Parents' Perceptions of Involvement in Their Students' First Year in College

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Higher education administrators' expectations of parental involvement have been based on legal implications, research regarding best practices, and student development theories. Little is known, however, about parents' perceptions of their involvement in college, particularly in students' first year in college. This research study sought to determine differences, if any, between parents' perceptions of their level of involvement and parents' demographic characteristics. Results indicated perceptual differences based on students' status as first-generation college students, ethnicities, and students' anticipated residence for the first year of college. Findings from this research can potentially inform institutions as they establish parent-university partnerships.

Students' first year of college is a complex transitional period of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2007), where they adopt responsibilities previously held by their parents during PK-12 education (Lake 2011, 2013; USDOE, 2020) while navigating new communities and developing new identities (Cohen, 1985). Research by Arnett (2000, 2007) on this period of emerging adulthood and results from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE, 2007) highlighted students' continued reliance on parents and families, particularly during students' first year in college. Research has demonstrated positive parental contributions as a result of parents' involvement with their college students in the areas of health and well-being, academic success, and motivation (Bradley-Geist & Olson-Buchanan, 2014; Cullaty, 2011; Darlow et al., 2017; Earle & LaBrie, 2016; Pizzolato & Hicklen, 2011; Schiffrin & Liss, 2017; Simmons, 2008; Turrisi et al., 2010).

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

Lowe and Dotterer (2017) defined parental involvement in college as including "parental support-giving, parent-student contact, and parental academic engagement" (p. 1). Students' involvement with their parents during college may take several forms, including consultation with parents on major decisions during college (Pizzolato & Hicklen, 2011), regular communication with parents (Fingerman et al., 2012), and engagement in academics (e.g., academic progress, grades attainment, courses taken), particularly in the first and second years of college (Wolf et al., 2009).

Parents' involvement in their students' college education is informed by various factors, including familial and cultural context, expectations of parental involvement during PK-12 schooling, parents' roles as consumers in relation to college expenses, and various non-tangible supports they offer their students (Cutright, 2008; Daniel et al., 2001; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997; Kiyama & Harper, 2018; Lowe & Dotterer, 2017; Wartman & Savage, 2008). Levels of parental involvement can differ based on the higher education institution, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, first-generation/first child in college status, and the student's residence for the first year in college (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997; Harper et al., 2019; Kiyama, 2010; Kiyama & Harper, 2018; Somers & Settle, 2010; Wartman & Savage, 2008). For instance, Kiyama's (2010) research found that Mexican American families maintained strong parent-family connections. Meanwhile, Wolf et al. (2009) found that higher socioeconomic status parents reported more involvement with their students than lower socioeconomic parents due to parental access to resources.

Traditionally, higher education administrators' expectations of parental involvement have been informed by legal implications such as the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA; U.S. Department of Education, 2020), research related to best practices for parental involvement in higher education, and student development

theories. In some instances, parents' involvement in college has been perceived as a negative factor rather than a positive one, with labels such as "helicopter parent" being used (White, 2005, p. B16). For instance, one negative view of parental involvement includes helicopter parents inserting themselves on behalf of their students, limiting the autonomy of their students, and critiquing faculty and higher education administrators' responses to their students' needs (Darlow et al., 2017; White, 2005). However, Kiyama and Harper (2018) argued for the need for higher education institutions to move beyond negative views of parental involvement and embrace a more inclusive perspective of parents and families as integral levers for students' success.

In 2020, postsecondary education enrollment numbers continued to climb, with more than 1.8 million first-year students starting at 4-year colleges and universities (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). This large number of incoming first-time-in-college (FTIC) students bring parents who hold perceptions of involvement, as well as students who may rely on parental support during their transition into higher education. It is necessary to address the gap in the literature by examining parents' perceptions of involvement to tap into the potential of parental involvement as an avenue for students' success in their first year in college. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to determine differences between parents' perceptions of involvement with their FTIC students based on parents' demographic characteristics, parenting a first-generation college student or their first child in college, ethnicity, income level, employment status (e.g., full-time, part-time, etc.), and their students' residence. Perceptions of parental involvement were analyzed at four levels of involvement: personal, appropriate, expected, and university role. *Personal* involvement was defined as the parents' anticipated involvement in their student's first year. *Appropriate* involvement called for parents to respond to items regarding their perceptions of what was suitable, whereas *expected* asked for parents' perceptions of what was a requirement. Finally, parents were asked to share their perceptions regarding the *university's* role in each survey item. The research question framing this study was: What is the difference in parents' perceptions of their level of involvement (personal involvement, appropriate involvement, expected involvement, university's role) and the parents' characteristics?

Methods

This quantitative research employed a causal-comparative design that relied on data collected through the distribution of a newly established survey instrument, the Level of Involvement from Parents Perceptions Survey (LIPPS). This research study was completed at a large Carnegie R1 institution (LRI). Every year, LRI welcomes more than 15,000 undergraduates and 10,000 guests (Visual Zen, 2019). From May

to August each year, LRI's transitions program office hosts new student orientations for students and their guests. During the orientation, family, and parent resources are offered, including LRI's parent monthly newsletter. Participants for this study were drawn from a convenience sample of parents who registered for the LRI monthly parent newsletter during LRI's summer 2020 new student orientation program.

DATA SOURCES

LIPPS was distributed through email directly from the LRU Transition Programs office to 5,039 parents registered for LRU's monthly parents' newsletter throughout the summer of 2020. Initially, 321 participants completed the survey representing 6.37% of the convenience sample. The final sample for the research was comprised of 261 participants who met the requirements of being a parent of a first-year student, being 18 years or older, identifying as a mother, father, or step-parent, and responding to all items on the LIPPS instrument. For the purposes of this study, the parent role was defined as mother, father, or step-parent (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). This was done to align the findings of this research to seminal research on parental involvement in PK-12 settings (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). The final sample was comprised of 5.17% of the total sample available to the researchers.

LIPPS INSTRUMENT

The LIPPS instrument, a newly created instrument, consisted of 60 items that used a five-point Likert scale with (1) *strongly disagree*, (2) *disagree*, (3) *neither agree nor disagree*, (4) *agree*, and (5) *strongly agree*. Twelve items were designed to collect the demographic characteristics of parents, and 48 items were designed to collect data on their perceptions of involvement. The first section of LIPPS collected data from the parents regarding their demographic characteristics (e.g., the student's status as a first-generation college student, the student being their first child to go to college, the parent's ethnicity, parent's employment status, household income range, and the student's intended residence for their first year of college) to serve as the independent variables (IVs).

The second section of LIPPS collected data on participants' perceptions of involvement and was comprised of four subsections with 48 items. Participants' perceptual data were collected on four levels of involvement: (a) how they *personally anticipated* being involved in their FTIC students' first year, (b) what they deemed to be *appropriate*, or "suitable or fitting," for their involvement (appropriate, n.d.), (c) their *expected* involvement such as "required, necessary, or obligated," (expected, n.d.), and (d) the *university's* involvement. In each subsection, participants responded to statements regarding academics, financial obligations, interpersonal relationships and social activities, and discipline. Statement themes were based on research, the review of literature, and professional experiences.

To develop the LIPPS instrument, researchers used the College Student Parental Interaction Preference scale (CSPIP) by Darlow et al. (2017) and Forbes' (2001) College Parents' Survey (CPS). CSPIP was created to understand students' preferences regarding parental involvement (Darlow et al., 2017), whereas CPS included items to compare parents' and students' expectations of the college experience (Forbes, 2001). Approval was sought and given to utilize items from the CSPIP and CPS instruments to create the LIPPS instrument. Five CSPIP items were modified to address parents' perceptions regarding academics, financial obligations, interpersonal relationships and social activities, and discipline. (Darlow et al., 2017, p. 3). Ten items were modified from the CPS for the LIPPS instrument to accommodate the format and structure of the finalized survey. The first five items informed the participants' characteristics, including demographics, income, distance from home to school, relationship with the student, and if the student was a first-generation college student (Forbes, 2000). Five additional CPS items regarding students changing a major, fraternity or sorority life, students missing class, students being found guilty of a minor disciplinary violation, and students' conflict with a peer (Forbes, 2000) were adapted for the LIPPS survey due to their fit with the research.

Prior to the dissemination of the survey to participants, a pilot study was completed to test the 48 items on the LIPPS instrument and to calculate the survey's Cronbach's alpha psychometric score (a = .89). In addition to completing the LIPPS instrument, the pilot participants were asked for any general feedback and input regarding the structure of the instrument and terminology.

Results

Findings from the demographic characteristics of participants demonstrated that over half of the participants identified as mothers (68.96%), while fathers represented a lower proportion of participants (30.65%). Most participants identified as White (71.26%), followed by Hispanic or Latino (14.55%), Black or African American (6.51%), Asian/Pacific Islander (4.59%), and finally Other (3.06%). Participants were also asked to respond to an item regarding their students' statuses as a first-generation college (FGC) student (11.12 %) or their first child to attend a four-year college or university (37.93%).

The results of participants' employment statuses concluded that 83.14% of participants were employed full-time, part-time, or identified as self-employed. The remaining participants identified as unemployed (11.87%) or retired or unable to work (4.98%). The participants provided their household income range for 2019, with the highest proportion reporting an income of less than $99,000 (37.13%), followed by more than $200,000 (24.52%) and $100,000 - $149,000 (22.22%). Finally, the LIPPS instrument requested anticipated residence arrangements for the participants' students' first year of college. From

the residences listed on the survey, participants selected: (a) on-campus within university housing (77.01%), (b) at home with family (12.26%), (c) a private home, apartment, or room (8.04%), (d) other (1.91%), and (e) prefer not to share (0.76%).

DIFFERENCES AMONG PARTICIPANT PERCEPTIONS OF INVOLVEMENT

To test differences among participant groups, the researchers used the Mann-Whitney U Test and the Kruskal-Wallis Test. Participant perceptual data were aggregated into mean perception scores for each of the four levels of involvement based on the survey's five-point Likert scale. The participant demographic characteristics were the independent variables (IVs), while the perceptual scores were the dependent variables (DVs). Differences in participant perceptions, where there were IVs with two potential responses, were analyzed by the non-parametric Mann-Whitney U test. The IVs with more than two potential responses (groups) were tested by the non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis test.

First-Generation in College

There was a significant difference regarding participants' perceptions of appropriate involvement and their students' statuses as first-generation college (FGC) students (U = 2580.50, p < .05). Similarly, participants with FGC students expected more involvement compared to their participant counterparts who did not have FGC students (U = 2481.00, p < .05). Finally, participants with FGC students held a significantly different perception of the university's involvement, specifically anticipating the university would be more involved (U = 2337.50, p < .01).

Ethnicity

Additionally, there were significant differences between parents' perceptions based on their self-selected ethnicity. The significant differences were evident across anticipated, personal involvement, anticipated, personal involvement, appropriate involvement, expected involvement, and the university's involvement. Table 1 presents the results of the Kruskall-Wallis analysis.

Pairwise comparisons were completed to determine where the differences lay based on participants' ethnicity (e.g., African American, Asian/Pacific Islander, Hispanic or Latino, Other, or White). Parents who identified as Hispanic or Latino (z = 2.549, p < .05), Asian/Pacific Islander (z = 2.069, p < .05), or African American (z = 2.623, p < .01) all held perceptions of anticipating being more involved than those participants who identified as White.

Table 1

Results of Kruskal-Wallis Test of Ethnicity and Perceptions of Involvement

Characteristic	Perceptions of Involvement	H	p
	Personal	15.995*	.003
	Appropriate	15.376*	.004
Ethnicity	Expected	16.567*	.002
	University	27.817**	.000

Notes. D(f) 4; *Difference is significant at the .01 level (2-sided); **Difference is significant at .001 level (2-sided). Adapted from "An Investigation of Parental Perceptions of Their Involvement in Their Student's First Year of College," by E. A. Manuel *Electronic Theses and Dissertations, 2020-*. 959, p. 141 https://stars.library.ucf.edu/etd2020/959.

The pairwise comparison determined participants who identified as White held significantly different perceptions of appropriate involvement than parents who identified as Hispanic or Latino (z = 2.811, p < .05) or Other (z = 2.292, p < .05). Participants who identified as White also held significantly different perceptions of expected involvement (H = 16.567, p < .01) compared to participants who identified as Hispanic or Latino (z = 2.03, p < .05) or Other (z = 3.17, p < .01). In these comparisons, participants who identified as Hispanic or Latino parents or Other responded that more involvement was both appropriate and an expectation in their FTIC students' first year of college. Significant differences were also presented between perceptions of expected involvement of Hispanic or Latino parents and Other (z = -2.014, p < .05), with the latter holding expectations of more involvement. Finally, there was a significant difference in perceptions of the university's involvement based on the parents' ethnicities (H = 27.817, p <.001). Parents who selected any ethnicity on the LIPPS instrument other than White perceived the university would be more involved: Hispanic or Latino (z = 3.443, p < .01), African American (z = 2.756, p < .01), Asian/Pacific Islander (z = 2.961, p < .01), Other (z = 2.537, p < .05). Table 2 presents the results of the pairwise comparisons for ethnicity.

Anticipated Residence

Analysis of participant data found a significant difference between participants' perceptions of their anticipated personal involvement and their students' residence (H = 10.788, p < .05). Participants who had students planning to reside with family or relatives anticipated being more involved (z = -2.652, p < .01) than those whose student would reside on-campus. Parents' perceptions did not significantly differ regarding appropriate involvement, expected involvement, or the university's involvement.

Table 2
Pairwise Comparisons of Ethnicity for Significant Differences

Perceptions of Involvement	Pairwise Comparison	Z	p
Personal	White (5), Hispanic or Latino (3)	2.549	.011
	White (5), Asian/Pacific Islander (1)	2.069	.039
	White (5), African American (2)	2.623**	.009
Appropriate	White (5), Hispanic or Latino (3)	2.811	.005
	White (5), Other (4)	2.292	.022
Expected	White (5), Hispanic or Latino (3)	2.030	.042
	White (5), Other (4)	3.170**	.002
	Hispanic or Latino (3), Other (4)	-2.014	.044
University	White (5), Hispanic or Latino (3)	3.443**	.001
	White (5), African American (2)	2.756**	.006
	White (5), Asian/Pacific Islander (1)	2.961**	.003
	White (5), Other (4)	2.537	.011

Notes. **Difference is significant at the .01 level (2-sided); All other differences are significant at .05 level (2-sided). Adapted from "An Investigation of Parental Perceptions of Their Involvement in Their Student's First Year of College," by E. A. Manuel *Electronic Theses and Dissertations, 2020-*. 959, p. 208 https://stars.library.ucf.edu/etd2020/959.

First Child in College, Employment, and Income

Participants who reported their student starting in Fall 2020 as their first child to attend college did not have significantly different perceptions of their involvement at the personal (U = 7834.00, p =.755), anticipated (U = 8529.50, p = .387), expected (U = 8206.00, p = .752), or university levels (U = 7206.5, p = .169). Similarly, there were no significant differences based on the parents' employment statuses as employed, not employed, or other at the personal (H = .354, p =.838), anticipated (H = .538, p =.764), expected (H = 2.535, p =.282), or university level (H = 4.690, p =.096). Finally, participants' income did not render significant differences in perceptions of personal involvement (H = 10.198, p =.251), anticipated involvement (H = 6.304, p =.613), expected involvement (H = 7.258, p =.509), or university involvement (H = 10.856, p =.210).

Discussion

Research on emerging adulthood underscored students' continued need for parental and familial support during the first year of college (NSSE, 2007). As universities

seek student success in the first year of college, it is critical that higher education institutions establish partnerships with parents, ensuring the partnerships are mutually beneficial for all involved: student, institution, and parent. Gaining an understanding of parents' perceptions of levels of involvement with parents' characteristics in mind is an initial first step for higher education institutions and was the aim of this study.

Both parents and higher education have a vested interest in students' success, retention, and degree completion (Mullendore, 2014a, 2014b). Adopting an asset-based perspective where partnerships with parents are equally as important as the other partnerships in achieving student success initiatives in the first year of college and throughout college may prove beneficial to students, institutions, and parents. Findings from this study may help to inform how higher education may navigate parental involvement and the role parents play in supporting their students during the collegiate experience (CAS, 2018; Hower & Wolcott, 2019). Each college may approach partnering with parents differently based on their student demographics. The results of this study regarding parents' perceptions, in combination with students' preferences, could inform the development of resource guides or training sessions for parents. Topics may include communication, expectations, and topics relevant to FERPA, such as grades and finances (Smith, 2018). Furthermore, the findings from this study should be shared with higher education faculty and administrators. Units within colleges or universities responsible for faculty professional development or new faculty orientation may rely on this research to develop workshops to support faculty's efforts to better understand their students' context.

This study found that parental involvement perceptions differed based on parent characteristics of their child's designation as an FGC student, parents' ethnicity, and their student's residence, similar to the findings of Kiyama (2010) and Wolf et al. (2009). Parents who shared these characteristics held perceptions of more involvement, both what they deemed as appropriate and what they expected, as well as the university's involvement. Through this study, assumptions of parental involvement were examined that may prove valuable to institutions seeking to build relationships and increase inclusive practices for parents and families, as Kiyama and Harper (2018) suggested. Institutions may consider developing affinity groups based on parents' common interests or specific parent characteristics. The use of affinity groups has the potential to support relationship-building among parents and sharing of experiences that will, in turn, support students.

There are limitations to the findings of this research study due to the sample size, composition of the sample, and higher education institution type that may affect the generalizability of the results. First, because the research was conducted in

2020, the COVID-19 global pandemic potentially impacted the parents' perceptions and response rates. Moreover, research into parents' perceptions of involvement is emerging; therefore, more research studies with this focus are needed. More quantitative studies of parents' perceptions of involvement are needed across higher education institutions to address these limitations. Further, to address the composition of the sample, the definition of parent could be expanded to include any individual (e.g., parents, family members, or others who provide support to students) who may be student caregivers and therefore have perceptions of involvement as they support students. Suggested terms may include any caregiver or student supporters to highlight the broader network involved in students' first year of college (Harper et al., 2018). Lastly, this research could be replicated in various higher education institution settings, including other R1 institutions, R2 institutions, community colleges, and others, to determine perceptions of parental involvement in multiple higher education settings.

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