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# Parental Engagement and Contact in the Academic Lives of College Students

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*Information on the various forms of parental involvement in higher education is lacking. This paper investigates parental engagement in college students' academic lives, the mode and frequency of student-parent communications, and how all of this varies across different student populations (by race/ethnicity, social class, parental immigrant status, gender, and year in school). Drawing from the 2006 University of California Undergraduate Experience Survey (UCUES), results revealed parental contact and engagement in college students' academics to be greatest among women, freshmen, and wealthy/upper middle-class students. Comparisons by race, ethnicity, and*

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*parental immigration status revealed above-average levels of parental contact among Mexican American, Latino/Other Spanish, Japanese/Japanese American, American Indian/Alaska Native students, and students of foreign-born parents, but below-average ratings of parental engagement in these same students' academic lives.*

According to the testimonies of student affairs professionals, parents are flooding the phone lines and offices of college campuses across the nation with concerns about the academic progress and well-being of their college-going offspring. These concerns extend across academic and social aspects of the college experience and have resulted in parents occasionally intervening on their children's behalf by contacting professors, selecting courses, and meddling in roommate troubles, among other things (College Board, 2007). Such behaviors have been characterized as "helicopter parenting," which is loosely described as the intense micromanagement of college students' lives, resulting in decreased student autonomy and development (Howe & Strauss, 2003). While this problem has received significant attention in newspapers, Op Ed pieces, and other nonpeer-reviewed documents, very little empirical research has been published on parental engagement in the lives of their college-going students; how it varies by social groups; and its consequences for academic, social, and personal development. To contribute to our understanding of these issues, this paper explores parent engagement in college students' academic lives and how it varies across different student populations.

## Background

While scholarship on parental involvement in primary and secondary education has advanced significantly in the past 2 decades, literature detailing the ways in which parents are involved in the lives of their college-going children is in the "inaugural stage" (Merriman, 2006). Parental involvement in higher education includes engagement in the college choice process, paying for college, offering support to students, and negotiating relationships with campus personnel (Daniel, Evans, & Scott, 2001). Research suggests that this engagement, encouragement, and support is associated with positive

outcomes like adjustment to college, academic achievement, persistence, healthier parent-child interactions, decreased stress, emotional health and well-being, and higher educational expectations among college students (Barnett, 2004; Herndon & Hirt, 2004; Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996; Kalsner & Pistole, 2003; Kenny & Stryker, 1996; Maton, Hrabowski, & Greif, 1998; Ratelle, Larose, Guay, & Senecal, 2005; Rodriguez, Mira, Myers, Morris, & Cardoza, 2003; Trusty, 1998; Wintre & Yaffe, 2000).

Despite some evidence regarding positive and negative correlations of parent involvement, we lack a concrete understanding of the fundamentals—*who, what, why, and how*—of parental involvement at the postsecondary level. In other words, what needs to be clarified are the definitions, theoretical explanations, behaviors, and differences across groups associated with parental involvement. In the following review of literature, we pull together fundamental information about college parental involvement from the higher education and student affairs literatures. We also glean scholarship from the K-12 sector, which has the most developed body of research and theory regarding family engagement in education. Merging the three sectors of literature is an appropriate strategy for this paper given that parenting practices at the primary and secondary level extend into higher education. Indeed, Bowlby (1988) hypothesized that parent attachment over the developmental trajectory is continuous and that the bond between parent and child is relatively stable across time, although quality of parenting may be perceived differentially by age. Previous research has confirmed this for college students (McCormick & Kennedy, 1994; Rice, Fitzgerald, Whaley, & Gibbs, 1995). Therefore, the following discussion of the particularities of parental engagement in postsecondary education rests on the notion that involvement behaviors taking place during the college years may resemble those observed in K-12.

### What is parental involvement at the postsecondary level?

Within the K-12 sector, parental involvement has been used to describe an array of parenting behaviors including aspirations for their children's achievement, communication with children about school, engagement in school-related activities and personnel, as well as

education-related rules imposed in the home (Fan & Chen, 2001). With respect to higher education, Tierney and Auerbach (2005) wrote that “parent involvement is a floating term that is poorly defined in empirical studies and policy talk” (p. 32). Yet, just recently, Wartman and Savage (2008) provided a working definition of parental involvement that is a first step towards understanding this construct within a postsecondary context. According to the authors,

the phenomenon of parental involvement includes parents showing interest in the lives of their students in college, gaining more information about college, knowing when and how to appropriately provide encouragement and guidance to their student connecting with the institution, and potentially retaining that institutional connection beyond the college years. (p. 5)

Borrowing from prior research and theory, and consistent with Wartman and Savage (2008), we perceive parental involvement as a multidimensional construct, involving engagement in various aspects of the college environment including academics and cocurricular activities as well as expressed interest in the day-to-day well-being of college students. We now move to a more nuanced understanding of parental involvement by defining the specific behaviors that constitute involvement for parents of college students, something that has been lacking in empirical research (Ford & Amaral, 2006).

### How are parents involved?

At all educational levels, parental engagement is “reflected through parents’ behavior and attitudes, parenting styles, and children’s perceptions” (Trusty, 1998, p. 1). These dimensions are differentially measured within academe, but tend to lie within one of two categories: engagement between parents and the school or engagement between parent and student in reference to education (Ford & Amaral, 2006). A majority of the literature on excessive parental involvement in college focuses on the former interaction—parents communicating and participating with the college campus. However, the current study concerns itself with the latter—the behaviors and activities that constitute parent-student interactions during the college years.

Generally speaking, today's parents invest heavily into their children's educational experiences whether emotionally or financially (Carney-Hall, 2008). With respect to postsecondary education, emerging research suggests that parents are prioritizing involvement in the academic experiences of their college-aged offspring (Carney-Hall, 2008). In the months building towards college enrollment, parents involve themselves in a variety of decisions including where to submit applications, where to enroll, which college activities to participate in, and which courses to take (Pryor, Hurtado, Sharkness, & Korn, 2008). Once in college, parents continue to be involved in students' academic lives. Literature on intrusive parenting suggests that parents have a large influence on students' choice of postsecondary institution. Although the anecdotal evidence suggests that overinvolved parents tend to choose challenging (and often unrealistic) majors for their children (i.e., Pope, 2001), empirical evidence suggests otherwise. Pearson and Dellmann-Jenkins (1997) surveyed college-bound seniors on the individuals most influential in their college major choice. Students' ranked other experiences and individuals including personal work history, coursework, and teachers over parents as most influential in their choice of major.

Recent data suggest that technological conveniences may partially explain the recent increase in parent involvement in higher education. According to the College Parents of America (2006), 34% of parents in their sample reported communicating with their children either daily or more than once a day. Ninety percent of their respondents communicated frequently through cell phone, 58% through e-mail, and 29% through instant messaging. A national sample of first-year and senior college students confirmed this trend, finding that communication through electronic means is more popular than face-to-face communication for today's college students and their parents (National Survey of Student Engagement [NSSE], 2007). In spite of research highlighting the influence of technology on parent-college student communication, we have a limited understanding of the nature of communication between college students and their parents and how it influences their overall perceptions of parental engagement in students' academic and personal lives.

### Which parents are involved?

Traditional understandings of parental involvement presented in education are based on the practices of White, middle-class parents (Auerbach, 2007; Lareau & Weininger, 2008), leaving very little knowledge about how parents from other social strata engage in the lives of their college-going children. Cultural capital theory (Bourdieu, 1977) assumes that middle and upper-class families value a college education as a means of securing status and privilege (McDonough, 1997). Parents from these families invest time, money, and effort into educational activities as a means to assert the value of a college education. Parents who have college degrees and have significant economic capital are in greater positions to transmit the value of a college education to their children because of their success in navigating through the educational pipeline and their greater job flexibility, which allows them to participate in school activities and more closely monitor students' academic progress.

However, students from underrepresented groups—namely, low-income, immigrant, and first-generation—are presumed to come from families and communities with lower educational values and lower involvement in their children's education than their peers from higher-resourced families (Villalpando & Solorzano, 2005). For example, first-generation college students report lower levels of parental encouragement to attend college, receive less support from parents during college, and have less knowledge about the campus environment than their counterparts (London, 1989; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). Parents of Latino students are also perceived to be less supportive of the decision to attend college, even though several studies suggest that these parents do value education and express this value informally by emotionally and morally supporting their children's educational and career aspirations, assisting their children in educational decision making, and stressing the importance of education (Auerbach, 2004, 2007; Ceja, 2006).

Though a large body of P-16 scholarship reveals variation in parental involvement by race/ethnicity, suggesting that parents of color are less involved in their children's educational endeavors than White parents (e.g., Charles, Roscigno, & Torres, 2007; Chavkin, 1993; Perna,

2000), differences across ethnicities typically are assessed via aggregated racial categories. This is particularly true for families of Asian descent. Decades of research on aggregated groups of Asian American college students would lead one to assume that all Asian ethnic groups share the same college access and college-going experiences, as well as similar family and educational values (Teranishi, Ceja, Antonio, Allen, & McDonough, 2004). However, recent attempts to debunk the “model minority myth” of Asian Americans have uncovered significant differences between achievement behaviors of lower-SES Southeast Asian and Pacific Islander versus Chinese and Japanese students (Wong, Lai, Nagasawa, & Lin, 1998). Also, research suggests that the assumed value of collectivism and influence of family in the educational achievement of Asian American college students may differ by ethnicity (Kim, Yang, Atkinson, Wolfe, & Hong, 2001). This collection of research reinforces the need to assess ethnic differences in parental involvement in the higher education context.

Students’ gender has also been shown to influence the nature of parent-student interactions during the college years. Numerous studies have described women as being more dependent on and connected with their families during the college years than men (i.e., Josselson, 1988; Kalsner & Pistole, 2003; Kenny & Donaldson, 1992; Lapsley, Rice, & Shadid, 1989; Lopez, Campbell, & Watkins, 1986; Sneed et al., 2006). A strong sense of connection to family has been shown to promote healthy development during college (Samuolis, Layburn, & Schiaffino, 2001), though other research points to the importance of college women establishing *independence* from their families (Sax, 2008; Sax, Bryant, & Gilmartin, 2004).

Given the link between students’ social class, parental immigrant status, race, ethnicity, and gender and the nature of parental involvement, it is clear that any research that examines the dynamics of parental involvement for college-going students must attend to these demographic variations. An understanding of how different student populations engage with their parents is vital for understanding the role that parents play in college students’ everyday lives, and the implications of that involvement for student development are also important.



## Theoretical Overview

A review of the higher education literature reveals very little theory generated to describe parent-child interactions specifically during the college years. Tinto (1975, 1993) suggested that separation (in varying degrees) from the family and home communities serves as the first step towards successful integration and subsequent retention in college. Student affairs literature refers to this phenomenon as the process of *letting go*, whereby parents allow their college-going children to make their own decisions and mistakes and to freely explore new environments and groups of people (Coburn & Treeger, 2003). From the first time that college students set foot on their respective campuses, they are encouraged to handle difficult decisions and unfamiliar environments on their own and to limit reliance on parents. Correspondingly, parents learn about their relationship to the university and about campus services available to students so that they can avoid intervening on their child's behalf when a problem arises (Coburn & Treeger, 2003; Coburn & Woodward, 2001).

Scholarship from the social sciences suggests that, for several reasons, this emphasis on "letting go" is contrary to our understanding of life-course development and cultural value systems of today's college students. First, the emphasis on *separation* "minimizes the importance of family connectedness in early and middle adulthood" (Freeberg & Stein, 1996, p. 460). Parents, children, and other members of the family unit have considerable contact with each other throughout the life course; and they are particularly involved in "sharing resources, advice, support, conflict and concern in the course of their adult relationships" (Freeberg & Stein, 1996, p. 460). Second, it ignores cultural values of many ethnic minority groups, which focus on centrality of the family and interdependence. A majority of non-White, non-Western families have been characterized in the literature as family-centered or placing a large emphasis on the needs and desires of family unit over the individual (Fiske, Kitayama, Markus, & Nisbett, 1998; Triandis, 1990, 1993). This value of family interdependence dictates an orientation towards activities and resources among the family unit, obedience and respect for elder family members, and the belief that the family is the primary source of support (Kibria, 1998). Additionally, emphases on duties and

responsibilities within the family translate into expectations about the role of children throughout the life course.

The importance of ongoing parent-student connections is also underscored by developmental theorists, who suggest that the quality of the parent-child relationship during late adolescence is important for successful adjustment to the college environment. Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1988) describes the bond that an individual has with his or her primary caregiver and how that bond influences socioemotional and personality development throughout the life-course. Healthy attachment to the primary caregiver, which is often characterized by balanced levels of connectedness and separation, serve as a security net in which individuals feel protected, stable, and comfortable enough to explore and gain mastery of new surroundings (Moller, Fouladi, McCarthy, & Hatch, 2003). The parent-adolescent attachment relationship can provide a secure basis for students to explore and adapt to the college environment and to be self-reliant when faced with environmental challenges (Kalsner & Pistole, 2003).

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. During the process of separation-individuation (Chickering, 1969; Josselson, 1988) the parent-child relationship is renegotiated to one that is governed by the authority of the parent to that which is characterized by reciprocity (Steinberg, 1990; Youniss & Smollar, 1985). Healthy separation-individuation takes place as adolescents seek to establish their own identities and sense of self with the support of their parents while simultaneously maintaining connections with the family (Grotevant & Cooper, 1998). Successful separation-individuation has been shown to promote the development of independence and identity exploration in college students, which in concert with family connections promote adjustment to college (Kalsner & Pistole, 2003). Ultimately, separation-individuation and attachment frameworks can be used to establish connections between the level of parental involvement and its influence on students' emotional and academic adjustment to the college environment.

## Scope of This Project

While parental involvement is noticeably on the rise from the perspective of campus personnel, we know less about parental involvement from the perspective of the student. It is important to consider the extent to which students communicate with their parents during college and the degree to which they perceive their parents to be involved in their academic lives. Further, given important cultural differences in parent-child relations, it is important to know how parental contact and academic involvement vary by race, social class, parental immigrant status, gender, and year in school. This project addresses these questions in an attempt to add to the limited empirical research on parent involvement in the academic dimensions of the college student experience.

## Methods

### Data/Instrument

This study used data from the 2006 University of California Undergraduate Experience Survey (UCUES), a longitudinal survey of UC undergraduates across nine campuses administered by the UC Berkeley Office of Student Research and managed by the University of California Office of the President. The University of California system includes nine public research universities offering undergraduate degrees (and a tenth campus—a medical school—not included in this study). The UC system is selective (among students in California, only the top 12.5% are eligible for admission), highly diverse in terms of race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status, and includes a mix of residential and commuter students.

Initiated in 2002, the UCUES instrument is designed to collect information on the backgrounds and experiences of UC undergraduates, with the ultimate goal of creating a longitudinal database useful for both institutional and scholarly research on the experiences of undergraduates within a research university (Brint, Douglass, Flacks, Thomson, & Chatman, 2007). UCUES consists of a Core (i.e., a bank of items administered to all students), as well as five modules each administered to a randomly selected 20% of the sample. These modules are: Academic Engagement, Civic Engagement,

Student Development, Student Services, and a Wild Card module that varies from campus to campus.

The 2006 UCUES instrument was administered online as a census survey to a pool of 153,457 UC undergraduates, of which 58,047 responded (38%). Response rates on individual UC campuses ranged from 31% to 48%. The sample for this study was restricted to the 10,760 students who completed both the Core and the Student Development module.

Items used in this study were derived from the UCUES Core and Student Development module. Items in the Core pertained to students' background characteristics, academic and personal development, academic engagement, satisfaction, and evaluation of their academic major. The Student Development module collects data on students' relationships with their parents, goals and aspirations, personal growth and development, time allocation, and perceptions of campus climate.

### Sample Characteristics

The gender distribution of this sample was 41% male and 59% female. Students in this study represented a diverse array of ethnicities; among the largest racial/ethnic groups were White/Caucasian (35.9%), Chinese/Chinese American (17.5%), Chicano/Mexican American (9.5%), and Pilipino/Filipino/Pacific Islander (5.3%); each of the remaining eleven racial/ethnic categories (including "Decline to State" and "Other") held 5% or fewer students. Over 37% of students indicated that they were from a "middle-class" background, compared to 28.7% of students from "upper-middle or middle professional" backgrounds, 21.4% indicated a "work-class" background, 10.3% indicated a "low-income or poor" background, and 2% of students identified themselves as "wealthy." The majority of students (61.8%) had either junior- or senior-class standing.

Participants of this study also varied by parent immigration status and education. The parents of nearly half (49.5%) of the participants were born outside of the United States. More than 40% of students had parents who were born in the United States, while the final 10% had one parent born in the United States. When it comes to parental

education, responses indicated that mothers and fathers of the students in this study achieved comparable levels of education within the United States, with some noteworthy differences. Slightly higher percentages of mothers received a high school degree than fathers (19.9 versus 17.2), while bachelor degree attainment for both parents was nearly identical (23.5% of mothers and 23.3% of fathers). Postbaccalaureate attainment of fathers exceeded that of mothers for students in this study. Nearly 18% of fathers obtained a master's degree in the United States compared to 15.1% of mothers. The pattern was amplified at the doctoral level where degree attainment of fathers was 6.5 percentage points higher than mothers (10.0% versus 3.5% respectively). In a study of response rates and response bias for the 2006 UCUES, Chatman (2007) identified very little nonresponse bias and concluded that the UCUES respondent sample was a good reflection of the UC undergraduate population (Chatman, 2007).

## Description of Variables

### *Parental Involvement in College*

The literature review presented earlier in the article described the varied ways in which today's parents can be involved in the lives of college students. The current investigation focused on two indicators of parental engagement: involvement in the academic spheres of the college environment and parental communication with college students.

### Academic Involvement

The key variables of interest to this study assessed parent involvement in the academic dimensions of college students' lives. These items were drawn from the Student Development Module of the UCUES. Students were asked to rate their agreement on a scale from one to six (strongly disagree, disagree, somewhat disagree, somewhat agree, agree, strongly agree) with the following statements about their parents' academic involvement during the current academic term:

- (1) My parents and I discuss what classes I should take.
- (2) My parents and I discuss what I learned in class.
- (3) I am pursuing, or considering, a major I don't like in order to please my parents.

- (4) My parents are very interested in my academic progress.
- (5) My parents stress the importance of getting good grades.
- (6) My parents ask about my friends or nonacademic activities at UC.

The first three items reflect parent involvement in academic decision-making, while the latter three reflect involvement in general and academic well-being. Therefore, the items measuring parental involvement in academics would not typically be considered 'hovering' behaviors (since more "intrusive" parenting behaviors are not addressed on the survey), but are nevertheless behaviors that may vary across student and parent demographics.

### Parental Contact

The second dimension of parental engagement measured in this study was parental contact. The final set of items in the Student Development Module asked students to specify the frequency of contact they had with at least one of their parents during the 2005–06 academic year. Modes of contact assessed in this study included phone, text message, e-mail or instant message, and in person. Students reported their responses to these items using the following scale: 1 = *Not at all*, 2 = *Once a month or less*, 3 = *A few times a month*, 4 = *About once a week*, 5 = *A few times a week*, and 6 = *Usually every day*.

One caveat about the survey instrument is that it did not allow students to distinguish between the involvement behaviors of their mother versus their father or indicate whether they were from a single-parent home. Therefore, while some students may have reported the average involvement of both parents, others may have reported the involvement of one parent or the parent who was most involved. In addition, the instrument captured a snapshot of the various modes of communication between today's college students and their parents. Recent technologies enabling social networking and micro-blogging sites (e.g., Twitter and Facebook) were not assessed at the time of the survey.

### *Background Variables*

Our desire to assess group differences in parental involvement guided our choice of variables. These included: race/ethnicity, gender, social

class, parental immigrant status, and year in school. We were further interested in examining whether parental engagement differed for commuter and residential students. However, we were not able to perform these analyses with these data. To assess the influence of race/ethnicity on parental engagement behaviors, the original sixteen categories included on the survey were recoded slightly due to restrictions in sample size, such that the Pilipino/Filipino and Pacific Islander ethnic categories were combined into one category. Social class was also used to assess differences in parent involvement. Students reported the social class level that best described their upbringing from the following categories: *wealthy, upper-middle or professional-middle, middle-class, working-class, and low-income or poor*. We chose to focus on social class rather than income because we are interested in students' subjective understandings of the lifestyle in which they grew up rather than students' estimations of their family income, which some students—specifically, Hispanic students—tend to overestimate (Olivas, 1986, as cited in Gonyea, 2005). Parental involvement was also assessed across students' year in school, gender, and parent immigration status (U.S born or foreign born).

### Data Analysis Procedures

We first examined descriptive statistics on individual survey items to provide an overview of student perceptions of parent involvement in academics and parental contact. We then developed summary measures for these constructs to uncover the ways in which parental academic involvement and contact differed across groups. *T* tests and ANOVAs allowed us to define statistically significant differences across gender, year in school, social class, parental immigrant status, and race/ethnicity.

## Results

This section will first provide a descriptive understanding of parental involvement for the sample as a whole using individual survey items. This section will then provide a discussion of subgroup differences in *Academic Involvement* and *Parental Contact*.

## Descriptive Statistics

### *Academic Involvement*

Table 1 presents the distribution of responses to the six parent involvement items. Frequencies of parent involvement behaviors revealed that the greatest levels of involvement were in promoting students' academic and personal well-being. The majority of students "agree" or "strongly agree" that their parents were interested in their academic progress (66.6%) and stressed good grades (59.7%). More than half of students (54%) also agreed or strongly agreed that their parents were interested in their out-of-class experiences, specifically their UC friends and nonacademic activities.

**Table 1**  
**Distribution of Academic Involvement Items**

	Percentage rating...					Strongly agree	Mean (SD)
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Disagree somewhat	Agree somewhat	Agree		
Parent(s) ask about UC friends and nonacademic activities	9.35	6.61	7.96	22.05	31.60	22.43	4.27 (1.53)
Parent(s) influenced choice of major	58.54	22.48	9.22	6.30	2.30	1.15	1.75 (1.12)
Parent(s) interested in academic progress	3.87	3.31	5.72	20.46	34.13	32.53	4.75 (1.27)
Parent(s) involved in choice of courses	33.49	26.79	11.46	16.47	8.06	3.74	2.5 (1.48)
Parent(s) involved in discussing course material	19.67	16.78	12.98	27.73	16.90	5.94	3.23 (1.55)
Parent(s) stress good grades	4.87	4.97	8.23	22.30	29.87	29.76	4.57 (1.37)

Note. Responses were coded on a scale of 1 (Strongly disagree) to 6 (Strongly agree).



While the data suggested that parents expressed moderate interest in their children's academic well-being, parental involvement in academic decision-making was less common. Specifically, the percentage of students agreeing or strongly agreeing that their parents influenced their choice of academic major or selection of particular courses was 3.4% and 11.8%, respectively.

### *Parental Contact*

Table 2 reveals how often students communicated with their parents via different modes of communication: telephone, text messaging, e-mail/instant messaging, or in person. Although all four modes of communication were used to contact parents, frequencies of contact suggested that some forms of contact were more popular than others. Our data suggested that parent-child interactions took place mostly by telephone, with one-quarter (24.9%) of students speaking with their parents every day by phone. An additional 30.7% of students reported speaking with their parents via telephone a few times a week, revealing that over half of students were in very frequent phone contact with their parents.

Forms of weekly contact that require access to and the use of advanced technology were less popular for our sample, probably due to a lack of *parental* use of such technologies at the time of the survey. Only 23.5% of students reported text messaging with their parents at any time; and among those who did, it was not done on a very frequent basis. Contact by e-mail was more common than by text messaging, as nearly two-thirds of students (62.3%) reported communicating with their parents via e-mail. However, as with text messaging, students who did e-mail with their parents tended to do so fairly infrequently (less than half of those who e-mail their parents do so on at least a weekly basis). In-person contact was also infrequent for the students in this study, with only 14% reporting seeing their parents at least a few times a week.

## Group Comparisons

### *Academic Involvement Scale*

In an effort to examine the extent and types of parental involvement in the academic realm of the college experience, and how this varies by different student subgroups, we first conducted an exploratory

**Table 2**  
**Distribution of Parental Contact Items**

<b>Contact with parent(s) via:</b>	<b>Percentage rating...</b>						<b>Mean (SD)</b>
	<b>Not at all</b>	<b>Once a month or less</b>	<b>A few times a month</b>	<b>About once a week</b>	<b>A few times a week</b>	<b>Usually every day</b>	
Telephone	2.20	4.30	12.43	25.45	30.67	24.95	4.53 (1.23)
Text messages on cell phone	76.53	5.83	4.40	4.09	5.25	3.89	1.67 (1.40)
E-mail or instant message	37.66	14.99	18.36	12.65	12.33	4.02	2.59 (1.57)
In person	10.75	44.37	21.13	9.74	6.02	7.99	2.80 (1.38)

*Note.* Responses coded from 1 (Not at all) to 6 (Usually every day).

factor analysis (principal component analysis with varimax rotation) on the parent involvement variables within the Student Development module. Only variables with factor loadings of .50 or higher were included in the analysis. This analysis produced four factors, though only one made conceptual sense and had practical utility, given the focus of this study. The four survey items that comprised the *Academic Involvement Scale* were: parent(s) are involved in choice of courses, parent(s) are involved in discussing course material, parent(s) are interested in student's academic progress, and parent(s) stress good grades (see Table 3). The Cronbach's alpha for the scale was .71, which indicates moderate reliability for this factor. Given that the factor scores were standardized, the mean score for the scale is zero with a range of -2.71 to 2.09 (in standard deviation units).

### *Parental Contact Measure*

We also developed a measure of students' frequency of contact with their parents. This variable reflected students' highest frequency of parental contact (ranging on a 6-point scale from 1 "not at all" to 6 "usually every day"), regardless of the mode of contact (phone, text messages, e-mail, and in-person). For example, a student would receive a score of 1 only if he or she responded "not at all" to each of the four modes of contact, and a student responding "usually every day" to any of the four modes of contact would receive a score of 6. We then standardized this measure so that we could directly compare

**Table 3**  
**Items, Factor Loadings, and Reliabilities for**  
**Academic Involvement Scale (Alpha = .71)**

Items	Factor Loadings
Parents involved in choice of courses	0.81
Parents involved in discussing course material	0.75
Parents interested in academic progress	0.73
Parents stress good grades	0.65

group differences in frequency of parental contact with our parental academic involvement measure. Scores on parental contact ranged from -3.50 to 1.12 (in standard deviation units).

*T* tests and ANOVAs were performed with the *Academic Involvement* scale and *Parental Contact* measure to investigate group differences in parental engagement with college students. These analyses revealed significant differences in parent involvement behaviors by students' gender, year in school, social class, parental immigrant status, and race/ethnicity. The analyses are organized by the student characteristics to compare group differences in academic involvement to that of parental contact.

### Gender

*T* tests were conducted to assess whether students' ratings of parental involvement in their academics and frequency of contact with parents varied by gender. Female college students reported greater parental involvement in their academics than did their male counterparts ( $M_{\text{female}} = .04$ ;  $M_{\text{male}} = -.06$ ),  $t(10743) = -5.41$ ,  $p < .01$ . Females also reported more frequent contact with parents than males ( $M_{\text{female}} = .15$ ;  $M_{\text{male}} = -.22$ ),  $t(10726) = -19.50$ ,  $p < .01$ . These results demonstrated that the gender difference in parental contact was larger than that of parental involvement in academics. In other words, male and female students differed more in how *often* they communicated with their parents than in whether academics were the subject of their conversations.

Year in School

Next we conducted one-way ANOVAs to investigate differences in perceived parental engagement by students' year in school. Results showed that students early in their college experience (first-years and sophomores) believed their parents to be more involved in their academics than did juniors and seniors. Ratings of academic involvement were significantly higher for first-year students than for juniors and seniors, but not sophomores  $F(3, 10750) = 73.30, p < .05$ . The differences were most obvious at the extremes, where first-year students' rated academic involvement is .35 standard units higher than that of seniors ( $M_{\text{first-year}} = .20; M_{\text{senior}} = -.15$ ). Group differences in parental contact followed a similar pattern, with college seniors reporting the lowest amount of parental contact compared to their peers  $F(3, 10733) = 5.86, p < .05$ . However, first-year students, sophomores, and juniors were not statistically distinct from one another in terms of the amount of contact they had with parents throughout the academic year ( $M_{\text{first-year}} = .04; M_{\text{sophomores}} = .06; M_{\text{juniors}} = -.01$ ).

Social Class

One-way ANOVAs were also conducted to examine whether patterns of parental engagement varied by students' self-reported social class. Results of these analyses showed that students from lower social class backgrounds reported lower levels of parental involvement with respect to academics and less frequent contact throughout the academic year than did students from higher social class backgrounds (see Table 4).

**Table 4**  
**Parental Engagement Differences by Social Class**

Engagement	Social Class					F	Bonferonni Contrasts
	Poor (n = 1,103)	Working Class (n = 2,289)	Middle Class (n = 4,027)	Upper-Middle Class (n = 3,073)	Wealthy (n = 211)		
Academic	-.60	-.24	.06	.30	.32	226.53*	W, U > P, WC, M
Contact	-.19	.01	.00	.04	.26	15.33*	W > P, WC, M, U

Note. Ns = 10703 - 10687. Means are reported in standard deviation units. \*  $p < .05$ .

Similar to the patterns observed for year in school (and unlike the pattern observed for gender), social class differences were greater with respect to academically oriented parental engagement than for parental contact. For example, average levels of parental academic involvement for poor students was .60 units *below* the mean compared to wealthy students whose average was .32 units *above* the mean, creating an overall difference of .92. Comparatively, the absolute difference between poor and wealthy students in their ratings of parental contact was .45 units.

### Parental Immigration Status

This variable assessed parents' country of origin at three levels: both parents were born in the United States, only one parent was born in the United States, and both parents were foreign born. One-way ANOVA results revealed that parental academic involvement was significantly lower among students whose parents were both foreign born ( $M = -.11$ ), in comparison to those with at least one parent born in the United States,  $F(2, 10394) = 66.67, p < .001$ . There were no significant differences in parental academic involvement between those with one parent who was born in the United States and those with both parents born in the United States; both groups reported above-average levels of parental involvement ( $M_{\text{both U.S.}} = .11; M_{\text{one U.S.}} = .15$ ). An opposite pattern was revealed for parental contact, in that students of foreign-born parents reported above-average contact with parents ( $M = .05$ ), while students with at least one U.S.-born parent reported below-average levels of parental contact ( $M_{\text{both U.S.}} = -.05; M_{\text{one U.S.}} = -.00$ ). The ANOVA results revealed that parental contact was significantly greater among students with foreign-born parents only in comparison to students for whom both parents were born in the U.S.,  $F(2, 10380) = 12.11, p < .001$ .

### Race/Ethnicity

Figure 1 presents standardized means for the academic involvement and parental contact by students' race/ethnicity. One-way analyses of variance revealed that East Indian/Pakistani college students perceived significantly higher levels of academic involvement and contact with parents than students with other racial/ethnic backgrounds  $F(13,$

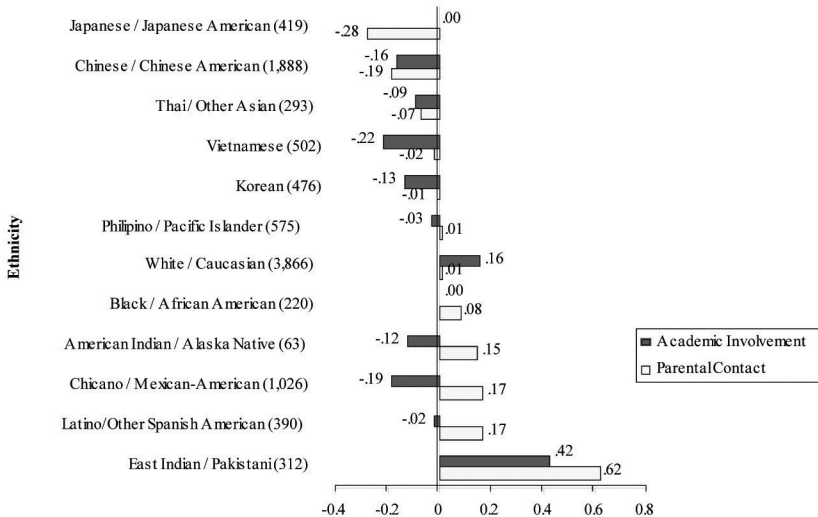
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1. Racial/ethnic categories 'Other' and 'Decline to State' were eliminated from this figure.

10746-10729) = 22.21 – 21.22,  $p < .05$ .<sup>1</sup> In contrast, students from other Asian ethnic groups (Japanese, Chinese, Thai/Other Asian, Vietnamese, and Korean) reported below-average levels on at least one of the of parental involvement measures.

Figure 1 further demonstrates an observable mismatch between ratings of academic involvement and parental contact for some racial/ethnic groups. For example, Chicano/Mexican American college students reported higher-than-average levels of parental contact ( $M = .17$ ), but lower-than-average levels of parental academic involvement ( $M = -.19$ ), resulting in an absolute difference of .36. A similar absolute difference (.37) was observed between perceived academic involvement and parental contact of American Indian/Alaska Native students. Japanese/Japanese American students had average levels of academic involvement ( $M = .00$ ), but significantly lower levels of overall parental contact ( $M = -.28$ ) compared to all other ethnic backgrounds except Chinese/Chinese American, Thai/Other Asian, and American Indian/Alaska Native ( $p < .05$ ). These distinctions will be addressed in the next section.

**Figure 1**  
**Racial/Ethnic Differences in Parental Engagement**



## Summary and Discussion

This study examines the level of parental engagement in the lives of undergraduates in the UC system on two dimensions—academics and overall contact—and how it varies by student characteristics such as gender, year in school, social class, parental immigrant status, and race/ethnicity. These results contribute to our understanding of the extent to which parents are involved in college students' lives, and provide evidence of the fact that the phenomenon of “helicopter” parenting does not accurately reflect the behaviors of all parents.

Overall, students report fairly high levels of parental interest in their academic progress and success, though fewer students indicate that their parents were involved in their selection of particular courses or a program of study. Thus, while students view their parents as supportive of their academic endeavors, they generally do not view them as encroaching on their academic decision making in college. This is not to suggest that parents and their college-age children are disconnected; indeed, the vast majority of students report communicating with their parents several times a week or more, primarily via telephone.

Nevertheless, the study did reveal moderate variation in parental involvement observed across students' year in school (with declining involvement as students progress through college). Differences were most notable at the extremes, with college seniors reporting less frequent contact and lower levels of academic involvement from parents than did first-year students. This pattern is consistent with prior research and theory focusing on parent-child interactions during the transition to college and young adulthood. Tinto's (1988, 1993) theory of student persistence suggests that successful integration into the college environment begins with varying degrees of disassociation between the student and past relationships and then progresses towards the “establishing competent membership in the social and intellectual communities of college life” (Tinto, 1988, p. 446). Assumedly, first-year college students would have closer bonds and associations with family as they have had fewer opportunities than seniors to establish new social networks that they can rely on for academic advice and support. First-year students may also feel a greater need to ‘check in’ or keep in touch with parents because of the

recent move outside of the household, compared to college seniors who are more likely to have lived apart from parents for some period of time. A limitation of the data is that they are cross-sectional and not longitudinal, which limits our ability to truly determine whether declining parental involvement can be attributed to students' integration into the college environment.

Variation by gender was fairly small in terms of parental involvement in academics (with women reporting slightly higher levels of parental academic involvement), but more notable with respect to parental contact. This is consistent with previous research describing female college students as perceiving higher levels of social support for college attendance than their male counterparts (Elkins, Braxton, & James, 2000) and perceiving greater connectedness with their parents. Further, a study of parental attachment, separation-individuation, and ethnic identity conducted with a multiethnic sample found that female college students perceive higher levels of emotional support from their parents and caregiver sensitivity compared to males (Kalsner & Pistole, 2003). Results of the present study suggest that women's stronger sense of ongoing attachment to parents contributes to their greater level of communication with parents.

Wealthy and upper-middle/professional middle-class students report significantly higher levels of parental engagement than students from less affluent backgrounds. Social and cultural capital theory provides a useful lens for exploring these differences. In general, increases in parental income have been associated with increased perceptions of parental support (Elkins, Braxton, & James, 2000). Theoretical scholarship suggests that parents with greater educational attainment have a greater understanding of and access to social networks that employ the strategies necessary to navigate the higher education environment, the role it plays in promoting social mobility, and its role in personal development than do parents who have little to no postsecondary experience (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). More importantly, college-educated parents may have greater familiarity with "accessing and understanding information and attitudes relevant to making beneficial decisions about such things as the importance of completing a college degree, which college to attend, and what kinds of academic and social choices to make while in attendance" (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, p. 252).



While the data in this study do not reveal the topic of conversations between affluent college students and their parents, it is likely that the expertise of affluent parents in navigating the college academic environment affords a great deal of discussion about courses, exams, and future career plans.

Students with parents who were both foreign-born reported below-average involvement from parents in academic matters, but above-average parental contact. This finding seems consistent with prior K-12 research indicating that immigrant parents might be less involved in their children's education than their U.S.-born counterparts (Tierney & Auerbach, 2005). The fact that these parents do have such high levels of contact with their children, however, indicates that there is an opportunity for more conversations about students' academic lives, should that be desired. Further research is needed to determine whether students of foreign-born parents are at a disadvantage because of this lack of communication with parents about academic matters.

This study has also revealed significant racial/ethnic differences in parental involvement. These distinctions raise two important discussions regarding parent-student child communication and the importance of disaggregating racial groups for research purposes. First, analyses related to race/ethnic differences in parental engagement produced inconsistent patterns with regard to parental academic involvement and contact for some ethnic groups. In particular, above-average levels of contact between Mexican American, Latino/Other Spanish, Japanese/Japanese American, and American Indian/Alaska Native students were paired with below-average ratings of parental involvement in their academics. This raises several questions about the nature of parent-child communications during the college years. First, what kinds of discussions are these students having with their parents? To what extent do students discuss academics with their parents? According to the NSSE (2007), college students talk with their parents about personal issues, their academic performance, and family matters. The current investigation focuses solely on the frequency of communication between college students and their parents; however, future research should explore other aspects of parent-college student communication like disclosure of

academic information and supportiveness, and how they influence students' perceptions of parental involvement.

The current investigation further contributes to a recent trend in higher education research by disaggregating research findings related to the experiences of Latinos and Asian Americans by ethnicity. Findings from this study suggest that East Indian/Pakistani parents are more engaged in the academic experiences and keep in closer contact with their college-going children than parents with East and Southeast Asian backgrounds, a finding that would not be visible without disaggregation by ethnicity. Socioeconomic circumstances of East Indian and Pakistani individuals in the United States can shed light on these trends. According to the 2000 Census, individuals with Asian Indian and Pakistani origins have the highest degree attainment among all Asians age 25 and older (Reeves & Bennett, 2004), with 63.9% and 54.3% of the respective populations having a bachelor's degree or higher. Furthermore, Asian Indian and Pakistani individuals are less likely to be employed in service positions than East and Southeast Asians. Therefore, East Indian and Pakistani parents may be transferring valuable strategies for academic success and may inquire more about their students' academic well-being than parents with other ethnic origins because of their exposure to American higher education. This explanation is reasonable, considering that one-half of the items in the academic involvement scale relate to academic decision making.

For some students, parental involvement in academics (or lack thereof) may result from language barriers and cultural values that place greater emphasis on other aspects of students' well-being. For example, Mena and Guardia (2007) discussed how involvement among Latino parents often reflects a concern for the overall safety and welfare of their college-going offspring, rather than a primary focus on academics. Furthermore, college students from immigrant families may have different priorities and value systems regarding home and university life than their parents (Kalsner & Pistole, 2003). Such differences could create stressful situations for students who, in the college environment, value independence and self-reliance; but in the home environment, are expected to respect and accept the advice of elders. Previous research has shown this to be the case for students

from minority cultures who often feel high parental expectations and a general lack of family understanding about the demands of the competitive college environment (Smedley, Myers, & Harrell, 1993). Consequently, some students with immigrant backgrounds may not consider their families as reliable sources of support or guidance when it comes to college (Kenny & Perez, 1996).

## Implications for Research and Practice

The descriptive analyses presented in this study provide some indication of the extent to which parents are perceived to be involved in the academic dimensions of the student experience. While this paper has demonstrated variations across different student subgroups, most notably by social class, parental immigrant status, and race/ethnicity, the implications of these results are unclear without knowing more about the *influence* of this type of parental involvement. Indeed, levels of parental involvement that may be considered “excessive” for some students could for other students represent an important source of academic and social support. We lack an understanding of which forms of involvement are most beneficial, under which circumstances, and for which students. For that reason, the next phase of this study examines how parental academic involvement relates to students’ personal, academic, and social development during college, as well as whether and how that relationship varies by race/ethnicity, social class, and gender.

What this research does reveal, however, is that parental involvement and contact in the lives of college students is not uniform across all groups. While most of the rhetoric about the parents of college students focuses on their overinvolvement, this study reveals that this conception of parents is not applicable to all parents. Indeed, previous research and conversations about parental engagement have focused on the practices of White, middle-class parents (Auerbach, 2007; Laureau & Weininger, 2008). This study, therefore, offers a layered understanding of parental involvement and contact that is more appropriate for the diversity of today’s college-going population. This area of research has important implications for campus practice, especially at a time of increased parental involvement in the lives of their college-going children. Student affairs professionals would

benefit from a more nuanced understanding of the role of parents and how that may depend on family background, class, race/ethnicity, gender, and myriad other factors that influence how students and their parents interact with each other during college. Colleges certainly cannot advise all students and parents in the same way, as some students would benefit from greater parental involvement, others from less. An awareness of these varying dynamics would help practitioners to develop orientation programs for new students and their parents that are mindful of these distinctions.

This study revealed that parental involvement in academic matters was less frequent among men; juniors and seniors; students of lower socioeconomic statuses; students of foreign-born parents; and Mexican-American, Latino/Other Spanish, Japanese/Japanese American, and American Indian/Alaska Native students. Further research is needed to determine whether these differences in parental involvement are creating problems for these students, or if the current involvement levels among these students are actually appropriate in that they are either beneficial or have no effect on student outcomes. Professionals working in specific units such as orientation, counseling, and residential life also would benefit from greater knowledge about optimal parent-student relations during the college years. If it is determined that parents should become even more invested in students' academic lives, student affairs professionals can bridge this gap by offering strategies and information to both students and parents—or, perhaps, can make sure that these students have other sources of support and conversation regarding their academic lives. Ultimately, institutions (and their students) may be in a position to benefit from parents' renewed interest in students' college experiences, but only if they are equipped with more information about the conditions and consequences of this growing phenomenon.

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