transition:**

1. Do you consider yourself an adult? Why or why not?

2. Describe your core values?

3. How do you think your parent(s) have affected your beliefs or values?

4. In what ways has your relationship with your parent(s) changed since you started college?

5. In what ways has your relationship with your parent(s) remained the same?

**Conclusion**

1. So imagine that you are giving a speech at graduation or for an award that you have been given and it comes to the part where you acknowledge others in your life. What would you say about your parents?

2. What else would you like to tell me about your parent(s) involvement in college that we have not covered in these questions?

3. Do you have any questions for me about this interview or my research study in general?

Thank you very much for your participation. Explain what happens next.

- Timeline for completing the interview transcript
- Invitation to review the transcript