

Abstract:

Heading off to college is often the first time young adults experience time away from their parents. There are growing amounts of studies suggesting that attending a university for the first time entails a transition in young adults' lives filled with a great deal of stress. In regards to young adults' adjustment to university life a study found that as many as 40% of students encounter serious difficulties and fail to complete their degree (Wintre & Yaffe, 2000). Before this transition to university life, children are accustomed to communicating with parents on a daily basis due to the fact they live in the same house and see their parents frequently. Once at college, the communication between young adult and parent drastically changes. Family communication norms are perceived differently as a child matures and the child's perception of communication changes as well (Ritchie & Fitzpatrick, 1990). The transition to college proves to be difficult for most young adults and is a test on whether parent-child communication will continue or diminish. Every young adult transitions differently to college; indeed, sometimes communication between student and parent can become inexistent, overbearing, or counterproductive.

Parent-Child Communication during Transition to University Life

Family relationships are the most important interpersonal relationships people have in their lives (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002). Familial relationships play a vital role in the socialization of each individual (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002). Doing a research study to evaluate how communication with parents affects first year college students' adjustment to university life would improve parent-child communication and help universities to adjust their first year experience programs and resources. Because students with involved parents often are more successful than individuals with hands-off parents (Hamilton, 2016), further research needs to be conducted on how students communicate with parents during college and the best ways for this interpersonal communication relationship to proceed. The hopes of this study is to provide the university with valuable information on how to address parents of incoming freshman students so the university can increase retention rates. This paper goes into a literature review of past studies on family communication, theories of communication, parenting styles and the hypotheses for the current study. It then discusses the methods for the study, results and recommendations for the university.

Literature Review:

A student's adjustment to university life can be broken down into several factors including academics, career outcomes, social relationships, wellbeing, and success in college. For the purpose of this study, academics consists of a student's major, coursework, classes, and grades while career outcomes is defined as networking, professional connections, and aid in obtaining scholarships. Happiness, good health, and a sense of fulfillment construct wellbeing. Success in college contributes to obtaining good grades, graduating in four years, getting a good job following graduation, financial stability, and independence from parents.

Koerner and Fitzpatrick developed a theory of family communication based on the schematic representation of relational knowledge because communication plays a central role in the family (2002). Relational schemas exist in long-term memory; they are made up of interconnected pieces of declarative and routine knowledge about relationships (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002). Three subschemas of knowledge stored in the memory make up a relational schema according to Baldwin's (1992) model. Self-schema, or self-concept, is the first subset of knowledge consist of self-relevant thoughts, like one's emotions, ideals, goals, attitudes, and

beliefs (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002). The second subset of knowledge, other-schema, focuses on the knowledge of others including one's perceptions of others, their beliefs, and attitudes (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002). Other-schema concerns the other individual with whom one is in a relationship with (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002). Thirdly, interpersonal-scripts are built on models of behavioral structures that are used to interpret social situations (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002). They help to define ideal relational interactions by providing explanatory and procedural knowledge of typical behavioral sequences; in return, developing expectations for and planning behaviors (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002). At their core, humans are social beings and these three subschemas are highly reliant on one another; consequently, they all belong to one alike cognitive structure, the relationship schema (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002). Family structures change immensely over years due, in part, to the flexible ways that family members communicate with one another (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002). Family communication is therefore a product of cognitive processes determined by family relationship schemas (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002). A hierarchical organization of relational knowledge is used by family members to decode information applicable to their relationships and interpersonal behaviors (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002). Overall, Koerner and Fitzpatrick's theory on family communication states, "How we perceive familial relationships and how we behave in them depends on our family relationship schemas, and our family relationship schemas depend on our interactions within the family" (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002).

Individuals who maintain a close relationship with their parents during college demonstrate greater independence and self-confidence (Wintre & Yaffe, 2000). Particularly in the transition to a university, studies show how family support acts as a crucial buffer throughout one's life (Wintre & Yaffe, 2000). Mutual reciprocity, an important factor in parent-child relationships, describes "relationships wherein individuals perceive each other as relative equals, respect each other's point of view, and are involved in ongoing and open communication" (Wintre & Yaffe, 2000). Students who perceive greater degrees of mutuality with parental relationships are less likely to be identified as depressed (Wintre & Yaffe, 2000). Students with parents who shared interests and concerns with them performed better academically (Wintre & Yaffe, 2000). In relationships with parents mutual reciprocity and discussion are more directly related to university adjustment than parenting style (Wintre & Yaffe, 2000). Discussion of university specific issues with parents contributes to overall adaptation and academic achievement (Wintre & Yaffe, 2000). Students whose parents focused on providing a social experience, pink helicopter parents, were unsuccessful in graduating on time, finding a job, and being independent (Hamilton, 2016). Conversely, students with parents who focused on academics and career outcomes—professional helicopter and paramedic parents—graduated on time with solid academic performances and able to display independence across a variety of life's arenas (Hamilton, 2016). Students with bystander parents who could not provide consistent, beneficial guidance struggle to graduate, have an increased risk of transferring and dropping out, and receive low grades with enormous debt attached to them (Hamilton, 2016). Parenting and communication styles aside, inconsistent parental aid is found to be more damaging than none at all (Hamilton, 2016).

Given the existing research, this study will consider five hypotheses in an attempt to understand how communication with parents affects a first year college student's perceived success in college. Success can mean something different for every individual; however, for the purpose of this study success in college is measured by grades, graduating in four years, staying

at one university for entire education, financial stability, independence from parents, a sense of fulfillment and personal wellbeing. Below are the hypotheses for the study.

H1: As frequency of communication with parents involving discussion about academics increases, a student's self-perceived success in college will increase.

H2: As frequency of communication with parents involving discussion about career outcomes increases, a student's self-perceived success in college will increase.

H3: As frequency of communication with parents involving discussion about social relationships increases, a student's self-perceived success in college will decrease.

H4: When a student perceives mutual reciprocity within parental relationships, a student's self-perceived success in college increases.

H5: If a student has consistent communication with parents throughout the transition to college, a student's self-perceived success in college will increase.

When a student's perception of success in college increases, so will their likelihood to stay and continue education at the university. Incoming undergraduate students are at risk for depressive symptomatology and negative reactions to stress (Wintre & Yaffe, 2000). This is why it is important for universities to help maintain the psychological well-being of their students in order to benefit the university's retention rates.

Methods:

In this study a survey method was conducted. The population was freshman college students and Pennsylvania freshman students at a four year university made up the sampling frame. A voluntary, convenience sample took place by reaching out to professors who taught COMM 100 in spring 2017 and asking whether they would allow the distribute of surveys to take place in their classroom. COMM 100 classes were selected because the subject of the course is in the area of this study and mainly freshman are enrolled in the class. Once a professor agreed, I visited the COMM 100 and asked students to partake in the study. The students self-selected to participate or not. It was made clear to the students that they were not required to complete the survey and there was no penalty for non-participation nor a reward for participation beyond helping a fellow student complete a project. Students were handed an informed consent form and chose whether they were going to participate or not. After they signed the informed consent form they traded it in for a questionnaire and Scantron answer sheet. Participants took the survey in their classroom with other students in silence. Margaret Thorwart and at least one other professor were in the room while the surveys were being completed.

To ensure validity, two focus groups were conducted with self-selected freshman. From the focus groups, revisions were made to the questionnaire to increase face validity, or legitimacy of the questions in the survey. The questionnaire was also reviewed and revised by three professors with Ph.Ds. in communication fields additionally increasing face validity.

Many of the students from the focus groups talked about communicating with parents, rather than other family members, while at school. The majority declared they mainly communicated with mother figures. However, the students did mention the topic being discussed does impact who they choose to talk with about it. Sometimes, but not most often, students would turn to siblings or cousins when communicating about certain topics. This knowledge allowed the questionnaire to focus solely on students' communication with parents since the majority of students agreed they communicated most frequently with parents while at school. The focus groups defined family communication as talking to mom, dad, siblings, aunts, uncles,

and/or cousins about anything and everything; including talking about your day and occasionally feelings. Family communication was found to differ per family member that was being talked to and phone conversations were avoided because students found it took up too much of their time, so they preferred texting as means to communicate.

Students in the focus groups who did not have parents who attended college mentioned they do not usually go to their parents for help or advice. Because their parent's perspective is different, having not attended a four year university, these students were more likely to communicate with cousins or siblings in order to obtain advice and guidance. The students expressed it was not so much about what they talked to their parents about, but knowing that their parents were there for them when and if they need them. It was not about having to talk to their parents every day, but having them always be there when the students needed them. Students stressed the importance of having parents that are able and willing to listen to them along with stable parents whom the students could rely on. This led to the addition of including questions on mutual reciprocity to the questionnaire.

Results:

The demographics of the study are as follows. The sample size was $n=161$. The entire population sampled were freshman year students who lived on campus. From the population surveyed, 46.6% were male, 50.3% were female and 3.1% were transgender/other or preferred not to answer. The majority surveyed identified their race or ethnic identity as White (83.9%), while 7.5% identified as Black or African American and 5.0% identified as Hispanic or Latino. 64.0% of the sample earned a grade point average of 3.0 and above for the last semester. Three participants (1.9%) chose not to answer. 41.0% of the sample's permanent home was 51-100 miles from Millersville. Two individuals surveyed (1.2%) preferred not to answer. From the students sampled, 36.0% had a family household income of \$75,000 or above.

The surveys revealed 75.7% of the participants always or often communicate with their parents and 42.2% of the sample always or often asked their parents for personal guidance. 53.4% always or often had discussions with their parents about academics and 39.7% always or often had discussions with their parents about career prospects. 40.3% of those surveyed always or often had discussions with their parents about social/interpersonal relationships. The total average frequency a student communicates with their parents discovered by this survey is 3.15 on a scale of 1=Never, 2=Rarely, 3=Sometimes, 4=Often and 5=Always.

There was a statistically significant positive correlation between success in college with both consistent communication with parents (.181) and mutual reciprocity with parents (.246). There was a statistically significant positive correlation between I have a positive sense of fulfillment and all of the measures for mutual reciprocity. I am self-motivated to succeed in college (.218) and I get good grades (.196) both had a statistically significant positive correlation with I can count on my parents and if I need them for anything, they would be there for me. I get good grades had a statistically significant positive correlation with my parents' respect my point of view (.239). There was a statistically significant positive correlation between I will graduate in four years and I can openly communicate with my parents about anything (.176). I am able to achieve goals that I set for myself had a statistically significant positive correlation with both my parents and I treat each other with mutual respect (.206) and I maintain ongoing communication with my parents (.207). I maintain ongoing communication with my parents also had a statistically significant positive correlation with I have a positive sense of fulfillment (.317). There was a statistically significant positive correlation between I get good grades and I check in

with my parents on a daily basis (.253) as well as between I will graduate in four years and I consistently communicate with my parents (.163).

Self-perceived success in college had an overall statistically significant positive correlation with social relationship discussions with parents (.251). I talk to my parents about my friends had a statistically significant positive correlation with both I am able to achieve goals that I set for myself (.176) and I feel that I am succeeding at Millersville (.176). There was also a statistically significant positive correlation between I talk to my parents about parties I go to and I get good grades (.286).

Self-perceived success in college had an overall statistically significant positive correlation with career outcome discussions with parents (.195). There was a statistically significant positive correlation between I talk to my parents about internship or other career-oriented opportunities and all of the following: I am able to achieve goals that I set for myself (.268), I feel that I am succeeding at Millersville (.170) and I get good grades (.228). There was also a statistically significant positive correlation between my parents and I discuss possible career paths and all of the following: I feel that I am succeeding at Millersville (.159), I get good grades (.229) and I will graduate in four years (.161).

Academic discussions with parents had an overall statistically significant positive correlation with a student's self-perceived success in college (.261). There was a statistically significant positive correlation between I get good grades and I keep my parents updated on how I am doing in class and my grades (.303) in addition to I talk to my parents about homework and my class projects (.260). I talk to my parents about homework and my class projects also had a statistically significant positive correlation with both I feel that I am succeeding at Millersville (.156) and I will graduate in four years (.238). I keep my parents updated on how I am doing in class and my grades had a statistically significant positive correlation with I am self-motivated to succeed in college (.263) and I have a positive sense of fulfillment (.259).

	Communication	Academics	Career	Social	Mutual Reciprocity
Success	.181*	.261**	.195*	.251**	.246**

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Overall the data displays, first year students who communicate and share mutual reciprocity with their parents report having a higher level of self-perceived success in college. This study proves Hamilton's conclusion that in America's current society, college is a personal edification project that parents must enable (2016). Parental support, stemming from positive parent-child communication and relationships, is a predictor of how young adults will fare during the transition to college. Several functions of the family continue to get passed on to other social agencies (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002), but self-perceived success in college still relies on family members providing caregiving and support. The statistically significant positive correlation between I can count on my parents and if I need them for anything, they would be there for me and all of the following: I have a positive sense of fulfillment (.209), I am self-motivated to succeed in college (.218), and I get good grades (.196) means self-perceived success in college increases as parents are reliable.

The statistically significant positive correlation between I get good grades and I check in with my parents on a daily basis (.253) shows how daily communication contacts regardless the content will benefit a student's success at college. This is also true for the statistically significant

positive correlation between I will graduate in four years and I consistently communicate with my parents (.163). From those surveyed, the majority of students who strongly agreed or agreed to they maintain ongoing communication with their parents also reported having a positive sense of fulfillment and being able to achieve goals they set for themselves.

Because academic (.261), career outcome (.195) and social relationship (.251) discussions all had a statistically significant positive correlation around the same level, it is beneficial for parents to have communication with their children regardless of the topic being discussed. This is similar to Hamilton's paramedic parents whose view of college is a hybrid including academic, career and social visions (2016). Discussion of all university specific issues with parents contributes to the self-perceived success of an individual. Parent-child communication is not so much about the content, but about just being there. The total average frequency a student communicates with their parents discovered by this survey is 3.15 on a scale of 1=Never, 2=Rarely, 3=Sometimes, 4=Often and 5=Always which shows having the right amount of communication with parents contributes to a student's self-perceived success in college. The average frequency fell closest to "sometimes," explaining that too much communication as well as too little communication can be detrimental to a student's self-perceived success in college.

Recommendations:

Universities want students to stay at their institution all four years and to possibly come back for graduate school. Parent-child communication throughout college is not something a college can directly control, but there are ways universities can increase parent involvement and communication with their children. Universities, with the replacement of public funds with private dollars, must depend heavily on families (Hamilton, 2016). As discovered in this study, a parent's conversation with their child should include a variety of topics. However, the information and advice given from the parent to the child needs to be accurate. Parents also have to start communicating at the beginning and stay consistent throughout college. One way a university can benefit parents of freshman students is to educate them on the services available to their students (ex. centers for health education and promotion, peer educators, health services, counselors, tutors, etc.). Information sessions for parents should cover topics of university and college life including what to expect emotionally, financially, socially and education wise. This could be done during open houses when high school seniors are being recruited to attend the university, parent's weekends and freshman orientation. Pamphlets and brochures can be used to stress the importance of open communication between parent and child throughout college, the benefits and how to do so. Education for parents on what first year students should typically be taking course wise, would allow parents to better guide their child through academic counseling and could also be presented through print media and orientation. Parents should stress the importance of choosing the right major for their student as well as the importance of showing interest in their child's grades and courses they are enjoying. Parents can let their children know what is possible and then help them to understand what needs to be done in order to get there.

Another way universities can benefit parents of freshman students is by having parents follow the schools social media sites. This would encourage parents to stay up to date on what is going on and happening around campus. A specific social media platform could be created just for parents of students. Through these social media platforms, parents would be updated on activities and resources available to their children. The parents would then be able to guide their

child in the right direction with practical advice when their student feels lost or needs some sort of assistance or help.

Thirdly, universities can also host a variety of special events for parents and students. One event could be a program on financial assistance and how to apply for scholarships. This event would educate parents on how to go about financing college as well as where to find financial aid assistance when they or their child doesn't know the answer. Universities should also encourage parents and children to have a conversation about what they both want to get out of the college experience. This could be a workshop held during orientation or parent's weekend. Through this workshop, both parent and child would start the college experience on the same page and would provide a starting point for open communication through the process. A map of the student's possible college path would be created, giving parents a way to get involved and stay involved by checking in on where their child is on the map they both created.

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