“If I Hadn’t Had that Support System, I Think I Would Have Dropped Out by Now”: Parental Support in College and its Implications for Student Adjustment

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Abstract
Understanding college students’ perceptions of parental support and its impact on student adjustment have important implications for maximizing retention rates within higher education institutions. College students (N = 53) participated in qualitative interviews focused on students’ perceptions of mothers’ and fathers’ support during college and its impact on college adjustment. Holistic coding interviews indicated three different classifications of parents based on levels of support: supportive, ambivalent, and unsupportive. Students indicated that their parents continued to be the main source of support and a key factor that supports their adjustment during the college years. In contrast, students who did not receive such support expressed having difficulties continuing working toward their degree. Students’ narratives also indicated that mothers and fathers provided support in different

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ways. These findings have important implications for practice, and in particular how high education institutions can promote adjustment and retention rates by encouraging parental engagement.

**Keywords**
parental support, college students, qualitative, adjustment, parent/child relations

**Introduction**

College enrollment is a time of transition during which students must navigate the psychosocial challenges of emerging adulthood (e.g., autonomy, identity, and achievement) in a new environment, often while living away from home for the first time. Emerging adulthood is a developmental period spanning ages 18 to 25 (Arnett, 2000, 2004, 2016) and is a period of time during which many young adults commence post-secondary education. Within the United States (US), approximately 44% of high school students enroll in 4-year institutions directly upon high school graduation (NCES, 2020). However, only 60% of these students obtain a degree within 6 years (NCES, 2019). During college, students need to adjust to new academic environments, relationship dynamics, and responsibilities. This can be stressful, and many students report experiencing anxiety, depression, loneliness, and sleep deprivation (Doane, Gress-Smith, & Breitenstein, 2015; Drake, Sladek, & Doane, 2016; Lee, Dickson, Conley, & Holmbeck, 2014; Terry, Leary, & Mehta, 2013). Attending college comes with a number of challenges that can limit parents’ opportunities to support their young adult children (e.g., distance from home). However, parental support has been identified as an important protective factor to prevent or ameliorate negative outcomes associated with college transition challenges. College students who receive more parental support report better school adjustment, higher GPAs, and higher retention rates during the first year of college (Kolkhorst et al., 2010b). This developmental period offers a unique opportunity to study the role of parental support as young adults become more autonomous and navigate the world of higher education. Understanding the sources and limitations of parental support in young adult college students can offer crucial information to improve student mental health and support retention.

In recent years, scholars have highlighted the need for considering the role of parents in supporting student success in higher education (Roksa & Kinsley, 2019; Sax & Wartman 2010; Wartman & Savage, 2008). Some studies have attempted to describe the nature of parental involvement during college, but research has often only focused on how parental involvement
affects dimensions of student social and academic engagement and fails to consider additional ways in which parents might support college students. In addition, most studies have examined the frequency and method of communications between parents and college students or focused on parental support painted with a broad brush, usually based on questionnaire data. Very few studies have used qualitative approaches. Within this study, we attempted to overcome these limitations by applying a qualitative interview approach in which we asked open-ended questions that allowed college students to provide elaborated responses and discuss the specific types of support their parents provided (or failed to provide), as well as the strategies parents used to provide this support. This approach offers a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of parental support and its impact on students during this important developmental period.

**Theoretical Framework**

During the 21st century in the US, increased enrollment in higher education has changed the nature and definition of adulthood. From 1950 to 2014, the number of full time US college students increased from 2.3 million to 20 million (Snyder et al., 2014). College students who enter post-secondary institutions with the years closely following high school graduation are considered to be *Emerging Adults*. Arnett (2000) argued that emerging adulthood is a theoretically distinctive developmental period that falls in between adolescence and adulthood. Arnett proposed five distinguishing features of emerging adulthood: identity exploration, self-focus, time of possibility, instability, and feeling in-between (Arnett, 2004). During this developmental period, parents play a critical role in supporting independence and facilitating a successful transition to adulthood (Arnett, 2004; Settersten, 2012).

Given the large number of students who enroll in college directly following high school graduation, the study of emerging adulthood and parental support in higher education is particularly relevant. Most traditional theories of college student development place parents at the periphery; however, research shows that parents continue to play an important socialization role in the lives of their children during the college years (Lowe & Dotterer, 2018). Consistent with cultural and demographic shifts that motivated the specification of the developmental stage of emerging adulthood, theories focused on the development of college students have incorporated the role of parents (e.g., Perna & Thomas, 2008). Additionally, there has been a shift toward promoting collaborative relationships between parents and institutions to promote student success (Henning, 2007). The current study was framed by the theory of emerging adulthood, which suggests that emerging adults rely on their parents to attain self-sufficiency as they become more autonomous (Arnett, 2000). As
students transition to higher education institutions, they rely on their parents for emotional and decision-making support, and they often depend on them financially. However, as students gradually learn to navigate the college environment, they rely less on parents to regulate their behaviors and parental levels of supervision decrease (Lowe & Dotterer, 2018). The theory of emerging adulthood is a useful framework for examining how parents and college students maintain connections and how parental support can promote adjustment and retention rates during college.

**Parental Support During College**

The extent to which parents engage in different types of support and the strategies they use to provide support differ across developmental periods. Compared to high school, parents of college students have to renegotiate strategies for supporting their children in a context that is often geographically distant. Several studies have examined the nature and impact of parental support during the transition from high school to college, but less is known about the role of parental support in facilitating students’ adjustment as enrollment in college continues. The current study aims to address these gaps by examining college students’ perceptions of parental support as an important factor that relates to their adjustment during the college years.

**Types of support**

During the transition to college, parents act as “safety nets” to support their children as well as providing “scaffolding” to foster the development of independence (Swartz, Kim, Uno, Mortimer, & O’Brien, 2011). During college, parents remain key sources of both tangible and nontangible forms of support by providing financial support (Yelowitz, 2007) and emotional support (such as listening and giving advice a few times a month and consulting about important decisions (Pettit, Erath, Lansford, Dodge, & Bates, 2011; Pizzolato & Hicklen, 2011). Even though most of the literature on parental support during emerging adulthood has focused on financial and emotional support, another way in which parents provide support during college is by assisting students with academic-related tasks and decisions, discussing class materials, and placing an emphasis on grades and graduation. These types of support are especially prevalent among parents of first year students (Dorsch, Smith, & Dotterer, 2016; Harper, Sax, & Wolf, 2012; Wolf, Sax, & Harper, 2009). Also, parents can provide support to college students by engaging in behaviors such as checking in, encouraging, or demonstrating pride—behaviors that are often overlooked by researchers in part due to the quantitative nature of most studies of college students. In one qualitative study, interviews indicated that students accessed their parents not only for
financial and emotional support, but also to ask questions about college and relationships issues. In order to provide this support, parents used calls, emails, sent cards and packages, used words of encouragement, and visited students on campus (Kolkhorst et al., 2010a). Similarly, in an ethnographic study exploring Latinx first-generation college students’ experiences, family members were identified as one of the most important sources of support (Michel & Durdella, 2019). Even though parents provided limited financial support and did not provide academic guidance, they engaged in strategies such as academic encouragement, parental pride, and motivational encouragement to support their young adults. Communication technologies such as cell phones, emails, and social networking sites facilitate families in their efforts to be supportive, even when physically distant from children (Lefkowitz, 2005). This is particularly relevant for college students, who in most cases are living away from home from the first time during their first year of college (Arnett, 2004).

**Impact of support**

Parental support during college has been associated with a variety of positive outcomes, with students who feel supported by their parents reporting lower levels of psychological distress, experiencing fewer feelings of loneliness (Hall et al., 2017), reporting higher levels of social adjustment, and experiencing more positive relationships with friends (Mounts, Valenti, Anderson, & Boswell, 2006). For college students who report higher levels of shyness and maladaptive coping skills, parental support is particularly strongly associated with positive college adjustment (Katz & Somers, 2017). In a sample of low-income first year students, emotional support was associated with positive academic outcomes (grades, credit accumulation, and persistence), greater psychological well-being, and more student engagement; financial support was more beneficial for continuing generation students than for their first-generation peers (Roksa & Kinsley, 2019). In addition to promoting positive adjustment and academic success, parental support has implications for parent–child relationship quality. For example, increases in parental support from high school to college have been associated with higher levels of satisfaction within the parent–young adult dyad after the transition to college (Levitt, Silver, & Santos, 2007). Similarly, students who report stronger attachments to parents display more social competence during their transition to college (Fass & Tubman, 2002) as well as experiencing greater academic, social, and emotional adjustment to college (Mattanah, Hancock, & Brand, 2004). Finally, students who are more academically, socially, and emotionally adjusted are more likely to remain in college and graduate (Woosley, 2003), and those who have better parent–young adult relationships earn higher GPA’s and have higher retention rates (Kolkhorst et al., 2010b).
Given the implications of parental support during college for student’s adjustment and retention rates, the current study focuses on college students’ perceptions of parental support and the impact of this support. This perspective is consistent with recent theories of college student development that underscore the need to examine the role of parents to better understand students’ experiences in higher education. We analyzed students’ narratives generated during qualitative semi-structured interviews in an effort to (a) understand students’ perceptions of parental support and lack of support during the college years, (b) examine the strategies parents use to provide support, paying attention to differences between mothers and fathers, and (c) examine the impact of parental support (or lack of support) as it relates to college adjustment and academic success.

Method

Participants

Participants in this study were a subset of students who participated in a larger qualitative study of parent–college student relationships (N = 70). A subset of 53 college students were selected because they named their mothers and/or fathers as their primary caregivers and lived outside of the family home. Participants in this study were 47 female (89%) and 6 male (11%) and ages ranged from 18 to 23 with a mean age of 19.76 (SD = 1.36). This sample was 45% European American (n = 24), 32% African American (n = 17), 9% Latina (n = 5), 8% Asian American (n = 4), and 6% Multiethnic (n = 3). Participants were classified as 12 First Year (23%), 12 Sophomores (23%), 8 Juniors (15%), and 21 Seniors (40%). Participants reported living in on-campus housing (n = 25, 47%) and in apartments off campus (n = 28, 53%). Mothers’ education ranged from less than or having finished high school (n = 11, 21%) to having a graduate degree (n = 42, 79%), and fathers’ education ranged from less than or having finished high school (n = 14, 36%) to having a graduate degree (n = 39, 64%). Students’ family structures were 53% two-parent homes, 36% single-mother homes, and 11% mother/stepfather or father/stepmother homes.

Procedure

Participants were recruited from a public university located in the southeastern US during the 2017–2018 academic year through emails that were sent to all “traditional” students. According to the university guidelines, traditional students were those who enrolled in the university within 2 years of completing high school. Only students who were 18 years of age and older were eligible to participate in the study. Students who were interested in participating emailed the research project staff and were enrolled in the study.
Participants provided written IRB-approved consent and face-to-face interviews were conducted in a private room in the university library and digitally recorded. Interviews lasted approximately 1 hour and were transcribed verbatim; pseudonyms were assigned to all participants. As an incentive for participation, students received a US$10 gift card to the university store.

**Interview Protocol**

Interviews consisted of a series of open-ended questions about parent–college student relationships. Students identified up to two “primary caregivers” and were asked questions for each of them. Of particular interest to this study were questions focused on students’ perceptions of mothers’ and fathers’ support during college. Protocol questions focused on (a) whether mothers and fathers supported or did not support students during college, (b) how mothers and fathers supported or did not support students, and (c) the impact of support on college experiences and academic success.

**Data Analysis**

The second and fourth authors engaged in independent and repeated readings of transcripts and discussions to identify conceptually unified related sections within transcripts (“data chunks”) and develop a preliminary list of themes. Following Miles, Huberman, and Saldana’s (2014) recommendations, first cycle coding was applied to these “data chunks” for the purpose of summarizing the content of these chunks using descriptive and process codes. In order to develop and refine the final set of codes, the second and fourth authors engaged in multiple independent reading of transcripts and conferences, making modifications until a final set of codes was established that accurately reflected the content of transcripts.

Atlas.ti software was used to enter and apply codes to transcripts and to calculate inter-coder reliability. A total of 20 out of the 53 interviews were double coded for reliability purposes by both the second author and either the first or the third author. Inter-coder agreement was calculated using Krippendorff’s alpha coefficient. Krippendorff’s alpha coefficient is considered a more accurate measurement of reliability than simple percent agreement and is an effective tool for small sample sizes. Simple percent agreement does not account for chance agreement between raters, and Cohen’s kappa (Cohen, 1960) assumes an infinite sample size and counts disagreements between coder’s preferences for categories as agreements. Following Krippendorff’s (2019) recommendations for acceptable levels of reliability, a cut-off point of $C_\alpha \geq 0.800$ was used, which indicates that at least 80% of data are coded to a degree better than chance. Both sets of coding teams (Coder 1 and Coder 2; Coder 1 and Coder 3) had acceptable reliability, $C_\alpha = 0.942$ and $C_\alpha = 0.919$, respectively.
For the current study, all transcripts were read and summarized by the first author, and second cycle coding (pattern coding) was used to identify meaningful categories of parental support, as well as the impact of support or lack of support on students’ adjustment and academic success. A cross-case, variable-oriented strategy was used to create a model that represented the nature of parental support among mothers and fathers and its impact on college students’ adjustment. Specifically, points of consistency that emerged across college students (cases) with the respect to the manner in which mothers and fathers engaged in parental support (variables) emerged and were connected. Each transcript was coded as a whole in order to classify different types of parents as supportive, ambivalent, or unsupportive. Transcripts were read and coded separately a second time by the first author and an undergraduate research assistant, which yielded perfect agreement regarding classifications.

Findings

Conceptualizations of Parental Support. Based on college students’ narratives, three broad categories of parental support were identified. Emotional support referred to the extent to which students perceived their parents as helping them, listening, and providing advice. Academic support referred to the extent to which students perceived their parents as helping them with college-related academic issues, such as coursework, major decisions, and school choice. Financial support referred to the extent to which parents provided monetary support to pay for school and other expenses. Most students indicated that their parents provided some amount of financial support, whereas emotional and academic support were less frequently discussed. In the next section, different strategies that parents used depending on their level of support are presented.

College Students Perceptions of Mother’s and Father’s Provision of Support

Three different classifications of parents emerged based on levels of support: (a) supportive, which included mothers and fathers that were perceived as fully supportive throughout the interviews, (b) ambivalent, which included mothers and fathers who were perceived as supportive of some aspects of students’ lives but not others, and (c) unsupportive, which included mothers and fathers who were perceived as not providing support overall or whose children described specific and meaningful instances in which parents were clearly unsupportive. Figure 1 includes a summary of classifications of parental support and how parents provided support within each category.
Supportive parents

Most parents within our sample were supportive (74% mothers, 71% fathers), indicating that parents supported students even when they were in college and not living in the same household. Parents engaged in different strategies to provide emotional, academic, and financial support during college. Most students mentioned that parents called, emailed, used social media, or sent them packages with the goal of staying connected despite the distance. However, when parents lived close enough to campus, they were able to support students by visiting them or attending events such as sports games, concerts, or college events.

We just have long conversations about everything and she’s—like I said, she’s an enthusiastic person, so you can really tell how she feels, even over a phone, in her voice. (Blake, European American, junior, two-parent home).

But she always says, I do support you and whatever you choose, you know, you’re a smart, grown lady, you can do it yourself. Um, yeah. And she’s supported my games, she’s come to all of them. (Shannon, European American, sophomore, two-parent home).
Additionally, both mothers and fathers provided support by celebrating the little steps. For example, in response to a positive event or an accomplishment, parents would suggest recognition of the event, “when you come home lets go out to dinner and celebrate” (Meaghan, European American, junior, two-parent home). Parents also consistently showed students how proud they were of them and encouraged them to finish school and work hard in their classes, “just encouraging me to not give up and even if something’s hard just keep trying.” (Emily, African American, senior, two-parent home).

Parents were especially supportive when students were stressed about school related issues. Most students described their parents as being available to listen to them and providing advice about anything that worried them.

I get stressed out about certain things and she just stays encouraging and listens to me even if I complain about whatever it is. And she just listens to what I have to say and offers like advice, like “maybe you should talk to your professor” or “do this” or “do that.” She’s very helpful. (Maya, Multiethnic, first year, single-mother home).

In addition to emotional support, parents also provided financial support, which included paying for school, books, monthly bills, and food, “they’ve always been there to support me, financially for school things, if it’s school money, supplies for school, books, pencils, tuition for college.” (Maria, Latina, first year, two-parent home). Students valued this type of support and perceived that when parents supported them financially, they indirectly supported them academically.

Well first the biggest thing is that they’re paying for me… uh pretty much they um very supportive of making sure I get to where I am going, I am able to go to the store and get the stuff I need, and stuff (Michelle, European American, first year, two-parent home).

Together, supportive parents provided emotional, academic, and financial support and engaged in different strategies to provide these types of support. Specifically, parent used calls, emails, and social media to stay connected, visited students and attended events, celebrated little steps, showed pride, offered academic encouragement and advice, and helped pay for school.

**Ambivalent parents**

Within this sample, 22% of mothers and 23% of fathers were classified as ambivalent. Compared to supportive parents, ambivalent parents were inconsistent in the extent to which they provided support during college. For example, some ambivalent parents were supportive in terms of
students’ school choice but did not support students’ decisions about their majors.

Yes, she supported me coming to school here, but as far as my decision to major in science, period she does not support. And that’s because they do not find that useful back home, because nobody majors in physics, nobody majors in chemistry because what are you going to do with that? (Akira, African American, sophomore, two-parent home).

Additionally, some parents were supportive “indirectly” but not “directly”, in that they would praise students in front of family members and friends but not praise students directly. This type of behavior was more representative of ambivalent mothers compared to fathers.

Internally she supports my success all around, she never praises me directly. She never talks good about what I could do directly. She always is talking about improvements, what I need to do, what I should do, what I’m not doing. Like its constant criticism but whenever she’s talking with other people is more content, more proud, more excited for me as school, as far as school goes. She’ll be happy to tell them about all my achievements (...) but when it comes to me personally she is not supportive, but outside of me she is very supportive (Karina, Latina, senior, two-parent home).

Finally, for some students, higher levels of parental support were perceived as “too much” or as “suffocating.” In many cases, high levels of parental support were exacerbated by mothers’ levels of worry or anxiety when college students traveled out of the state or attended events.

Like she can be super worried and super paranoid like if most of the time something good happens and it’s like going to the conference or I have to go out of state or like and she will get worried that my dad will be upset or like, anything if I’m so excited to go to a concert, you know she is excited for me, like she might be a little worried at first, but she is just happy that I’m happy (Marlene, Latina, senior, two-parent home).

Unsupportive parents

Even though very few parents were unsupportive (4% mothers, 6% fathers), a few students perceived their parents as failing to provide support in relation to their major decisions, grades, and emotional support.

Sometimes she’s not supportive, like say if I made a bad grade on the test, you know sometimes she says you know, why didn’t you do this or sometimes she scolds me for not being focus – cause she knows my potential so if I didn’t
give that test my all, she will scold me for that (Rachel, African American, senior, single-mother home).

No. My mom’s not a emotional support person, she will just like scold you the whole way through. She’s the person where you don’t show your emotion to because it’s a sign of weakness but me, I’m always showing emotion (Victoria, European American, senior, two-parent home).

Differences between mothers and fathers. Students’ narratives provided insights regarding how mothers and fathers provided support in different ways. Three themes described students’ perceptions of differences in support received by mothers and fathers. The first theme related to maternal emotional support and accessibility. Students were more likely to describe their mothers as emotionally available and accessible. Kelly (Asian American, sophomore, single-mother home) emphasized that “there is really never case when I really need to talk to her, and she won’t be available.” Additionally, whereas both mothers and fathers provided emotional support, mothers were more frequently mentioned as providing emotional support and described as providing unconditional support. For example, Jocelyn (African American, senior, mother/stepfather home) commented that, “like my mom would do anything I need she would do” and Blake (European American, junior, two-parent home) stated that “she supports me with whatever I do. And if I ever, like, came across making a bad decision or whatever, she just trusts me.”

The second theme related to paternal financial support and fathers’ profiles. When asked about how fathers supported students’ experiences in college, most students immediately mentioned financial support, “he supports it by paying for it” (Marie, European American, junior, single-mother home).

I definitely wouldn’t have been able to make it through college without my dad’s money (laughs) this sounds so bad, it makes it sound like I only love him for his money. Um, he has definitely supported me monetarily, getting books or pretty much anything like paying my rent, a car, or anything that I need. So, it’s like daily, him paying for gas for my clothes and my food. Um, and I would say he’s not my emotional support that’s partially because I haven’t really gone to him that way (Jocelyn, African American, senior, mother/stepfather home).

Compared to mothers, fathers were often described as “pushers” and “less enthusiastic”, which may explain why students perceived their mothers as more emotionally supportive and accessible and were more likely to reach out to mothers when seeking that type of support.

I would say it’s a little different, you know, I think he pushes more, you know, I think he knows me and knows what I can do, so if I don’t (laughs) things, when I
don’t maybe do something the best I can, like he’s more of a pusher, like, “hey, you can do better, so do it.” (David, European American, senior, two-parent home).

Even though students believed that fathers ultimately supported and cared about them, the overall provision of support was described as “different” compared to mothers.

You know I think that, uh, he wishes me well. Uh, he’s not one to necessarily reach out and ask me how I’m doing or what I need. Um, but you know, I think at the end of the day, he does care. He just goes about caring in a different way (Brittany, European American, senior, single-mother home).

Nevertheless, most students who mentioned differences between mothers and fathers who were married or living in the same household described their parents as “working as one unit” (Angela, Asian American, junior, two-parent home). For example, some students described dynamics in which they contacted their mothers for support and mothers communicated with fathers to also keep them invested. Similarly, most students described their parents as complementing each other in the type of support they provided and how they provided it.

**Impact of Parental Support**

Student interviews provided insights regarding the extent to which mothers and fathers levels of support impacted their experiences during college (see Figure 1). In general, most students had a strong family support system and perceived that their parents’ support positively impacted their transition to college and academic success. In relation to our classifications of parental support, this was true for supportive and ambivalent parents. Specifically, this support made students feel that their parents cared about them, were present during the transition to college, and made students feel that they had a “safety net.” For example, Ashley (Multiethnic, senior, single-mother home) comment of her mother’s support: “it makes you feel safer no matter what decisions I make so it’s nice.” Similarly, Kierra (African American, junior, two-parent home) stated that, “it makes me feel good. It makes me feel um, like she cares.” On many occasions, students described parents as their “own personal cheerleading team” (Danielle, African American, senior, mother/stepfather home). Parents’ words of encouragement provided students with a “confident boost” (Keisha, African American, senior, single-mother home) and made them “work harder” (Kelsey, European American, first year, two-parent home). Overall, these supportive strategies made students feel more motivated and reassured.
I can do this, the motivation needed and knowing that she is always there. Confident knowing that she is there and helping me, it just makes me like, “okay, I can do this. My, my mom helped me. My mom said I can do it. I can do it.” (Deandra, African American, senior, father/stepmother home).

Additionally, college students highlighted the importance of having supportive parents “to make it,” “to not drop out,” and “to graduate.” For example, Cynthia (Multiethnic, sophomore, single-mother home) emphasized “I think that my mom is a huge support system and that if I hadn’t had that support system, I think I would have dropped out by now.” In their narratives, students who perceived their parents as supportive felt privileged and noticed the difficulty other students had in transitioning to college and succeeding in their classes if they did not have that level of support. Danielle (African American, senior, mother/stepfather home) highlighted “I know that some people don’t have a support system, and I don’t know how they do it. Because I would not be able to, if I didn’t.” Specifically, several students mentioned that receiving financial support allowed them to have more time to focus on their homework and classes, which ultimately affected their academic success.

Yes. I wouldn’t be able to the grades that I get. I wouldn’t have been able to go on without him being a financial support because if not, then would have to work more and that would probably affect my school grades to drop even lower. So it definitely has affected my academics (Jocelyn, African American, senior, mother/stepfather home).

In contrast, for students who perceived their parents as unsupportive, this lack of parental support had a negative impact on their transition to college and academic success during college. Even though this situation represented very few students’ experiences within our sample, some parents did fail to provide support in terms of major decisions, grades, expectations, and students’ worries and concerns. As a result, students who felt unsupported by their parents developed negative feelings about themselves and experienced frustration and lack of motivation, “it used to really hurt, but now that I just have that barrier between it all I don’t feel it. It just makes me feel unworthy, that I can’t do it, like it does not in my realm to do so, so why even try” (Akira, African American, sophomore, two-parent home). “Uh, not good. It makes me feel like a failure sometimes, like it kinda puts a drop on my self-esteem at that moment” (Angela, Latina, junior, two-parent home).

Discussion

Understanding college students’ perceptions of provision of parental support and its impact on student adjustment has important implications for
maximizing retention rates within higher education institutions. This study identified specific types of parental support provided during college, examined strategies parents used to provide this support with attention to differences between mothers and fathers, and considered the impact of parental support (or lack of support) as related to college adjustment and academic success. Findings indicated that students perceived their parents as providing three types of support during the college years: emotional, academic, and financial support. Parents differed in the extent to which they provided support and were categorized as supportive, ambivalent, or unsupportive. Additionally, students’ narratives indicated that mothers and fathers provided support in different ways. Findings from this study indicated that parents continue to be key sources of support during the college years even when students are becoming more autonomous and geographically distant and that students perceive parental support as a key factor that supports their success in college.

Within our sample, students were most likely to perceive their parents as supportive and engaged in a wide range of strategies to provide emotional, academic, and financial support. Consistent with other research focused on the manner in which parents support their children during the college years (Kolkhorst et al., 2010a, 2010b), students mentioned that parents called, emailed, used social media, or sent them packages in order to stay connected despite physical distance. Unique to this study was students’ elaborated descriptions of how support was expressed through these mediums. Emotional support involved parents listening and giving advice when students were stressed or worried about a range of issues that included social, academic, and financial challenges. In contrast, academic involved parental focus on student successes by celebrating accomplishments, showing how proud they were, and encouraging students to finish their degrees. Parents provided financial support by paying for school, books, monthly bills, and food. Importantly, students perceived financial support as also constituting academic support, as students felt that when their parents supported them financially, they were able to dedicate more time to the demands of school. The elaborated nature of students’ descriptions of ways in which their parents supported them indicate the importance of gaining more comprehensive understanding of parental support that goes beyond examination of frequency and quality of communication between parents and college students.

Students who perceived one of their parents as supportive also tended to perceive the other parent as supportive—especially when mothers and fathers lived in the same household. Yet interestingly, mothers and fathers were perceived as providing support in different, and often complementary, ways. Although these students felt comfortable reaching out to both parents when seeking emotional support, they were more likely to contact mothers because they were more available, more accessible, and more likely to provide...
unconditional support. In contrast, participants were more likely to seek financial support from their fathers. The greater tendency of students to contact mothers when seeking emotional support was also the result of student perceptions of fathers as pushing success and demonstrating less enthusiasm in communications. These findings are consistent with research indicating that adolescents report having closer relationships with mothers (Laursen, Noack, Wilder, & Williams, 2000), and rely on mothers for emotional support but fathers for instrumental support (such as money; Crockett, Brown, Russell, & Shen, 2007). They are also consistent with reports that high school students engage in cell phone communications focused on emotional connections with mothers compared to fathers (Fletcher, Benito-Gomez, & Blair, 2018). Findings from our study suggest that this differential nature of communication and support extends to the college years.

Although most students described their parents as supportive, others described parents as inconsistent in the extent to which they provided support or as failing to provide support. Students’ narratives from those who perceived their parents as ambivalent or unsupportive were characterized by a perceived lack of academic support around decisions related to their choice of major (both mothers and fathers) and academic grades (only mothers). In most cases, this lack of academic support was related to parents concerns about finding a job after graduation. This is consistent with some findings suggesting that parents exert pressure regarding major decisions because they want to maximize the likelihood of financial security after graduation (Museus, 2013). In contrast, students’ perceptions of lack of emotional support related to parents worries or anxieties about their young adult children being away from home. Kins et al. (2011) documented parents’ experiences of separation anxiety as their young adult children transition to higher education settings, especially when no longer living in the same household (Kins et al., 2011). It is possible that parental preoccupations related to separation anxiety may have contributed to students’ perceptions of parents as unsupportive.

The extent to which parents were classified as supportive, ambivalent, or unsupportive had implications for students’ adjustment and academic success during college. Previous research indicates that parents provide “scaffolding” and act as “safety nets” to promote their children’s success during their transition to adulthood (p. 415; Swartz et al., 2011). Within our study, students who had supportive (and, to some extent, ambivalent) parents felt they had a “safety net” and a cheerleading team supporting their decisions and making them feel safer. This support made students feel motivated to work hard to finish their degree and not drop out. Consistent with findings from a qualitative study of first year college students (Yazedjian, Purswell, Sevi, & Toews, 2007), our students emphasized that receiving financial support allowed them to focus on their academics and not have to worry about expenses, which ultimately facilitated their academic and emotional adjustment. These students
acknowledged how hard it would have been to continue their education without such a support system, both emotionally and financially. Our findings in this area are similar to those reported by Barnett (2004) who reported that 70% of male and 80% of female college students indicated that their parents’ support and encouragement helped them to complete their degrees.

Our findings indicated a less positive pattern for the small number of students who perceived their parents as unsupportive. These students stated that not having supportive parents contributed to developing negative feelings about themselves, feeling frustrated, and having lack of motivation to continue working towards their degree. College is potentially a highly stressful transitional period, and previous research has indicated that parental support is associated with positive adjustment, higher GPAs, and higher retention rates (Kolkhorst et al., 2010b; Swartz et al., 2011; Woosley, 2003). Our findings confirm that parental support remains important in the college years, and that the extent to which students feel supported have implications for their adjustment.

Despite these contributions, the findings of the current study should be considered in light of several limitations. First, data for this study were collected within one single university in the southeastern United States, and participants were predominantly African American and European American. Even though these two groups were the most prevalent at this institution, findings reported here cannot be generalized to college students from other ethnic groups, other geographic areas of the United States, and other countries. Future studies should consider ways in which patterns reported in this study may or may not replicate within samples that differ in terms of characteristics including ethnicity, social class, country, and first-generation status. Second, our sample was disproportionally female, with interview data from only six males. The overall patterns of findings regarding parental support during college may better reflect the ways in which parents support their daughters rather than their sons. Future research on this topic should strive for greater balance in terms of gender to better capture whether students’ perceptions of parental support and their impact of student adjustment differ for males and females. Finally, it is possible that the college students who agreed to participate in this study might have been especially likely to have positive relationships with their parents which could explain why close to three-quarters of the parents were perceived as supportive.

Implications

The findings from the current study have important implications for practice, and in particular how high education institutions can support student success by encouraging parental engagement. As Hamilton, Roksa, & Nielsen (2018) recently argued, parental engagement is not only desirable but rather
necessary to ensure that students succeed in higher education. Findings from this study highlight the importance of promoting collaborative relationships between parents and institutions in an effort to promote student adjustment. Specifically, parental support could be integrated into models of student support and academic success during college. For example, Students Affairs personnel could highlight to incoming students and their parents the importance of relying on existing support networks to facilitate the transition to college. As suggested by Kolkhorst et al. (2010b), one way to do this is by implementing seminars during the first year of college that provide students the opportunity to reflect on their relationships with their parents and on which ways parents could support them while in college. Student Affairs offices could also develop workshops or parent support groups to guide parents in terms of strategies to support students’ changing needs and renegotiate their relationships with students across the transition to adulthood. Current understanding of how students can best achieve autonomy involves individuation, a process in which young adults become autonomous while maintaining connectedness with their parents (McElhaney, Allen, Stephenson, & Hare, 2009). This achievement of independence and detachment from their parents while maintaining a balance between autonomy and connectedness helps students to adjust to the new challenges that come with enrolling in college. Having these conversations with both parents and students regarding the benefits of parental support during the college years is imperative. Facilitating communications between students and their families, and the development of partnerships between families and institutions will ultimately foster higher levels of student adjustment and academic success. In addition to promoting partnerships between families and high education institutions, findings from this study highlight the need to provide better institutional support for those students who do not have supportive parents. Mental health counseling, career counseling, peer tutoring programs, and more financial aid sources could fill the gaps for those students who do not have parental support in the emotional, academic, and financial domains.

Parental support has been associated with a wide range of indicators of positive adjustment throughout development, including the college years (Duineveld, Parker, Ryan, Ciarrochi, & Salmela-Aro, 2017; Hall et al., 2017). Importantly, parental support during the college years can have lifelong implications (Desjardins & Leadbeater, 2017; Polenick, Birditt, & Zarit, 2018; Schulenberg, Sameroff, & Cicchetti, 2004). For that reason, it is important to understand the role of parental support as young adults navigate the world of higher education. Our findings indicate that parental support remains important in the college years and the extent to which students feel supported have implications for their adjustment. Specifically, parental support might be particularly important in terms of maximizing retention rates and reducing the number of years that college students take to graduate. Integrating parental engagement efforts into models of student success has the potential to improve
students experiences in high education institutions, and their lives after they leave such institutions.

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