

The Role of Parental Involvement in the Autonomy Development of Traditional-Age College Students

Brian Cullaty

Increased parental involvement in higher education has led to a rise in the number of parent interactions with university faculty and staff. The purpose of this study was to explore how parental involvement influences the process of college student autonomy development and to examine the implications of this process for college administrators. Data were collected from 18 participants through three semistructured interviews and two journal entries. The results suggest the importance of parents maintaining supportive involvement instead of intervening, establishing adult-to-adult relationships with college-age children, relinquishing unnecessary control, and fostering responsibility.

Increased parental involvement in higher education has led not only to an escalation of intensity in parent contact with their students but also to a rise in the number of parent interactions with university faculty and staff (Daniel, Evans, & Scott, 2001; Mullendore, Banahan, & Ramsey, 2005). This involvement includes influencing the student's academic and career decisions, contacting daily the student by phone or email, and intervening with faculty or staff on behalf of the student to solve a problem (Jaschik, 2007; Johnson, 2004; Trice, 2002). College life issues, such as roommate conflicts, course registration, academic progress, and health questions, often involve parents (Flanagan, 2006).

Student affairs administrators worry that a high level of parental involvement prevents students from achieving important learning outcomes. That is, the phenomenon of increased parental involvement may place parents at odds with the mission of colleges and universities to transform teenagers into adults with the ability to take responsibility for their own lives and contribute to society (Lewis, 2006; Shapiro, 2002). Although the college environment enables students to practice self-governance, individuation from parents, and freedom to direct their own lifestyles (Zarrett & Eccles, 2006), parental interventions threaten to inhibit this development. The concern arising from this trend is that college students will not develop the autonomy needed to function as competent adults.

In this study, autonomy refers to the notion of self-governance and the ability to make separate responsible decisions (Steinberg, 2008). Indeed, those studying college student development consider autonomy to be an important developmental goal for college students (Boyer, 1987; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Furthermore, college students have reported that autonomy is one of the primary learning outcomes from their experiences outside the classroom (Kuh, 1993). The purpose of this study was to explore how parental involvement influences this process

Brian Cullaty is Assistant to the Vice Provost for Academic Programs at the University of Virginia. This research was funded by a grant from the SACSA Foundation and a Research and Assessment Grant from NASPA Region III. This research was also selected as the recipient of the 2009 Burns B. Crookston Doctoral Research Award from the ACPA Professional Preparation Commission Research & Writing Awards Committee.

of college student autonomy development and to examine the implications of this process for college administrators. To address this central question, this study followed the methods of a grounded theory approach, analyzing data from interviews with students and using techniques such as coding, memoing, and constant comparisons to generate theoretical themes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Parental Involvement in Higher Education

The literature on college student–parent relationships reveals that the way parents are involved with their college-aged children is changing. Since the year 2000, articles in higher education publications have documented a trend of more intense parental behavior on college campuses. One volume of *New Directions for Students Services* addressed what the editors called a recent phenomenon of “the increased involvement of parents throughout students’ collegiate experiences” (Daniel & Ross, 2001, p. 1). Seven years later a chapter in another volume of *New Directions for Student Services* about parental involvement addressed parents as a “viable constituency that cannot be ignored” (Carney-Hall, 2008, p. 9). Furthermore, a recent issue on parental involvement in the *ASHE Higher Education Report* noted a cultural shift in the relationship between most parents and their traditional-age college students since the late 1990s (Wartman & Savage, 2008).

Although the majority of sources documenting an increase in parental involvement are anecdotal and journalistic, a small amount of empirical evidence supports the claims of involvement in these accounts. A nationally representative survey of 750 parents by the Institute for Higher Education Policy found that 72% of parents helped their children fill out applications to college and 57% of parents

spoke with an admissions officer. Only 6% of parents did not participate in any part of the admissions process (Stringer, Cunningham, O’Brien, & Merisotis, 1998). In addition, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) annual report provided evidence of parental involvement for the first time in their 2007 report. This survey found that 7 of 10 students communicated very often with at least one parent or guardian. Thirteen percent of freshmen and 8% of senior students reported their parent or guardian frequently intervened on their behalf to help them solve problems they were having in college. Another quarter of freshmen and 21% of seniors said their parent or guardian sometimes intervened.

Parental involvement as discussed in the literature encompasses behaviors in which parents interact with their student and/or the institutional representatives concerning their student’s college experience. These behaviors include frequent conversations about specific university issues (Wintre & Yaffe, 2000), influencing decisions (Lefkowitz, 2005), and personal contact with faculty or staff on behalf of the student to solve a problem (Keppler, Mullendore, & Carey, 2005). The former dean of Harvard College, Harry Lewis (2006), recounted that growing numbers of parents call professors about their children’s grades, sometimes wanting to take up the arguments for their children and sometimes wanting explanations for their child’s grade.

Autonomy Development in College Students

Understanding autonomy in the context of college student development requires not only grasping its importance during adolescence but also realizing its function in the transition to adulthood. Theories of human development (Blos, 1979; Kegan, 1982; Levinson, 1978) and college student development (Chickering & Reisser, 1993) reveal the increase of

autonomy during the adolescent years into the transition to young adulthood. Blos's theory points to separation from parents as a gradual sharpening of the adolescent's sense of autonomy and competence. Development of autonomy involves relinquishing childish dependencies on parents in favor of a more mature, responsible, and less dependent relationship. In this framework autonomous functioning begins in late adolescence and coincides with identity development.

Although the development of autonomy begins in adolescence, it continues to progress in college. Leaving home to attend college facilitates the individuation process. Many students enter college still immersed emotionally and psychologically in their family of origin, but by the time of graduation, most have achieved a new level of independence (Arnstein, 1980). Theorists define this process of separation as a task that must be completed in order to transition from adolescence to psychological adulthood (Arnstein, 1989; Blos, 1979; Levinson, 1978).

Indeed, separating from parents is a key component of the autonomy development process for college students. Levinson's (1978) theory of adult development proposes that during the early adult transition period, which lasts from ages 17 to 22, young adults must separate from their parents. Chickering and Reisser's (1993) theory of college student development also suggests that the development of autonomy begins with separation from parents. In both Levinson (1978) and Chickering and Reisser's theories, college students able to successfully complete the task of separating from parents form an adult identity and become capable of living with a greater degree of autonomy. This autonomy is characterized by increasing responsibility and competence in adult social roles (Levinson, 1978).

Both theories stress, however, that separa-

tion from parents does not imply ending these relationships altogether. In this transitional period a crucial change occurs in the character of the relationship with parents, and the relationship must be transformed. Autonomous college students develop adult-to-adult relationships with their parents (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). In this process, both parents and children negotiate what they will keep in the relationship and what they will give up (Levinson, 1990). They reject certain aspects of the relationship but build in new qualities such as mutual respect between distinctive individuals. College is an institutional setting that facilitates this process (Levinson, 1978).

The majority of research on autonomy and college students follows the theoretical framework of autonomy development proposed by Chickering (1969) and Chickering and Reisser (1993). Studies that construe autonomy similar to self-governance have demonstrated that college students develop greater levels of autonomy from their freshmen to senior years in college (Greeley & Tinsley, 1988; Jones & Watt, 2001; Taub, 1997; Wachs & Cooper, 2002). Kuh's (1993) study of student participation in out-of-class experiences provided qualitative evidence for these findings that autonomy increases through 4 years of college. Other researchers have demonstrated that levels of academic autonomy, defined by the ability to meet education goals with minimal help from others, increase as levels of involvement in extracurricular activities and student organizations increase (Cooper, Healy, & Simpson, 1994; Foubert & Grainger, 2006; Smith & Griffin, 1993).

Fewer studies on college students and autonomy have examined the role of parents in autonomy development. One finding suggests that too much emotional support from parents inhibits the development of autonomy, but the sample studied was limited to female participants (Taub, 1995). In a qualitative

study, Mather and Winston (1998) found that students negotiate new relationships with their parents during the college years. This finding is consistent with Chickering and Reisser's (1993) theory that predicts that students moving toward autonomy develop adult-to-adult relationships with their parents. Mather and Winston also found that the ease of this renegotiation was contingent on parental support for developing autonomy. The ways that parents supported autonomy, however, were not well described by the authors.

The research on college student autonomy development has focused more on aspects of the self than on autonomy in the context of relationships with family. These aspects, however, are related, and relationships with parents are an important part of developing autonomy. Despite the importance of focusing on autonomy in relatedness as seen in the literature on adolescent development, only two studies (Mather & Winston, 1998; Taub, 1995) considered the role of parents in the autonomy development process of college students. More research is needed to understand the role of parents in this process. This study addressed this gap by examining how students describe their parent's role.

METHODS

To address the role of parents in the autonomy development process, two research questions guided this study: (a) How do college students describe the role of their parents in the process of developing autonomy? and (b) What types of perceived parental involvement behaviors promote and/or inhibit autonomy development? This study followed the methods of a grounded theory approach, analyzing the data from the interviews and using techniques such as coding, memoing, and constant comparisons to generate theoretical propositions (Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Participants

The site for this study was a flagship state university in the Southeast. Southern State University (SSU) is a public institution with an approximate enrollment of 21,000 students of which nearly two thirds are undergraduate students. The unit of analysis for this study was traditional-age college students in their third year. A web-based survey was created to select a purposeful sample of students. The survey asked students to assess the level of their parents' involvement in their college affairs and included questions about the frequency of phone contact with their parents, the number of discussions with parents concerning academic, career, and personal matters, and the frequency of contact their parents had with college administrators and faculty. From the 400 random third-year students surveyed, 169 students responded to the survey. The descriptive statistics from this sample revealed a range of parental involvement among the respondents and allowed for the selection of participants for interviews.

To choose participants for interviews, a stratified purposeful sampling strategy was used to obtain a sample of above average, average, and below average cases of parental involvement from the survey results (Patton, 1990). A purposeful group of 18 students was selected manifesting three different levels of parental involvement. This group included 6 students reporting a high level of parental involvement, 6 students reporting a medium level of parental involvement, and 6 students reporting a low level of parental involvement. This stratified purposeful sampling strategy (Patton) provided for participants with a range of variation in parental involvement (Maxwell, 2005) and allowed for an understanding of different levels of involvement. Balance in gender was established in each group given that theory and research have suggested that

TABLE 1.
Selected Participants by Gender, Race, and Parental Income Level

Involvement Level	Gender		Race ^a				Parental Income			
	Male	Female	As Am	Af Am	White	Hisp	Low	Middle	High	Unknown
Low	3	3	2	0	4	0	3	2	1	0
Medium	3	3	1	1	4	0	3	2	0	1
High	3	3	0	1	4	1	1	2	3	0

^a As Am = Asian American, Af Am = African American, Hisp = Hispanic American.

men and women develop autonomy differently (Gilligan, 1982; Josselson, 1988; Taub, 1995). In addition to gender, students were selected using the criteria of race and parental income ranges. The characteristics of the participants are depicted in Table 1.

Data Collection

Data were collected through three semi-structured interview sessions with the participants (Seidman, 1998). The first two interviews took place in March and April of the Spring 2008 semester and ranged from 20 to 60 minutes in length. The third interview was conducted in the Fall 2008 semester and ranged from 15 to 30 minutes in length. In these interviews, parental involvement and the development of student autonomy were explored in the areas of academic decisions, career decisions, money management, and solving problems. The students were asked questions about how their parents were involved in these areas and the extent to which their parents influenced their decisions, for example, “Do you think your parents have confidence in your ability to take care of problems that arise in college? Why or why not?” The students were also asked to discuss and describe specific incidents when their parents became involved, for instance, “Has your mother or father ever intervened with a

faculty member or an administrator concerning your grades or an academic decision? (If yes) Can you describe this situation?”

To increase participant self-reflection and gain greater insight into the students’ thinking, the participants were also asked to complete two journal entries. The first journal entry was required after interview one and the second entry was required after interview two. A topic was provided for the students to write about that coincided with the interviews. For example, the first journal entry asked students to describe a time in college that their mother or father did not agree with a decision they made. They were asked to describe their parent’s reaction, the extent they were able to express their own opinion, and what they learned from the situation.

Data Analysis

Methods were used from a grounded theory approach to analyze the data (Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and generate themes that were “grounded” in the participants’ experiences. After each interview had been transcribed, it was loaded along with the journal entries into NVivo 7, a qualitative data analysis software program. NVivo was used as a tool for analysis to assist in the mechanics of coding, data organization, and searching for patterns. In the first phase of analysis the text

was read and passages labeled with codes. Some of these codes were derived from the literature, whereas other “emic” codes emerged from the data and represented the perspectives of the participants. Data were then sorted into new documents that represented each overarching category and its properties.

In the next step of coding, these new documents were read and reread and patterns were identified from the categories. During this phase, causal statements and propositions were considered that related concepts and patterns together. When at least 10 of the participants’ comments shared common characteristics they were grouped together and considered for a possible theme. Previously written memos informed this process and helped track the analytic process. After creating initial themes from the first two interviews, clarification was sought in the final interview session with the participants to help refine the themes.

To ensure trustworthiness of the data, several colleagues coded a subset of transcripts for comparison purposes and a peer debriefer evaluated data being placed into categories. Additionally, “member checks” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) were used to share the interview transcripts with the participants and establish accuracy of their statements. Journal entries allowed for a comparison of what the participants said in interviews to their own reflective comments.

FINDINGS

The findings are presented in three themes addressing the role of parental involvement in the autonomy development process. The first theme addresses how autonomy develops in the context of supportive relationships with parents. The second theme examines three parental behaviors that promote autonomy development. The final theme looks at a parental behavior that inhibits autonomy development.

Autonomy Develops in the Context of Supportive Parental Relationships

The participants in this study expressed close relationships with their parents. Eleven of the 18 students explicitly defined their relationship with their parents in positive terms whether this was good, close, or involved. As part of these close relationships, students described how feeling supported allowed them to act autonomously and make significant decisions.

Acting autonomously refers to the notion of self-governance (Steinberg, 2008). The participants in this study stressed the importance of feeling support for their autonomous actions. This does not mean that students could not make their own decisions or act self-sufficiently, but rather, support from parents helped students feel ownership of their actions (Grolnick, Deci, & Ryan, 1997). Students described how support from their parents helped them make decisions confidently, set goals and make plans, and explore new places.

Participants, however, noted that their parents did not provide too much support, which one participant perceived could be overbearing. One student described support as a “balance between being too intrusive in my life but also making sure that I’m not, you know, going astray somewhere.” Students with parents of low, average, and high involvement expressed feeling support from their parents. This suggests that parents can provide support without frequent involvement.

One of the participants, Ashley, described support from her parents in relation to choosing her majors. She entered college as a biology major but soon made a change. In a journal entry Ashley wrote, “My parents honored my decision to study Philosophy and Sociology instead.” Ashley’s parents did not try to influence her decision or change her mind; they simply left the decision to her by recognizing this was her choice. Ashley explained that

her parents offered similar support for other decisions, “They have honored my decisions about studying abroad, and they have honored my decisions about summer employment.” In a later journal entry Ashley commented on her growing feelings of autonomy:

I hope to become more independent in the future, but it is reassuring to know that I have made progress. I can depend on myself to take care of things, and I know that I can usually handle a situation competently. I don't need to rely on others to micromanage my life—I am taking care of it on my own and things are running more or less pretty smoothly.

This passage illuminates Ashley's feelings about her own independence. She knew she could take care of her own affairs, and her parents have affirmed this mind-set by supporting the decisions she has made about her studies and summer plans.

Other times, parents' support may provide students with the encouragement they need to meet new challenges or grow academically. Chloe had been debating about pursuing an undergraduate research project. She speculated that her friends would question the decision by saying, “Oh but it's your fourth year, you don't want to be stressed out your fourth year, you just want to have fun.” Chloe recalled asking her father for advice:

Because it's a big thing to take on and I wasn't really sure and I talked to my dad about it for a long time and he just basically kept pointing out that most people go through life without really doing anything for anybody else, like yeah it might be fun. But then there are people who have the opportunity to make a difference and he thinks I have this opportunity, and so it might stress me out next year, and I might not have as much free time in my fourth year as I would like, but if I don't do it I would probably regret it.

On this occasion Chloe's father supported Chloe in making a decision that diverged from her friends' approval. His support for this endeavor demonstrated to Chloe the importance of pursuing aspirations and meeting challenges despite dissension from others.

In sum, when students felt supported by their parents they perceived greater freedom to make their own decisions and plan independently from the approval of others. They gained confidence when they acted autonomously and received support for their actions from their parents. Scott described the sentiment associated with parental support:

I know I can always count on them to help me through anything, no matter what. That is probably the most comforting thing in my life, knowing that I have that support system whenever I need it. It allows me to focus on other things rather than worry about what my parents will think about what I do and how I live my life.

Because Scott felt supported, he believed he could focus on meeting his own responsibilities and setting goals for himself rather than seeking approval from his parents. Calvin echoed Scott's comments saying that he thought it was “the perfect situation to have them let me take care of things myself but to know if I do need some help or even sort of a safety net kind of situation that it's there.” Parental support provided a base for developing autonomy.

Parental Behaviors Promoting Autonomy Development

The participants described three parental behaviors that appeared to promote their autonomy development. These behaviors were actively redefining the parent–student relationship, relinquishing unnecessary control, and encouraging responsibility. The first of these behaviors, redefining the parent–student relationship, occurs when the relationship

between parent and child starts to change upon entering college. By redefining the relationship from a parent-to-child model to an adult-to-adult model, parents can promote autonomous behavior.

Ten of the participants in this study depicted how their parents sought to establish adult-to-adult relationships. Their parents provided avenues for a friendship to emerge. Students described instances of their parents seeking advice and treating them like equals. Several participants recounted changes in their relationships during their college years. Chloe recalled:

They used to tell me this a lot a year ago, they feel like I've matured a lot since I've been in college and they feel like they can have a different kind of conversation with me than they used to be able to have and they enjoy talking to me because they know that I now enjoy talking to them and vice versa.

This exchange illustrates a transformation in the relationship. Jake also emphasized the different type of conversations he could have with his parents expressing that “I feel like we can talk . . . in a more adult manner now.”

Other students described adult-to-adult relationships with their parents exemplified by a growing equality with their parents. Richard characterized his relationship with his parents saying that “it is not as much a parent–child dynamic as it is more almost just an equal now. More just giving advice as opposed to setting down rules strictly.” The parent–child relationship had abated and Richard’s parents had become more like equals. Scott referred to a “different level of respect that exists between us now.” This different level of respect forms a foundation for adult-to-adult relationships.

Adult-to-adult relationships furthered autonomy by helping students gain confidence in their abilities. Students no longer perceived the dependency of a child reliant on their

parents. Instead they recognized a greater equality with their parents and realized that they could trust their own opinions and ideas. Having adult-like relationships with parents furthered the students’ feelings of independence. Sam described “a sense of mutual respect and understanding that has allowed me to have a great degree of independence from them but to also feel a strong appreciation for them and connection to them and enjoy spending time with them.” These comments illustrate how establishing an adult-to-adult relationship characterized by mutual respect and understanding engenders feelings of independence.

Participants also described the value of their parents relinquishing unnecessary control. Sometimes resigning control included allowing students to make mistakes or permitting students to learn from mistakes without intervening on the student’s behalf. Ultimately, participants described learning responsibility and acquiring confidence when their parents loosened control and trusted them to make important decisions.

Several participants in this study described circumstances in which their parents disagreed with their opinion but still respected their independent decisions. In these cases students reported making divergent choices despite the advice they received from their parents. Parents fostered autonomy development in these situations by communicating to their college-age children that they could make their own decisions and accept responsibility for their choices. This stance promoted self-assurance by teaching students how to thoughtfully articulate dissenting beliefs and make confident decisions.

Keith described in his journal entry a situation when his mother disagreed with him about his decision to change his major:

There was an instance when my mother didn't agree with my decision to change

majors and no longer pursue an engineering degree. Leaving high school, it was written in stone that I was to take up a technical career, be it Architecture or Engineering. The reaction was a lot of debating. In order to get out why we make our decisions we tend to analyze and provide crucial evidence for our decisions, enabling to persuade the other to why it's a good decision or at least hold one's ground. From which that's what I did. She was only persuaded by so much, but supported me in my decision considering the situations at hand and my reasoning.

Although Keith's mother disputed his choice, she allowed him to express his grounds for the decision. Instead of preventing the change or even remaining opposed to the decision, she chose to support Keith's decision after he communicated his reasoning for the change. Keith wrote that he learned that "you can't let others decide on your life, you're never certain where life may take you. Life gives you lemons, make lemonade." This statement reveals that Keith does not think others control the direction of his life. His comments also indicate an emerging sense of autonomy; he recognizes that he can trust his own judgment and cope effectively with difficult situations.

Seven participants in this study also discussed instances when their parents did not intervene to prevent or correct a mistake. Instead of intervening, their parents supported them in coping with the mistake. Encouraging students to learn from these situations promoted autonomy development. Ashley said her parents "never really fixed my problems for me but they were, and especially my mom was, there to sort of listen and provide suggestions to how to sort of deal with the situation." Keisha recalled forgetting to sign in for a lab and then receiving a failing grade for an assignment because there was no record of her signing in for the lab. Instead of attempting to contact her instructor and change the grade, she said

her parents "sat me down and said you need to stop hurrying, and plan things out more." Keisha believed this advice helped her behave more autonomously in the future. She recalled, "It really helped because I actually schedule my classes where I have time to have meetings and do certain stuff in between or right after or before so it's helped me a lot especially with organization." Learning how to structure time and organize daily life in this manner is one of the components of college students' emerging autonomy (Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

Finally, parents encouraging responsibility also promoted autonomy development. New responsibilities, roles, and life choices arise when the student leaves home and enters college. Autonomous students handle these challenges confidently with minimal direction from others (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Parents, however, play an important role in teaching their children how to manage these demands. When parents encourage students to take responsibility, students learn important lessons of self-governance. The participants in this study described instances of their own emerging sense of responsibility.

Gabrielle and Kristen said that their parents had given them new responsibilities when they moved off campus. Gabrielle explained that "this year I'm living off campus so it's basically up to me to be able to pay my rent and take care of utilities and everything, so I am sort of living on my own." When asked how it felt to have these responsibilities, Gabrielle responded, "It feels good. I sort of feel like an adult now so I'm kind of getting practice for when I go off and get a job and live on my own so it's helpful." Kristen expressed similar sentiments about living off campus and having more responsibilities commenting, "It's more just a general feeling that I am equipped to handle being an adult." Having these new responsibilities made both Gabrielle and Kristen feel more autonomous and closer to adult life.

Maintaining Parental Control Inhibits Autonomy Development

Although parental support facilitates autonomy for college students, parental control may inhibit autonomy. Participants in this study believed they did not need their parents to do things for them. They thought they could handle their own situations. For instance, Chloe commented that “sometimes my mom makes plane reservations for me, which is kind of annoying. . . . And I’m like I wish I would have just bought that myself, ’cause like usually that’s my thing; I buy the plane tickets.” In addition, students found it “aggravating” or “frustrating” when their parents tried to exert too much influence over their academic or career decisions. Sometimes parents’ influence led to personal conflict and other times it led to resentment. In some cases pressure from parents prevented students from following their own academic interests.

Over-involved parents attempted to sway their college-age child’s academic decisions and career plans when they disagreed with decisions the student made. Although the participants often appreciated input and advice, excessive influence inhibited their autonomy development. Students began to feel conflicted about their decisions or second guess their choices. Five of the participants in this study described circumstances in which their parents exerted pressure on them to make particular decisions related to their career paths.

When parents attempted to exert control, it left the participants feeling conflicted about their choices instead of self-assured. Jake believed his mother “pushed” him toward majoring in economics. He shared that recently he had “been feeling a little resentment” toward his mother’s influence. Jake said that it was close to what he wanted to study but not exactly and he worried that he would not have a chance to pursue some

of his intellectual interests. He expressed his concern: “Now I’m getting close to graduating and it feels like I’m running out of time to do that and that feels unfortunate to me.” Jake considered the role of his mother’s influence:

I don’t really want to blame her because I should have been aware of what my interests were, but it’s just kind of depressing because I’m not going to be in school much longer and there are some things that I wish I had done that I haven’t done. And I kind of wish—maybe I wish that I had asked advice in a better way. I wish someone would have told me do what you want to do as opposed to do this.

He did not want to place all the blame on his mother, realizing that he could have been more aware of his own interests. Jake’s comments, however, imply that he thought his mother told him what to do instead of allowing him to choose his own interests. He believed that his mother’s involvement may have contributed to his predicament.

Erica experienced self-doubt after her mother attempted to sway her decision to participate in a summer internship program at Harvard. Her mother initially expressed apprehension about the program because of safety concerns relating to living in the city. Erica also recalled her mother saying, “You don’t want to do this, you don’t want to work in a lab.” Instead of supporting Erica’s pursuit of an internship that related directly to her academic and career interests, her mother tried to convince her not to participate in the program. Erica characterized the situation as an “ongoing dispute,” but her mother’s influence was causing her to have doubts. She called her mother’s response “kind of like a bummer.” Erica explained her thoughts, “It was just a lot of, why doesn’t she want me to have this experience and a lot of second guessing. . . . It can be aggravating.” Her mother’s input caused Erica to second guess participating in the internship program.

In a subsequent interview Erica mentioned she had given up her plans for graduate school altogether. She described interactions with her parents about attending graduate school in a journal entry:

They (like most other parents) are very apprehensive of the cost of many graduate school programs. . . . I tried to convince my parents that I would find a job and apply for as many financial aid grants as I could find, but this did not really appease them. I also had several lengthy conversations with my Mum about how in Neuroscience and Psychology programs, the department usually pays a significant amount for you to go to the school, but even after numerous (really, a ton) of conversations she didn't seem to believe me. . . . Thus talking about the later stages of planning my life became tedious and unenjoyable rather than thoughtful and exciting.

Ultimately, Erica decided to live at home after graduation and obtain a job while learning real estate investing from her mother. Her parents' influence may have prevented her from pursuing her first choice of attending graduate school and making a completely autonomous career decision.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Since the late 1990s, numerous stories in the media have documented a trend of college parents exerting their influence on college campuses. The close relationship of students and parents in the current generation of students has been well documented (Coburn, 2006; Daniel, Evans, & Scott, 2001; Howe & Strauss, 2003). Despite the attention given to "helicopter parents" by the national media, not all parents are highly involved or intrusive (Wartman & Savage, 2008). Indeed, parents often provide helpful support and encouragement for their college-age children. Many of the participants in this

study felt supported by their parents and expressed their appreciation for this support. Alternatively, some students described excessive influence from their parents. The results reveal that supportive involvement played an important role in the autonomy development process. Too much intervention from parents, however, appears to hinder students' feelings of autonomy.

The participants perceived that their parents promoted their autonomy by actively redefining the parent–student relationship, encouraging responsibility, and relinquishing unnecessary control. Parents can exercise these behaviors through establishing adult relationships and treating their college-age children like emerging adults. Redefining the parent–student relationship occurs as parents begin to relinquish old roles and assume new ones (Weissman, Cohen, Boxer, & Cohler, 1989). The dynamics of the new relationship allow students to no longer feel dependent on their parents. Alternatively, they begin to view themselves as equals and capable of handling adult responsibilities. Although college students may not yet have reached full adulthood, faculty and administrators expect college students to take adult responsibility for their actions. Continuing to treat students like children hinders them from handling these new responsibilities. Furthermore, preparing students for adulthood provides students with the skills they need to successfully manage their college experience.

In contrast with these behaviors, some participants reported that their parents' attempted to control academic, career, and financial decisions and in the process inhibited feelings of autonomy. In support of these findings, college administrators generally believe excessive support or over-involvement occurs when parents do things for which students should take responsibility or do on their own (Keppler et al., 2005; Wartman & Savage,

2008). These behaviors may include managing roommate conflicts, registering for courses, or contacting a professor about an assignment. In this study, some of the participants reported that their parents changed their academic or career decisions. When parents are able to change their college-age child's decision, they may be unintentionally maintaining dependency. Students may not feel ownership of their actions (Grolnick et al., 1997).

Parents, however, may receive mixed messages about becoming involved in their child's college experience. Some colleges encourage requests and contacts from parents whereas others emphasize that students are young adults responsible for their own affairs (Coburn, 2006). College administrators and parents need to understand both the purported benefits of parental involvement and the potential detriment of over-involvement. This study has implications for both parents and student affairs administrators who work with parents.

Parents should realize that support does not entail intervening with administrators on their child's behalf. Rather, support involves listening to the student, asking questions, respecting independent decisions, and offering emotional encouragement. This type of support allows students to act autonomously. Not intervening also requires relinquishing control and allowing students to differ in opinion and make their own decisions even if this means allowing students to make mistakes. In addition, college is a time for parents to establish adult-to-adult relationships with their children. Mature relationships allow students to feel more like adults and express their own beliefs and opinions.

These findings can also inform college administrators when interacting with parents. A recent survey found that 38% of freshmen and 29% of seniors reported their parents either frequently or sometimes intervened to solve problems they were having in college (NSSE,

2007). When parents contact administrators in these situations, the administrator can attempt to divert the control of the problem from the parents to the student. Administrators should encourage parents to let their children solve their own problems. This may involve listening to the parent and thanking the parent for their concern but requesting that the student initiate future contact. Furthermore, administrators can remind the parents that promoting responsibility in their child will lead to further autonomy development.

College administrators should use existing programs and mechanisms to communicate with parents and educate them about strategies for autonomy development. A recent parent services survey indicated that 95% of the colleges and universities surveyed offered a parent orientation program, 95% provided a family day or weekend, 78% published a handbook for parents, and 54% sent out parent newsletters (Wartman & Savage, 2008). These services provide forums for educating parents about their role in the autonomy development process. For instance, one university posted videos on their website to help parents understand the student experience and another institution developed an online course to educate parents on topics of college drinking and student financial management (Wartman & Savage).

As institutions create policies for communicating with parents, administrators should consider the role of parents in student development. Several student affairs practitioners and professors have suggested that colleges and universities should develop comprehensive philosophies concerning their relationship with parents (Mullendore et al., 2005). These commentators note that such a philosophy should invite parents to participate with established appropriate boundaries around their involvement (Mullendore et al.). The findings from this study suggest that

these policies should note the importance of supportive parental involvement but cautiously guard against instances of excessive influence.

There are limitations to this study. The university selected for this study is a selective institution with traditional-age full-time students that are not representative of the majority of college students in the United States. There is, however, a large population of nontraditional undergraduate students in the United States. Many of these students attend community colleges or 4-year colleges on a part-time basis. The type of involvement these students experience from their parents may differ significantly from students at the research site and should be explored in future research. Further limitations exist in relation to the sample. Participants with close relationships with their parents may have been more willing to participate in a study about parents than those with strained relationships with their parents. This could have led to sample of students with more positive relationships with their parents than the typical student.

The current study examined parental involvement and autonomy development through the perceptions of students. Future research could explore similar questions from the perspective of parents. How do parents describe their role in the process of their college student's autonomy development? What actions did they find promoted and/or inhibited autonomy development? Studying the parent perspective could provide a whole new lens for understanding the reasons and motivations behind particular involvement behaviors. Additionally, research could be conducted that accounted for both the parent and the student perspectives by studying parent–student dyads. Such a study could address inconsistencies between parents' intentions for involvement and students' perceptions of these motives.

Although the current study attempted

to include a diverse sample of participants, including 3 Asian American students, 2 African American students, 1 Hispanic American student and 12 White students; the findings presented should be examined for their applicability to students of different ethnicities. Recent research found that students of color were more likely than were White students to indicate that their parents were too little involved in college-related decisions and dealings with college officials (Pryor, Hurtado, Sharkness, & Korn, 2008). Latino/a students were most likely to indicate that their parents were not involved enough in these areas (Pryor et al.). These findings suggest that parental involvement patterns may differ by ethnicity and warrant future research specifically examining these different ethnic groups of students. How might these different parental involvement patterns reflect cultural conceptions of autonomy?

This research demonstrates the important role parents play in the lives of their college-age children. With the rise of parental involvement in recent years, understanding this role is critical for college administrators who increasingly interact with parents. Maintaining colleges and institutions that serve as a transition from adolescent to adulthood will require that administrators and parents work together to ensure that students develop autonomy. This research offers practical suggestions for supportive parental involvement during the college years. It is hoped that the results of this study will provide a framework to guide administrators and parents as they seek to prepare college students for the adult world after graduation.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Brian Cullaty, Assistant to the Vice Provost for Academic Programs, University of Virginia, PO Box 400308, Charlottesville, VA 22906-4308 ; brc7q@virginia.edu

REFERENCES

- Arnstein, R. L. (1980). The student, the family, the university, and transition to adulthood. *Adolescent Psychiatry, 8*, 160-172.
- Arnstein, R. L. (1989). Overview of normal transition to young adulthood. In S. C. Feinstein, A. H. Esman, J. G. Looney, G. H. Orvin, & J. L. Schimmel (Eds.), *Adolescent psychiatry: Developmental and clinical studies* (Vol. 16, pp. 127-141). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Blos, P. (1979). *The adolescent passage: Developmental issues*. New York: International Universities Press.
- Boyer, E. (1987). *College: The undergraduate experience in America*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Carney-Hall, K. C. (2008). Understanding current trends in family involvement. *New Directions for Student Services, 122*, 3-14.
- Chickering, A. (1969). *Education and identity*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Chickering, A., & Reisser, L. (1993). *Education and identity* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Coburn, K. L. (2006). Organizing a ground crew for today's helicopter parents. *About Campus, 11*(3), 9-16.
- Cooper, D. L., Healy, M. A., & Simpson, J. (1994). Student development through involvement: specific changes over time. *Journal of College Student Development, 35*, 98-102.
- Daniel, B., Evans, S., & Scott, B. R. (2001). Understanding family involvement in the college experience today. *New Directions for Student Services, 94*, 3-13.
- Daniel, B., & Ross, B. S. (Ed.). (2001). Consumers, adversaries, and partners: Working with the families of undergraduates [Special issue]. *New Directions for Student Services, 94*.
- Flanagan, W. J. (2006). The future of the small college dean: Challenges and opportunities. *New Directions for Student Services, 116*, 67-83.
- Foubert, J. D., & Grainger, L. U. (2006). Effects of involvement in clubs and organizations on the psychosocial development of first-year and senior college students. *NASPA Journal* (Online), *43*, 166-182.
- Gilligan, C. (1982). In a different voice: Psychological theory and women's development. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Greeley, A. T., & Tinsley, H. (1988). Autonomy and intimacy development in college students: Sex differences and predictors. *Journal of College Student Development, 29*, 512-520.
- Grolnick, W. S., Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (1997). Internalization within the family: The self-determination theory perspective. In J. E. Grusec & L. Kuczynski (Eds.), *Parenting and children's internalization of values: A handbook of contemporary theory* (pp. 135-161). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.
- Howe, N., & Strauss, W. (2003). *Millennials go to college*. Washington, DC: American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers.
- Jaschik, S. (2007, March 15). Data on helicopter parents. *Inside Higher Ed*. Retrieved March 15, 2007, from <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2007/03/15/parents>
- Johnson, H. E. (2004, January 9). Educating parents about college life. *Chronicle of Higher Education, B11-B12*.
- Jones, C. E., & Watt, J. D. (2001). Moral orientation and psychosocial development: Gender and class-standing differences. *NASPA Journal, 39*, 1-13.
- Josselson, R. (1988). The embedded self: I and thou revisited. In D. K. Lapsley & F. C. Power (Eds.), *Self, ego, and identity: Integrative approaches* (pp. 91-108). New York: Springer.
- Kegan, R. (1982). *The evolving self: Problem and process in human development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Keppler, K., Mullendore, R. H., & Carey, A. (Eds.) (2005). *Partnering with the parents of today's college students*. Washington, DC: NASPA.
- Kuh, G. D. (1993). In their own words: What students learn outside the classroom. *American Educational Research Journal, 30*, 277-304.
- Lefkowitz, E. S. (2005). "Things have gotten better": Developmental changes among emerging adults after the transition to university. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 20*, 40-63.
- Levinson, D. J. (1978). *The seasons of a man's life* (1st ed.). New York: Knopf.
- Levinson, D. J. (1990). A theory of life structure development in adulthood. In C. N. Alexander & E. J. Langer (Eds.), *Higher stages of human development* (pp. 35-54). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lewis, H. R. (2006). *Excellence without a soul: How a great university forgot education* (1st ed.). New York: PublicAffairs.
- Lincoln, Y., & Guba, E. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Mather, P. C., & Winston, R. B. (1998). Autonomy development of traditional-aged students: Themes and processes. *Journal of College Student Development, 39*, 33-50.
- Maxwell, J. A. (2005). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Mullendore, R. H., Banahan, L. A., Ramsey, J. L. (2005). Developing a partnership with today's college parents. In K. Keppler, R. H. Mullendore, & A. Carey, (Eds.), *Partnering with the parents of today's college students* (pp. 1-10). Washington, DC: NASPA.
- National Survey of Student Engagement (2007). *NSSE Annual Report 2007*. Retrieved November 5, 2007, from <http://nsse.iub.edu/NSSE%5F2007%5FAnnual%5FReport/>
- Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. T. (2005). *How college affects students: Volume 2. A third decade of research*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (2nd ed.). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Pryor, J. H., Hurtado, S., Sharkness, J., & Korn, W. S. (2008). The American freshman: National norms for fall 2007. Los Angeles, CA: Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA.
- Seidman, I. (1998). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences* (2nd ed.). New York: Teachers College Press
- Shapiro, J. R. (2002, August 22). Keeping parents off campus. *New York Times*, p. 23.
- Smith, J. S., & Griffin, B. L. (1993). The relationship between involvement in extracurricular activities and the psychosocial development of university students. *College Student Affairs Journal, 13*, 79-84.

The Role of Parental Involvement

- Steinberg, L. (2008). *Adolescence* (8th ed.). New York: McGraw Hill.
- Strauss, A. L. (1987). *Qualitative analysis for social scientists*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Strauss, A. L., & Corbin, J. M. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Stringer, W. L., Cunningham, A. F., O'Brien C. T., & Merisotis, J. P. (1998). *It's all relative: The role of parents in college financing and enrollment* (USA Group Foundation New Agenda Series). Washington DC: Institute for Higher Education Policy.
- Taub, D. J. (1995). Relationship of selected factors to traditional-age undergraduate women's development of autonomy. *Journal of College Student Development, 36*, 141-151.
- Taub, D. J. (1997). Autonomy and parental attachment in traditional-age undergraduate women. *Journal of College Student Development, 38*, 645-654.
- Trice, A. D. (2002). First semester college students' email to parents: I. Frequency and content related to parenting style. *College Student Journal, 36*, 327-334.
- Wachs, P. M., & Cooper, D. L. (2002). Validating the Student Developmental Task and Lifestyle Assessment: A longitudinal study. *Journal of College Student Development, 43*, 124-129.
- Wartman, K. L., & Savage, M. (2008). Parent involvement in higher education. *ASHE Higher Education Report, 33*(6).
- Weissman, S. H., Cohen, R. S., Boxer, A. M., & Cohler, B. J. (1989). Parenthood experience and the adolescent's transition to young adulthood: Self psychological perspectives In S. C. Feinstein, A. H. Esman, J. G. Looney, G. H. Orvin & J. L. Schimmel (Eds.), *Adolescent psychiatry: Developmental and clinical studies* (Vol. 16, pp. 155-174). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Wintre, M. G., & Yaffe, M. (2000). First-year students' adjustment to university life as a function of relationships with parents. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 15*, 9-37.
- Zarrett, N., & Eccles, J. (2006). The passage to adulthood: Challenges of late adolescence. *New Directions for Youth Development, 111*, 13-26.