

The parent-child relationship during the college planning process

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SUMMARY

With the dramatic increase in competitiveness in college admissions evident by falling acceptance rates over time, the college planning process has become of great importance to high school students and their parents. As a result, high schools are redesigning their college counseling programs to better serve their students in this increasingly competitive environment. However, college counseling programs are just one piece of the puzzle. The parent-child relationship during the college planning process also plays an important role in achieving a successful outcome. This study presents results from a survey in which high school students answered questions in the form of messages to their parents during the college planning process. We surveyed 138 high school juniors from two private schools that differ in contextual factors (e.g., a private boarding school versus a private non-boarding parochial school). We applied the Grounded Theory coding method to code open-ended survey responses into common themes that were used to test three hypotheses regarding school-specific contextual factors and the frequency of common themes in student messages to their parents. One key result from our analysis is that students at private boarding schools are likely to express greater fear of parental control and disappointment than students at private non-boarding parochial schools. We also found that students at schools with less extensive college planning programs express greater need for parental help in the college planning process. These findings provide evidence that contextual factors are important in the college planning process and could be useful to the design of college planning programs at high schools.

INTRODUCTION

Planning for and applying to college are stress-inducing tasks for high school students, because college choices will affect future outcomes such as potential earnings, career choices, and social capital (1). Parent involvement during the college planning process can have both positive and negative effects on students' stress levels. Contextual factors, such as the type of school a student attends, may affect parent involvement and thus may affect student stress (2). In the current study, we solicited messages from students to their parents regarding the college planning process

and examined how these messages differ among students based on contextual factors of the schools they attend. This research can be useful to high school college counseling programs by identifying common issues affecting the parent-child relationship during the college planning process.

Parents play an important role in a student's college planning process. Many parents have high expectations for their student's educational and occupational achievements. Parent involvement in academics can be helpful, as parent involvement is shown to improve a student's academic performance (3). However, due to the growing competitiveness in college admissions, parents increasingly manage students' academic activities to maximize likelihood of college admission (4). Many negative effects, however, can result from this aspect of parental involvement. Parents who consistently intrude on the physical, emotional, and intellectual space of students may interfere with students' abilities to develop independent thinking skills (5). For example, Nelson, Padilla-Walker, and Nielson show that "helicopter parenting," generally defined as an overly-involved parenting style, is associated with student instability or stress (6). The authors also provide evidence that the absence of parental warmth can cause physiological problems in emerging adulthood.

Previous studies have shown that parental educational background can also be a factor in their level of involvement in the college planning process. Kalenkoski finds that less-educated parents tend to be less involved in students' college planning process (7). Students whose parents did not go to college tend to report lower academic expectations than their peers. This may be due to the fact that parents, who did not go through the college planning process themselves may feel ill-equipped to help students during this process (8). Parental educational level is not the only factor that influences involvement in the college planning process. Rowan-Kenyon et al. found that the selectivity of the colleges their student is applying to, socioeconomic factors, and state academic requirements also contribute to differences in parental involvement (4).

Parents who choose private high schools for their children do so for a variety of reasons which may have implications for the college planning process and students' development. There are several specific factors that can also influence the development of high school students. Bryk and Driscoll found that parochial schools shape their students in many aspects including their academic capabilities and personal character

Contextual Factor	School A (n = 108)	School B (n = 26)
Boarding	Yes	No
Urbanicity	Suburban	Rural
Geography	East coast	East coast
Counseling Programs (description)	Extensive, All students college bound, Focus on admission to Ivy League / competitive institutions	Less extensive, All students college bound, Focus on community engagement
% accepted to Ivy League colleges	~20%	< 1%
Student-counselor ratio	90:1	160:1
Admissions rate	20%	86%
Private vs. Public	Private	Private
Parochial	No	Yes

Table 1: Contextual factors of schools included in study.

(9). They found that parochial high schools, for instance, tend to create organizational structures for their students that encourage strong commitments to social cooperation and meaningful community interaction. Therefore, the authors concluded that it is possible that students attending these institutions exhibit a more caring and connected relationship to family and peers at their school.

When comparing across different educational levels of schools, there are several additional factors that may influence student development during the college planning process. For example, private boarding schools in the United States, are expected to offer a wide array of extracurricular activities (9). This extensive involvement of the school in extracurricular activities may account for a student’s feeling of being controlled. It can also add to a student’s anxiety level as it creates pressure on students to excel both in and outside of the classroom. Families often place their children in private boarding schools, because they feel these schools prepare students well for admittance to highly competitive colleges and universities (9).

In this study, we were interested in answering the following research question: How do student messages to their parents during the college planning process (e.g., messages conveying fear of parental disappointment, anxiety, and need for independence) differ depending on school-specific contextual factors? The goal of this study was to provide an initial exploration that could generate useful insights on the development of more effective college counseling programs at high schools and identify areas for future research. A deeper understanding of the relationship between contextual factors and the parent-student relationship in the college planning process will allow schools to design their college planning programs to better accommodate the needs of their students and families. For example, private boarding schools may find that implementing counseling methods that foster a better parent-student relationship to be the most effective,

since this bond may be lost when a student is not living at home.

Based on previous studies, we generated three hypotheses related to the effects of these contextual factors on the response of the students that we tested in our study. First, based on the findings of the Bryk and Discoll study, we expected students attending the private boarding school to express fewer messages of parental warmth and support than students attending the non-boarding parochial school. Second, also based on the findings of Bryk and Discoll, we expected students at the private boarding school to express more feelings of anxiety, as well as fear of parental control and disappointment, than students at the less competitive non-boarding parochial school. Lastly, we expected students at the private boarding school, which features more extensive college planning programs, to express less need for parental help in the college planning process than students attending the non-boarding parochial school.

We found that students at private boarding schools are likely to express greater fear of parental control and disappointment than students at private non-boarding parochial schools. We also found that students at schools with less extensive college planning programs express greater need for parental help in the college planning process. These findings provide evidence that contextual factors are important in the college planning process and could be useful to the design of college planning programs at high schools.

RESULTS

To test our hypotheses related to the influence of school-specific contextual factors, e.g., private boarding versus non-private boarding, we conducted statistical analyses on data we collected from a survey of high school students that asks them to provide messages they would like to convey to their parents with respect to the college-planning process. In general, we did not find significant differences between the two schools in the frequency of themes like “child asking for independence”, “parent controlling”, “child anxiety”, “gratitude”, “difficulty” and “warmth” (Table 2, two sample t-test, $p < 0.60$).

Differences in several themes (“parent expectations,” “confidence,” “uncertainty,” “excitement,” “potential/current child disappointment,” “parent supporting independence,” and “comparing to others”) were weakly significant (Table 2, two sample t-test, $0.1 < p < 0.4$), indicating little, if any, meaningful differences in the responses of the students regarding these themes.

However, for five themes, there was a significant difference in response frequency between the two schools: “potential/current parent disappointment” (two sample t-test, $p < 0.05$), “child reassuring parent” (t-test, $p < 0.05$), “child asking for help” (two sample t-test, $p < 0.01$), “child desires” (two sample t-test, $p < 0.01$), and “instrumental/financial support” (two sample t-test, $p < 0.1$). School A (a private boarding school located in a suburban area in the eastern United States) had

Themes	Examples	All	School A	School B	p-value
Potential / current parent disappointment	"You're going to be disappointed. I'm sorry. I'll probably go somewhere though."	43.3%	51.9%	7.7%	.035**
Child asking for independence	"Let me do me. Let me make a decision that will help me feel more comfortable with my future."	15.7%	15.7%	15.4%	.965
Parent expectations	"It's not going to be as good as you expected."	14.2%	15.7%	7.7%	.294
Parent controlling	"I don't want to be a doctor. If you could stop trying to make me be one, that'll be great."	14.2%	13.9%	15.4%	.846
Child reassuring parent	"Don't worry, I got it."	11.9%	14.8%	0%	.037**
Child anxiety	"I'm stressed."	10.4%	11.1%	7.7%	.612
Confidence	"I got this!"	9.7%	11.1%	3.8%	.265
Child asking for help	"Help me, please."	8.2%	4.6%	23.1%	.002**
Uncertainty	"I am not sure where I want to go to college."	8.2%	9.3%	3.8%	.371
Parent anxiety	"Stop worrying about my grades, where I'm going, or what my test scores are."	7.5%	9.3%	0%	.10*
Child desires	"I want to play college hockey."	10.4%	5.6%	30.8%	.0001***
Gratitude	"I hope all goes well and I'm grateful for their help."	8.2%	8.3%	7.7%	.916
Instrumental / financial support	"Sign me up for ACT registration."	7.5%	5.6%	15.4%	.088*
Difficulty	"It is hard to go to a good school."	5.2%	5.6%	3.8%	.728
Excitement	"I'm ready for an exciting but turbulent process."	3.0%	3.7%	0%	.323
Warmth	"I love you and support everything you do for me!"	4.5%	4.6%	3.8%	.864
Potential / current child disappointment	"I don't think I'm gonna get into that one..."	12.7%	15.7%	0%	.183
Parent supporting independence	"Thank you for supporting me and letting me lead my own path."	1.5%	0.9%	3.8%	.274
Comparing with others	"Mom, this will be easier than dealing with [name] and [name]."	2.2%	2.8%	0%	.394
	Total Responses	134	108	26	

Table 2: Summary statistics of survey results. Two sample t-test was used for analysis, * p < 0.10; ** p < 0.05; ***p < 0.001.

a higher percentage of responses than School B (a private non-boarding Catholic school located in a rural area in the northeastern United States) that contained statements of “potential/current parent disappointment” and “child reassuring parent.” School B, on the other hand, had a higher percentage of responses than School A for the other three significant themes: “child asking for help,” “child desires,” and “instrumental/financial support.”

DISCUSSION

A few key messages emerge from these results. First, we found no difference in the frequency of messages of warmth, as conveyed by students expressing feelings of love and support toward their parents, between the two schools. Thus, our results suggest that students attending private non-boarding parochial schools will not express more messages of warmth than students attending private boarding schools. Second, although we found no difference between the two schools with respect to direct messages of warmth from students to parents, there was a strongly significant ($p=0.0001$) difference between the two schools related to the “child desires” theme, with students at School B answering the survey with messages of what they want to do in college (e.g. “I want to play college hockey”). The largest percentage of student responses at School B (30.8%) fell under the “child desires” theme while this was one of the lowest percentages at School A (5.6%).

Third, although we found no significant difference between the schools in students expressing greater anxiety, and fear of parental control, we did find a significant difference between the schools in students expressing “potential/current parent disappointment.” The largest percentage of responses from students at School A (51.9%) fell under the theme, “potential/current parent disappointment,” while a small percentage (7.7%) of responses from students at School B fell under this theme.

Fourth, although weakly significant ($p=0.294$), we found that the second highest percentage of responses from students at School A (15.7%) fell under the theme of “parent expectations,” while this was one of the lowest percentage of responses from students at School B (7.7%). However, there was no significant difference ($p=0.965$) in the percentage of responses between the two schools that fell under the theme of “child asking for independence” (15.7% for School A and 15.4% for School B).

Lastly, our results found a strongly significant ($p=0.002$) and very large difference in the responses from students asking for help between School A (4.6%) and School B (23.1%).

The results of this study have important implications for our expectations based on the prior literature. Based on findings from the literature, we expected students at the private boarding school (School A) to express fewer messages of warmth. From the findings of Bryk and Driscoll, we expected that School A, as a boarding school, would foster

less warmth between students and parents in comparison to School B, where students lived at home. However, there was no significant difference found in student responses between the two institutions related to this theme.

However, we did find a significant difference in terms of “child desires.” This may be the result of a more community-focused atmosphere at School B relative to School A. School A is a boarding school that expects many of their students to attend elite colleges and universities. However, School B encourages the exploration of other options outside of the traditional college track, such as art schools, technical schools, gap years, community colleges, or collegiate level athletics. This seems consistent with the findings of Bryk and Discoll, who found that parochial schools encourage strong commitments to social cooperation and community interaction among their students.

Our results also found that students from School A had a significantly higher percentage of responses related to “potential/current parent disappointment” when compared to School B. We hypothesize that many students at School A fear disappointing their parents and families when it comes to the college planning process. This may be related to the greater pressure put on students at private boarding schools to get into the most competitive colleges and universities. Parents are paying higher tuition for their students to attend a private boarding school, and students may fear that they will not be able to deliver the outcome parents desire, therefore fearing parental disappointment. Acceptance rates at colleges and universities have fallen dramatically over time, as the process has become more and more competitive (10). Although college admittance rates continue to fall, the expectations that parents place on their students are unchanged. This can lead to students fearing disappointment if they are unsuccessful achieving the outcome they were hoping for during their college planning process.

Our results also suggest that students have a good sense of parental expectations as the college planning process nears. Students tend to have two different responses to the pressure of meeting these expectations. Some students may ask for independence to make their own decision related to their college choice. This was the case for both School A and B, as we found no significant difference between the schools in responses related to “child asking for independence.” At the same time, students may also express a fear of disappointing their parents if they do not meet the standards that their families expect of them. We found a weakly significant difference between the schools in student responses related to “parent expectations,” with a higher percentage of responses from students at School A.

Lastly, we found strong support for the conclusion that students at schools with more extensive college planning programs will express less need for parental help in the college planning process. We conjecture that this may have to do with the difference in counseling services offered at each school. School A has an extensive counseling program

in place for their students, while School B had less college planning services offered to their students. This difference seems to explain the large response rate from students at School B asking for help in the college planning process in comparison to School A.

Although the results of this study are compelling, there are important limitations to our study that could be addressed with a fuller exploration of this research topic. The use of Grounded Theory coding could raise the possibility of bias in our analysis, as the categories of themes are often changed as researchers notice patterns (11). This may create experimenter bias, caused by a subconscious influence on results to benefit the hypotheses. Though we do not believe that this method altered our data analysis substantially, it may have created bias within the initial design of the study.

Another limitation of our study is the lack of public school participation in our survey. Including survey results from a public high school would have enhanced our analysis by allowing us to compare how student responses differ between public and private high schools. This would have also allowed us to explore the importance of resources/support, which tend to be much higher at private schools. With the majority of children in the United States attending public schools, the insights from our study therefore have limited scope. We surveyed only two schools, both on the East Coast, which may also present limitations to the applicability of our results to schools in other regions. Additionally, administrators at the schools that participated in our survey required oversight on the types of questions we could ask students. Therefore, we were unable to ask students about their parental background in order to gain a better understanding of each student's family life. Though we added a question regarding parental education for students in School B's survey, the administrators required that the question be optional, limiting the number of responses and preventing us from drawing any clear conclusions. An additional question asking how often students communicate with their parents would have allowed us to make stronger claims about the lack of family communication with students who attend boarding schools. Another interesting addition to the study would be to evaluate the messages given from parents to their children. This would allow us to assess how the parents' messages differ depending on contextual factors, as well as how they matched up or did not match up with the students' perceptions of parental expectations.

Lastly, differences in the methods used for survey distribution at each school could lead to bias in our study. In the case of School A, our study used previously collected data that was distributed for the school's own purpose. Because of this, the survey distribution for School A had already taken place before the study was conducted. The survey was distributed at a school-wide meeting for all juniors. Each student was asked to take out a sheet of paper and write their answers to a single question that was displayed on the screen. The papers were then collected and recorded manually. School B, on the other hand, was asked to participate in the study

after School A's survey was collected. The administration at School B suggested that we use Google Survey to administer the survey, because they felt it would be the most efficient method for their students to access the questionnaire and would also take up less class time. The difference in these methods may have introduced some bias into our study. Students may have felt inclined to respond more thoroughly to an online questionnaire than one which required pencil and paper.

Regardless of these limitations, we feel that our study offers an important and compelling initial exploration of how students convey their feelings about the college planning process to their parents. Depending on the type of school, these findings could be useful in the design of counseling programs at high schools to better serve their students during the college planning process. For example, based on our results that students at boarding schools expressed feeling greater pressure from their parents than students who attend a non-boarding school, counselors at a boarding school could work toward creating programs that form better and more constructive communication between parents and their students. At highly competitive schools, counselors could take the results found in our study and develop programs that emotionally and mentally support students during this stressful time, as many students felt as if their acceptances into elite colleges influenced what their parents thought of them.

METHODS

To address our research question, we collected data from two private schools primarily serving college-bound students. We coded these data to collect themes related to the parent-child relationship and compared the frequency of these themes to the contextual factors of each student. We were thus able to identify important themes that are related to the type of influence parents have on their children during the college planning process.

Participants from School A (n=108) attended a private boarding school with a competitive admissions process and an enrollment size of approximately 210 students per class (**Table 1**). A large number of students who graduate from School A are accepted to highly competitive universities, including Ivy League institutions. School A is located in a suburban area in the eastern United States. The college counseling programs implemented at the school are extensive and are available to students as early as their freshman year. For instance, School A arranges meetings between students and college admission counselors from their students' desired schools to help students refine their college applications. The counseling programs at School A go to great lengths to ensure that their students have the highest chances of acceptance to elite universities. The student/counselor ratio is relatively low, allowing for more one-on-one interactions. Since School A is a boarding school, the majority of students live on campus. As a result, it can be inferred that most students at School A

do not have daily face-to-face interactions with their parents.

Participants from School B (n=24) attended a small private Catholic school with an enrollment of approximately 32 students per class (**Table 1**). Students, who graduate from School B are college-bound, but not necessarily targeting acceptance to highly competitive universities. School B is located in a rural area in the northeastern United States. The student-counselor ratio at School B is larger than School A, as there is only one counselor to serve all of the students in all four grade levels. The college counseling programs implemented at the school are less extensive than that of School A; however, similar to School A, college planning is also a high priority at School B for students starting as early as their freshman year¹. The academy is non-boarding, and students generally live at home with their parents. Students at the two schools were asked to respond to the following question: "If you could tell your parents/guardians one thing as you begin the college planning process, what would it be?" Students were asked to write one or two sentences in response to this open-ended question. The study collected 108 student responses from School A and 26 student responses from School B.

At School A, the survey was distributed on paper during a school assembly with all juniors. In addition to questions related to the educational background of their parents, students were asked by their assembly advisors to write a response to the open-ended question on the survey. It was explicitly stated to each student that the survey was completely optional and that they may provide as much information in their responses as they pleased. The responses were recorded anonymously, as students were instructed not to write their names on the paper. The students were given 5-10 minutes to complete the open-ended question on the survey.

At School B, the survey was distributed via Google Survey. The survey was created and distributed to the head directors of the schools, who then emailed the survey to the junior class. Students were asked by their teachers to write a response to the open-ended question on the survey. Along with the open-ended question, there were several additional questions regarding the students' parents' educational backgrounds². It was explicitly stated to each student that the survey questions were completely optional and they may answer as many or as few questions as they pleased. The responses were recorded anonymously. The students were given 5-10 minutes to complete the open-ended question on the survey.

We used open-ended Grounded Theory coding methodology to analyze the survey responses. Grounded Theory coding methodology, developed by Glaser and Strauss (12), involves inductive data analysis and is used when assessing qualitative data (13). As data is reviewed, repeated ideas found within the data are assigned to codes

and eventually categorized into concepts. Based upon this analysis, each of the 134 student responses was coded for the following themes: parent disappointment, child asking for independence, parent expectations, parent controlling, child reassuring parent, child anxiety, confidence, child asking for help, uncertainty, parent anxiety, child desires, gratitude, instrumental/financial support, difficulty, excitement, warmth, child disappointment, parent supporting independence, and comparing with others. Student responses were coded for as many themes as were applicable. As there were three researchers involved in the coding process, it was important to ensure consistency of theme assignment. If two or more coders chose the same theme, then the theme assignment was made; else, the assignment was not made (14).

We present summary statistics from our survey results in **Table 2**. Column 1 contains the themes identified by the study authors; Column 2 provides an example of the type of response that would fall under each of the themes in Column 1; Column 3 presents the percentage of responses from students at both schools (134 students total) that fell under each theme; Column 4 presents the percentage of responses from students at School A (108 students total) that fell under each theme; and Column 5 presents the percentage of responses from students at School B (26 students total) that fell under each theme. We used the Stata statistical software package (15), to test whether the differences seen in the percentage of the given responses are statistically significant using a two-sample t-test of difference in means (ttest) where the null hypothesis is defined as: $H_0: \text{mean}(A) - \text{mean}(B) = 0$ and the alternative hypothesis is defined as: $H_A: \text{mean}(A) - \text{mean}(B) \neq 0$. The values shown in the last column of **Table 2** are the *p*-values from the statistical test of the null hypothesis.

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Footnotes: ¹ In discussions with administrators at School B, we were told that parent-student meetings related to college and future planning are held at least once a year to engage parents in the college planning process.² Due to the small number of responses gathered to the additional parental education questions, these data was excluded from the analysis of the study.

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