A Phenomenological Study of Parental Involvement and the Undergraduate College Student Experience

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Abstract

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Parents highly involved in the academic lives of their college-going children have become increasingly common and yet the effect of such involvement on students is poorly understood by student services administrators and faculty. The purpose of this study was to better define the phenomenon of parental involvement in college through an investigation of the lived experiences of undergraduate students with high levels of parental involvement. The following questions guided this study: What are the common lived experiences of these students? How is the student’s ability to cope with stress affected by parental involvement? What meaning does parental involvement have on the ongoing academic and social experience of these students?

This study included six major findings, divided into three themes. The first theme – parents and academic pressure – yielded two findings: parental pressure on major choice can affect student academic choices and parent financial pressure can affect student academic choices. The second theme – parents, stress and coping – yielded two findings: student stress is closely related to their parental relationships and that not all students are prepared to cope without their parents. The third theme – parents as a part of the social whole – yielded two findings: the parental relationship is affected by siblings and the parental relationship is affected by friends. The results and interpretations were also discussed. The study concluded with an examination of the shared experiences of the participants in relation to the student-parent relationship, both in general and as it related to the students’ stress and coping. Recommendations are made both for action and for further study.

Keywords: parental involvement, college student, emerging adulthood
Dedication

To Bronwyn and Abigail
Now, let’s go to Disneyland!
Acknowledgments

The word “support” means “to hold up,” and readers will find it used repeatedly here. The dissertation process is long and stressful and I know that this work would not have been possible without the help those around me, who, indeed, did hold me up throughout. I would like to thank my wife, Bronwyn Garrison, who was unwavering in her love, patience and support. I would like to thank my daughter, Abigail, who has no idea how important she was to the completion of this project. I would like to thank my parents, David Garrison and Laurel Garrison, without whose constant love and support through the years I would not be where I am. I would like to thank my incredibly supportive mother-in-law, Joy Holleran. I would like to thank my colleague and friend Patti Utz, who was very patient and supportive during this long process. I would like to thank my friends – in particular Neil Freese, Lenore Myers, and Adam Hagan – who motivated me to better myself.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Research

To a new generation of college students, parents are increasingly acting as confidantes, advocates, and partners (Kennedy, 2009; White, 2005). For university administrators and faculty parents involved in the lives of their college-going children have become a common component of student interaction, yet the effect of such involvement on students is poorly understood (Wolf, Sax, & Harper, 2009). Highly involved parents have come to be known, some say pejoratively, as “helicopter parents,” because of the way in which they are perceived to hover over the lives of their students (Somers & Settle, 2010). There are many dimensions to this issue, and it is imperative to understand the meaning this phenomenon has for the students.

The existing research in this emerging field of study is largely quantitative or is focused on the perspectives of people other than students. A deeper understanding of the issue from the student perspective is required to comprehend the meaning of what is happening. This research study uses qualitative research methods, specifically phenomenological research within a single setting, to investigate parental involvement from the perspective of undergraduate college students. It focuses on how undergraduate students are affected by parental involvement at one institution, a campus in the University of California system. Through the investigation of lived college student experiences, this study explores the phenomenon of parental involvement as it is perceived by students.
Statement of the Problem to be Researched

Parents who are highly involved in the academic lives of their college-going children have become increasingly common and yet the effect of such involvement on students is poorly understood by student services administrators and faculty.

Purpose and Significance of the Problem

The purpose of this study is to better define the phenomenon of parental involvement in college through an investigation of the lived experiences of undergraduate students with high levels of parental involvement. A third of college students report their parents intervene in their academic career, and three-quarters of students communicate with a parent two to three times per week, yet the effect of this involvement is poorly understood (National Study of Student Engagement, 2007; Wolf et al., 2005). The literature that does exist about parental involvement in the lives of college students tends to either be quantitative and not reflective of the deep nature of the phenomenon as an integral part of a student’s experience, or advocates that the effect is helpful or harmful to the students or the institution. However, separating the effect from the underlying situation is not necessarily the most productive way of studying the phenomenon. Student lives are complicated, and characterizing motivations by a single aspect – the involvement of their parents in the students’ lives – may not accurately illustrate the complexity of these relationships.

In better understanding parental involvement in the lives of college students, school officials may be able to develop programs to meet student needs while fostering independence, and also leverage such involvement to the advantage of students, parents, the institution, administrators, and faculty. This research offers insights that have the
potential to inform a host of programs or policies designed to harness such involvement in a productive manner. Once a better understanding of this phenomenon of parental involvement is further developed, clear policies may be designed that enable university administrators to provide clear direction about how to focus and handle such involvement in a way that promotes student success.

**Research Questions**

This study looks at the lived experience of undergraduate college students with involved parents. It asks the following questions:

- What are the common lived experiences of these students?
- How is the student’s ability to cope with stress affected by parental involvement?
- What meaning does parental involvement have on the ongoing academic and social experience of these students?

**The Conceptual Framework**

**Researcher stance**

My personal stake in this phenomenon is two-fold. Firstly, as a parent myself, I sympathize with hovering parents and find it interesting that this issue has become so important. My daughter just celebrated her fourth birthday and I have already experienced conflicting impulses about when to let go and when to let her make independent decisions and learn from her mistakes. I have no doubt that as she grows older and her choices become more consequential, this impulse will only become more challenging for me. Secondly, I regularly interact with highly involved parents first-hand as a college administrator. I am mindful of my role as a university official and of the university’s view of students as adults, as well as the role of college to help students
develop emotionally and learn independence. I am also aware of how the university reinforces the parent-child connection, from considering parents when determining financial aid eligibility or residence status for tuition purposes, to the parent sessions available during freshman orientation activities (Hamilton, 2010).

My worldview as a researcher is pragmatic and constructivist. I believe in one reality that cannot be perceived by anyone in its entirety but is defined by the individual perception and interpretation of each observer. As a result, I am not committed to any one system of reality because I believe all systems are different, imperfect perspectives on the same thing. My research drew on this. In an axiological sense, I seek to represent what role values play in perspectives. How does each individual’s perspective relate to his or her values? Ontologically, I seek to understand how the research participants see the world. How does each actor’s version of reality differ?

Conceptual framework of the three streams. The phenomenon of parental involvement represents conceptually a complex interplay of many factors. The literature review of this study looks at the issues surrounding this phenomenon using a three-stream framework. The first research stream concentrates on emerging adulthood as a distinct life stage. The second research stream focuses on stress and coping among undergraduate college students. Finally, the last research stream looks at the phenomenon of parental involvement itself.
The first stream looks at the life stage of emerging adulthood, a recently identified phenomenon (Arnett, 2000). This stream largely draws on the ideas and research of Arnett (1997, 2000, 2004) to assemble a conceptual framework. Drawing on scholarly analyses of several longitudinal studies, that of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) and Children in the Community Study, this stream illustrates some of the trends and qualities present in the emerging adult.

The second stream looks at stress and coping among undergraduate college students. The research draws initially on the work of Dyson and Renk (2006), who studied freshman university life and how it relates to stress, coping, and depression. The theories of Lazarus and Folkman (Lazarus, 1993; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) were incorporated to further understand the concept of theory of coping as a process. It is from this theory that most studies on college student stress and coping seem to draw their own theoretical framework.

The third stream looks at patterns of parental involvement among undergraduate college students, at the way parents are involved and how this phenomenon is
developing. This stream includes an investigation of the emergence of this phenomenon, at the demographics and patterns of what is happening, and then specifically at the social construct of so-called “helicopter” parents. The research of Wolf et al. (2009) frames the investigation of the demographics and patterns of this phenomenon. Finally, this research discusses the widely cited typology of “helicopter parents” formulated by Settle and Somers (2009).

**Definition of Terms**

**Autonomy**

Being independent, self-reliant, and able to set and meet goals (Bensen, Johnson, & Elder, 2012)

**Confrontive coping**

A coping strategy in which one stands one’s ground to get what one wants and tries to get the person responsible to change his or her mind; it may involve anger (Lazarus, 1993)

**Distancing**

A coping strategy in which one makes light of the situation (Lazarus, 1993)

**Emerging adulthood**

A life stage between adolescence and fully realized adulthood (Arnett, 2000)

**Escape-avoidance**

A coping strategy in which one wishes that a problem would just go away (Lazarus, 1993)
FERPA


Generation 1.5

A student who is foreign-born but moved to the U.S. in the early teens. The definition was also extended to include individuals born in the U.S., moved abroad at an early age, and then moved back to the U.S. in their teens.

Helicopter parent

Parents who “hover” over their child while they are a university student. There are several different types of helicopter parent as defined by Somers and Settle (2010).

Mattering

“The feeling that others depend upon us, are interested in us, are concerned with our fate, or experience us as an ego-extension” (McCollough & Rosenberg, 1981, p. 165)

Negative Affectivity

The concept of Negative Affectivity based upon a mood scale, called the PANAS scale, developed by Watson, Clark, and Tellegen (1988). On the PANAS scale, low negative affectivity is characterized by calm, whereas high negative affectivity is characterized by disruptiveness, anger, guilt, shame, distress, nervousness, irritability, and hostility (Smith & Renk, 2007).
Planful problem solving

A coping strategy in which one knows what needs to be done, concentrates on doing this, and formulates a plan to get it done (Lazarus, 1993)

Positive reappraisal

A coping strategy in which the person coping changes in a good way as a result of the problem (Lazarus, 1993)

Problem-focused coping

A coping strategy in which “the individual who is experiencing stress perceives the stressful situation to be alterable and within his or her capabilities of control” (Smith & Renk, 2007, p. 407)

Psychosocial maturity

Behavioral characterization combining autonomy and social responsibility (Bensen et al., 2012)

Satisficing behaviors

A term coined by Herbert Simon in 1956, satisficing behaviors are behaviors that meet “adequacy on multiple fronts, rather than optimize chances for a particular outcome” (Hamilton, 2013, p. 21).

Seeking social support

A coping strategy in which one seeks out others to speak about the situation, may talk to a friend or to someone who can do something about the problem (Lazarus, 1993)
Self-controlling coping

A coping strategy in which one keeps feelings to oneself and takes time to consider the best way forward (Lazarus, 1993)

Self-esteem

“One’s general feelings of self-worth” (Dixon & Robinson Kurpius, 2008, p. 414)

Social responsibility

Behavior characterized by “contributing to the well-being of society” and “tolerating differences in others” (Bensen et al., 2012, p. 1753)

Subjective age

A function combining perceived age, acquisition pace of social maturity, acquisition pace of adult responsibilities, and perceived adult status (Bensen et al., 2012)

Transition level

Broken down into four categories – residential, financial, romantic, and parenting – measures the “extent to which, at each point in time, the [emerging adult’s] behavior was more like that of a child or approximated fully adult role behavior” (Cohen, Kasen, Chen, Hartmark, & Gordon, 2003, p. 660)

Assumptions and Limitations

Assumptions. Coming into this research I had extensive experience working with college students and, in many cases, their parents. My initial bias regarding highly involved parents was that it tends to be unnecessary, and as an administrator found that parental interactions could be frustrating. However, I saw parents be involved with a range of results. I perceived the involvement to be good in many cases, particularly when
the student had difficulties related to disability or injury. On the other hand, I perceived the involvement to be negative in cases when the student simply was unwilling or unable to take the necessary action. In the latter cases, I found that parents tended to get involved when the student did not successfully navigate the university bureaucracy, submitted something incorrectly, or was stopped from taking an action due to a deadline they missed or policy they did not understand or consider. The parent then would assume their own negotiation skills or ability to force action would bring about the desired outcome.

To add to my own personal stake, while writing this research, I learned of an administrator in another student services office who received a death threat from a frustrated parent. As an administrator I make a point to treat every interaction with the utmost care, whether it is a contact with a student or parent – and I try to be helpful in either case.

**Limitations.** A limitation of this study was the population size, characteristic of qualitative studies: nine undergraduate students at the campus where the research took place – a large, public research university in the University of California system. Also, the demographics of the campus may be atypical of other campuses. As such, the generalizability of this data to other institutions, student groups, and situations may be in question. The demographic makeup of the population studied was somewhat similar to that of the campus’s overall demographics, although Asian students were over-represented: seven out of the nine participants identified as Asian, including ethnicities as diverse as Indian, Vietnamese, and Chinese. Two of the participants identified as Caucasian. The campus where the research was conducted was typical of most campuses in the University of California system, with a high Asian American population, a slightly
lower white population, and relatively low populations of African American and Chicanon/Latino students (University of California, 2010). Three of the participants were male and six were female, in comparison to a system wide female population of 54% (University of California, 2010). Five of the students studied were born internationally, but only one came to the U.S. solely to attend university. It should be noted that as a phenomenological study, the analysis of the phenomenon was the chief concern, and so having a sample representative of the demographics of the general student population was secondary.

Summary

Parental involvement in the lives of college students is becoming an increasingly common phenomenon at universities (Kennedy, 2009; National Survey of Student Engagement, 2007; Somers & Settle, 2010). The current research explores the impact of involved parents in one large public university and ties together the concepts of emerging adulthood, stress and coping in college, and parental involvement. Previous studies on parental involvement during college have offered a variety of perspectives on the issue, which this research aims to supplement with the deep, rich knowledge gained through a phenomenological study. Parents highly involved in the academic lives of their college-going children are increasingly common; yet the effect of such involvement on students is poorly understood by student services administers and faculty.
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

The phenomenon of parental involvement in the lives of college students is not new, but is one that has been reconsidered significantly over the previous two decades (Cullaty, 2011). The transition to adulthood that most traditionally-aged college students go through is increasingly being recognized as a distinct stage of life (Arnett, 2000). Moreover, college tends to be a pronounced time of stress for students (Smith & Renk, 2007). There is little consensus about how parental involvement affects college students; however, the involvement of parents – who are paying for the education and support of the student – has emerged as a major way of coping for students living in the life stage between adolescence and adulthood.

Conceptual Framework

In this study, the phenomenon of parental involvement was investigated using a three-part framework. The three streams investigated are:

- Emerging adulthood as a distinct life stage.
- Stress and coping among undergraduate college students.
- Patterns of parental involvement among undergraduate college students.

The first stream is an investigation of the research related to the life stage of emerging adulthood, a time between adolescence and fully fledged adulthood that provides a framework for analyzing student development. The second stream represents the research defining and describing the difficulties students have adapting to college life. The third stage represents, in large part, a response to student stress and to the needs of the emerging adult.
Literature Review

Research Stream 1: Emerging Adulthood as a Distinct Life Stage

The life stage during which most undergraduate students attend college has come to be called emerging adulthood – specifically, this refers to the life stage that begins in an individual’s late teens and goes into their 20s before they become full-fledged adults (Arnett, 2000; Beck, 2012; Dyson & Renk, 2006; Furstenburg, 2000). Emerging adulthood is distinct from the previous stage of adolescence and the following state of fully-fledged adulthood. The concept of emerging adulthood as a life stage provides a useful lens through which to look at the life transitions happening among undergraduate college students. This review of the literature on emerging adulthood looks at the origin of the concept of this new life stage, as well as several studies that analyze this life stage.

Emerging adulthood as a social construct. The 1990s saw the maturation of a new field of social psychology scholarship called emerging adulthood, a period linking adolescence to fully-fledged adulthood (Arnett, 2000, 2004; Furstenberg, 2000). This burgeoning field has been consequential in many areas, from law to health sciences, history, and public policy (Furstenburg, 2000). The transition between childhood and adulthood began to coalesce as a discrete life stage with the identification of adolescence around the 1950s, “when the transition from childhood to adulthood became (at least temporarily) more predictable, rapidly accomplished, and socially organized” (Furstenberg, 2000, p. 897). More broadly, the 20th century also saw a trend in which young adults married later in life, became economically independent before marriage, and continued their education into later years (Fussell & Furstenberg, 2005; Johnson, Berg, & Sirotzki, 2007). This new life stage has come to be called “emerging adulthood,”

Sweeping demographic shifts have taken place over the past half century that have made late teens and early twenties not simply a brief period of transition into adult roles but a distinct period of the life course, characterized by change and exploration of possible life directions. (p. 469)

The social transition to adulthood is recursive and self-reinforcing. “As young people begin to engage in adult role relationships, others treat them as adults, expect adult behavior of them, and the young people come to expect it of themselves” (Johnson et al., 2007, p. 244). Arnett (2004) differentiated adolescence from emerging adulthood at around the age of 18, the age at which individuals legally become adults in most western countries. Up until age 18, most adolescents have many characteristics in common: they attend high school, live with their parents, and are going through puberty. “None of these remain typical after age 18, so it does not make sense to call them adolescents any more. After age 18 comes the freedom, exploration, and instability that distinguish emerging adulthood” (Arnett, 2004, p. 207).

Like adolescence, the period of emerging adulthood is marked by transitory events, and this period is one of “profound importance” (Arnett, 2000, p. 169). These include “finishing education, entering the labor force, establishing an independent household, marriage, and parenthood” (Arnett, 1997, pp. 3-4). Arnett (1997) argued that the very phrase “transition to adulthood” implies that life stages, even those as basic as childhood and adulthood, are social constructs that may change and develop with society. Much of this transitory period is dependent upon role transitions, such as accepting personal responsibility and becoming financially independent, which became
decreasingly guided by social institutions throughout the 20th century (Arnett, 1997; Cohen et al., 2003). However, because it is common among the current generation of post-adolescents to experience a prolonged period during which they explore their identities – while remaining financially dependent upon their parents and families – these post-adolescents tend to reject the idea of firmly delineated role transitions (Arnett, 2000, 2004).

The emerging adult perspective. Arnett (1997) conducted a series of two surveys involving several hundred undergraduate college students, aged 18 to 21, which asked the students about “the criteria they believed to be necessary for a person to be considered an adult” (p. 9). In terms of role transitions, an overwhelming majority of these students identified “financial independence from parents” (66% in sample 1 and 73% in sample 2), and “no longer living in parents’ household” (57% and 73%), as criteria for becoming an adult. In terms of cognition, 80% and 78% indicated that deciding “on personal beliefs and values independently of parents or other influences” was a criterion. Behaviorally, the only items a majority of these students could agree on were the avoidance of illegal activities, such as drunk driving (60% and 55%) and petty crimes (70% and 60%), as well as the use of contraception (65%). While there was no consensus about the age of adulthood, taking responsibility for one’s own actions (92% and 94%), ranked very high.

However, there was “considerable ambiguity in the responses to the question about whether they considered themselves to have reached adulthood” (Arnett, 1997, p. 20). Only about a quarter of respondents indicated they had definitively entered adulthood, while nearly two-thirds said they had reached adulthood in some respects but
not in others (Arnett, 1997). The study indicated that more than half of respondents between the ages of 21 and 24 considered themselves to be adults. Arnett (1997) argued this “suggests that the majority of young Americans consider themselves to have completed the transition to adulthood before the time when they get married or have their first child” (p. 19). Arnett’s 1997 study, while somewhat dated, is a landmark in the field; it was followed by a paper in which Arnett (2000) popularized the term “emerging adulthood” and elaborated upon in his 2004 book.

Building upon Arnett’s work, Johnson et al. (2007) conducted a mixed-method longitudinal study and “consider[ed] several perspectives for adult identity” (p. 244). These perspectives included, “those that focus on the acquisition of adult roles, the development of adult character qualities, and the confluence model” (Johnson, et al. 2007, p. 244). In this study, data was drawn from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health). In this study, a large group of students were interviewed in “Waves” starting when they were in middle school or high school and continuing as they got older. Johnson et al. (2007) looked at data primarily from Wave III in which the respondents were between the ages of 18 and 28. It should be noted that data regarding race and ethnicity in the Add Health survey was not gathered until Wave III (Johnson et al., 2007).

Johnson et al. (2007) predicted the data would support the confluence model of age identity, which asserted, “the factors that shape self-perceived adulthood also vary by race/ethnicity and socioeconomic background, owing to differences in life trajectories” (p. 245). Specifically, they hypothesized there would be ethnic and socioeconomic differences in the way individuals perceived adulthood, as indicated, for instance, by the
higher proportion of Asian Americans and Whites in school, and the earlier ages at which Blacks and Hispanics tend to start families. Less educated people were predicted to move through life stages more slowly (Johnson et al., 2007).

Johnson et al. (2007) found their results did support the confluence model, though not always in ways they expected. The results showed that “blacks were more likely to feel adult all of the time compared to non-Hispanic whites, and Asian Americans and Hispanics were less likely to compared to non-Hispanic whites” (p. 251). However, racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic status “did not fully account for group differences in self perceived adulthood” (Johnson et al., 2007, p. 252). Parental educational level had a stronger effect on Whites than on other groups (Johnson et al., 2007).

Of the role transitions studied – i.e., leaving the parental home, finishing school, entering the labor force, marrying, and becoming a parent – all were positively correlated with feeling like an adult all of the time (Johnson et al., 2007). All three of the studied personal qualities – financial independence, maturity, and general independence – were also positively correlated (Johnson et al., 2007). Being a parent was strongly associated with feeling adult all of the time, and females tended to feel adult due to their tendency to complete more of the role transitions than males (Johnson et al., 2007). For those who had not gone through some of the key role transitions, such as getting married, graduating, or having kids, their parents’ educational levels were more strongly correlated to feeling adult, and the impact that financial independence would have on feeling adult was positively related to parental educational level (Johnson et al., 2007).

Bensen, Johnson, & Elder (2012) also conducted a study using the same dataset from the Add Health study used by Johnson et al. (2007), but drawing from Wave IV data
– albeit with different research goals. They conducted their analysis to determine the extent to which identity and self-perceptions impact development into adulthood, specifically work-related and educational attainment later in development (ages 25-29). Bensen et al. (2012) conceptualized *psychosocial maturity* as including autonomy and social responsibility. *Autonomy* was defined as being independent, self-reliant, and being able to set and meet goals, and *social responsibility* was defined as “contributing to the well-being of society” and “tolerating differences in others” (Bensen et al., 2012). The study conceptualized *subjective age* as including perceived age, acquisition pace of social maturity, acquisition pace of adult responsibilities, and perceived adult status (Bensen et al., 2012).

Bensen et al. (2012) divided the participants into four categories based on their subjective ages and psychosocial maturity: late adults had younger subjective ages and lower psychosocial maturity, pseudoadults had older subjective ages and lower psychosocial maturity, early adults had older subjective ages and higher psychosocial maturity, and anticipatory adults had younger psychosocial ages but higher psychosocial maturity. A conceptual diagram of these concepts may be found in Figure 2.
The study hypothesized that “youths with higher levels of psycho-social maturity [would be] better equipped to navigate life pathways, formulate plans, manage responsibilities, and make decisions with attainment implications” (Bensen et al., 2012, p. 1753). Pseudo-adults were expected to have low educational and work-related attainment, while early adults were expected to have low levels of educational attainment and have high levels of work-related attainment. For both anticipatory adults and late adults, it was expected they would have low levels of work-related attainment and higher levels of educational attainment – with anticipatory adults having more work-related attainment later in development due to a predicted ability to plan more effectively (Bensen et al., 2012).

The results of the Bensen et al. (2012) study indicated that late adults tended to have the highest levels of educational attainment. “While late adults were investing in education, early adults…and anticipatory adults…made the most progress toward developing a career” (Bensen et al., 2012, p. 1755). Pseudo-adults did not tend to have high levels of both education and work. Early adults reported the highest earnings, and
educational attainment was high with early and anticipatory adults. Furthermore, the findings of the Bensen et al. (2012) study indicated, “the implications for subjective age for educational and work attainment are conditioned by an individual’s ability to cope and adapt to the multiple challenges associated with school-to-work transition” (p. 1756). Low psychosocial maturity combined with low subjective age was not necessarily an indicator of low attainment, rather it indicated a slower process of maturing that led to success later in life.

Cohen et al. (2003) conducted a study based on a sample of individuals from the Children in the Community cohort, a longitudinal study of 800 young adults who were studied since early childhood and were around the age of 27 at the time of the study. A sampling of this cohort was interviewed and examined within the context of the longitudinal study. The study tested demographic influences on the trajectory of the participants’ assumed adult roles. The study broke transition levels into several transition level functions: residential, financial, romantic, and parenting. Each transition level measured the extent to which, at each point in time, the participant’s behavior was more like that of a child or approximated fully adult role behavior, defined by independence from parental control, expression of own goals and preferences, and assumption of responsibilities. (Cohen et al., 2003, p. 660)

The transition level at each measured point was ranked on a 100-point scale, with zero being “full childlike” and 99 being “a fully adequate adult role” (Cohen et al., 2003, p. 660).

Cohen et al. (2003) found the residential transition level increased, on average, about 4.25 percentage points per year between the ages of 17 and 27, going from 26.7 at
age 17 to 69 at age 27, with women being about 10 points more independent than men. Race was not found to have a statistically significant effect, although non-White individuals only accounted for a very small percentage of the total population. Education was positively correlated with individuals who were in school having a score that was 1.85 percentage points higher than those who were not; “school attendance rates were highest in the first 3 or 4 years of the period, when the alternative was often to remain in the parental home” (Cohen et al., 2003, p. 664).

In terms of the financial transition level, this increased at a rate of 3.89 percentage points per year, going from 21.4 at age 17 to 64.5 at age 27 (Cohen et al., 2003). Students from families with high socioeconomic status ranked an average of 1.44 percentage points higher, with women more affected than men. The romantic transition level increased about four percentage points per year, from 27 at age 17 to 68 at age 27 (Cohen et al., 2003). The parenting transition level at age 17 was very low with only four participants having children at that point, and the increase was low with an average score of 11 at age 22, increasing to 30 at age 27 (Cohen et al., 2003). Gender was found statistically significant for parenting transition level, with women having, on average, a score that was nine percentage points higher than men.

Summary. A life stage of emerging adulthood, connecting adolescence with that of fully-fledged adulthood, came to be recognized as a social construct in the 1990s (Arnett, 2000, 2004; Furstenberg, 2000). Research has indicated that individuals in the emerging adult stage tend to recognize a diverse series of landmarks as heralding emergence into adulthood, including financial independence from parents, moving out on one’s own, getting married, becoming a parent, making independent decisions, and taking
responsibility for one’s own actions (Arnett, 1997; Johnson et al., 2007). As might be expected, racial, ethnic, and gender differences pointed to significant differences in the way these life changes occur and are self-interpreted (Johnson et al., 2007). Both subjective age and psychosocial maturity predicted differences in educational attainment and work-related attainment, with the interplay of these concepts indicating that the pace of maturation also plays a role in eventual attainment levels (Bensen et al., 2012). Finally, the years between 17 and 27 proved crucial to people taking on a full-adult role (Cohen et al., 2003).

Emerging adulthood is significant in the way it illustrates as a social construct the unique post-adolescent life challenges that impact individuals experiencing the responsibilities of autonomy of adulthood for the first time. This life stage also provides structure for analyzing the nature of independence, and the ways in which developmental stages can progress differently for different individuals. Arnett, of the previously cited articles, opined to the Wall Street Journal in 2012 that “most emerging adults find it very exciting to be in this time of life, but some find it overwhelming” (Beck, 2012, para. 22). Continuing with advice for parents of emerging adults, “It pays to relax and not panic because your 21-year-old of even your 26-year-old doesn’t know what he or she is going to do….We all figure it out eventually” (Beck, 2012, para. 25).

Research Stream 2: Stress and Coping among Undergraduate College Students

Transition to college is fraught with stressors, opportunity, and abrupt life changes. “Although attending college can be a rewarding experience, it can also be a time of considerable anxiety and stress for students” (Smith & Renk, 2007, p. 405). There is an expectation, as perpetuated by popular culture, that college life is one of parties, self-
exploration, and growth; however, the experience of students entering college tends to be characterized by stress, adaptive difficulties, and struggle (Dyson & Renk, 2006). This literature is reviewed as it relates to undergraduate college student stressors and coping mechanisms.

**Sources of stress for the undergraduate college student.** A major part of the experience of a college student is stress: stress about grades, about living on one’s own, about relationships, stress exacerbated by poor daily habits, and stress about finding oneself during this new life stage, which is often referred to as emerging adulthood as explored earlier (Arnett, 2000; Dyson & Renk, 2006). “Stress is common among college students as they endeavor to adjust and adapt to a multitude of experiences that have never been encountered before while at school” (Ong & Cheong, 2009, para. 2).

Academic workload, too many tests and exams, difficult courses, exam grades, and lecturer characteristics, were among the academic stressors most reported by college students (Ong & Cheong, 2009). Campuses around the U.S. are trying to identify and mitigate stress among college students because of the detrimental effect the stress can have on student health, graduation, and general academics (Dixon & Robinson Kurpius, 2008; Ong & Cheong, 2009).

Dixon and Robinson Kurpius (2008) hypothesized that mattering, self-esteem, and gender would accurately predict depression and college stress and that understanding the relationships between mattering, self-esteem, and gender would enhance the degree to which stress predicts levels of depression among university students. They conducted a survey of 455 undergraduates from 31 lower division courses testing the correlation between mattering and self-esteem and how they relate to stress and depression.
Mattering was defined using the definition provided by another study, as “the feeling that others depend upon us, are interested in us, are concerned with our fate, or experience us as an ego-extension” (McCollough & Rosenberg, 1981, p. 165). Self-esteem was defined as “one’s general feelings of self-worth” (Dixon & Robinson Kurpius 2008, p. 414).

Dixon and Robinson Kurpius (2008) found that both self-esteem and mattering were interrelated with stress and depression. There was a positive correlation between mattering and self-esteem: “It only makes sense that the less one feels valued as a person, the more one is susceptible to depression and more vulnerable to perceiving events are more stressful” (Dixon & Robinson Kurpius, p. 419). The study also concluded that mattering and self-esteem were “significant predictors of depression” because “having a sense of self-worth (self-esteem) can protect people from negative feelings of alienation” (Dixon & Robinson Kurpius, p. 419).

Ross, Neibling, and Heckert (1999) suggested, “[c]ollege students, especially freshmen, are a group particularly prone to stress….The dynamic relationship between the person and environment in stress perception and reaction is especially magnified in college students” (para. 3). They conducted a study of 100 undergraduate students using the Stress Survey. The survey sought to measure the levels and sources of students’ stress, and found that the five most frequent stressors were change in sleeping habits (89%), vacations and breaks (82%), changes in eating habits (74%), new responsibilities (73%), and increased class workload (73%). They recommended that institutions better prepare students for the stresses of student life, “stress in the college setting cannot be eliminated but we can and should do a better job preparing our students to manage it”
The Ross et al. study is illustrative, although it should be noted it was conducted in 1999 before rise of the Internet, online social networks such as Google and Facebook, and smartphones such as the iPhone became everyday fixtures in the lives of most students. The dynamics will likely have been affected by the emergence of these tools.

With poor sleeping habits creating stress for nearly 9 out of 10 college students (Ross et al., 1999), sleep is indeed a major issue when considering stress among college students. Hamilton et al. (2011) studied the sleeping patterns of students over a period of two years, from 2005 to 2007. Their total sample was 4,513 students – 1,823 males students and 971 female students reported the first year, while 1,044 male students and 675 female students reported the second year (Hamilton et al., 2011, p. 613). These students were drawn from the same cohort both years. Most of the students were freshman in the first year of the study, predominantly Caucasian, and had a roommate (Hamilton et al., p. 613). The students were asked to complete a survey based upon the Pittsburgh Quality Sleep Index (PQSI); the survey asked students to self-report their sleep quality and sleep disturbance over a one-month period (Hamilton et al., pp. 613-614).

After the surveys were completed, the researchers followed up with student interviews.

The study found that only one-tenth of the students reported their sleep in the previous month was “very good,” 60% reported their sleep was “fairly good,” a quarter reported their sleep was “fairly bad,” and 5% rated their sleep as “very bad” (Hamilton et al., 2011). “In interviews, many students commented on the effect of sleep on their personal well-being and interactions with others, saying that it was easier to be cheerful, peppy, outgoing, mentally stable, and to manage stress when they got adequate sleep”
The study also found a moderate correlation between the quality of sleep and student GPA and a strong relationship between poor sleep and either falling asleep in class or skipping class (Hamilton et al.). Lastly, the study found a link between poor sleep and stress, anxiety, and family conflict (Hamilton et al., 2011).

In a similar study conducted by Buboltz, Brown & Soper (2001), 191 undergraduates were asked to complete a Sleep Quality Index (SQI) questionnaire designed to measure their sleep habits. The study found that nearly three-quarters of the students reported poor sleep habits, with females reporting more difficulties than males (Buboltz et al., p. 133). Buboltz et al. explained that poor sleep quality is “linked to increased tension, irritability, depression, confusion, and generally low life satisfaction” (p. 131). Furthermore, they pointed out the feedback relationship between poor sleep and poor academic performance; and that students who stay up late and study tend not to realize the impact poor sleep can have on academics, thus reinforcing the effect that poor sleep has on academic performance (Buboltz et al., 2001).

Coping with the stress of college. To understand how stressors might affect college students, it is also necessary to understand the concept of coping with these stressors. Lazarus (1993), building on previous research (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), developed a typology of coping mechanisms commonly used to evaluate coping. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) looked at coping as a process, and asserted coping mechanisms are not necessarily good or bad in and of themselves, but rather affect a person in ways specific to her or his individual self and immediate situation. For instance, denial, at one point regarded as a pathological process by psychologists, may have a positive effect in some situations and a negative effect in others (Lazarus, 1993; Lazarus & Folkman,
1984). Similarly, broad situational experiences tend to have stressors inconsistent and individualized, and thus productive coping in these situations is difficult to generalize (Lazarus, 1993).

Lazarus (1993) described eight different ways of coping: *confrontive coping*, a coping strategy where one stands one’s ground to get what they want and tries to get the person responsible to change their mind – this may involve anger; *distancing*, where one makes light of the situation; *self-controlling*, where one keeps feelings to oneself and takes time to consider the best way forward; *seeking social support*, where one seeks out others to speak about the situation; *accepting responsibility*, which involves self-criticism or lecturing, and the realization that a problem is self-created; *escape-avoidance*, a coping strategy where one hopes for a “miracle” and wishes the problem would just go away; *planful problem solving*, where one knows what needs to be done, concentrates on doing this, and formulates a plan; and, *positive reappraisal*, where the person coping changes in a good way as a result of the problem. Lazarus (1993) found that some coping mechanisms are more likely than others to lead to satisfactory conclusions for the person coping: “planful problem solving and positive reappraisal were significantly associated with satisfactory outcomes, whereas others, such as confrontive coping and distancing, were associated with unsatisfactory outcomes” (p. 239).

The period of emerging adulthood when students tend to be in college, discussed earlier, can prove to be a crucial test of a person’s ability to adjust and cope with a new environment, and such adjustment can cause illness and have a generally negative effect on one’s health (Dyson & Renk, 2006). In particular, college freshman were shown to engage in some unique coping techniques: they “reported more psychological
dependencies on their mothers and fathers as well as poorer social and personal-emotional adjustment to university life than did upperclassmen” (Dyson & Renk, 2006, p. 1,233).

Smith and Renk (2007) conducted a study that explored the correlation between coping mechanisms and student academic stress. This study asked students to complete a questionnaire incorporating several different assessment tools to measure academic-related stress, coping strategies, parental and social support, parenting styles, and anxiety. They found a significant predictive effect with the coping mechanism they referred to as “problem-focused strategies” (Smith & Renk, 2007, p. 409). Smith and Renk (2007) cited two coping strategies, as previously identified by Lazarus and Folkman (1984). The first coping strategy, problem focused coping, was employed when “when an individual has determined that a harmful, threatening, or challenging situation is amenable to change” (Smith & Renk, 2007, p. 407). Emotion-based coping strategies “focus[ed] on dealing with the negative emotions that are a product of the stressful situation” (Smith & Renk, 2007, p. 407).

This agrees with the theories put forth by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), who found that planful problem solving, a root concept that is the basis for the problem-focused coping strategies, was one of the few mechanisms significantly related to positive outcomes. Furthermore, anxiety was also a predictor of academic-related stress, the use of problem-focused coping strategies for females, and the use of emotion-focused coping strategies for males. “It may be the case that college students experiencing anxiety are more prone to academic-related stress due to a general experience of negative affectivity” (Smith & Renk, 2007, p. 426). The concept of negative affectivity was based
upon a mood scale, called the PANAS scale, developed by Watson et al. (1988). On the PANAS scale, low negative affectivity was characterized by calm, whereas high negative affectivity was characterized by disruptiveness, anger, guilt, shame, distress, nervousness, irritability, and hostility.

In addition, Smith and Renk (2007) found that parental support related to academic stress levels, although not in a way that was predictive. “A majority of college students in [the] sample…reported that they had frequent contact with their mothers and fathers” (Smith & Renk, p. 424). This study found that the quality of the relationship a student had with her or his parents growing up, strongly correlated with academic stress. “In particular, academic-related stress was connected significantly to the authoritarian style used by fathers of female college students, with higher levels of authoritarian characteristics being linked to higher levels of academic-related stress” (Smith & Renk, 2007, p. 425). On the other hand, Smith and Renk (2007) did not find a significant correlation between maternal relationships and academic-related stress.

**Summary.** Attending university can be a stressful experience for college students (Arnett, 2000; Dyson & Renk, 2006). Risky and unhealthy behaviors are a common part of the student experience and occur while students learn to manage a whole host of emerging challenges, from rigorous academic study requirements to the difficulties that go along with living on one’s own. Moreover, stressful behaviors among college students included poor sleep habits, vacations and breaks, and changes in lifestyle: eating habits, academic workload, and responsibilities (Buboltz et al., 2001; Hamilton et al., 2011; Ross et al., 1999). The concepts of mattering and self-esteem were found to be strongly interrelated with stress and depression (Dixon & Robinson Kurpius, 2008). Lazarus
(1993) laid out a framework for analyzing coping strategies, and it was found that careful planning and consideration tended to yield more positive results for college students (Dyson & Renk, 2006; Lazarus, 1993; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Smith & Renk, 2007). Understanding stress and coping among university students is vital to understanding their experience, this experience vital to understanding their perspective.

**Research Stream 3: Patterns of Parental Involvement among Undergraduate College Students**

The literature regarding parental involvement has shown a trend of more intense parental involvement in the last 20 years, particularly since the year 2000 (Cullaty, 2011). Highly involved parents are referred to in a derisive manner in the media as “helicopter parents” – because of the way they hover over their college-going children (Gabriel, 2010). However, this may be due to the shifting cultural norms exemplified by such parenting, and the increased administrative burden a persistent parent can place on the system, rather than a systematic analysis of the issue. In addition, “despite some evidence regarding positive or negative correlations of parental involvement, we lack a concrete understanding of the fundamentals – who, what, why, and how – of parental involvement at the post-secondary level” (Wolf et al., 2009, p. 327). There is a lack of consensus within the literature about whether a high level of parental involvement is healthy or detrimental to the student and what, if anything, should be done to encourage or discourage the practice.

**Exploration of the phenomenon of high parental involvement.** The recent rise of parental involvement may largely be due to the increasing role of technology in university life and the subsequent ability to easily access information about students off-
campus (Wolf et al., 2009). Furthermore, technology has made communication
between a student away at college and their parent much easier. From Facebook to Skype
to SMS text messaging to email, the contemporary student’s pervasive connectedness
with home is able to persist through technology even after they move away – regardless
of distance (Kennedy, 2009). Junco and Mastrodicasa (2007) estimated college students
speak with their parents an average of 1.5 times per week, with more than half of these
conversations reported as being about academic success, social life, work, money, or
health.

This increased involvement through technology has allowed the involvement or
parents to persist, regardless of what the child wants (Kennedy, 2009). What is clear is
that the quality of the parent-child relationship is crucial when gauging how an involved
parent will impact their child’s academic career. “The quality of the parent-child
relationship becomes particularly important when youth transition to adulthood and begin
to establish autonomy and differentiation from the family” (Wolf et al., 2009, p. 333).

Kolkhorst, Yazedjian, and Toews (2010) found, in a study of undergraduates and
their relationships with their parents, “the vast majority of students reported positive
relationships with their parents and felt that their parents trusted them to make their own
decisions” (p. 52). The study also found that students relied on parents as confidantes and
reported the parental-child relationship improved since starting college. However, this
support – while viewed positively by the students – encouraged reliance on the parents
(Kolkhorst et al., 2010). The study further suggested, “students who reported a secure
relationship with their parents included a description of parents who demonstrated a
balance between involvement and separation” (Kolkhorst et al., 2010, p. 58).
Parents and the cost of college. “Higher Education has long been financed by parents’ funds. Over time, however, the burden on parents has grown heavier and more substantial” (Hamilton, 2013, p. 1). As the cost of college has risen, the investment of parents in their child’s education has also increased – outpacing inflation. Kennedy (2009) calculated that between 1995 and 2004, the cost of attending a public university has increased 71.3% and the cost of attending a private university 98.1%. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that inflation rose 24% in the same time period (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2007).

Hamilton (2013) conducted an analysis of how parental investment in college affected two college outcomes: Grade Point Average (GPA) and degree completion. Hamilton (2013) asked, “Can parents purchase a better outcome for their children? Do parental dollars boost student performance? Or is there a point of diminishing returns, even a negative influence?” (p. 2). Hamilton’s (2013) study contrasted two opposing views on parental investment in college: the traditional more is more approach stating an “individual’s sociological destination is a function of ability, background, aspirations, and parental investments in education” (p. 4); and, the contrasting less is more approach, asserting there may be a developmental cost to parents financing college for their children, impeding the child’s adult independence. The study drew data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES): specifically the Baccalaureate and Beyond study of 1993 and the Beginning Postsecondary Student Study 1990 to 1994, as well as the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, linked to the NCES data.

The results of Hamilton’s (2013) study are surprising, and reveal a mixed effect for parental investment in education. For the first dimension, GPA, Hamilton found
parental investment had a harmful effect on student performance. The greatest
detriment to a student’s GPA came from the initial $8,000 of investment in college, and
then proceeded to be detrimental, at a lower rate, as the parental aid increased.
Conversely, the link between parental funding on degree completion exhibited an
altogether different result: “although the pattern is one of diminishing returns, parental
investments significantly increase a students’ likelihood of completing a [bachelor’s
degree]” (p. 20).

Hamilton (2013) attributed this mixed result to the degree to which parental
funding can enable *satisficing behaviors* – behaviors which meet “adequacy on multiple
fronts, rather than optimize chances for a particular outcome” (p. 21) – and to the ability
of parentally funded students to use these funds for social experiences that may be
detrimental to academic performance. Hamilton (2013) also drew a correlation between
parental funding and socioeconomic class, stating, “parental support for college, while
not entirely determined by class, is the aid form most linked to privilege” (p. 22). It
should be noted that because the socioeconomic link to parental aid is high, it is possible
the use of parental aid as a causal independent variable may be problematic; also, the age
of the data may reduce its current applicability in light of the rise of college costs over the
last two years.

**Parental involvement and autonomy development.** “The parent-child
relationship is often of great importance in helping entering students make the adjustment
to college life, often wrought by indeterminable changes in mood, self-satisfaction, and
unfamiliar circumstances” (Klein & Pierce, 2009, p. 168). This relationship provides
students with stability and support for a situation that has very high stakes for the student.
Parental support can be helpful in fostering student independence, but too much interference can stunt development of autonomous behaviors (Klein & Pierce, 2009).

Cullaty (2011) conducted a study of parental involvement and student autonomy development, intended to address the following questions: “(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?” (Cullaty, 2011, p. 428). A grounded theory study, he interviewed 18 students seeking to answer these research questions. Cullaty (2011) identified three parental behaviors that promote autonomy: “actively defining the parent-student relationship, relinquishing unnecessary control, and encouraging responsibility” (p. 431). Parental behaviors shown to have a negative impact on autonomy development included “managing roommate conflicts, registering for courses, or contacting a professor about an assignment” (Cullaty, 2011, p. 436).

Klein and Pierce (2009) conducted a study of the effect of parental care and overprotection on student adjustment in college. The concepts of parental care and overprotection were measured using a Parental Bonding Instrument developed by Parker, Tupling, and Brown (1979). “Parental care” measured the amount of affection shown towards the child, and “overprotection” measured the “restrictive constraint that can be compared to smothering and too much involvement” (Klein & Pierce, 2009, p. 170). The purpose of the study was to “examine undergraduate students’ adjustment to college in relation to two key aspects of parenting style…parental care and overprotection” (p. 169). Through a series of student-completed surveys, parents were classified into four groups: optimal parents (high care and low overprotection), affectionately constraining parents...
(high care and high overprotection), affectionless overprotecting parents (low care and high overprotection), and neglectful parents (low care and low overprotection). It should be noted all data were student-reported. The degree to which a student is well or poorly adjusted was measured using the College Adjustment Scales (CAS).

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**Figure 3.** Diagram of the parental care labels used by Klein and Pierce (2009).

There was no significant difference in the development of the students with mothers with low protection and those with high overprotection; however, students with low paternal overprotection were “significantly better adjusted” than those with high paternal overprotection (Klein & Pierce, 2009, p. 174). In addition, students with high maternal care were significantly more well-adjusted than those with low maternal care; students with high paternal care were also significantly more well-adjusted (Klein & Pierce, 2009). Mothers showed a significantly higher level than fathers for both care and overprotection (Klein & Pierce, 2009). There were no significant differences between male and female respondents for maternal overprotection, but females experienced a much higher level of paternal overprotection (Klein & Pierce, 2009).
**Helicopter parents.** College campuses teem with anecdotal stories of so-called *helicopter parents*, a nominally pejorative term slang for a highly involved mother or father. So named because “like helicopters, they hover closely overhead” (Kennedy, 2009, p. 19), these parents have become a staple of popular culture, with high profile stories run by CNN, NPR, *Time Magazine*, *The Boston Globe*, and *The New York Times* (Aucoin, 2009; Belkin, 2007, 2010; Stewart, 2007). Indeed, the media has reported on a variety of sensational cases. On the extreme end of the spectrum, a student at the University of Cincinnati was recently granted a restraining order against her parents, who, among other things, admitted to installing spy software on their daughter’s computer and cell phone (Perry, 2012). A 2009 *Time Magazine* cover story detailed how “college deans described freshman as “crispies,” who arrived at college already burned out, and “teacups,” who seemed ready to break at the tiniest stress” (Gibbs, 2009, para. 6).

Settle and Somers (2010) performed an exploratory study that, because of the typology developed from the data, is very useful in looking at this phenomenon. Unapologetic in their use of the term helicopter parent, Settle and Somers (2010) studied the following questions: “What is a helicopter parent and how do they act? How prevalent are helicopter parents? What are their demographics?” Additionally, they asked, “What factors encourage helicopter parent behavior?” (Somers & Settle, 2010, p. 22). Settle and Somers (2010) performed interviews and focus groups with 190 academic and student affairs professionals (p. 22). A typology was developed that identified five different types of helicopter parents.
The first type, the “consumer advocate,” view college as a financial transaction, tend to view themselves as “co-purchasers” of their child’s education, and regard every aspect of the education process as being up for negotiation (Somers & Settle, 2010, p. 24). The “fairness advocate” is very concerned that their child is treated fairly and not disadvantaged in relation to other students. They are concerned with relative quality, looking for the “best” teachers, dormitories, majors, etc. Despite their name, they actually tend to want to maximize their child’s opportunities and pursue better, not equal or fair, treatment. These parents also tend to regard themselves as very knowledgeable of the legal issues in higher education while basing this knowledge off of what they know from their child’s days in high school (Somers & Settle, 2010). The “vicarious college student” “missed out on many college experiences themselves and want[s] to create those golden four (or five or more) years spent as undergraduates. They are at every activity, parents’ weekend, and sports event” (Somers & Settle, 2010, p. 24).

The “safety patrol parent” focuses their efforts on ensuring their child’s safety. They speak frequently to campus officials about their concerns, which are often related to high-profile incidents such as the tragedies at Columbine High School and Virginia Polytechnic University (Somers & Settle, 2010). Lastly, are the “toxic parents.” These parents “have numerous psychological issues and are controlling, negative, and try at once to live their child’s lives even as they ‘one-up’ their children in the process” (Somers & Settle, 2010, p. 25). For the toxic parent, “nothing is satisfactory. The student is incompetent” (Somers & Settle, 2010, p. 20).

Settle and Somers (2010) asserted, “helicopter parents are male and female and come from all racial, economic, and ethnic groups” (p. 23). They found that while there
was a tendency for helicopter parenting among parents of both first-generation college students (F-Gens) and continuing generation college students, the percentage among the parents of continuing generation college students was higher (60% vs. 40%), and the concerns of these two groups of parents tended to differ (Somers & Settle, 2010, p. 23).

For example:

F-gens [parents of first generation college students] are anxious that their children receive the same benefits and opportunities as “continuing generation” students. Thus, they may spend more time talking with staff about the basics of programs in an effort to determine whether their children are getting an equitable share of the resources. (Somers & Settle, 2010, p. 23)

Other concerns of these F-gen parents include the relation of a student’s area of study to future career prospects, and the avoidance of “fluff” courses and extracurricular activities, which they see as having little value (Somers & Settle, 2010).

Settle and Somers (2010) also investigated the role of gender in helicopter parenting; however, most of the findings in this study relating to gender were based on scattered anecdotal evidence. While they did not explore any differences in depth, they did find that several themes emerged. For instance, “mothers helping sons was a major theme, with some respondents estimating 60 percent of all helicoptering reflects this pattern” (Somers & Settle, 2010, p. 23). Also, there was an impression among respondents that “fathers tended to get involved in ‘bigger picture’ issues – e.g., grade appeals, refunds, and graduating on time” (Somers & Settle, 2010, p. 23). Wolf et al. (2009), in their own study, found that variation between male and female college students was “fairly small” (p. 347).

However, some research suggests students want more parental participation in their college lives. For instance, a 2007 Higher Education Research Institute (2008)
survey reported that 24% of college freshman said that their parents had too little involvement in choosing college courses, and 22.5% said that their parents too little involvement in choosing college activities – less than 4% reported that their parents were involved too much in either category. The National Survey of Student Engagement (2007) found that students with involved parents had “higher levels of engagement and more frequent use of deep learning activities,” and they experienced “greater gains on a host of desired college outcomes, and greater satisfaction with the college experience” (p. 25).

**Demographics and patterns.** Wartman (2009) asserted that the phenomenon of highly involved parents was primarily represented in a subpopulation of the student body: “This subpopulation of overly involved mothers and fathers has come to represent all parents of college students, even though these examples are largely socioeconomic class-based” (p. 1). Essentially, Wartman (2009) suggested it is a largely White and Asian phenomenon. Furthermore, the Higher Education Research Institute (2008) conducted a study in which they found some distinct differences in student perception of appropriate parental involvement that support Wartman (2009). “Students of color were more likely than white students to indicate that their parents were too little involved in all areas” (Higher Education Research Institute, 2008, p. 2). Fewer than 17% of White students felt their parents were not involved enough compared to 20.5% to 33.7% of African American students, 33.3% to 39.6% of Asian/Pacific Islander students, and 32.2% to 43.5% of Latino and Latina students (Higher Education Research Institute, 2008, p. 2).

Wolf et al. (2009) found that foreign-born students reported high levels of parental involvement but low levels of parental intervention. Furthermore, they found
that “wealthy and upper-middle/professional middle class students report[ed] significantly higher levels of parental engagement than students with less affluent backgrounds” (Wolf et al., 2009, p. 347). This indicated there may be factors correlated with student ethnicity, such as income level, parental education, and cultural factors, which tend to predict student expectations.

Louie (2001) studied how “social class influences Chinese immigrant parents’ expectations, strategies, and investment in their children’s education” (p. 438). Since 1960, there has been a marked increase in Asian immigration to the United States, with the Asian American population having increased 11-fold between 1960 and 2000, from under 900,000 to over 10 million (Louie, 2001). Additionally, according to the U.S. Census, the Asian American population rose an additional 7 million between 2000 and 2010 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Louie (2001) wrote:

These high levels of immigration have been accompanied by high levels of educational attainment, which have contributed to the reputation of Asian Americans as a ‘model minority’ – that is, a group that has achieved a rapid ascent up the socioeconomic ladder my virtue of its educational success. (p. 438)

Explanations for this disparity include cultural reasons, immigrant optimism regarding challenges that they will face as a minority population group, structural and economic reasons, and the fact that as a group, Asian Americans tend to be a “voluntary minority” who arrived at the U.S. by choice rather than through enslavement or colonization (Louie, 2001).

Louie (2001) conducted a series of interviews and surveys with Chinese American students and parents at Columbia University and Hunter University over a period of nine years. The students she interviewed were all first-generation, second-
generation, or generation 1.5, meaning, children who were born abroad but moved to the U.S. in their early teens. The idea of the latter label is to connote an individual raised in their native culture but still young enough to assimilate to American culture after moving to the U.S. Louie (2001) found a universal expectation by Chinese American parents that their children complete at least a bachelor’s degree. There was also a preoccupation with “good” schools by the parents of these students, recognition of the opportunities present in the American university system, and an aversion to the lack of social mobility in China (Louie, 2001). “Chinese middle-class parents in this study had the resources to explore many different options, thus the choice of school for their children was of primary importance to them” (Louie, 2001, p. 455). Furthermore, Chinese American working-class parents also highly valued good schools but had to engage in alternative methods, such as pre-college Catholic and parochial schools, which they perceived as providing a better education, in order to maximize their children’s college opportunities (Louie, 2001). Lastly, there was a sense of reciprocation for college education, an expectation that parents would send their child to school accompanied by an obligation on the student to do well and be successful (Louie, 2001).

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) (2007) asked students about issues related to parental involvement. Among first-year students, the NSSE report found students were reluctant to separate themselves from their pre-college social networks – parents, friends, families, etc. In relation to parental contact,

Seven of ten students communicated “very often” with at least one parent or guardian during the academic year…electronic media were more common than face-to-face communication…[and] the most popular member of the support network was the student’s mother, followed by father and siblings. (NSSE, 2007, p. 24)
Among first-year students, 38% reported that a parent or guardian intervened, with about a third of these doing so “frequently” (NSSE, 2007, p. 2). Among seniors, 29% reported a parent or guardian intervened, with, again, about a third of these doing so frequently (NSSE, 2007, p. 2).

In a series of case studies about parental expectations among African American and Mexican American university students, Fisher and Padmawidjaja (1999) found “high parental expectations seemed to be motivated by…the desire to have their children surpass their own educational and occupational level, thus placing them in a position to make a contribution to their racial-ethnic group” (p. 150). In terms of Caucasian students, Zhang (2005) found “children from Caucasian and nonimmigrant families were more involved in household chores and interacting with salespeople in their daily lives” and were more independent than other ethnic groups (p. 160). Zhang also found African American families did not tend to involve their children in decision making; furthermore, the authority of the parents was not emphasized as strongly by Asian and immigrant parents as it was by Caucasian and nonimmigrant parents. Zhang (2005) speculated this was because parental educational level, which tends to be higher among Caucasians and nonimmigrants, has more of an impact than ethnic background.

Another study, conducted by Bean and Vesper (1994), looked at how parental influence varies between genders. The study involved a survey of 328 students, mostly upperclassmen at a large mid-western university, and sought to assess the nature of student satisfaction with their college instructors. The model used by the study estimated that student satisfaction is determined by three factors: the student’s background, the
academic institutional environment, and the social environment. The study found that student satisfaction tended to differ between men and women, with men being more uniformly influenced by parental encouragement and father’s educational level (sub-variables in the student’s background factor) and the academic and social environment of the institution. Women were influenced by the same things, but with more of an emphasis on confidence in abilities and success in coursework (sub-variables in the academic and institutional environment factor).

**Parental influence on major selection.** Oishi and Sullivan (2005) surveyed undergraduate students, in both the U.S. and Japan, in a series of two survey studies. They found that specificity of parental grade expectations and fulfillment of these expectations factored heavily into student’s self-esteem. The differences culture played in the specificity of parental expectations had a direct impact on the student’s perceived sense of fulfillment. This phenomenon was most pronounced in Asian American students; specifically, Asian American students tended to have a lower sense of well-being and this was positively correlated with specific and high parental expectations. “The difference in well-being is that Asian college students perceive their parental expectations to be more specific and thus harder to fulfill than Americans do” (Oishi & Sullivan, 2005, p. 1291).

Leppel, Waldenauer, and Williams (2001) examined how the socioeconomic status of a student’s family and occupation of their parents influenced the student’s choice of major. This study involved an analysis of data gathered by the 1990 survey of Beginning Postsecondary Students (BPS). The study found “both similarities and differences in the way factors affect men’s and women’s choices” (p. 389). Specifically,
in both male and female students, the children of fathers who were engineers or scientists tended to be more likely to pursue college majors in engineering or the sciences; and women were more likely to choose to study in a male-dominated field, such as engineering, if the woman’s father had a high occupational level.

Conversely, the study found that women whose mothers were professionals or executives were less likely to choose to study education, a female-dominated occupation (Leppel et al., 2001). The “mother’s influence as a role model was positively related to the nontraditionality of the daughter’s major choice” (Leppel et al., 2001, p. 390). The impact of socioeconomic status on major choice differed between women and men. “As socioeconomic status increased, women became less likely to choose to major in business, while men became more likely to do so…. male business majors came from wealthier families than female business majors” (Leppel et al., 2001, p. 390). Lastly, the study found that “for female students, having a father in a professional or executive occupation has a larger effect than does having a mother in a professional or executive occupation. For the male students, the opposite holds” (p. 391). It should be noted the age of the data used for this study may have significant implications for its current applicability.

Conversely, Zafar (2010) analyzed the impact of parents in student decisions to complete multiple majors, but did not find a clear correlation. “At least a quarter of college students have more than one undergraduate major” (p. 1). In addition to eventual careers and enjoying the coursework, Zafar (2010) found that students also choose majors in order to gain parental approval. “Since college majors are chosen under uncertainty…students use their preferences and expectations about uncertain future
aspects of the choice when making their decision of what to major in” (p. 23). It should be noted that Zafar (2010) did not find “that students major…in one field to satisfy their own interests and another to gain parents’ approval” (p. 23). The author was uncertain about the generalizability of his findings due to a small heterogeneous sample size at a single university.

The parent-university relationship. The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1972, or FERPA, has come to define privacy law for any institution of higher education that receives federal financial aid dollars. The intent of FERPA was to establish the right for students to inspect their own education record, to petition the institution to correct their record should they find a mistake, and to restrict access to their record by others (Kaplin & Lee, 2007, p. 503). FERPA is at the nexus of the interplay between institutional responsibility, student rights, and parents’ right-to-know. FERPA often causes confusion, as it applies differently to students in primary, secondary, and post-secondary school, but once a student turns 18 or enrolls in college, their parents lose the legal rights granted them under FERPA, which, at that point, shift to the student.

As parental involvement has increased and tuition risen dramatically, the parental expectancy that they, the parents, be treated as an equal partner in their student’s education has also increased (Falkner & Savage, 2007, p. 56). Moreover, universities tend to decline to recognize student independence in many cases, particularly when it involves money. For example, universities preserve the student-parent relationship when considering the expected financial contribution of a student’s parent in determining the eligibility of the student for financial aid, or in determining whether a student must pay non-resident tuition. Indeed, it is exceedingly difficult for students under the age of 24 to
prove to a university they are financially independent from their parents for purposes of residency tuition in California, and even when it exists, such independence has little meaning when it comes to financial aid. While this might be fair in realistically determining how much aid a student needs for school, it creates a problem of dissonance when students are expected to act and be responsible for their own welfare. “Even as parents and students gradually loosen their family ties, purse strings keep them attached” (Falkner & Savage, 2007, p. 56).

**Summary.** Journalists and researchers have noted a number of differences between the college experience of today’s students and students of their parents’ generation. Technology has increased the degree to which students can stay connected to pre-college social networks (Junco & Mastrodicasa, 2007; Kennedy, 2009; Kolkhorst et al., 2010). Moreover, as college costs have increased at a rate far greater than inflation, parental investment in college has also risen – and this investment has not always proven to be constructive in the academic lives of students (Hamilton, 2013). The relationship a student has with their parents has been amplified by these societal changes, and the stability and support provided by parental support has led to consequences in autonomy development, both good and bad (Cullaty, 2011; Klein & Pierce, 2009).

With these new societal realities, the level of parental involvement has been amplified, and both helpful and harmful parental behaviors have emerged – with consequences for student anxiety and resilience (Somers & Settle, 2010). It should be noted, however, that parental involvement varies significantly between demographic groups, including those defined by race and ethnicity, parental educational level, country of origin, and gender (Bean & Vesper, 1994; Leppel et al., 2001; Wartman, 2009; Wolf et
al., 2009; Zhang, 2005). This has included a measurable parental influence on student major choices, as well as consequences for the parent-university relationship (Leppel et al., 2001; White, 2005; Zafar, 2010).

The cultural shift evident in this emerging phenomenon of highly involved parenting though the college years is partly a result of demographic changes, partly a result of the increasing costs of higher education and the linkage of need-based aid with parental income, and partly a product of a generational realignment of the student-parent dynamic. A new social paradigm is evident in the nominally pejorative comparison of these highly involved parents with helicopters, and while there is much speculation about the impact of such involved parenting, the effect of this research is far from conclusive.

**Summary of Literature Review**

There is mutual feedback between these literature streams. Whereas stress and emerging adulthood are inextricably linked, parental involvement can be both the cause of, and caused by, the other two. Conversely, parental involvement can be a coping strategy, as can an extended period of emerging adulthood – both of these can also cause stress of their own. These research streams provide a foundation for understanding the undergraduate college student experience and how this experience is impacted by parental involvement. Within the context of the life stage of emerging adulthood, during which individuals tend to attend college for their undergraduate degrees, stress was a primary cause for student troubles. Understanding this life stage, and the coping mechanisms used by students during this time, is fundamental to analyzing how and why parental involvement may persist with these students.
Chapter 3: Research Methodology

Through an investigation of the existing literature regarding parental involvement in the lives of college students, it was determined that a better definition of the phenomenon was needed. Qualitative research methods were employed to gain an understanding of the phenomenon from the student perspective and to supplement the predominantly quantitative data that already exists. Creswell (2007) defined qualitative research as the study of a human or social problems using an “emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people or places under study, and data analysis that is inductive and established patterns or themes” (p. 37). The problem of understanding the phenomenon of parental involvement in the lives of college students is primarily a human and social one. As such, qualitative research methods are ideal for identifying the defining patterns and themes.

This research took the form of a phenomenological study seeking to explore the student perspective on parental involvement. It looked at the lived experiences of undergraduate college students with involved parents. Specifically, the research addressed the questions: What were the common lived experiences of these students? How was the student’s ability to cope with stress affected by parent involvement? Lastly, what meaning did parental involvement have on the ongoing academic and social experience of these students?

Research Design and Rationale

This research study utilized a phenomenological approach to data gathering and interpretation, using Van Manen (1990) and Creswell (2007) as a guide. Grounded in the
philosophy of Edmund Husserl, phenomenology is at its most basic the philosophical principle that neither consciousness nor the world itself can be described directly; rather, it is the way people experience and perceive the world in which they live that can be described in a meaningful way (Van Manen, 1990). “Phenomenology is a human science (rather than a natural science) since the subject matter of phenomenological research is always the structures of meaning of the lived human world” (Van Manen, 1990, pp. 11-12). Essentially, phenomenological research is less interested in objective facts, and more interested in the way in which the world is experienced by those who live in it. If a tree falls in a forest with no one there to hear it, does it make a sound? To a phenomenological researcher, the answer would be that it does not matter.

“What first of all characterizes phenomenological research is that it always begins in the lifeworld” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 6). One of the principle goals of phenomenological research is that it is structured in a way that it does not fragment situations but rather looks at them in the context of the whole person, the whole situation. For this reason Van Manen (1990) described it as the “philosophy of the personal, the individual, which we pursue against the background of an understanding of the evasive character of the logos of other, the whole, the communal, or the social” (p. 6). What this means is a phenomenological researcher takes special care to understand the person or individual being studied from that person’s perspective. This is well suited to research in education because of the way such a perspective shift and holistic approach illuminates the complicated student perspective on their own lives.

One consequence of the phenomenological approach is that the writing process, as an act of interpretation, is inextricably linked with the results. “[It] is unlike other
research in that the link with the results cannot be broken...without loss of all reality to
the results. And that is why, when you listen to a presentation of a phenomenological
nature, you will listen in vain for the punch line, the latest information, or the big news”
(Van Manen, 1990, pp. 12-13). Phenomenology is not an empirical analytical science – it
is a human science interested in people’s lived experiences, not the inductive derivation
of that experience into a theory or summary.

By its nature, phenomenological research is data based and goes beyond mere
speculation; however, it is not designed to be used as a problem solving mechanism;
rather, it is a means by which the researcher can come to understand a phenomenon (Van
Manen, 1990). Van Manen (1990) described it as establishing an inextricable relationship
with “original” experience, consisting of the interplay of six research activities:

(1) turning to a phenomenon which seriously interests us and commits us to the
world; (2) investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it;
(3) reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon; (4)
describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting; (5)
maintaining a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon; and
(6) balancing the research context by considering the parts of the whole. (pp. 30-31)

Research Design

This was a phenomenological study of nine undergraduate students at a campus in
the University of California system and the effects of parental involvement on the lives of
these students. It involved interviews with these students, student-completed journal
entries, and field notes.

Rationale

Much of the current research regarding the phenomenon of parental involvement
in the lives of undergraduate students was based on survey research. In contrast to such
quantitative methods, qualitative research provides thick research descriptions not present in the current conversation. For instance, a survey is useful in investigating general themes but is lacking when it comes to deriving meaning. The phenomenological approach provided a mechanism by which to investigate the lived experience as it relates to a phenomenon. The phenomenological approach used here offers insights missing in other analyses of this problem.

Site and Population

Population Description

The study focused on undergraduate students at a campus in the University of California system. One of the students was dismissed and then reinstated to the university during this study; another graduated during this study; and the remaining seven participants were current students. The sample of nine students from this study was an availability sample taken from the general student population of the campus. “Availability sampling is a nonprobability sampling procedure in which elements are selected from the target population on the basis of their availability, convenience of the researcher, and/or their self-selection” (Daniel, 2012, p. 81). Specifically, what was used in this study was a sample of convenience. Because the population of concern was broad and the phenomenological methodology being used in this study exploratory, and necessarily resource intensive, the researcher used the population at hand. This meant the researcher talked to students self-identified as having involved parents and who were willing to talk about the research problem. While such a sample could not be used to infer characteristics of the general population, it is well suited for the exploration of a phenomenon.
Site Description

The campus where the research took place is a large research university in the University of California system. The campus is located near several large urban areas, hosts a wide variety of professional schools, and is a physically a large campus. In the University of California system, the “top ‘one-eighth’ of California public high school graduates is eligible for admission” (University of California, 2010). About a third of University of California system enrollees are eligible to receive Pell Grants, which “provides a way to approximate enrollment levels of low-income students” (University of California, 2010). As of fall 2008, the University of California system had an Asian American population of 38%, a White population of 32%, and a Chicano/Latino population of 16% (University of California, 2010). “Asian Americans make up the largest percentage of undergraduate students [system wide]. At seven campuses they comprise about 38 percent of all undergraduates, with the largest percentages at Irvine (53 percent) and San Diego (49 percent)” (University of California, 2010, p. 20).

Site access. The researcher received permission from the host campus to perform this research.

Research Methods

List of Methods Used

- Nine one-hour, semi-structured interviews with students
- Nine participant-completed journal entries
- Field notes
- Audio recordings and transcriptions from each interview
Description of Each Method Used

**Interviews.** For the student interviews, a series of questions were used to elicit responses in different areas. The organic flow of the interview was allowed to direct the interaction whenever possible. The questions were oriented around the two basic phenomenological questions suggested by Creswell (2007): “What have you experienced in terms of this phenomenon? What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences of the phenomenon?” (p. 61).

The student interviews were semi-structured, conversational interviews. There was a target interview time of one hour for each participant. Each interview began with the solicitation of some background and demographic information (name, age, year in school, high school graduation date, geographic area of origin, estimated household income, parental marriage status, and ethnicity), and then proceeded into the main interview questions (see Appendix A). The questions were broad and the subjects were prompted, when necessary, to elaborate and provide more information.

**Journals.** The journals the students completed were given to them upon their acceptance in the study and they were asked to journal on the question, “Describe your experience as an undergraduate student at [name of university]? How have your parents supported, intervened, or been involved in your academic experience? Please be as detailed as possible.” The journal prompt was provided as a piece of paper or a non-editable PDF, so the participant would be likely to complete the journaling by hand. Journaling by hand yields a response more stream-of-consciousness and less subject to editing than a journal completed on a word processing program.
Field notes. These notes complemented the audio recordings taken of the interviews, recording non-audible cues such as mood, setting, thoughts of the interviewer, and any other aspects of the interview that seemed important or cogent to what the participant was saying.

Participant invitation, selection, and identification. The participants were solicited during the spring 2012 and fall 2012 quarters, using several different methods. The first method was a targeted poster campaign on the campus (see Appendix B). The researcher also contacted students that had been referred by colleagues and asked them directly if they would be willing to participate. A few of the participants were known to the research due to past contact and offered the opportunity to participate. Volunteers were screened to ensure they were undergraduates and had experienced some measure of parental involvement (see Appendix C). Asking participants to complete a journal and then participate in an hour-long interview required significant time commitment. A token of appreciation – a $10 Starbucks Gift Card – was given to each of the students to thank them for the time commitment required for their participation. While the reward was noted on the recruitment material, it was non-specific and students were only given the detail of the reward upon applying to participate. This largely mitigated the skewing effect that a reward may have had on the data. Student demographic and academic information was gathered directly from participants. This required no intervention or involvement on behalf of the host campus.

Participants were given a consent form to sign before the interview that explained they could withdraw at any time without penalty and that their data would be kept confidential and reported anonymously (see Appendix D). Interviews were recorded
using a digital audio recorder and extensive field notes were taken. Upon selection, students were asked to journal a response to a question, to be handed in at the interview. The journals offered an additional set of data and provided insight into the student interview answers. Students were notified they could be asked to return for a follow-up interview and were asked to provide an email address for such follow-up.

**Data Analysis**

The interview transcripts were coded using Dedoose analysis software (http://www.dedoose.com). The student journals were coded by hand. A narrative of each interview was then developed using the field notes. The formal analysis of the gathered data occurred as described by Creswell (2007), who in turn used Moustakas as a template. The data was coded using axiological coding, which was helpful in the next major stage of phenomenological data analysis, horizontalization. Horizontalization involved searching the data to develop a deep understanding, note significant statements or themes, and to identify clusters of meaning. “These statements and themes are then used to write a description of the context or setting that influenced of what the participants experienced” (Creswell, 2007, p. 61). This is called textural description. The penultimate step, called imaginative variation, involved incorporating the field notes and the formal writing of a description of the phenomenon as experienced by the subject. In the final step, “the researcher then writes a composite description that presents the ‘essence’ of the phenomenon, called the essential, invariant structure (or essence)” (Creswell, 2007, p. 62).
**Stages of data collection.** Data collection took place during the spring 2012 and fall 2012 quarters – spring quarter spans from March to June, and fall quarter spans from September to December. Data collection continued into January 2013.

**Ethical Considerations**

It was necessary to seek IRB approval primarily because the experimental unit of analysis was human subjects. Because this was a relatively low-impact study and only involved opt-in interviews, expedited IRB review was pursued from Drexel University. The host campus indicated that because university resources were not being used, additional IRB approval from the host campus was not necessary. The host campus reached an agreement with Drexel University for Drexel to be the Institutional Review Board of record for this study and site permission was granted through this process.

The primary ethical considerations in this research were to follow the privacy, collection, and informatics standards relating to the use of psycho-sociological data. To preserve the confidentiality of the subjects, each participant was assigned an aliased first name through which he or she was referenced. The interview transcripts and recordings were handled with the utmost attention to privacy and stored in an encrypted folder on the researcher’s home hard-drive. The only reason the privacy of a participant would have been breached is if a participant’s safety was in question, such as ideations of suicide expressed during an interview. To avoid identifying participants who may be part of a population small enough to allow their inadvertent identification, the ethnicities of several of the participants were generalized and the specific school name was removed.

Care was taken to ensure that there was no feeling of obligation on the part of the participants that they participate. Because the researcher was an employee of the
university, it was emphasized that participation in the interview was voluntary and would in no way impact the student’s academic career or relationship with the university. A few of the participants had been in a previous professional relationship with the researcher. However, at the time of their participation there was no continuing relationship.

The interview questions reflected respect for participant feelings and were free from discriminatory, hurtful, or exclusionary language. The study was conducted in a way to minimize psychological distress, meaning that if students seemed to be bothered, the interviewer ascertained the participant’s state of mind before continuing. Participants were also instructed they were permitted to withdraw at any time without penalty. This was particularly important because of the $10 gift card received for their time in the interview; they were informed they would receive this card regardless of whether they sat in the interview to its conclusion. Signed consent was obtained for all participants and these considerations were communicated in the consent form. All recordings, transcriptions, and consent forms are maintained in a locked file.
Parental involvement in the lives of college students has been an emerging phenomenon over the last 20 years. Such involvement can be significant in the academic lives of college students. This phenomenon takes many forms, from the parents acting as confidantes and advisers, to acting as advocates, and to influencing a student’s field of study. While parents who are highly involved in the academic lives of their college-going children have become increasingly common; the effect of such involvement on students is poorly understood by student services administrators and university faculty. The purpose of the study was to better define the phenomenon of parental involvement in college through an investigation of the lived experiences of undergraduate students with high levels of parental involvement. This chapter will present the findings, results, and interpretations of this study.

This study investigated the following research questions, looking at the lived experience of undergraduate college students with involved parents. It asked:

- What are the common lived experiences of these students?
- How is the student’s ability to cope with stress affected by parental involvement?
- What meaning does parental involvement have on the ongoing academic and social experience of these students?

**Findings**

This phenomenological study involved nine undergraduate students from a campus in the University of California system. The participants were interviewed about the essence of parental involvement in their college lives. Each participant sat for an
interview and answered a journal question; the journal was submitted to the researcher at the time of the interview. Field notes were taken during each interview to augment the transcribed dialogue. These notes focused on voice tone and speed, body language, and other visual cues.

The interviews occurred in a variety of places at the convenience of the participants, including numerous locations on campus, a local Starbucks, and online via Skype video chat. The planned time for each interview was an hour, and the mean interview length was approximately 50 minutes. The interviews took place between June 2012 and January 2013 – the timing impacted by when students were on campus. The interview questions may be found in Appendix A. Pseudonyms were used to protect the confidentiality of each individual. Basic participant information may be found in Table 1.

Table 1

*Participant Description Matrix*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym, Sex, Age</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>U.S. Generational</th>
<th>Year in School</th>
<th>Current Major</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Martha, F, 18</td>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>Generation 1.5</td>
<td>First</td>
<td>Political Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donna, F, 19</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>CA Resident</td>
<td>Third</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mickey, M, 18</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>International</td>
<td>First</td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose, F, 20</td>
<td>Filipino</td>
<td>Generation 1.5</td>
<td>Third</td>
<td>Computer Engineering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rory, M, 20</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>CA Resident</td>
<td>Third</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah, F, 21</td>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>First-generation</td>
<td>Fourth</td>
<td>Communication &amp; Psychology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amelia, F, 20</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Generation 1.5</td>
<td>Third</td>
<td>Anthropology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clara, F, 25</td>
<td>Middle Eastern</td>
<td>First-generation</td>
<td>Graduated</td>
<td>Biology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack, M, 21</td>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>First-generation</td>
<td>Fourth</td>
<td>Design</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: All names are pseudonyms. Ethnicities were self-described by each participant. Some ethnicities were generalized to protect the identity of the participant.
The participants’ diversity – only 22.5% were Caucasian – related to the diversity of the University of California system, where 32% are Caucasian (University of California, 2010). Given the small size of the research sample, the convenience aspect led to the difference noted. For the purposes of this research, a Generation 1.5 student was one who was foreign-born but moved to the U.S. by his or her early teens. The definition was also extended to include individuals who were born in the U.S., moved abroad as an infant, and then moved back to the U.S. in the early teens. This is consistent with the intent of the Generation 1.5 label, as represented by Louie (2001), to connote an individual who was raised in his or her native culture but still young enough to assimilate to American culture after moving to the U.S.

To analyze the qualitative data gathered during this research, the interview transcripts were coded using Dedoose software (http://www.dedoose.com). The student-completed journal entries were coded and analyzed manually – this data was combined with the data gathered using Dedoose. These codes were compared and analyzed to derive themes and findings. Figure 4 presents a word map generated using Wordle software (http://www.wordle.net) utilizing both Dedoose coding data and manual coding data. The word map demonstrates the relative occurrence of the 30 most commonly occurring codes in this research.
Three primary themes were identified using the above described coding process: 
1) parents and academic pressure, 2) parents, stress, and coping, and 3) parents as a part of the social whole. Within each of these themes, two findings were identified and are discussed.

**Theme 1: Parents and Academic Pressure**

Student discussion of parental pressure on their academic decisions was a meaningful theme within the context of this research. Specifically, two findings emerged within this theme: a) parent pressure on major choice can affect student academic choices and b) parent financial pressure can affect student academic decisions. The two codes most relevant to this theme were those for “parental involvement” and “major choice.” The code for parental involvement occurred 88 times in the analysis of interviews and
journals and the code for major choice occurred 55 times. They co-occurred, or were cited in the same section of data, 18 times, demonstrating the interrelatedness of these concepts within the context of the research.

**Finding 1a: Parent pressure on major choice can affect student academic choices.** Of the nine participants, five spoke about parental pressure on their choice of major. Specifically, their parents emphasized they major in a “practical” field of study. Martha, Amelia, and Sarah all experienced pressure to be medical doctors. Rory and Mickey experienced similar pressure to major in a field of study, such as Engineering, that would have a clearly defined career path. This parental pressure was characterized by a concern for their child’s future. As such, the participants’ reactions to the pressure were complex and reflected a hesitance to defy what they perceived to be a concern for their best interests. However, only one of the participants, Mickey, indicated near-complete acquiescence – but this may have been complicated by his status as an international student from a foreign culture.

Martha, a generation 1.5 Indian American, was majoring in Political Science against the wishes of her father, who wanted her to study to be a medical doctor. She said this was a conversation she and her father had had many times. Of this, she relayed the following: “My dad was like, ‘Be a doctor.’ I said, ‘No! Dad, I’m going to be a failure doctor. I’m going to stick with what I like.’” Despite the apparent strength of her response, she laughed nervously and gave the impression during the interview that the matter was far from settled. Indeed, the influence of her father on this matter was evident when she discussed hedging her options: “when I go to grad school I’ll take some
business classes because I want to have two careers just in case one doesn’t work so I can depend on this other one.”

Likewise, Amelia – a generation 1.5 Chinese American – was majoring in Anthropology counter to the wishes of her parents. She grew up wanting to be an Anesthesiologist and initially majored in Biochemistry. She later chose to change her major to Anthropology, a major complementing her linguistic ability (she spoke four languages). This choice was difficult for Amelia, and she had to confront skeptical parents who were concerned she was “giving up” on a prosperous field. She said that her mother told her she “shouldn’t give up too easily.” Amelia relayed the conversation she had with her parents, who ended up supportive despite being wary: “they’re like, ‘What are you going to do with [Anthropology]? You can’t get a job.’” Amelia explained their specific concern: “they both just wanted me to get a good job. They’re always asking me, ‘what are you going to do? Are you going to go straight to grad school?’ They’re always asking me about my plans for the future.”

Similar to Martha and Amelia, Sarah – a first-generation Vietnamese American – was pressured by her parents to study to be a medical doctor and actively resisted the pressure. It should be noted that several things mitigated this pressure: her sister deciding to study to be a medical doctor at another UC school, and a misunderstanding of her father about the difference between types of doctoral degrees. Once her father understood that a PhD and an MD were not the same, he said, “Once you get your doctor degree, you need to get your actual doctor degree.” She responded, “No dad, that’s not how that works.” Sarah came to the university with the intention of studying Psychology.
However, while not giving in to the expectation that she be a doctor, she did add Communications as a double major at the prompting of her parents:

I was just going to do Psychology at first, but then my parents kind of told me how bad the economy was, and how I needed to double major or minor, or do something to, you know, look more diverse and knowledgeable for jobs.

On the other hand, Mickey, an international student from China, indicated an attitude of acquiescence despite a marked enthusiasm for fields of study outside his parents’ expectations. Mickey was studying mathematics but discussed a passionate interest in social science, philosophy, and writing – Mickey was a published magazine writer in China and the interview conversation frequently touched on literature, video games, film, writing, and social issues. Mickey said he was wanted to pursue a double major, in Mathematics and Philosophy, but his parents were pressuring him to do something more “practical:” “my parents said [majoring in] Philosophy… does not make sense. But it just makes me feel awesome if I study mathematics and philosophy.” Despite his desire to major in Philosophy, he said he was considering Economics for his second major because it was more practical. Furthermore, he indicated he would rather study theoretical (“pure”) mathematics, but at the prompting of his mother was going to change his major to Applied Mathematics: “My mom says Applied Math is maybe more useful. Applied Math is hard here because it asks for two or three more classes than Mathematics.”

Also, for Mickey, there was added pressure to plan for a career that would allow him to take care of his parents as they aged and entered retirement. He identified this as a pronounced cultural expectation in China and spoke of it as an obligation to pay his parents back for their current investment in his schooling: “because you cannot survive
by yourself when you are kid, you have to take care of your kids. So when you grow up, the responsibility is you [the child] will take care of your parents and your kids.”

This phenomenon of parental pressure on major choice was pronounced but not limited to the Asian and Asian American participants. Rory, a Caucasian student from central California, experienced pressure from his father to pursue a major more conducive to getting a job after college. When Rory told his father he wanted to study Psychology, he said his father’s first reaction was to ask, “Where are you going to get a job doing that? Do Computer Science. Do Engineering…. Something where you’re going to get good money.”

Neither of Rory’s parents went to college – this included his father and stepmother, whom he related to as his mother and called “mom” (his biological mother passed away when he was in high school) – and their perspective on college was focused on the practical. For Rory’s father, the issue seemed to revolve around money:

My dad is more of the practical application guy. So, he was kind of wary [of] my major and my choice of college degree, whereas my mom was more supportive. So I got both ends of it. But at the end of the day… They wanted me to get a job, in fact, more than anything. That’s their main concern after I graduate. They’re worried that I am going to get a degree and be like, ‘I have a degree…I’m in debt and I have a piece of paper. What do I do now?’ I try to explain to them that I’ll make my way, I’ll figure it out. My dad is a little iffy still, [but] my mom understands.

However, despite this pressure, Rory’s focus on a career in student counseling helped him stick with his first major of choice. “I’ve known that since probably early high school, even middle school. I was never really interested in anything beyond people and interaction.”
This finding discussed the pressure the participants’ parents put on the participants to pursue a practical field of study. Parental pressure on major choice was something about which these participants were very mindful. Sarah, Amelia, Rory, and Martha all indicated they spoke freely with their parents regarding their choice of major – even soliciting parental advice. While only one of the participants, Mickey, indicated giving into this pressure, it was nonetheless striking how they all internalized this guidance.

**Finding 1b: Parent financial pressure can affect student academic choices.**

The second finding within this theme involved parental financial pressure, namely, that the participants expedite their schooling in order to save tuition money. All participants indicated a perception that the campus was an expensive school to attend. For Mickey, Sarah, and Donna, there was a pronounced concern about the cost of school. Both Donna and Mickey indicated they were planning on graduating early, while Sarah was taking a very high unit load to finish her double major as quickly as possible. In the cases of Donna and Sarah, they indicated they had been largely successful and done well in school, while Mickey was in his first term.

Mickey expressed his intention to complete school in three years, even with a double major, because he wanted to save his parents money: “It will save a lot of money. I really feel highly uncomfortable because I spend all of my parent’s money.” He noted that even though his parents were paying for him to attend school in the U.S. and paying non-resident tuition, they were middle class and not wealthy. He said, “I’m in the middle class… In fact, [my parents] are poorer than the average American.” When asked why his parents opted to pay so much to send him to university in the U.S. despite them not being
wealthy, he indicated that in China, an American college degree is “worshipped” and strongly associated with professional success.

Likewise, Sarah was taking a very high unit load so as to finish early: “16 [units] this quarter. I took 17 last quarter and 14 the quarter before.” This is significantly higher than the 13 units students are expected to complete per term at the host campus. Sarah wrote in her journal that her parents wanted her to study hard and finish early because “school is not cheap.” Sarah’s parents were not only supporting her in school, but also Sarah’s younger sister who was attending another UC campus in Southern California.

Donna, a Californian, experienced parental pressure on her major that appeared to be primarily about money. For financial reasons, while in High School, Donna was originally planning on attending a community college and then transferring to a UC. Donna explained it was because of the cost of attending a UC school: “Yeah, mostly cost. Like, definitely cost. It was all about cost.” Like Mickey, Donna liked the way it felt to major in two very different fields of study. She explained why she wanted to double major in English and Mathematics:

I actually chose math because – I loved freshman year, I loved telling people that I was a double Math and English major. I loved blowing people’s minds and how they were so confused. I was like, “I’m just cool.” I seriously thought that was awesome. Now that I’m not kind of makes me sad. Also the fact that I would have graduated with a BA and a BS…that’s what I wanted.

At the time of the interview, Donna had decided to not pursue a double major in English and Mathematics because of the additional cost required by a second degree. These cost considerations eventually had led Donna’s parents to ask her to graduate in three years: she did a major check with an adviser and found out it was possible to graduate in three years as an English-only major. After learning this from her, Donna’s
parents’ reacted to this news: “[they said] ‘then you’re doing it’…. They were really excited.” Donna appeared less excited.

This finding discussed parental financial pressure on academic decisions. Donna, Sarah, and Mickey all indicated they were accelerating their study plan as a reaction to parental pressure. Donna even changed her field of study in reaction to this pressure, forgoing a desired double major and dual degree in favor of early graduation. All three students recognized that for their family circumstances, the host campus was an expensive school to attend, and these cost concerns played an important role in their individual academic paths.

**Theme 2: Parents, Stress, and Coping**

This theme concerned the parental relationship with student stress; specifically, as a cause of stress, or, conversely, as a component of the coping mechanism used by the student to cope with the stress. The two codes most relevant to this theme were those for “stress” and “coping.” The code for stress occurred 34 times, the code for coping 36 times; they each co-occurred, or were cited in the same section of text, eight times with the code for the parental relationship with the student. The code for parental involvement co-occurred nine times with the code for stress, and seven times with the code for coping. Stress and coping co-occurred with each other 20 times. These four concepts were deeply interrelated, as evidenced in Table 2.
Two findings emerged from the data in this theme. The first finding was that student stress is closely related to their parental relationships. The second finding within this theme was that not all students are prepared to cope without their parents. All nine of the participants spoke about stress and coping and offered evidence toward the following findings within this theme.

**Finding 2a: Student stress is closely related to their parental relationships.**

The first finding within this theme was the relationship the participants’ parents had to the participants’ stress. In some cases, the parents were a supportive means of coping with stress, as with Rose, Donna, and Jack. Clara and Martha were both examples of how parents could at times be the cause of stress. Clara was also an example of how parental relationships can change in relation to stress and coping, moving from stressor to support. This finding was characterized by the interconnectedness of stress and coping with the participants’ parental relationships. The relationship the participants described with their parents before college did not necessarily change in college.
Rose’s parents helped her cope with the stress she was experiencing as a university student in her first year. Rose reported that academically, she did not feel her work in high school adequately prepared her for the academic rigor of university study. She described the transition as “rough” in her journal, and indicated there were both cultural and academic hurdles she had to overcome: “The academic expectations were much higher and the teaching styles were a lot less patient and personal compared to high school…Watching [my] grades fall from straight A’s to B’s and C’s wasn’t an easy process.” As Rose faltered, she fell back on her parents’ support for help. She wrote in her journal: “My parents instilled the confidence in me when I lost faith for myself. Knowing that I had that much support made a positive difference in my studies.” Rose wrote of the current nature of her parents’ involvement in her schooling, indicating she appreciated the way they became more hands-off as she successfully progressed through school. She said:

As much as I like keeping them involved in my life, my parents give me enough space to myself and they respect my privacy. My parents never harass me to show me their grades in school. They don’t constantly check to see if I’ve been keeping up with my homework.

In addition to a rigorous academic course load she took as an engineering student, Rose found the bureaucratic hurdles of the university particularly daunting. Her default reaction was to ask her parents to intercede and help with things like applying for financial aid and filing her FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid):

And so my freshman year, I made [my parents] call a lot of people. It was just like, “I don’t know who I’m supposed to call. You do it.” I would push the responsibilities on them just because… I was already so overwhelmed with the classes by itself.
However, Rose’s parents would get frustrated with her unwillingness to confront these hurdles independently:

My dad got mad at me a lot because he was like, “you’re eighteen. You’re technically a legal adult. You need to do this yourself. You need to figure this out yourself.” We use to argue a lot because he would say, “Did you call them?” I would say “no, I thought you were.” There would be miscommunications there and he would say, “You need to start handling things on your own.”

Similar to Rose’s choice to involve her parents with her challenges, when Donna was upset about a low grade, she indicated she sought support from her parents regarding this anxiety. When she got the ‘D’ she discussed it with her parents and they were not shy about offering advice:

I looked up my grades when I was home for spring break [and] saw that I got a ‘D’ and I was…I was sitting there alone. [My dad] was not looking at it. We were just alone in the kitchen, but I looked it up and I was, like, really upset. I [said] “no, I really thought I did better,” and he was like, “What?” “I got a ‘D’ in that Math class I was doing bad in.” He was like… “That’s fine. You are okay. It won’t kill you. You’ll be fine.” My mom goes, “Oh, okay. Well, you can retake that you know.” I was like, “okay Mom.”

Donna did not want to retake the class – when she dropped an originally planned second major in Mathematics it was no longer required – and yet she was still pressured by her mother to retake the class to bolster her GPA. Donna said, “[my mother] still pushes me retaking that class.”

Jack took a different stance when academic and social challenges began to pile up. He resisted involving his mother, believing he could manage on his own. It was only when he was academically dismissed that his mother became aware of his difficulties, stepped in, and helped him get back on track academically – during the timing of this study, Jack was both dismissed from and readmitted to the university. When social challenges resulted in Jack getting into academic trouble he resisted going to his mother –
or anybody, for that matter – for help. When he eventually did share his distress with his mother, she insisted on helping him. She pushed and guided him through the processes necessary for him to get back on track academically:

[My mom and I] drove up from San Jose on a day off that she had for the summer…. And so my mom through that process helped me talk with everyone, talked with them also herself, made sure I was getting all the information very thoroughly, making sure I was seeking out all the possible resources I could on campus, to be reinstated as a student.

Jack indicated he met with school administrators and faculty with his mother, and she acted as an advocate for him. He noted that during these meetings his mother often did most of the talking; as a college professor herself she was used to quirks of the university bureaucracy, and he willingly followed her lead.

After that fact, I made sure that I followed everything she did. I mean, she nagged me for weeks and weeks to make sure I got those forms, to make sure I drove myself to turn in those forms at the registrar or wherever when I needed to do it – really making sure that I was doing it…now. And so, in addition to that support she gave, all that nagging really helped. It’s the motherly love, the motherly nag. Making sure her kids get their things done.

In his journal, Jack elaborated about the general role his parents tended to take when would get in trouble:

My family, and more specifically my mom and my step-dad, have always had to come pick up the pieces when I’ve checked out. In the case of my first year at [school], my mom had to convince me to find all of the options available to me after failing my classes for two quarters. My plan was to not come back, and there was really no forethought into what I would do after. My mom intervened and made sure trying to get back to [the host campus] was my priority.

Jack indicated his mother later even helped him work with the university to have the terms where he was academically unsuccessful retroactively dropped from his academic record, facilitating his return to the host campus less than a year after he was academically dismissed.
Conversely, parental relationships were also, for some of the participants, the perceived causes of stress. Both Clara and Martha indicated they had a stressful relationship with their parents. Clara was very close with her mother and father. When her mother became ill during Clara’s second year of attendance at the host campus, Clara was called upon for support in her father’s absence when he travelled back to the Middle East on urgent business. Clara described how her mother’s illness, and Clara’s role as caretaker, impacted her academics – eventually leading to her dismissal from the university. Clara explained:

Yeah. So my mother, she found out that she [was very ill]. So my father went to take care of something…in [the Middle East]. So it was just us – me and my mom – and it was just really hard. It was just my responsibility to fill up the space that my dad could have done, because I had to just be there for my mom as a daughter, a husband…just be there around her. And it was really hard, because I think she needed him more than she needed me maybe at that time.

Clara described becoming preoccupied with the stress of having to take care of her ailing mother, mentioning this was compounded by the family’s physical distance from campus. They were close enough for her to visit but far enough for it not to be easy for Clara to come often. She wrote in her journal: “at the time I had no car, so commuting back and forth took so much time and energy away from me. My grades fell, but I tried not to bother them with bad news.” Clara spoke in more detail about the stress she was under during the interview:

When you’re studying, you’re thinking about family. When you’re with the family, you’re thinking about school. So it was hard. I tried really hard. I did really good in some classes, not all of them. But it was a lot better than the semester before that.

Martha spoke of a unique home situation that resulted in acute stress based on her parental relationship. When Martha was an infant she was sent to live with her aunt and
uncle in India, who raised her as their daughter. At the start of high school she came to
the U.S. to visit, and only then was informed that who she thought were her aunt and
uncle were actually her biological parents. Her biological parents took over parenting and
arranged for her to stay in the U.S. with their family unit. This created tension in the
family and Martha indicated that she was prohibited from going home to India or
contacting her aunt and uncle (adoptive parents).

Martha said that, once she moved away from home to live in the university dorms,
she found she could once again make contact with her aunt and uncle. She was pleased to
have re-established this relationship, but also saddened as she discovered her “father” in
India was quite ill. When he died, Martha indicated she was not permitted by her father to
go to India and attend her uncle’s funeral. She painted the dissonance between how she
feels about her biological parents, and her aunt and uncle: “If something happened to one
of [my biological parents], I would not feel as sad as I feel for my parents in India. Like
when my dad [uncle] passed away...whew, it was hard.” This event was an important
moment for Martha, as it represented an acute divergence of her interests from those of
her father. It appeared to be at the root of significant stress.

The above evidence represented the close relationship of parents to the
participants’ stress and coping. The stressors discussed by the participants were related to
both the parental relationships as well as to academic rigor. Indeed, in the cases of four of
the nine participants – Rose, Donna, Jack, and Clara – their parents were an important
means of support when they were distressed. Clara illustrated the flipside of this issue as
well, as she spoke about how her parents both caused her stress and then later helped her
cope. Conversely, Martha’s parents and a unique family situation caused her stress; they
were not a source of coping support. What was evident with these five participants was that a student’s stress tended to be closely related to their parental relationship, for better or worse.

**Finding 2b: Not all students are prepared to cope without their parents.** A reaction of many students, when under stress, was to cope without seeking help from their parents. Some were more successful than others. This finding concerned the absence of parents in the college-student coping process. The students discussed below fell into two groups, those who were successful in coping with difficulty independently from their parents and those who were unsuccessful and only were able to get back on track after their parents intervened. One third of the total participants – Amelia, Martha, and Rory – were successful in a hands-off parental environment, even if, at first, the transition away from their parents was troubled. On the other hand, another third – Mickey, Jack, and Clara – had difficulty coping; furthermore, Jack and Clara were only able to successfully manage their problems with the help of their parents.

Amelia missed her family when she moved away to college, and it was difficult for her to adapt to this independent lifestyle:

I feel like back in freshman year, especially the first quarter, I was always just getting homesick, wanting to go back home. I didn’t really want to be here. Just the way I act, I guess. I didn’t really realize the things that go into… ‘Cause like now, I’m paying for my apartment and stuff like that. I guess it’s more real world stuff that I’m learning and stuff like that. So it’s definitely different.

Amelia’s parents played an important role in her coping. They were a source of support when she was having trouble, and then gradually retreated when Amelia proved capable of handling her problems without them. Her current level of autonomy was allowed to grow organically.
Martha explained that when she moved away to attend university, she had a lot of friends from high school who wanted to be dorm mates. Rather than rooming with them, she instead opted to make the transition to college as clean a break as possible and live with dorm-assigned strangers. She noted that this independence instigated her to force some distance between her and her mother and father. This was not well received by her parents:

I feel like my parents didn’t really like the fact that I could stand up for myself or that I could do whatever I wanted to for myself. First of all, they didn’t accept it for a while. They were like, “why are you doing this? … Why don’t you want to do this or that.” I just stuck to my decisions and slowly they started accepting that…slowly though.

Likewise, Sarah did not rely on her parents while in college and said she was happy she did not. She regarded the “bumpy” parts of school – which were primarily social for Sarah – as essential learning and growth opportunities. “I think if I were to do it again, I would do it the same way. It was a rough start, but it was necessary. If the transition was smoother, I don’t think I would have grown so much.” Indeed, Sarah was wary of relying on her parents too much, and felt as if going to them for help would have made her “more reliant on them than anything.”

Rory identified academic problems as his biggest transition issue, but, like Sarah, he did not feel as if he should go to his parents for help. It was Rory’s view that his low-income high school had not adequately prepared him for college, and because of this, his transition to the more academically rigorous university environment was considerable. Because his parents did not go to college themselves, he did not feel as if he could rely upon them to provide specific academic guidance for him while in college. They did, however, provide general counsel when he asked them for help:
If I’m thinking about a double major I want to add, or should I drop this class and add this one, I’ll definitely call my mom or my dad for advice. “What would you do if you were in my shoes?”

One of the ways Rory dealt with the transition problems he was having was by reaching out socially. Along with some friends, he revived a defunct chapter of a national fraternity in his first year attending university. He regarded his independence from his parents as being a major factor shaping who he was.

Mickey, Jack, and Clara had difficulty coping, and Jack and Clara were only able to successfully manage their problems with the help of their parents. While Jack and Clara each spoke to the personal expectation that they handle their problems independently from their parents, this choice seemed to have the effect of cutting them off from what proved to be an essential source of support.

Jack described coping with the stress associated with the bullying and derogatory slurs about him being gay. His freshman roommate harassed him. According to Jack, this harassment sometimes reached extreme levels and culminated with his roommate making bigoted slurs and throwing used condoms on Jack’s bed. This led to Jack’s decision to sleep in his car and shower in a campus gym, while waiting for the offending roommate to move out at the end of the term. Jack shared that he did not actively seek help from the university or his parents. “In times of crisis, it’s always in times of really strong distress that I tune out and say I can’t do it. I give up.” Jack wanted to cope with the problem on his own:

I don’t know why I didn’t reach out to anyone, because I felt like it wasn’t that big of a deal, and I didn’t want to be considered the narc or anything, because I guess I was still seeking approval, making sure that I didn’t push any buttons or anything….. I just fell into really deep depression. And I wasn’t getting any help… I wasn’t seeing my psychiatrist like I had regularly…. So I wasn’t getting
the communication that I should have been. And so, I just really checked out of school altogether.

Jack continued with his story, indicating he was dismissed from school at the end of that first year. It was only at that point that he told his mother. They had an intense argument about the situation, with Jack wanting to continue to handle the situation on his own, and his mother wanting him to let her help. She eventually “got to” Jack, and he allowed her to help. Jack recounted this altercation and traced his thought pattern:

We had a really long, two-day fight about it, because I had not told her anything up until that point. And I was being really childish also. I was telling her she doesn’t have any right to know…and I can just make my own life choices. So I said, “well, I’m going to figure out my life. I’m going to move…find a job there.” Really no forethought into what I was going to do after I got dismissed from [the host campus]. And so we got into a huge fight, and I was saying I wasn’t going to come back, it wasn’t worth it for me because I’m not a good student and that….

In the situation, once Jack’s mother became aware of the issues, she contacted the university on his behalf and helped guide him through some of the academic remedies available to him, even attending meetings with university administrators and faculty (with Jack). As a result of her guided efforts, Jack indicated he was readmitted to the host campus the spring after being dismissed, less than a year later. Jack learned from his mother’s involvement, and he planned to continue to rely on her support during his continuing journey:

[My mother] gave tremendous support in saying that I could do it, and I’ve done it in the past before. And it just takes proper support, proper guidance, and people who can look out for me, people I can use for support rather than taking it all on my own…. Just everything I wasn’t doing. And so, throughout those two days that we talked, it really made me say, okay. I need to try everything possible. Can you help me try everything possible to get back to…my education?

Similarly, Clara shared that when she was dealing with the stress of her mother’s illness, her situation came to a head when she was dismissed from the university. Her
mother, in particular, reached out and helped her to get on track. Similar to Jack’s experience, Clara indicated her mother worked to help her pursue all the academic remedies available to her as a student. Her parents also made an effort to allay some of the pressure from home:

They tried to not stress me as much. They told me how it is very important for them that I finish and I do what I want to do, and just pursue my dreams, not just to focus on their problems. They told me sometimes there’s just nothing I can do. The best thing for me to do sometimes is just focus on my own thing…. it was just a lot better when we had the talk, and I found out they’re very supportive.

Clara eventually was re-admitted to school and graduated during the time this study was conducted. She indicated she was planning on living with her parents and applying to dental school.

Mickey noted he was far away from his home country, China, and he felt alienated as a new student at the university. Both academics and socialization appeared to be difficult for Mickey. “The worse thing is that I don’t even have time for friends because I’m very busy every day…. Most international students stay with other internationals, but I’m different. I stay alone.” Mickey talked about how he filters out the bad aspects of his life when he speaks with his mother on the telephone:

I talk to my mom a lot. We talk on the telephone. But it’s a sad fact that I only talk to her about the good stuff about my life here. “Everything goes extremely fine, extremely fine,” I say. “I go to work every day and I have a very good life! I get along well with my friends.”… I just want my mom to be happy and not worry about me.

This finding explored the absence of parents in coping. From the participants who prospered when independent, such as Amelia, Rory, and Martha, to the participants who resisted asking their parents for help but eventually relied on this help to get back on track, such as Jack and Clara, this evidence suggests some students were ready to cope
without the aid of their parents, and others were not. Because Mickey was only in his first term, his long-term ability to cope with his stress is not yet fully known. This variability underlined the potential importance of parents, and offered evidence as to when and why they may get involved in dealing with campus administrators in support of some college students.

**Theme 3: Parents as a Part of the Social Whole**

The relationship between a student and their parents does not exist in a vacuum. The third theme that emerged in this research was how the participants’ relationships with their parents were impacted by other lateral relationships, specifically the relationship of the participant with siblings and the relationship of the participant with friends. The code for siblings occurred 45 times within this research; the code for friends appeared 33 times.

**Finding 3a: The parental relationship is affected by siblings.** The first finding that emerged within this theme was that the effect of the sibling relationship was significant to the nature and quality of the participant’s relationship with his or her parents. Siblings were profoundly influential on the participants’ parental relationships. Eight of the nine participants spoke about their relationships with brothers and sisters, and six of these talked specifically about how these sibling relationships affected their relationships with their parents. The ninth, Mickey, an only child, brought up his lack of siblings several times. It was for this reason that sibling information was originally included in Table 1. Each situation was unique but demonstrated the theme of this finding that the sibling relationship and the parent relationship are linked.
Sarah received respite from her parents’ expectations to be a doctor when her younger sister went to college. Donna discussed the supportive relationship with her parents in opposition to that of her siblings, whom she identified as being jealous and vindictive. Likewise, Martha’s unique extended family upbringing was informed largely by the presence of her sister. Rose described her siblings as a source of support, and Rory’s role as a co-parent with his younger siblings reinforced the peer-like relationship he described of his parents.

The dynamic between Sarah, Sarah’s sister, and Sarah’s parents appeared to have an impact on the pressure that Sarah’s parents placed on Sarah to become a medical doctor. As Sarah described it, her sister’s entrance into college took some of the pressure off Sarah to be a medical doctor: “it’s only this year that my sister is in school; so instead of calling me, they call her.” Sarah expressed relief that her sister was there to absorb some of the pressure.

Donna described a relationship with her four sisters characterized by tension and rivalry. Though she had three older sisters, Donna would be the first in her family to graduate college. There was an eight- and 12-year age difference with Donna and her three older sisters. Donna also had a younger sister who still lived at home. Donna indicated a contentious relationship with her siblings:

I’m one of the people in my family who doesn’t hold grudges like the other ones do … I mean I’ll think back on things and it makes me upset when I think back on how my sister doesn’t really approve of me going to school because she thinks she deserves it too.

Donna further explained how her relationship with her parents was affected by her sisters:
The oldest one [sister] is twelve years older than me, so she, like, partly raised me. When I got a little bit older they [her sisters] started telling me how they don’t think our parents are good parents. So that’s kind of a weird influencer when your other siblings are telling you, “oh no, they’re not up to the standards they should be.”

Donna’s sisters seemed to repeatedly impose their opinion on Donna about their parents, which was overwhelmingly negative: “I’ve never understood why some of our sisters sometimes really, really don’t like our parents. I don’t know why. I don’t know what happened. I don’t know what made them really hate this.”

Martha’s relationship issues with her younger sister had repercussions on the relationship with her parents, and vice versa. Her understanding for the reason for being sent to live with her aunt and uncle when she was young was that her parents already had a daughter and so did not want another – “yeah, they were sexist,” she explained. However, when she moved back to the U.S., she was confronted with a younger sister, seemingly contradicting her understanding of why she was sent away. During the interview she described her younger sister as “mean.” This was significant because it illustrated the tension Martha felt, being a part of two distinct family units, and seemed to confirm Martha’s latent wariness of parental rejection.

In contrast to Martha’s strained relationship with her family, Rose’s family was brought closer by their significant shared transition of moving to the U.S. together. After her mother passed the dental exam in the U.S. and was able to start practicing dentistry, the family moved to a two-story house in an upscale community in the San Francisco Bay Area. She said she “vents to her parents and siblings a lot,” and she had “really open communications” with them. She typically would go home every weekend to visit her family and had a younger sister she was trying to convince to come to study with her at
the host campus. Rose’s close relationship with her siblings was reflective of an overall
closeness with her family. Indeed, this closeness was born out when she had academic
trouble and went to her parents for support.

Another example of a positive sibling relationship that affected the participant’s
broader parental relationship, Rory had become a role model for his younger siblings.
Because he was the first person in the family to go to college, and because his family
lived in a lower income area, Rory represented the possibility of college for his younger
brothers and sisters.

I know I’m a huge…I don’t want to say role model, but I play a big part in their
raising and whatnot. The age difference, I basically raised them. You know what I
mean? I was 15 when the youngest was born. And they look up to me a lot.

Rory regarded himself as almost a co-parent with his younger siblings, and this had the
effect of creating a peer-like relationship with his parents.

Martha, Sarah, Donna, and Rory were all examples of individuals with sibling
relationships that affected their parental relationships. The information shared by these
participants was of a family unit that continued to interact internally in a way specific to
their parental relationships. These individuals communicated that their relationship with
their siblings and their parents were closely related and the relationships affected one
another. As a member of the participants’ pre-college support system that carried over to
college life, and indeed was closely tied to the participants’ parents, the siblings were
very important to the participants’ parental relationship dynamic.

**Finding 3b: The parental relationship is affected by friends.** The second
finding that emerged within this theme was the effect friends of the participants had on
their parental relationships. Several of the participants spoke at length about their friends
and how those relationships impacted their college lives, how their friends were a catalyst for independence from their parental support structures. The participants’ relationships with their friends were closely related to the degree with which they reached out to their parents for help. For instance, both Martha and Sarah described a process of becoming more independent that was closely tied to both their relationships with their parents, as well as to the newly found college social groups they developed. Rory’s independence was closely linked to the social relationships with his friends he had built at college. Jack’s friend relationships may have initially been a manifestation of an attempt at independence that was impacted by academic failure, but they also ended up being a powerful motivator for Jack to do what was necessary to return to the host campus.

Martha described becoming much more independent from her parents throughout her first year, while relying increasingly on her friends for support. When Martha was interviewed, it was at the end of the academic year and she was preparing to move in with her parents over the summer. She was not happy to go because she did not want to leave her friends. She wrote in her journal:

I only have a week left and I’m not feeling happy to be done with school. My first year…was amazing. It couldn’t have been any better. I love the girls I live with, and in fact, all of us are living together next year too. We are like a small family away from our real families.

She called this group her “fambam” and described the relationship with her friends as a “cherry on top” of her college experience. Martha said she was very shy when she came to college, but indicated the support structure of these friends has begun to fulfill the support once provided by her parents:

Actually, [I only talk to my parents] every other month [now] because I feel like they don’t really help me, so I just ask my friends instead. That’s easier…. I
would rather go to the library and ask my friends if they’ve studied [a particular subject].

Martha’s “fambam” played a key support role for her, giving her a structure on which she could rely in times of trouble, such as when her father-like uncle died, and formed a critical part of her college social environment.

Sarah described one of the biggest factors in the changing relationship with her parents as her friends. “I would say that one of the biggest ones was friends… I get lectures from them [her parents] about having different types of friends.” Sarah came from an ethnically homogenous environment and her parents were wary of her friends that were of unfamiliar backgrounds. She talked more about her parents’ attitudes regarding her friends:

So they’ll be like, “Oh, they’re not Asian,” or something. “They’re Mexican.” The stereotypes they hold. And I try to explain to them, [that] they’re not all like that. What you see on TV is a lot different from what you see in real life. It’s different people. It’s not like they’re the same type of people. But there’s been some squabbles there, trying to tell them my friends are okay, and them trying to tell me they’re not.

Sarah indicated her transition to college was daunting. She started attending university fearful of socializing, and later was torn between the need to study and the desire to socialize. She identified her friends and social groups as a key aspect of her burgeoning independence, a pressure valve for the intensity of school:

I’ve grown a lot. I’m a little more independent. And I’m actually a little more outgoing than I was before. I’m actually willing to try new things, and experience college a little bit more than I did when I was a freshman, because when I was a freshman, I was basically afraid of everything: going to parties, hanging out with the wrong people… So I basically locked myself in my room and studied a lot. And now it’s like, I really want to go out because I’m so tired of studying, and need something to be like a study break.
Sarah described herself as being “really sheltered” when she came to school, and very reliant on her parents, but gradually becoming much more autonomous.

Likewise, Rory’s high level of autonomy was tied closely to his social support groups. He described himself as very independent and identified starting a fraternity with his friends as a key part of this autonomy. He initially had difficulties adapting to university academic life. Halfway through his first-year, he worked with his friends to restart a defunct chapter of a national fraternity. This fraternity seemed to reinforce his independence from his parents. Primarily, it was a means of coping with the transition to college:

Coming here was just a totally different experience for me than I was used to. My friends than I met here are 180 degrees different from my friends back home. It’s just a culture shock, is the best way to put it. But now it’s a lot better. I’m more used to the lifestyle up here.

Rory elaborated on the founding of the fraternity:

I was already interested in it coming into college, but I didn’t know much about Greek Life or fraternity life as a whole. A good friend of mine, one of my best friends here, approached me about starting a fraternity. And what we did was basically went from five guys the winter quarter of my freshman year to now, we have over 50. We started from the ground up…. And we’re known across campus. And it was one of the most rewarding things, if not THE most rewarding, about college so far. I’m really proud of that fact, that we were able to do that.

Like Martha’s “fambam,” Rory’s involvement with the fraternity gave him a social structure on which he could rely and stability from an extra-familial source.

Jack experienced both success and failure at college, and these experiences were largely a part of his struggle to balance his friend relationships and his family. Jack relied heavily on his friends and pulled away from his parents, which reversed when he was dismissed and then reached out to his mother for help. While his process for being
readmitted involved his parents becoming actively involved, he was able during this time to stay connected to his school-based social network, ultimately finding a “balance” between his friends and his parents. He identified his social network as a factor in what he regarded as poor behavioral choices contributing to his academic dismissal, a time when he was pushing his parents away, as well as a prime motivating factor for the efforts he undertook to return to the host campus.

Part of the blame was because of [my] lifestyle choices. My definitely being irresponsible, me doing whatever I wanted to do, and kind of neglecting all of my academic priorities. Now being under parental… I mean, not that much parental guidance, but still living under my parents’ roof, I’m definitely a lot more academically focused again. And I know … I’m going to keep the academic focus, because I had my playtime… I don’t need to be involved in that lifestyle again.

Essentially, Jack had to find middle ground between the two influences for his own well-being.

This finding involved the effect of friends on the participants’ parental relationships, specifically, the way in which strong peer-relationships gave the participants an extra-familial support structure on which to rely. These friend relationships appear to be instrumental in the stories – of Martha, Sarah, Rose, Rory, and Jack – and were a source that these individuals used to draw on in developing autonomy.

Results and Interpretations

During this study the picture that developed of the phenomenon of highly involved parents in college proved to be both nuanced and complex. Several results were found, including that the phenomenon of parental involvement is best understood as a part of an individual student’s overall life situation. With that noted, it was also found that parents tend to continue to be important in the lives of students and are closely
related to the student stress and ability to cope. The following section discusses in more detail, and offers interpretations on, these results and links the data back to the review of the literature.

**Student-Parent Relationships are Best Understood as a Part of a Student’s Individual Overall Life Situation**

The degree to which a student relies on his or her parents tends to be a product of the overall life situation of the individual more than it is a defining factor. This study of nine participants represented a wide variety of situations and challenges. Some of these situations were common among the participants: academic difficulty, confusion about life and academic decisions, and social difficulties. Others were uncommon and tended to be personal. The lived experiences of these participants pointed to lives impacted by individual achievement, pre-college preparation, social cues, peer relationships, and future plans – the parental relationship, while important, was only one of many factors that shaped the lives of the participants once in college. As such, analysis focused primarily on parent behavior, such as that performed by Settle and Somers (2010), might be useful in classifying the parents but it offers little information about the student.

For the college dean describing overly sensitive students as “teacups” (Gibbs, 2009), the outward direction of the criticism seems to be on the parents, that a parent’s involvement, or “over-involvement,” is to blame for a student’s fragility. This research suggested a fragile student may not be a product of the parents so much as the result of a wide variety of social, psychological, and environmental factors. Looking at the research of Cullaty (2011), student autonomy was addressed as the goal. However, while being autonomous may be a socio-academic virtue, this research suggests it is only one
component in a student’s success; being autonomous was not always correlated with being successful.

**Parents Who are Highly Involved Tend to Continue to be Important in the Lives of Students**

The way a student tends to understand a highly involved parent or parents is as a persistent, positive influence in their lives. The participants in this study all still indicated their parents were highly involved in their lives. For instance, Rory viewed himself as very independent but still sought his parents’ advice regarding his academic choices. Other participants, such as Donna and Rose, sought parental guidance when they faced academic difficulty. On the other hand, Jack saw himself as somewhat dependent while also acknowledging that when he tried to live completely independently of his parents’ emotional support, he stumbled and was not successful. Based on his experience, Jack discussed finding a balance between his social life and his relationship with his parents. His mother’s help was a part of a coping mechanism that indeed had a positive outcome for Jack, as he returned to the host campus during this study shortly after being academically disqualified.

The vast majority of the study participants – seven out of nine – reported unambiguously positive relationships with their parents. This was in agreement with the research of Kolkhorst et al. (2010) who found most students reported positive parental relationships. One exception, Mickey, indicated numerous issues that appear to be closely tied to his status as an international student and cultural expectations. The other exception, Martha, indicated familial issues not typical of most students. No significant
differences emerged in the ways the first-generation and generation 1.5 students described their interactions with their parents.

College during the life stage of emerging adulthood can have a limiting effect on autonomy and independence from parents. None of the participants displayed what Cohen et al. (2003) described as “fully approximated adult behavior” in all four identified transition-level categories: residential, financial, romantic, and parenting. None of the participants were parents. None of the participants spoke about romantic relationships that were an important part of their lives, although it should be noted this was not a topic about which they were specifically asked. All the participants lived outside the parental household while in school, which is more adult-like, but all but one did so with the financial assistance of their parents. One of the participants, Clara, graduated during this study and moved back home. Jack also moved back home when he was academically dismissed. Amelia indicated her intention, as part of a cultural norm, to move back home when she graduated (if she did not go to graduate school). Donna and Rose both frequently described going home on weekends to be with their parents while Sarah and Martha spoke with their parents on the phone multiple times each week.

Parents are Closely Related to Student Stress and Coping

As a part of a student’s social support system, parents are a significant part of a student’s mechanism for coping. Like all coping mechanisms, as suggested by Lazarus (1993), the involvement of parents could be related to varied outcomes: positive, negative, and all along the spectrum. The discussion and analysis that characterize the literature about this topic tends to emphasize excess and value judgments – overly involved parents, overly dependent students – or to begin from an assumption that such
involvement is “good” or “bad.” This research suggests such a viewpoint is narrow and flawed.

There were numerous instances of coping mechanisms identified by Lazarus (1993) in the descriptions of these participants. Both Clara and Jack presented examples of distancing and escape avoidance. They each described attempts to minimize their problems and also communicated the hope they would resolve the issues on their own. Neither participant reached out for help until they were academically dismissed. As it turned out, these coping tendencies were not effective and it was only when they employed planful problem solving and positive reappraisal – sometimes with the help of their parents – that they were able to move forward. Jack also demonstrated the effect of “mattering” on his well-being and displayed signs of “negative affectation” during the period he was struggling.

Further aligning with Lazarus’ (1993) factors were examples of coping that increased the participants’ independence from their parents. Mickey appeared to be minimizing his problems and represented an example of distancing, although his success with this coping mechanism was not yet apparent. Both Martha and Rory sought social support to facilitate coping and independence from their parents – Martha in the way she learned to rely on her “fambam,” and Rory in his leadership in a fraternity. Indeed, the effectiveness of each of these coping mechanisms were individualized to the student. None were specifically “good” or “bad” in relation to the student’s academic and personal success, but in these situations, some tended toward positive outcomes more than others.
Summary

The predominant themes that emerged regarding the phenomenon of parental involvement in the lives of college students were that parents are an important, yet not exclusive part of these participants’ lives and that the parental relationship is deeply related to the participants’ responses to stress and coping. Most importantly, understanding the individual situations was shown to be essential to understanding the meaning parental involvement had on the participants.

Summary of Findings, Results, and Interpretations

This chapter investigated the evidence gathered from the nine study participants to look at the lived experience of undergraduate college students with parental involvement. Three themes and six findings were identified and discussed. The first theme – parents and academic pressure – yielded two findings: 1a) parental pressure on major choice can affect student academic choices and 1b) parent financial pressure can affect student academic choices. The second theme – parents, stress and coping – yielded two findings: 2a) student stress is closely related to their parental relationships and 2b) not all students are prepared to cope without their parents. The third theme – parents as a part of the social whole – yielded two findings: 3a) the parental relationship is affected by siblings and 3b) the parental relationship is affected by friends. The results and interpretations were discussed. The parental relationship was best understood within the context of the participants’ overall lives; parents tended to be important but were only one aspect of the participants’ lives, and the participants’ stress and coping were closely related to their parental relationships.
Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to better define the phenomenon of parental involvement in college through an investigation of the lived experiences of undergraduate students with high levels of parental involvement. The study was conducted at a large campus in the University of California system and involved nine participants, all of whom indicated their parents had been highly involved in their academic lives. The participants were interviewed and each completed a journal entry; these data were supplemented by field notes taken by the researcher. Through in-depth qualitative coding analysis, the researcher was able to explore what the phenomenon of parental involvement meant to the participants.

This study looks at the lived experience of undergraduate college students with involved parents. It asks the following questions:

This phenomenological study asked three research questions to look at the lived experience of undergraduate college students with involved parents:

- What are the common lived experiences of these students?
- How is the student’s ability to cope with stress affected by parental involvement?
- What meaning does parental involvement have on the ongoing academic and social experience of these students?

The participants’ reflections and responses were explored in relation to these research questions in the conclusions section that follows. The data yielded three themes and six findings. A matrix of the themes and findings may be found in Table 3.
Table 3

Theme and Finding Matrix

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<tr>
<td>Finding</td>
<td>a) Parent pressure on major choice can affect student academic choices.</td>
<td>a) Student stress is closely related to their parental relationships.</td>
<td>a) The parental relationship is affected by siblings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding</td>
<td>b) Parent financial pressure can affect student academic choices.</td>
<td>b) Not all students are prepared to cope without their parents.</td>
<td>b) The parental relationship is affected by friends.</td>
</tr>
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</table>

The results and interpretations were drawn from the findings and tied the qualitative data to the research streams explored in the literature review. The following conclusions of this study are developed from the findings, results, and interpretations and allow the researcher to synthesize his perspective. The conclusions are followed by recommendations for implementing the findings of this research as well as recommendations for further study.

Conclusions

Much of the current literature on parental involvement in the lives of undergraduate college students is either focused on advocacy or does not explore the meaning of the involvement to the student. The purpose of this study was to better define the phenomenon of parental involvement in college through the investigation of the lived experiences of undergraduate students with high levels of parental involvement. This section explores the relation of the gathered data to the three research questions.
What are the common lived experiences of these students?

A common experience demonstrated by this research was that the effect a highly involved parent has on the student is best understood as a part of the student’s overall life situation. College student lives are complex and the student-parent relationship does not exist in a vacuum. Many questions must be answered to understand parental involvement: Is this involvement solicited by the student? Is it welcome? Is it involvement encouraged by the student in a planful attempt to solve a problem? Indeed, a university administrator who attempted to understand a student’s situation based predominantly on a parental interaction would likely be missing key pieces of the puzzle. This is not to say students and administrators should encourage or discourage such behavior – only that parental involvement may be appropriate or inappropriate depending on the situation, and that it is essential the underlying circumstances that prompted the involvement be understood from the student’s perspective.

A second common experience demonstrated by this research was that the development and growth of students is an evolving process. The paradigm of emerging adulthood implies development as a process rather than distinct developmental boundaries. Individuals go from being children to adults neither on their 18th birthday nor when they move away to college. These participants continued to change according to a process during which child-like, dependent behavior tended to evolve into behavior that was more fully adult-like. Those who developed most successfully allowed their parental relationships to grow organically as they themselves matured.

A third common experience was that parents did not cease to be a significant part of a student’s life once the student went to college. Rather, parents tended to be one
aspect of the pre-college support system upon which the participants could continue to rely once in college. Furthermore, this study supported the idea that the transition period of emerging adulthood during which most traditional undergraduate students attend college is fraught with stressful situations and a rapidly changing environment for the student. Oftentimes, parents can and should step in and help.

A fourth common experience demonstrated by this research was that expecting students to conform to an idealized social norm, for instance a highly autonomous scholar on track to be a doctor, was not a valid expectation in most cases. There is a social ideal underlying much of the existing research into parental involvement of the traditional independent student who moves away from home and becomes immediately independent. This is problematic. For one, this ideal assumes students are leaving high school and entering college at a level of academic and social maturity conducive to success. Furthermore, it creates an ideal to which many students are not ready or able to live up. This was reflected in the students whose parents wanted them to major in a “practical” field of study. The careers associated with these fields of study were ones universally accepted as being successful: when finished with school, the student would be a doctor, or an engineer. Such a professional title is easy to understand and aim for, but not as easy to attain or even appropriate for many individuals.

**How is the student’s ability to cope with stress affected by parental involvement?**

The parent relationship was shown to be closely related to the student’s stress and coping. Parents tend to still be an important part of their college-going child’s support structure. As a component of student coping, the effect this involvement has on the student is deeply dependent on the student’s overall situation, the student’s maturity, and
the quality of the student-parent relationship. This implies parents should listen to their college-going students for cues and signs that their relationship with the student needs to evolve or change. However, forcing a level of involvement that is inappropriate to the individual situation tends to be counterproductive to the student’s ability to cope with problems that arise.

This research began with a bias against parental involvement. Anecdotal stories of “overly involved” parents were the driving motivation behind the study of this topic. What became apparent, however, was that this was a far more nuanced and individualized problem than it first appeared. There is an apocryphal story of Douglas MacArthur, then a student, later a celebrated US general, whose mother, it is said, rented an apartment near his West Point dormitory to ensure he was studying (Gibbs, 2009). This is often cited as a humorous example of overly involved parenting. What is often left out of this anecdote is the fact that he graduated valedictorian (James, 1970). How much parenting is too much? Indeed, to assume that one size fits all, so to speak, is to assume all parent-student relationships are the same. What became clear in this research was that the student’s ability to cope involved a complex interplay of the student’s broad situational factors of which parental involvement was only one part. In some cases, highly involved parents created stress for the student, and in other cases, parents helped the student successfully cope. What was consistent was that the child-student relationship tended to remain strong and influential during the college-going emerging adulthood stage, and that problems can arise if a student grows away from his or her parents before the student is ready.
What meaning does parental involvement have on the ongoing academic and social experience of these students?

When students go to college, parents do not cease to matter, however the student-parent relationship tends to evolve and change. This research suggested the participants started at a more vertical parent-child type relationship with their parents and then moved toward a lateral, peer-to-peer type relationship. Of course, these relationships could and did shift and move on the continuum, with the ultimate outcome within these changing relationships tending towards a lateral relationship-type. Furthermore, the traditional view of highly involved parents – as demonstrated by the term “helicopter parents” and modeled as a vertical-type relationship – is that this type of relationship is a cause in and of itself. However, the data gathered in this study indicated that parental involvement was better analyzed as a result of the student’s need rather than an independent cause. Figure 5 presents a visual representation of this relationship-shift.

Note: There may be other types of relationships not encapsulated by the above diagram, but they would be outside the scope of this research.

*Figure 5.* Figure demonstrating the changing nature of the student-parent relationship.
Jack was an instructive example of how an individual could move back and forth on this scale; he ultimately found success not in the lateral position, as would be predicted if this were a linear process, but rather when he discovered a point of balance that was appropriate to his individual situation. Rory demonstrated a lateral relationship with his parents, in large part due to his going to college, an experience his parents never had, and due to his role as a co-parent type figure with his siblings. Donna’s and Rose’s descriptions of the phenomenon were both examples of individuals moving slowly from the vertical to lateral-type relationships with their parents. The data suggest a swift shift from vertical to lateral would likely have been devastating for their development. Strong peer relationships and academic success both appeared to be correlated with a move toward the lateral; while peer detachment, academic difficulty, and significant stress appeared to be correlated with a move toward the vertical.

This research suggests the level of parental involvement is an outcome more than it is a cause. It is a product of the quality of the student-parent relationship, of the student’s need for a guide and advocate, of the degree to which he or she looks to pre-college support systems for support during college, and of the nature of the individual student situations. Simply saying parental involvement is “good” or “bad” misses the point. It is important college administrators and faculty recognize that parents frequently become involved when students need assistance, and that in many cases both students and parents regard this involvement as effective. Indeed, in the cases of academic dismissal experienced by Jack and Clara, parental involvement was a necessary component for their return to student status. Finally, in the cases of Donna, Rose, and
Amelia, it was a source of support they needed as a part of their individual
development as emerging adults.

**Recommendations**

Surely, universities want to support student academic success. Promoting
autonomy is a part of that success, but it is only a part. University administrators and
faculty need to be trained to view a parent’s involvement in the context of the student’s
overall life situation. While it may be appropriate to encourage or discourage
involvement in certain situations, there is not a catchall answer. A student who is
academically dismissed, dropped for non-payment, failing classes, or even just having
trouble making an academic decision, may be looking for help and guidance in a way
appropriate to their situation. Administrators need to recognize problems may arise when
the main element of a student’s pre-college support system upon which they are able to
continue to rely once in college – their parents – has become a taboo.

**Recommendations for Action**

Below are four specific recommendations to university administrators:

1) Implement training programs to educate staff about how parental
involvement needs to be understood in the context of a student’s
overall life situation. Introduce the life-stage concept of emerging
adulthood in a way that emphasizes the transition *process* to fully-
fledged adulthood. The expectation that students entering college are
instant adults is unrealistic.

2) Implement policies and procedures that clearly explain how to handle
parental interaction. These policies and procedures need to define the
legal obligations of the staff member for preserving student privacy
while also providing guidance for making such interactions as
productive as possible for each individual student’s success. Providing
structure for this interaction is key.

3) Review policies and procedures to determine if they presently
introduce bias regarding parental involvement. This review should
examine how these policies could affect a student who is having a
difficult time and may be looking to their parents as an appropriate
source of support. Redevelop these policies to emphasize the goal of
student success over the promotion of student autonomy.

4) Emphasize and strengthen advising and counseling resources available
to students in order to assist them in making difficult academic
decisions. Such resources encourage student autonomy by providing a
clear support structure should the student wish to make decisions
independently from their parents.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

Parental involvement in the lives of college students has been an understudied
phenomenon. The associated research leaves plenty of opportunities for further
investigation. Below are four recommendations for further research:

1) With the phenomenon of parental involvement brought into sharper
focus, an opportunity exists for grounded research to formulate a
formal theory about this topic.
2) Future research needs to include the parents’ perspectives. How do they feel about such involvement? What are their perspectives on what is happening?

3) Research focused on the psychological impact of parental involvement on college students conducted within the structure of the emerging adulthood framework would add to the depth of information for college administrators.

4) Students with poor or toxic parental relationships may be underrepresented by this study. Further research should be done focusing on these students.

**Overall Summary**

When this research began, the intention was to study “overly” involved parents and the limiting effect such parents had on college students. What became apparent through this exploration was that the entire concept of being “overly” involved, or not involved enough, was based on outdated views of a parent-to-adult shift that did not involve the intermediary stage of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Furstenburg, 2000). Furthermore, identifying parental involvement as a *cause*, in and of itself, was not necessarily the best way to understand how the involvement was related to the students and their situations.

It is necessary to understand how a parent’s involvement relates to what each student needs for their individual situation. The latent expectation that parents of college students need to be hands-off, even when their child is having a difficult time, is not wholly appropriate for today’s 18- to 25-year-old college student. Surely, promoting
autonomy is a socio-academic aim that makes sense when preparing students for the post-college workforce, but it also can engender a dangerous prejudice with the potential of pressuring students into a place for which they are not ready – and not able to get the help that they need.

There exists a dissonance between those who would encourage parental involvement and those who would advocate against it. This is caused by a divergence between what is believed will happen to the student in the absence of the parental guiding hand. There is a concept in political philosophy called “the state of nature,” meaning the natural state of society without the guiding hand of government. Some think that in nature’s natural state, society will degenerate into chaos – that, to paraphrase Thomas Hobbes (1997), life will be nasty, brutish, and short. Others believe government is needlessly restrictive and that in society’s natural state, people will thrive. Similarly, what is the “natural” state of a student, or, more specifically, the emerging adult? In the absence of parents, will they tend to thrive, or will their academic careers be nasty, brutish, and short?

It is tempting to get dogmatic on this question. A university administrator or instructor who works with students will undoubtedly be in contact at some point with a parent. Parents can be difficult to work with, and oftentimes seem to be the cause of a fragile student’s distress. And surely, there are some toxic and unhealthy relationships between parents and their college-going children. But it is essential to remember that there is no one “natural” student-state, as tempting as it would be to assign one. Some students are perfectly ready to function independently away from their parents, some are woefully unprepared, and a great number of students are somewhere in the middle. Over-
simplifying this issue – naming the parents as “helicopter parents” and dismissing them – is counter-productive. Parental relationships are certainly important in the lives of college students, but the student-parent relationship dynamic is one part of the student’s broader academic and life experience that needs to be understood by university administrators.
List of References


Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Tell me who you are.
   a. Where are you from?
   b. How old are you?
   c. What is your ethnicity?
   d. What is your class level?
   e. What is your major?
   f. Did you come to XXXXX as a Freshman?

2. Tell me about your parents’ household.
   a. What are your parents’ professions?
   b. Are you the first person in your family to go to college?
   c. Are your parents still together?
   d. Tell me about your siblings, if you have any.
   e. How do you feel around your parents?

3. What have you experienced in terms of your parents being involved or intervening in your academic career?
   a. What was the nature of your parents’ involvement?
   b. What was going on in your life at the time?
   c. How do you feel about their involvement?
   d. Did you ask them to become involved?
   e. Do you feel that their involvement has been helpful?
   f. How often do you speak with your parents? How do you communicate?
   g. How do your parents feel about your major?

4. What has been your experience at XXXXX
   a. How often do you speak with academic advisors?
   b. What have been your greatest challenges?
   c. Are you planning on pursuing post-baccalaureate or graduate study after completing your degree at XXXXX?
   d. Is there anything else about you I should know to understand your perspective?

5. What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences regarding your parents’ involvement?

6. Tell me about the person you are now in relation to when you began at XXXXX?
   a. How has your relationship with your parents evolved since you became a student?
   b. What positive changes, if any, have occurred in your life since this situation?
   c. What negative changes, if any, have occurred in your life since this situation?
Is there anything that you might not have thought about that occurred to you during the interview? Is there anything you would like to ask me?
Journal Question

Describe your experience as an undergraduate student at XXXXX? How have your parents supported, intervened, or been involved in your academic experience? Please be as detailed as possible.
Appendix B: Advertisement Materials

Email Advertisement

DREXEL UNIVERSITY DOCTORAL STUDY

Study on Parental Involvement and the Undergraduate College Student Experience

If you answer YES to these questions, you may qualify to participate:

• Are you an undergraduate student attending XXXXX?
• Are your parents involved in your academic career?
• Would you like to tell your story and have your voice heard?
• Are you 18 years of age or older?

Undergraduate students whose parents have intervened on their behalf may be eligible for this study.

The purpose of this research is to investigate the relatively recent phenomenon of active parental involvement among college students. Benefits include adding your voice to an emerging area of research. Participants will receive a gift card for their participation.

This study is being conducted on the XXXXX campus for a dissertation study at Drexel University by doctoral candidate David Garrison, who is a member of Drexel University. Contact David Garrison at XXX@drexel.edu or (XXX) XXX-XXXX for more information.
Recruiting Volunteers for a Research Study

Study on Parental Involvement and the Undergraduate College Student Experience

If you answer YES to these questions, you may qualify to participate:

- Are you an undergraduate student attending [redacted]?
- Are your parents involved in your academic career?
- Would you like to tell your story and have your voice heard?
- Are you 18 years of age or older?

Undergraduate students whose parents have intervened on their behalf maybe eligible for this study.

The purpose of this research is to investigate the relatively recent phenomenon of active parental involvement among college students. Benefits include adding your voice to an emerging area of research. Participants will receive a gift card for their participation.

This study is being conducted on the [redacted] campus for a dissertation study at Drexel University by doctoral candidate David Garrison.

Contact David Garrison at [redacted] or [redacted] for more information.

This research is being conducted by a researcher who is a member of Drexel University.
Appendix C: Consent Form

DREXEL UNIVERSITY
CONSENT TO TAKE PART IN A RESEARCH STUDY

1. SUBJECT NAME: ________________________________

2. TITLE OF RESEARCH: Parental Involvement and the Undergraduate Student Experience

3. INVESTIGATORS: Kathy Geller (principal investigator)
                   David Garrison (co-investigator)

4. RESEARCH ENTITY: This research study is being done by Drexel University.

5. CONSENTING FOR THE RESEARCH STUDY: This is a long and an important document. If you sign it, you will be authorizing Drexel University and its researchers to perform research studies on you. You should take your time and carefully read it. You can also take a copy of this consent form to discuss it with your family member, physician, attorney or anyone else you would like before you sign it. Do not sign it unless you are comfortable in participating in this study.

6. PURPOSE OF RESEARCH: You are being asked to participate in a research study being conducted. The purpose of this study is to investigate how parental involvement in the lives of undergraduate college students impacts the undergraduate college experience. The researcher will be attempting to construct a theory to explain such involvement.

   You have been asked to take part in this research because you are an undergraduate student who has indicated that your parent or parents have intervened on your behalf with the university. You may be asked to participate in follow-up interviews as further information is gathered and more questions arise.

   You must be 18 years or older to participate in this study.

7. PROCEDURES AND DURATION: You understand that the following experimental procedures will be performed on you in this study:
   a) You will initially be asked to complete a journal entry. The requested length of this entry will be approximately one page, written by hand if possible. You will be asked to write about your experience as a student and how the involvement of your parent(s) has affected that experience.
   b) You will be asked to participate in an interview. The target length of this interview will be approximately one-hour. The interview will be guided by questions regarding your experience as a student and how the involvement of your parent(s) has affected that experience

Subject Initials ________
c) You may be asked to participate in follow-up interviews of variable length but no longer than one hour. This study protocol involves the adjustment of interview questions as the study progresses to adapt to the information being gathered.

d) As such, as more interviews are conducted and the researcher gains new information and insight, you may be asked to participate in follow-up interviews to answer new questions that arise.

8. RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS/CONSTRAINTS: Minimal risk is associated with participation in this study. The primary risk, of the privacy of participants, is being addressed in the way that the data is gathered and stored. The interviews will not be conducted anonymously because of the possible need to conduct follow-up interviews. Only the researcher conducting the interviews, David Garrison, will have access to the identifying information of the participants, and this information will be kept separate from the interview data in a locked desk at the researcher’s home. After data collection has been completed the identifying information will be destroyed.

9. UNFORESEEN RISKS: Participation in this study may involve unforeseen risks. There may be side effects, which are unknown at this time. If unforeseen risks are seen, they will be reported to the Office of Regulatory Research Compliance.

10. BENEFITS: There may be no direct benefits to you from participating in this study. This study will provide potential societal benefits by contributing to a growing body of research in the field of parental involvement in the lives of their college students.

11. ALTERNATIVE PROCEDURES/TREATMENT: This is not a treatment study. Your alternative is not to participate in this study.

12. REASONS FOR REMOVAL FROM STUDY: You may be required to stop this study before the end for any of the following reasons:

   a) If all or part of this study is discontinued for any reason by the sponsor, investigator, university authorities, or government agencies; or
   b) Other reasons, including new information available to the investigator or harmful unforeseen reactions experienced by the subject of other subjects in this study.

13. VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION: Participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to be in the study or you may stop at any time without the loss of the care benefits to which you are entitled. However, you will be expected to follow the instructions provided by the research staff in order to ensure your safety.

14. COMPENSATION FOR PARTICIPATION: You will be given a $10 gift card one time for participation in this study. You will be given the gift card after the commencement of the first interview, regardless of whether you complete the interview or decide to withdraw.
15. RESPONSIBILITY FOR COST: There is no cost to you for participating in this study.

16. CONFIDENTIALITY AND PRIVACY: In any publication or presentation of research results, your identity will be kept confidential, but there is a possibility that records that identify you may be inspected by authorized individuals, the institutional review board (IRB), or employees conducting peer review activities. You consent to such inspections and to the copying of excerpts of your records, if required by any of these representatives.

Please be aware that confidentiality may need to be broken because of legal reporting requirements if research discloses reportable events, or if your health is determined to be at risk.

17. NEW INFORMATION: If new information becomes known that will affect you or might change your decision to be in this study, you will be informed by the investigator.

18. QUESTIONS: If you have any questions about this study or your participation in this study, or if at any time you feel you have experienced a research-related injury or a reaction to the study medication, contact:

Dr. Kathy Geller at telephone no. (916) 213-2790

If you have questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact:

Drexel University College of Medicine
Office of Regulatory Compliance
1601 Cherry Street
3 Parkway Building
Mail Stop 10-444
Philadelphia PA 19102
Telephone: 215-255-7857

Do not sign this consent form unless you have had a chance to ask questions and have received satisfactory answers to all of your questions.

If you agree to participate in this study, you will receive a signed and dated copy of this consent form for your records.
19. CONSENT

- I have been informed of the reasons for this study.
- I have had the study explained to me.
- I have had all of my questions answered to my satisfaction.
- I have carefully read this consent form, have initialed each page, and have received a signed copy.

I freely consent to participate in this research study.

I authorize the use and disclosure of my personal health information as explained in this consent form.

Subject or Legally Authorized Representative

Date

Investigator or Individual Obtaining this Consent

Date

List of Individuals Authorized to Obtain Consent

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Day Phone #</th>
<th>24 Hr Phone #</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>David Garrison</td>
<td>Doctoral Researcher</td>
<td></td>
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Subject Initials
Appendix D: Coding Tables

Code frequency list. Occurrence frequencies of the 30 most commonly occurring codes. This includes coding data from the interviews and the participant journals.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th># Code</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th># Code</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Parent Relationship (PR)</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>15. Pre-UC Enrollment</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Parental-Involvement</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>15. Money</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Transition</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>18. Parental-Education</td>
<td>23</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Siblings</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>20. Future-Career</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Autonomy</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>21. Parental-Care</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Personal-Info</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>23. Graduate-School</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Coping</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>24. Time</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Stress</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>24. Work</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Friends</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>27. Technology</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Parental-Care</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>29. Social</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Code Co-occurrence Table illustrating the co-occurrences of the 30 most commonly occurring codes (interview data only). Co-occurrence table generated using Dedoose Analysis software (http://www.dedoose.com).