

A Reliable Sounding Board: Parent Involvement in Students' Academic and Career Decision Making

Andrew N. Simmons, Brown University

With concern over parental involvement in students' academic lives on the rise, research is needed to provide guidance for advisors and parents. In this article, student-parent interactions about academic and career decisions are examined. Data come from the Brown University Office of Institutional Research and semi-structured interviews with students at Brown University. In the interviews, students reported that they rely on their parents for general support and as a source of advice about academic and career decisions. These findings are consistent with institutional data and prior research. Analysis of the findings draws on attachment theory and on Baxter Magolda's self-authorship model of adult development. Implications for advising practice as well as suggestions for fostering constructive parent involvement are addressed.

KEY WORDS: child development theory, helicopter parents, self-authorship, student perceptions

Relative Emphasis: research, theory, practice

Introduction

Media accounts and the experience of administrators, faculty members, and other college and university personnel all suggest an increase in the level of concern about parent involvement in their children's undergraduate education. The trend is not a recent one; Horowitz (1987), for example, noted that starting in the early 1980s students "involved their parents in a new set of decisions. Mother and father not only monitor grades; they help choose majors and even courses." In addition, students began to "assume their parents' cost-accounting perspective and demand of courses a return on the financial investment" (p. 272). More recent examples include parents asking to meet with academic advisors to choose courses for their children (Watson, 2005). Phillips and North (2005) recounted the incident of a mother who arrived on campus with an interior decorator for her child's dorm room. One student affairs dean has said that "a more appropriate label for my field has become 'family affairs'" rather than "student affairs" because of the large number of parent phone calls she receives (Merriman, 2007, p. B20). Intrusive college parenting is so prevalent that it has become known as

"helicopter parenting" ("In Defense of 'Copter' Parents," 2005; Phillips & North, 2005; Reimer, 2005; Shellenbarger, 2005; Watson, 2005).

Yet the 2007 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) has found that students who rely on their parents for assistance during college report being more satisfied with their undergraduate experience and more engaged with their academic work (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2007, pp. 24–25). While intrusive helicopter parenting is seen as counterproductive by faculty members as well as student and academic affairs personnel, evidence shows that some level of parental involvement can aid in a student's development in college. With educators increasingly concerned about intrusive parents on the one hand, and research showing the important role of parents on the other, further study is needed to provide guidance for educational practice and to inform parents about appropriate ways to support their children's college experience. In particular, advisors could benefit from research that illuminates the nature of parental involvement in academic and career decision making.

In this article I report on findings from a small-scale qualitative research study that I conducted with students at Brown University. My goal has been to develop an understanding of how students rely on their parents in the process of academic and career decision making during college. The research questions that guided this work are as follow:

1. What role do parents play in their students' academic decision making?
2. How do parents influence their children's thinking about the connection between college academic work and career goals?

Prior Research

Psychological research on attachment theory has been directed toward the nature of the parent-child relationship in late adolescence and therefore forms an important theoretical pillar for defining and understanding parental involvement with undergraduates. Bowlby (1988) found that children who have developed a strong emotional attachment to parents are more confident about exploring the world further from home in late adolescence. According to Bowlby, this secure base is

therefore imperative if college students are to be successful socially and academically. “The central feature of my concept of parenting,” wrote Bowlby, is

the provision by both parents of a secure base from which a child or an adolescent can make sorties into the outside world and to which he can return knowing for sure that he will be welcomed when he gets there, nourished physically and emotionally, comforted if distressed, reassured if frightened. In essence this role is one of being available, ready to respond when called upon to encourage and perhaps assist, but to intervene actively only when clearly necessary. (p. 11)

Hence, children and young adults need the security of stable, loving parents who are there for them when needed. If such a secure base is established, children and young adults feel more confident about independently exploring the world.

Attachment theory has been applied to the particular case of college students and their parents in the literature. Lapsley, Rice, and Fitzgerald (1990), for example, found that attachment is closely related to identity development in both first-year college students and those in their final year of study. They further found a link between adjustment to college and attachment to parents. Cutrona, Cole, Colangelo, Assouline, and Russell (1994, p. 376) concluded that attachment to parents is a “significant predictor of college grade point average in two independent samples.”

Scholars of attachment theory have also looked closely at the differences between college men and women in their quality and intensity of attachment to parents (Berman & Sperling, 1991; Kenny & Donaldson, 1992; Samuolis, Layburn, & Schiaffino, 2001; Sorokou & Weissbrod, 2005; Valery & O’Connor, 1997). Kenny and Perez (1996) noted that attachment theory is just as applicable in the case of minority college-student adjustment as it is for White college students. Schwartz and Buboltz (2004) found that the secure base parents form for their children in college is a complex relationship that may include conflict and reduced trust, but that this situation also can help students establish attitudes and values independent of their parents. Hence, while attachment theory contradicts earlier psychological models of adolescence that stressed separation and individuation (e.g., Erikson, 1968), it nevertheless accounts for tension in the parent-child relationship that can develop as college students become more independent. As long as parents continue to provide a secure base, even in

times of conflict, students can be confident and successful learners. Moreover, as Kenny and Rice (1995, p. 448) noted, college advisors, faculty members, and administrators should “be concerned with helping students negotiate more adaptive parental relationships and strive for balance between connectedness and individuation” because “theory suggests that student autonomy and self-reliance will be enhanced if a secure base of support is available.”

Another important theoretical perspective related to the college student-parent relationship comes from the work of Baxter Magolda. In particular, Baxter Magolda’s (1999, 2001) longitudinal study of the identity development of college graduates show how individuals struggle toward self-authorship, which is the capacity to live within the context of norms and expectations, whether defined by family, peers, or culture in general, without being wholly defined by them. By achieving *self-authorship*, individuals become better able to make decisions independently and to be more comfortable with their sense of self even in the face of different or contradictory values and ideas while being tolerant and accepting of such differences. The notion of self-authorship was first defined by Kegan (1994), who posited different orders of mind through which individuals become increasingly able to understand and differentiate between external and self-defined expectations:

As Kegan explained, “liberating ourselves from that in which we are embedded, making what was subject into object so that we can ‘have it’ rather than be ‘had by it’—this is the most powerful way I know to conceptualize the growth of the mind.” Kegan clearly stated that his use of the word *mind* does not refer to cognition alone but rather to the capacity of individuals to construct and organize meaning in their thinking, feeling, and relating to self and others. (Baxter Magolda, 1999, p. 631)

From her longitudinal study, Baxter Magolda developed a model in which individuals progress toward self-authorship. At the lowest level, the individual makes meaning and comes to decisions by following formulas. That is, one’s self-definition is the derivative of others’ expectations, and knowledge claims are accepted as unchallenged fact. Individuals in the crossroads have begun to develop their own values and no longer accept facts at face value, but have not yet developed the ability to see one’s own views and aspirations as distinct from others’ expectations. As they become the authors of

their own lives, people are able to set their own goals without having them wholly defined by external forces and they are able to evaluate ideas critically and based on evidence. Individuals who have reached this stage have developed complex ways of understanding themselves and the world around them. They also see themselves as living interdependently rather than in isolation from others, yet they retain the ability to assert their own sense of self (Baxter Magolda, 2001, p. 40).

Baxter Magolda concluded that undergraduate institutions often miss the opportunity to systematically foster self-authorship. She observed that the individuals in her sample did not achieve self-authorship in a serious way until years after they had left college. For the members of the group that Baxter Magolda studied, internal identity development after college happened in reaction to “discontent and a struggle to find another way, often guided by friends and colleagues who were also trying to find direction for their lifelong growth” (1999, p. 641). College, according to Baxter Magolda, is “equally critical for learning and for the evolution of internal voices” (1999, p. 641).

However, for college to create an environment conducive to developing self-authorship, individuals within and without must also be “good company for the journey” (Baxter Magolda, 2001, p. 190). In other words, young adults need individuals to provide “guidance and support to develop new ways of making meaning” (p. 190). While Baxter Magolda does not cite parents as either hindrance or helper in moving their young adult offspring toward self-authorship, the implication for the current study is that parents as well as faculty members and administrators need to be good company on the journey. Her work has inspired further scholarship showing that parents can be much more influential in women’s career choices than experts on campus such as career counselors and faculty members (Creamer & Laughlin, 2005); however, they looked specifically at women’s career decisions. Further study that includes men is needed to understand more thoroughly the importance of parents in students’ academic and career decision making.

Method

Data for this study are derived from 17 semi-structured interviews that I conducted with students at Brown University. Students in their senior year were selected for the sample because they hold the greatest potential for being “information rich cases” (Patton, 1990, p. 169). That is, because they have the longest experience in college they are

the most likely individuals to yield rich and useful data for the study.

The selection of individuals for the study was based on the idea of maximum variation sampling (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, pp. 233–34; Patton, 1990, p. 172). This means that individuals were selected with the goal of creating a heterogeneous sample. Such sampling works well for small-scale studies such as this one because “any common patterns that emerge from great variation are of particular interest and value in capturing the core experiences and central, shared aspects” of the phenomenon under study (Patton, 1990, p. 172). Because the study was focused on academic and career goals, students were recruited primarily for heterogeneity of interests, and I solicited volunteers from academic departments in the sciences and humanities. To account for possible gender and cultural differences in parent-student relationships, I endeavored to build a sample with roughly even numbers of men and women and to include students from ethnic minority groups. Students were recruited through the use of academic department E-mail lists as well as an E-mail list for students from minority ethnic groups. Students who volunteered completed a questionnaire in which they were asked about their academic areas of concentration as well as how they identified themselves across a number of demographic factors. As Table 1 below shows, the sample included eight men and nine women. Two were first-generation college students and five were the children of immigrants to the United States. Eleven participants were White and the remainder came from various minority groups. Table 2 shows that students came largely from the biological and social sciences.

To facilitate discussion about the research questions, I developed an interview protocol (see Appendix). The questions in the protocol are mostly open ended and designed to generate discussion about how students felt supported by their parents during college. In addition, the protocol questions prompted students to talk about how they believed their relationship with their parents changed during college, and how they perceived their interactions with parents around decision making and problem solving.

Some questions were also asked for background information about participants’ families. In most cases, the protocol was not followed strictly during interviews. Rather, it served as a general framework for guiding the discussion about the research questions. Each of the 17 interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed. To maintain confidentiality, each participant has been given a pseudonym.

Table 1 Self-identified demographic characteristics of the sample, *N* = 17

Characteristic	Number
Male	8
Female	9
First generation	2
Immigrant parents	5
White	11
Black	1
Indo-guyanese	1
Asian	2
Mixed race	1

Table 2 Areas of academic concentration

Area of Academic Concentration	Number with Concentration
Biosciences	8
Engineering	1
Humanities	2
Social Sciences	11

Note. Three students were completing two concentrations; one student was completing three concentrations.

The interview transcriptions were analyzed using grounded theory methodology. The trustworthiness of this study (Golafshani, 2003; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) has been assured through the use of negative case analysis and member checks. In addition, I used institutional data to triangulate the findings from this study.

Results

Students in the sample reported that their parents play an important part in supporting their college education. In particular, they reported that their parents are most helpful, not by mandating particular academic or career choices, but by helping to guide students' decision-making process. Moreover, these students describe their parents as a major source of support, one that they rely upon for general guidance when needed.

Parents, as described by students in this study, play a role in framing the purpose of their children's undergraduate education. While students say that they have latitude in their academic and career choices, they nevertheless believe that their parents want them to be directed toward well-defined and often lucrative career paths. Many of the students say that their own goals are congruent with those of their parents, though some acknowledge that it

is difficult to parse their own objectives from those of their parents.

Reliable Advisors

Students describe their parents as generally available and supportive when needed. They report that their parents listen to their problems and provide advice. Katherine, for example, said that her parents are her most trusted advisors, even more so than her closest friends:

I have three very close friends that I met freshman year and we either live together or very close by. But I would say that I feel comfortable sharing more with my parents due to our history, obviously, our relationship. I definitely on a day-to-day basis process things with them as well.

Tanya echoes a number of other students in this sample by describing the sounding-board role that her parents play in her life. According to Tanya, her parents' availability to listen to her and provide the perspective of more experienced adults has been vital to her well-being in college.

I think their role has often been to guide me in my process of self-discovery and kind of just be a sounding board and just be examples of, look, we're adults, we got through it, you know, our lives aren't perfect, but we've made our way. Not in a condescending way, like, when I was a kid I walked five miles in the snow—but more in a model and mentor kind of fashion.

Some students said that their parents provided vital support during times of personal crisis. Rita described her parents as trustworthy and nonjudgmental confidants when she was being treated for depression during her junior year:

In the last year or so I had a pretty tough struggle with depression. And I think that was sort of unique but it was not unique because I know a lot of students who were in some kind of funk or who were seriously depressed.... It was good to talk to my parents and sort of have them tell me it would be okay. I don't know, them being my parents, I guess they were just good confidants because they know me well.... I didn't feel like they would judge me in any way, or anything like that.

The range of issues with which students were willing to talk with their parents varied. For example, while Rita, Katherine, and Tanya reported feel-

ing comfortable discussing both personal and academic matters with their parents, Josh mostly consulted with his mother and father about matters related to his academic work and career goals.

I don't involve my parents too much in my personal life. I'll tell them some things when I'm having a particularly difficult time.... You know, there have been times during my experience here when I was really upset about something and it was really getting to me, nothing extremely serious, but, you know, just something that had been eating away at me a little bit. In that case I'll open up to them a little bit more.

When Josh experienced some personal problems, he went to psychological services on campus rather than talking to his parents or friends about it. This was mainly because he did not want his parents to worry about him.

I guess part of the consideration was, when I get my parents too involved in that type of emotional stuff, they get very worried about me.... You know, it'll just be this constant source of anxiety if I tell them. And then, every future conversation, or at least for a while in the future, the conversation would be framed in the context of how I'm doing in relation to that isolated period in my life even though it may be in the past. I don't want to have to deal with that for the rest of the next couple of months.

Students who come from minority or foreign cultures find their parents most helpful in maintaining their connection with home. This is particularly true for Carlos, a Mexican-American from South Texas, and Delia, who describes herself as Afro-Caribbean and is from Jamaica. According to Delia,

Just having that contact back home sort of pulled me back on a weekly basis. And going back home definitely helps a lot. Every time I go back home I feel re-centered. Because I come here with all these successful people and it's easy to get caught up and forget what the rest of the world is like. And I go back home and I'm like, why am I worried about all these crazy smart people who are around me? The rest of the world, you know, it's good that I'm here; it's good enough for them that I'm here and not the best here or anything like that. So that's definitely a re-centering experience.

Similarly, Carlos said that his parents are most

supportive by keeping him connected with his home. Though he believes they are not as helpful with academic support, they still play a vital role in his life:

I would say that they are a good support, but I would make sure that I'm not saying they're an academic support. They're more for family support. Just to hear it from another voice, you know? To remind myself of the connection that I do have back home. So they're there for that primary support also.... You know, this is your son calling; let's just talk and smile and do some jokes and laugh, and that's cool because I need that.

Academic and Career Decisions

Just as many of these students said that they rely on their parents for general support, they also reported involving parents in decisions about academic and career goals. Ari, for example, said that he talks to his parents about his major academic and career decisions, but noted that he seeks their advice only after he has made his own decision. Their role, as he described it, is to help him brainstorm ideas and develop networks as part of his job search.

A lot of times, the way it works I would make the first decision and they would support me the rest of the way. So for example, I'm still thinking about law school or the doctorate in history. But I decided in the fall that based upon my schedule there was no way I was going to be able to take a prep course and take the LSAT. And so because of that, not only did I not have time to take that, which would pretty much preclude me from applying to law school this year, but I also kind of realized that I wasn't ready to make the decision between those two yet. And so I decided that I was going to take a year or two off. And so since then they've been helping to find things for me to do during those years off, but I kind of made the initial decision. And it was the same thing when I was originally picking my thesis. I talked to my dad about various ideas he might have, like when I was bouncing things off of him I said, "I'm kind of thinking of this, do you know anything about it?" And then once I got a more concrete idea I said to him, "What do you know about this?"

Tanya particularly values her parents' help with major decision making because she says that she has trouble making decisions. Her parents' role, accord-

ing to Tanya, is not to tell her what decision to make, but rather to guide her decision-making process.

Well, I'm really bad at decisions! It causes me a lot of anxiety and I feel like I've only gotten worse since I've gotten to college.... And I think my parents have tried to talk me through the different options and not really push me one way or another unless they sense me going one way or another.... I think the way that I process things and the way that I make decisions is through talking to people, but I think that it's less about them giving me advice and more about me just needing to talk things out in order to make decisions.

In some cases, students reported that the advisory relationship they have with their parents is important enough that they want to at least run decisions by parents before committing to something, even when the student describes him or herself as an independent decision maker. Todd noted that he likes to talk to his parents before making any major decision:

So, would I sign on the dotted line before I talk to them? No. I always want their opinion; I always want their advice. I always want feedback on my own internal monologue. And it's like having a trusted second opinion of yourself. It's like, I know what I'm thinking. If I'm making a good choice I should be able to explain it to the people who know me the best. My parents are always a great sounding board for that.

Students said that the quality and degree of parental advice varies depending upon experience, ethnic or class background, and personal style. Rebecca, for example, noted that neither of her parents graduated from college. Her father spent some time in college, so she recognizes that he has a cursory understanding of student life, but she believes that neither he nor her mother can provide well-informed advice about college.

I think my dad has a decent awareness of what my life is like but not what my academic life is like. And my mom is just sort of like, "Oh really? It's like that? Oh, I didn't think it was like that." And I'm like, "Yes it is!" So...my parents have never helped me to make a decision about a class to take or, I mean, like, what extracurricular activities to get involved in, or what jobs to pursue and look for....

However, even when students perceive that their parents are unable to give advice on academic or career

matters, they nevertheless want to keep them informed about their work. As Adita noted:

I think I value the opinion at Brown more than my parents can offer me because they just couldn't understand where I was coming from when I was talking about development economics.... Just trying to give them a sense of what I do is key. It's not about asking them for advice because they really wouldn't know what to tell you, but it's good for them to stay in the loop.

Perception of Acceptable Academic Pursuits

Even as students describe their parents as generally supportive, many nevertheless believe their parents would disagree with academic choices that do not lead into familiar or elite, lucrative career paths. Rita, for example, has a great interest in theater but chose concentrations in history and education studies with the goal of going into teaching. "I guess in some ways," she explained, "if I had decided to just major in theater my parents might have been a little concerned because of stereotypical notions of that not leading to a good income."

Chloe, who at the time of this study had been accepted to enter medical school, noted that her parents have given her significant autonomy in her academic choices. However, she believes that her parents would have given only tepid support to a path of study that lacked a clear career trajectory.

You can't pick a fluffy major. Like, my cousin is a philosophy major, and that's definitely made fun of behind his back.... In their mind, though, you pick a degree that will ensure a paycheck. And if you don't know what to do with philosophy—if you're going to be a professor they're fine with it—but if you think that you can graduate undergrad and not go any further with something like a history degree or something like that.... I could see my parents questioning me if I had done that.

Joseph is an immigrant from a developing country and attended an urban public high school in the United States. He is an engineering concentrator (Brown University uses the term *concentration* instead of *major*) with the goal of attending medical school. He says that in his home country studying a nontechnical subject would not be valued and that his parents have the same attitude:

I didn't see myself ever going along the humanities track. Even if I was living in my former country, and I guess my parents, too, even if I

said I wanted to do humanities they, too, would disagree. . . . Because they don't feel that it's productive at all. And the mentality, I guess, in my former country, is that you have to do something with skills.

Furthermore, Joseph says that his parents and extended family expect him to have some kind of career focus. His parents "would not be very pleased" if he were undecided about a career path by his senior year of college.

Growing up with my parents, by this time you would have figured it out! Because they would be on top of you. And many times when I go home, you know, like relatives would ask, "What are you doing? Tell me about it." There's always that prompt, you have to think about it.

An important caveat to this finding is that most of the students in this sample do not articulate any fear that their parents will discontinue emotional or material support if they choose a path contrary to the one they would prefer that their children take. Adita, for example, believes that her parents would be very supportive if she were completely undecided about her career goals. "They would be helpful with contacts trying to get you to think through things. I mean they would never abandon me!" Adita is planning to get some work experience before going on for her advanced degree. Her father, in particular, does not fully agree with this plan because in his home country, India, all schooling is typically completed before a young adult enters the workforce. Adita believes that after explaining her plans to him, her father will accept her choice.

You just keep trying to explain to them that work experience is valued in this country. So it's just a process of educating them, and talking to them more and more and even showing them examples of other people that have done it and how well they've fared by taking time off, and it's not even taking time off! I'm working next year.

In stark exception to the families that show unconditional support of their children's choices, Carlos's father, vexed by the idea that his son has chosen a career in education over one in medicine, has threatened to cut off funding for his college education.

When my mom and my dad talk about my education in their own little sphere without me, my mom will come and report back. [She

says], "Your dad said he's not going to pay for your education at Brown any more because you want to be a teacher. . . ." So I'll go to my dad and take her with me. I'll say to him, "She said you're not going to pay for my college any more. Is that true? If so, I'll go get a loan and work it out with a bank." And my dad is like, "I didn't say that." And then they'll start fighting. And then I'll say, "Tell me straight: Are you going to help me out or not with my final year at Brown?" And my dad said, "yes," that he made a promise to himself that when I got to college he'll pay for whatever he has to pay for. So I took his word. And that's why I got a grant to pay for my own graduate school experience because I'm not going to deal with their bickering any more. . . . But, yeah, they definitely have threatened to pull the plug! It's scary sometimes.

Not all of the students perceive their parents as guiding them toward a clear and lucrative career path. Tanya reported that her parents have not pressured her to have a particular career goal; in fact, she says that her mother would disapprove of any connection her daughter would have with powerful institutions that she believes to be oppressive.

I think I'm pretty lucky. . . . I think that there are things they would rather not see me doing, like consulting work for mega banking firms. I think my mom would not be pleased with that. [However,] I think she would encourage me to do whatever I found interesting and important.

Congruity of Expectations

Though these students say that their parents have specific ideas of acceptable academic pursuits, they nevertheless describe their educational goals and expectations of the college experience as being aligned with those aspirations expressed by their parents. Emma, for example, noted that even though her grades have not been as high as her parents might like, she believes that she and her parents have the same basic expectations:

. . . I think we have very similar expectations. We all expect me to do well academically. I think their idea of "well" is a bit higher than mine is! Like, if I showed them that I am a B-average student they wouldn't be disappointed but they definitely would ask me to try harder and that sort of thing. They know I'm not a C student, or failing, or that sort of thing. But I think they expect me to be on the lower A-level of a student rather than a solid B, which is

what I am here. But I think aside from that we're very similar in how we view the college experience.

Students also note the difficulty of separating their own expectations from those of their parents. As Rita said, "... I sort of think my ideas are pretty similar to theirs, probably because they come from theirs to an extent." Similarly, Todd explained that prior to coming to college he "expected great things from [himself]. But, how do you separate what you grow up in and what you come to believe?" Expectations are also colored by culture. Delia, for example, could have gone directly to medical school in her home country of Jamaica. However, she wanted to go to college in the United States before going into medicine. Her parents were willing to allow this as long as Delia continued to be on the pre-med track:

It's hard for me to imagine me not knowing what I'm going to do....Because I think the understanding with me coming here was that, okay you're going to do medicine. It's going to take you a year more than it would take you at home, but okay.

Institutional Data

A noteworthy complement to the findings from the interviews are institutional data showing that students rely on their parents as a major source of advice. For example, surveys conducted in 2006-2007 by the Office of Institutional Research at Brown University found that 77.9% of students sought advice about academic goals from a parent, guardian, or other family member. Students relied on parents for advice more than any other source, including peers, academic deans, and faculty members. When seeking advice about courses, 73.0% of students reported relying on a parent, guardian, or other family member for course selection. Results show that students sought out parents for advice more often than individuals on campus who have more curricular expertise, including faculty members and academic deans. These institutional data lend credibility to the notion that parents play an important advisory role in the lives of their children during the college years.

Limitations

Because the data presented in this study represent a single case, it should not be thought of as broadly generalizable. Rather, it is a working hypothesis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which can be used as a starting point for further inquiry into the nature of college parent involvement. In addition,

the interviews and findings herein relate mainly to parent involvement in students' academic and career decision making. No attempt has been made to look at how parents involve themselves in extracurricular decision making or in students' personal lives during college. Finally, while the sample is heterogeneous in terms of ethnicity, gender, social class, and academic interest, the study does not delve deeply into the ways that these differences affect academic and career decision making.

Conclusions and Implications for Advising Practice

The finding that students in this sample perceive their parents to be reliable advisors who also play a vital role in their major academic and career decisions is highly consistent with Bowlby's (1988) theory of parents as constituting a secure base. Implicit in these interviews is the notion that parents are an important source of the support needed for success in college. Thus, appropriate parental involvement requires the maintenance of a secure base—one that allows young adults to explore the challenging college environment while knowing that they always have someone with whom a reciprocal and unconditional relationship of love and trust exists so that they can turn to them when important or difficult decisions need to be made. By saying that their parents act as an important sounding board for their decision-making process, these students acknowledge their continuing need for a secure base.

When viewed through the lens of self-authorship, the students in this study appear to be very similar to those in Baxter-Magolda's longitudinal study, many of whom did not achieve self-authorship until several years after graduating from college. The fact that many students in the current study said that their expectations for college are largely congruent with those of their parents and that they at least tacitly accept their parents' circumscribed view of acceptable career choices demonstrates that they may not yet have reached the crossroads stage of development. The findings in this study are also consistent with those of Creamer and Laughlin (2005), who studied college women's career decision making and found that many of the women in their sample "turn to parents for advice, if not direction, about career choices" (p. 24). In fact, because these women had not achieved self-authorship and hence defined their own goals in terms of their parents' expectations of them, they "are often not in a position developmentally to process information, such as career advice, when it is at odds with

recommendations made by trusted others” (p. 25).

These findings suggest that the advisor should not merely provide advice but should also help students move toward self-authorship. This means viewing advising as a process whereby students are encouraged to evaluate critically the information they receive about academic programs and career paths as well as alternative paths. At the same time, these findings show just how important parents are in their children’s decision making. Indeed, parents can provide support to students that advisors and others on campus simply cannot. Parents, therefore, should be viewed as a complement to the educational mission of any college or university. For parents to manage their role successfully, however, they need to be educated about listening skills, the need for constructive and regular communication about academic progress, and about helping their children develop independent decision-making, problem-solving, and critical-thinking skills.

In addition, parents need to be made aware that limits apply to the involvement they have with their children in college. At many institutions, educating parents about these aspects of appropriate college parenting has already been incorporated into programs such as orientation and parents’ weekend. Some colleges and universities have also set up parent relation offices or otherwise have staff dedicated entirely or in part to parent relations. Still others use parents themselves as a resource during orientation and other on-campus programming. All of these strategies can be aimed at making parents partners in the process of moving their children into adulthood as the authors of their own lives while also continuing to provide a vital secure base.

Implications for Future Research

Because of the localized context of the findings of this study and the focus on academic and career decision making, further study is needed to understand the scope and quality of parent involvement. Additional qualitative studies with students from a greater variety of institutions would add texture to the findings in this study. Larger scale quantitative analysis would also help to show the degree to which parents provide the secure base that their children need. In addition, further study could look beyond the academic aspects of student life, delving into the role of parents in their children’s decisions pertaining to personal issues, extracurricular activities, and crisis situations. Another important area of further study could be to look at the student-parent dynamic across gender, race, and

ethnic differences.

References

- Baxter Magolda, M. B. (1999). Constructing adult identities. *Journal of College Student Development, 40*(6), 629–44.
- Baxter Magolda, M. B. (2001). *Making their own way: Narratives for transforming higher education to promote self-development*. Sterling, VA: Stylus.
- Berman, W. H., & Sperling, M. B. (1991). Parental attachment and emotional distress in the transition to college. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 20*(4), 427–40.
- Bowlby, J. (1988). *A secure base: Parent-child attachment and health development*. New York: Basic Books.
- Creamer, E. G., & Laughlin, A. (2005). Self-authorship and women’s career decision making. *Journal of College Student Development, 46*(1), 13–27.
- Cutrona, C. E., Cole, V., Colangelo, N. Assouline, S. G., & Russell, D. W. (1994). Perceived parental social support and academic achievement: an attachment theory perspective. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 66*(2), 369–78.
- Erikson, E. H. (1968). *Identity, youth, and crisis*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Golafshani, N. (2003). Understanding reliability and validity in qualitative research. *The Qualitative Reporter, 8*(4), 597–607.
- Horowitz, H. (1987). *Campus life: Undergraduate cultures from the end of the eighteenth century to the present*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- In Defense of “Copter” Parents. (2005, October 2). *The Chicago Tribune*, p. 10.
- Kegan, R. (1994). *In over our heads: The mental demands of modern life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Kenny, M. E., & Donaldson, G. A. (1992). The relationship of parental attachment and psychological separation to the adjustment of first-year college women. *Journal of College Student Development, 33*(5), 431–38.
- Kenny, M. E., & Perez, V. (1996). Attachment and psychological well-being among racially and ethnically diverse first-year college students. *Journal of College Student Development 37*(5), 527–35.
- Kenny, M. E., & Rice, K. G. (1995). Attachment to parents and adjustment in late adolescent college students: Current status, applications, and future

- considerations. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 23(3), 433–56.
- Lapsley, D. K., Rice, K. G., & Fitzgerald, D. P. (1990). Adolescent attachment, identity, and adjustment to college: Implications for the continuity of adaptation hypothesis. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 68(5), 561–65.
- Lincoln, Y.S., & Guba, E.G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. London: Sage.
- Merriman, L. S. (2007, November 23). It's your child's education, not yours. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, p. B20.
- National Survey of Student Engagement. (2007). *Experiences that matter: Enhancing student learning and success, annual report 2007*. Bloomington, IN: Author.
- Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods* (2nd Ed.). London: Sage.
- Phillips, S., & North, M. (2005, June 24). Big mother is watching you. *New York Times*, p. 21.
- Reimer, S. (2005, May 5). *A name for hovering parents*. The Baltimore Sun, p. N1.
- Samuolis, J. L., Layburn, K., & Schiaffino, K. M. (2001). Identity development and attachment to parents in college students. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 30(3), 373–84.
- Schwartz, J. P., & Buboltz, W. C. (2004). The relationship between attachment to parents and psychological separation in college students. *Journal of College Student Development*, 45(5), 566–77.
- Shellenbarger, S. (2005, July 28). Tucking the kids in—in the dorm: Colleges ward off overinvolved parents. *Wall Street Journal*, p. D1.
- Sorokou, C. F., & Weissbrod, C. S. (2005). Men and women's attachment and contact patterns with parents during the first year of college. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 34(3), 221–28.
- Strauss, A. L. (1987). *Qualitative analysis for social scientists*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Valery, J. H., & O'Connor, P. (1997). The nature and amount of support college-age adolescents request and receive from parents. *Adolescence* 32(126), 323–38.
- Watson, S. T. (2005, October 23). Letting go—or maybe not. Some moms and dads become “helicopter parents”—hovering over their college-age children. *Buffalo News*, p. A1.

Author's Note

Andrew N. Simmons is Associate Dean of the College for Health and Law Careers at Brown University. He can be contacted at Andrew_Simmons@Brown.edu.

Appendix Questions from the interview protocol

1. Broadly speaking, what do you consider to be important educational goals for yourself during college?
2. What have been your most important learning experiences since coming to college? Think about your experiences both inside and outside of the classroom.
3. Please tell me about your family.
4. Were you raised by your mother and father together? If not, what was your family structure?
5. Tell me about your relationship with your parents before college.
6. How has your relationship with your parents changed since you've come to Brown?
7. In what ways, if any, does your assessment of educational success at Brown differ from your parents'?
8. Describe for me some of the challenges you've faced (if any) at Brown and how you overcame them.
9. What role did your parents play in dealing with the issues you just described?
10. If your parents are not involved in problem-solving who do you turn to for support?
11. Has your parents' role in trouble-shooting changed at all during your time at Brown?
12. What are some of the biggest decisions you've made, or that you've had to make, since coming to Brown?
13. Please describe for me how you make decisions/your decision-making process.
14. What role do your parents play in your decision-making process?
15. If you do not seek out help/support from your parents when making decisions, who do you get help from?
16. Has your parents' role in helping with your decision-making changed at all during your time at Brown?
17. What types of decisions, issues, and/or problems do you share with your parents? What are your expectations about the support you will receive from your parents around these issues?
18. In what ways do you think you've changed during college?
19. What factors in your life here at Brown have had the most influence in the changes you just described? Why?
20. As you think about the ways that you've changed in the college years, what role have your parents played?
21. To your knowledge, have either of your parents or any other caregiver or family member ever intervened on your behalf with an administrator or faculty member? If yes, please explain.
22. What is your feeling about the intervention you just described?
23. How would you feel if your parents intervened with an administrator or faculty member on your behalf but without your knowledge?