Redefining Parental Involvement: Working Class and Low-Income Students' Relationship to Their Parents During the First Semester of College

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Redefining Parental Involvement: Working Class and Low-Income Students’ Relationship to Their Parents During the First Semester of College

Dissertation

by

Katherine Lynk Wartman

submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

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Redefining Parental Involvement in Higher Education: Working Class and Low-Income Students’ Relationship to Their Parents During the First Semester of College

by

Katherine Lynk Wartman

Dr. Karen Arnold, Dissertation Chair

ABSTRACT

“Parental involvement,” a term long part of the K-12 lexicon is now included in the higher education vocabulary. Many college administrators today associate “parental involvement” with a certain pattern of behavior and describe the contemporary traditional-aged student-parent relationship with negative examples. Dubbed by the media as “helicopter parents,” this sub-population of overly involved mothers and fathers has come to represent all parents of college students, even though these examples are largely socioeconomic class-based.

This qualitative phenomenological study considered the lived experience of the relationship between working class and low-income students and their parents during the first semester of college. All students in the sample were enrolled at four-year colleges and had attended an alternative high school where parental involvement was supported and encouraged. Students (n=6) participated in three open-ended, qualitative interviews and their parents (n=7) participated in two.

What constitutes “parental involvement” for working class and low-income students and parents in the context of higher education? This study found that the parents had positive, emotionally supportive relationships with their students. Students were autonomous and functionally independent, but emotionally interdependent with parents. Parents in the study did
not have a direct connection to their child’s college or university; students served as intermediaries in this parent-institution relationship. Therefore, this sample did not fit the current definition of parental involvement in higher education. As colleges and universities implement parent services as a reaction to the phenomenon of parental involvement, they need to consider alternative pathways for communicating with parents from lower socioeconomic groups, many of whom have not attended college.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As “Manny,” one student participant in this study noted, he was not the only one responsible for his success at college. It was a collective success that he shared with those who supported him in his efforts and experiences, especially his family. When he was talking about who was responsible for his success in our interview, he said, “It’s everybody that’s with me…it’s a collective me.” The same can be said for my conducting and writing this dissertation study. It is not just me, but “everybody… with me” who are responsible for this final product.

Who’s with me? First of all, my greatest thanks goes to my “co-researchers,” the student and parent participants in this study. Thank you for welcoming me into your lives and your homes, sharing your powerful stories, and allowing me to tell them. I have learned so much from each of you.

To the staff at the Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical Center, particularly the five advisors with whom I worked, thank you for welcoming me into your classrooms where I felt more like a participant than an observer. To Ben Castleman and Carmen Perez, thank you for your friendship, your incredible support of this project, and above all your tireless efforts to help low-income students reach college “one student at a time.”

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I was helped a great deal by my own family, both the Lynks and Wartmans, through their unconditional love and support. To my mother Bev and mother-in-law Sue, especially, for sharing in my passion and enthusiasm for my work as well as engaging in the tedious task of editing my drafts.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

“Parental involvement,” a term long part of the K-12 lexicon is now included in the higher education vocabulary. Many college administrators today associate “parental involvement” with a certain pattern of behavior. They describe the contemporary traditional-aged student-parent relationship with extreme examples: a father who contacts the college late at night to report a mouse discovered in his daughter’s room, a parent’s complaint about a roommate who snores, anger over a grade on a paper “my son worked so hard on” (Coburn, 2006, p. 9). Dubbed by the media as “helicopter parents,” a term originally used by Cline and Fay (1990) to describe an “ineffective parenting style” in their book Parenting With Love and Logic: Teaching Children Responsibility, this sub-population of overly involved mothers and fathers has come to represent all parents of college students, even though these examples are largely socioeconomic class-based.

But is the image of the hovering helicopter parent the most accurate portrayal of the relationship between parents and their children in college? What about students and parents in the lowest socioeconomic class groups? The media’s front page stories and the dean’s office water cooler tales of parent behavior would have the public believe that all parents of all college students from all socioeconomic classes act in this manner. And although parental involvement at the college level certainly takes extreme forms in some cases, examples like those above do not seem to tell the whole story, especially the part about the experience of low-income and working class students and their parents, who did not go to college themselves.

Many faculty, staff, and administrators in higher education consider parental involvement alarming, based on their concerns that parental involvement interferes with students’
development to become autonomous individuals. Therefore, at some colleges and universities, administrators are actively fending off parental involvement, even to the point of assigning “parent bouncers” to prevent parents from accompanying students to course registration at orientation (Shellenbarger, 2005). At other institutions, however, administrators have determined that if parents are going to be involved, the institution should define and direct that involvement. These schools have introduced parent relations offices with the goal of providing communications directed to parents, scheduling family-focused events, and responding to parent concerns (Wartman & Savage, 2008). In general, the college is unsure about how to define “parental involvement” and how to react to it. Parents in the context of higher education are primarily viewed from a negative, deficit perspective.

The discourse surrounding this phenomenon of parental involvement in higher education seems to be predominantly about students from the middle and upper areas of the socioeconomic spectrum. The experience of students from lower socioeconomic class groups, especially those whose parents did not go to college, is lesser known. A sharp thematic contrast emerges when the variable of socioeconomic class is introduced into the discussion of parental involvement. Student affairs administrators have expressed concerns about the ways that parents are currently involved in their students’ lives. Yet when one looks to the texts that describe low-income students in the context of higher education, specifically access to it, parental involvement is differently defined- another message is being sent: parental involvement is beneficial to students and there should be more of it (Attinasi, 1989; Auerbach, 2004; Hossler, Schmidt & Vesper, 1999; Perna, 2002; Stage & Hossler, 2000). Parental involvement in the context of college access as well as K-12 education is viewed from an additive, positive perspective.
What role does socioeconomic class play in the relationship between parents and college students? Through interviews and her work as a participant-observer in two different first grade classrooms, one “working class,” and one “middle class,” Lareau (1987) found that the level of parental involvement in a child’s education varied depending on socioeconomic class. Is the same true for higher education? How does the level of parental involvement of working class and low-income parents compare to the media’s description of parental involvement? The buzzing helicopter cannot possibly serve as a metaphor for the behaviors of all parents of college students from all socioeconomic class levels. Which parents are really making all of the noise? In order to truly understand the phenomenon of parental involvement for all parents and students, it is important to look at the relationship between parents and students from the lowest socioeconomic classes.

Therefore in this dissertation study, I plan to examine the following research questions:

1. What is the lived experience of the relationship between working class and low-income students and their parents, particularly during the first semester of college, and specifically for students who attended a high school where parental involvement is supported and encouraged?

2. What constitutes “parental involvement” for working class and low-income students and parents in the context of higher education?

Significance of the Study

Why is it important to study the experience of working class and low-income students and their parents during the first-semester of college? By the time these students matriculate at their chosen four-year institutions, they will have made it through most of the college access pipeline, but they will not yet have come out the other end. These students will have completed
the first four of five critical steps to obtaining a college degree: 1) having educational experiences that academically prepare them for college in middle or elementary school 2) making plans to go to college while they are still in high school 3) taking the necessary steps towards college admissions, such as taking standardized tests and filling out applications 4) enrolling in the college of their choice. What remains is: 5) persisting until degree completion (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2002).

Persistence in higher education is a challenge for students from the lowest socioeconomic class groups. These students graduate from college at much lower rates than those from middle and upper income groups (Gladieux, 2004). Within five years of beginning college at a four-year institution, 41% of students from the richest quartile and 6% of students from the poorest quartile receive a bachelor’s degree (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1996 cited in Kahlenberg, 2004). In addition, these students are underrepresented in higher education, especially at selective colleges. Of all first-year college entrants, almost half of the low-income students attend community colleges, compared to just one in ten high-income students (Kahlenberg, 2004). Students from higher socioeconomic classes at four-year institutions outnumber students from lower socioeconomic class backgrounds by a rate of four to one (Terenzini et al., 2001). Higher education appears to be more stratified when it comes to student socioeconomic status than it was 30 years ago (Astin & Oceguera, 2004).

Why aren’t students from these backgrounds fully represented in the academy? Higher education has a history of excluding certain groups, such as Jewish students, Black students and female students (Karabel, 2005). Students from low socioeconomic class backgrounds are the last marginalized group in higher education. Even though institutions have made efforts at
inclusion, the definition of “merit” upon which admissions decisions are made, reflects the distribution of power in the larger society (Karabel, 2005).

What happens to working class and low-income students once they enroll in college? What do we know about their collegiate experiences? Most of what appears in the literature on this topic almost exclusively concerns the role of financial factors (Terenzini et al., 2001). These factors are crucial to students’ ability to attend and complete college, particularly those students from low parental income and educational backgrounds (St. John, 1990). However, there is literature that suggests that financial aid, on its own, does not have the ability to fully explain why students from the lowest socioeconomic groups persist in college. Students’ experience after they enroll in college seems to play an even more important role in their persistence, performance, and degree completion than their ability to pay (Terenzini et al., 2001).

What about parents’ role in their students’ college experience? Parents play a crucial role in the college choice process for students from the lowest socioeconomic classes students. For example, parental education level as well as parental encouragement and support are key factors in whether low-income students will attend college (Bedsworth, Colby & Doctor, 2006; Hossler & Stage, 1992; Hossler, Schmidt & Vesper, 1999; Terenzini et al., 2001). Where is the role of parents in the final steps of the higher education access pipeline?

When considering Terenzini et al.’s (2001) model of college process and outcomes, for example, one can see the shift that occurs over the college access pipeline concerning the relationship between students and parents. “Parent SES” appears as a factor under “precollege characteristics,” and “family” is an “external factor” related to “institutional choice” (Terenzini et al., 2001, p. 18). Yet, in terms of “college experiences,” parents are not mentioned. In the
context of access literature, parents disappear from the picture when it is time to talk about persistence.

The institutional response to the reported phenomenon of parental involvement has been primarily to implement programs and services for parents. Since the year 2000, there have been many changes in these parent services. For example, in 1999, a survey of colleges and universities indicated that most parent offices provided just one or two parent services or events. At that time, 43% of schools responding to the national survey offered a Parent or Family Weekend, and a third offered parent orientation, but only 16% offered both. In 2007, on the other hand, almost all schools that provide parent services offered both a Parent or Family Weekend and a parent orientation (95% offer both); 75% also offer family events on move-in day when students first arrive on campus. Given a list of 14 common parent services, 96% indicated they provided five or more of those services. One of the most popular services involved fundraising (Savage, 2007; Wartman & Savage, 2008).

Table 1

What parent services does your office/does your institution provide for parents?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service</th>
<th>1999</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2007</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent/Family Wknd</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>74.4%</td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>94.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent Orientation</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>61.0%</td>
<td>97%</td>
<td>95.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newsletter</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>54.9%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>54.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents Council</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>36.6%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>65.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fundraising</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>43.9%</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>85.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welcome Wk/Move-In</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>73.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Handbook 31% 12.2% 75% 78.6%

Note: Surveys were conducted with schools that have parent services; 1999 survey listed only six programs or services; 2007 survey listed 14.

On the national level, administrators across institutions are working together to share strategies for working with parents. A group of individuals who work with parent programming on college and university campuses has been meeting annually at the Administrators Promoting Parent Involvement (APPI) conference for the past thirteen years (Administrators Promoting Parent Involvement, 2008). In addition, in 2005, the student affairs professional organization NASPA launched its Parent and Family Relations Knowledge Community, which is dedicated to sharing best practices in parent programming as well as current and emerging research on parents (NASPA Parent and Family Relations, 2008). Parents themselves are also organizing on a national level. College Parents of America is a national membership association dedicated to advocating and to serving on behalf of current and future college parents. By paying the membership fee and joining the organization, parents receive benefits such as newsletters, access to online college planning tools, and dining and shopping discounts. There are over 70,000 members of College Parents of America (College Parents of America, 2008).

Only very recently have researchers produced empirical data on the parental involvement phenomenon. For example, The Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at UCLA amended its Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) instrument in 2007 to reflect students’ perspectives of parental involvement. The 2007 CIRP included six new questions about parental involvement. (These questions did not appear on the 2008 instrument.) Results showed that most students perceive the level of parental involvement in their lives to be “just right.” However, certain populations of students, specifically Latino students and first-
generation students, were more likely to report “too little” parental involvement (Pryor et al., 2007).

Definition of Terms

Parent/ Parenting

The term parent suggests a relationship with a child that includes acts of caring, nurturing, and protecting. The definition of parenting is assuming responsibility for the emotional, social, and physical growth and development of a child. Neither the role of parent nor the act of parenting requires that there be a biological relationship with the child (Bornstein, 1995; Smith, 1999).

Parental Involvement

The definition of parental involvement in both K-12 and higher education includes the institution. Parental involvement refers to how involved parents are in students’ lives and also how involved they are with the school (Connors & Epstein, 1995). The term “parental involvement” is differently defined in both higher education and in K-12 education. These terms have contextual meanings. Parental involvement in higher education refers to the recent phenomenon reported by student affairs administrators where parents have high amounts of contact with their student and with their student’s college or university, on their student’s behalf. Most of the behavior classified as parental involvement, and discourse surrounding the term, is socioeconomic class-based. In addition, parental involvement in higher education is usually considered from a deficit perspective; it is seen as hindering students’ development.

The term helicopter parent has quickly become part of the American educational vocabulary. Some college administrators even describe sub-species of the helicopter parent. For example, the Black Hawk parent- a helicopter parent whose behavior is not only excessive, but
in some cases unethical (Wikipedia, 2007). Other terms administrators use are lawnmower parents (mowing down anything in their way), submarine parents (hidden below the surface and popping up to attack when things go wrong), and stealth missiles (arriving under the radar and destroying any obstacles to their goals) (Wartman & Savage, 2008). These negative terms have been used widely to describe members of the current parent constituency in higher education.

On the other hand, parental involvement in K-12 education is usually considered from an additive perspective; it is beneficial to students’ development. In the K-12 context, parental involvement consists of parents taking responsibility for their sons and daughters’ education at home and forming positive connections with the school (Harvard Family Research Project, 2007). Parental involvement in K-12 education has been linked to many positive outcomes such as higher grades, school success, higher standardized test scores, higher self-esteem, social competence, reduction in substance use, aspiration for college, enrollment in college (Harvard Family Research Project, 2007). Parental involvement is an important component of No Child Left Behind. I consider parental involvement in college access to be in the same category as parental involvement in K-12 education because in the context of college access, parental involvement is also viewed from an additive perspective.

Socioeconomic Status

Since the discourse around parent involvement in higher education is largely socioeconomic class-based, and the behaviors associated with the phenomenon appear to be the behaviors of middle and upper-middle class parents, it is important to study students and parents in the two lowest socioeconomic class groups in order to examine the lived experience of their parent-student relationships. I call these socioeconomic classes working class and low income. I use the term “low income,” rather than poor because many people from low-income
backgrounds see this term as negative. The term low income is preferred by social activists (Leondar-Wright, 2005).

I chose to use socioeconomic class terms to reflect the difference between “income” and “wealth” (Terenzini et al., 2001). There are no clearly defined categories of socioeconomic class in the United States. However, I define socioeconomic status in terms of parental education level, parental occupation, and resources available to students. Socioeconomic status has become the preferred way to reflect one’s potential for social and economic mobility based on one’s background. This term is predominant in the college choice and persistence literature (Terenzini et al., 2001).

For the purposes of this study, working class parents have little or no college education; in particular they have not attended four-year institutions. They are typically be employed in jobs requiring manual labor that offer little flexibility (Hess, 2007; Leondar-Wright, 2005; Zweig, 2000). They have little or no net worth and for the most part either live in rental housing or a non-luxury home that they have saved for over time (Leondar-Wright, 2005). Low income refers to the bottom of the socioeconomic class spectrum. These families typically have no college education. They tend to live in substandard housing or are homeless. Their levels of income are below the poverty level, and they use public benefits such as welfare or charity. The children in low-income families meet the requirements for the Federal Free and Reduced Lunch Program (Leondar-Wright, 2005).

Parental education level is a key component to socioeconomic status as few parents of working class and low-income students have gone to college. In this study, first-generation refers to students who have parents whose highest level of education is high school or lower. If a student’s sibling, or a member of their parent’s generation, such as an aunt, uncle, or cousin,
attended college, I still consider that student to be first generation. In addition, I use the terms *socioeconomic class* and *socioeconomic status* interchangeably. When I refer to students and/or parents from the lowest socioeconomic classes, I am referring to students and/or parents from the working and low-income classes.

**Theoretical Grounding**

A number of important theoretical terms emerge in the discussion about working class and low-income college students and their parents. First of all, Bourdieu’s (1984) concept of *cultural capital* refers to the high status cultural signals of social and cultural selection processes (such as college admissions) (Bourdieu, 1984; Lamont & Lareau, 1988). Cultural capital is a product of both one’s upbringing and education (Bourdieu, 1984).

According to Coleman (1988), *social capital* refers to the possession of valuable relationships that aid in gaining other kinds of tangible and symbolic resources, such as human capital, or education. A key component of social capital in the education context is intergenerational closure, or the effective sharing of shared norms and values. Social capital is primarily passed from parents to children but students can also gain social capital from sources outside the family, such as school personnel (Coleman, 1988; Stanton-Salazar, 1997).

One problem with both of these theoretical bases is that they take a deficit approach, and refer to what the student is missing in the context of higher education, instead of what students and their families bring. The theory of *funds of knowledge*, which comes from the K-12 context, takes a non-deficit approach, suggesting that families’ homes and communities should primarily be considered in terms of the strengths and resources that they possess, rather than by what they lack (Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti, 2005). In many ways, funds of knowledge represents an alternative viewpoint of the capital present in low-income and working class families (Kiyama,
Experience With the Topic

How did I become aware of the phenomenon of parental involvement and develop interest in this topic? In 2002, I met with the president of a small college in the North East. She told me she thought that the way students and parents were interacting was changing and that institutions would be wise to react. She suggested I read *The Organization Kid*, by David Brooks, a tale of the overscheduled and over-managed students at the nation’s elite colleges. Then, she asked me to come and work for her and establish a parent and family relations program for her college.

While serving in this role, I experienced the phenomenon of parental involvement firsthand, both through the parents I spoke with on a daily basis, as well as through the team of administrators from across the campus that had direct contact with parents. It was my task to educate administrators, as well as faculty members, about why we might want to involve parents in a meaningful way and take a proactive stance towards defining parents’ role in relation to the institution.

Through my work, I became connected to the national network of administrators working with parents of college students, Administrators Promoting Parent Involvement (APPI). I was struck by how many of the services that other institutions across the country were implementing seemed to be targeted to and taken advantage of by parents from the middle and upper-middle classes. For example, many parent and family relations offices have dues that parents that must pay in order to gain membership, and some parent associations hold the expectation that parents will contribute to the annual fund. While parent contributions can be a worthwhile source of funding for institutional budgets, having this as a prerequisite will exclude some parents.
Around this same time, I was also volunteering at a summer access program for low-income students, as I had developed a passion for low-income students’ higher education access and persistence. In the conversations with these students about college and their aspirations, parents were noticeably absent. It was the students themselves who were learning how to fill out financial forms and trying to comprehend the standards for college acceptance. The absence of these parents stood in stark contrast to the phenomenon of parental involvement as the colleagues at my institution, the broader student affairs community, and the media described it. I had a hunch that there was a piece of the story about parental involvement that was not being told, or at the very least, not being heard.

Overview of the Study

In the following chapters, I will ground my dissertation study in the literature, discuss the methodology I used to carry out the research, share findings, and then suggest implications. Specifically, Chapter Two discusses the bodies of literature that pertains to the broad topic of parental involvement in higher education. Chapter Three outlines the study methodology including rationale, sampling, data collection, analysis, positionality, and limitations. I also discuss a pilot study that I conducted in order to test my interview questions. Chapter Four highlights the findings from this study on low-income and working class students’ relationship to their parents, particularly four dominant themes that emerged from the data. Chapter Five discusses these findings, suggesting implications for practice, theory, and further research.
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Overview

In order to better understand the role of “parental involvement” in higher education for all families, it is important to consider literature from a number of related content areas that captures the relationship between parent and student, and perhaps more importantly, the relationship between parent, student, and the institution. In the first part of the review, I will examine the status of the parent-student-institution dynamic today as well as the history of these relationships over time, including the rise and fall of in loco parentis. Next, I will look at the student development literature. I will explore the tension between traditional notions of separation-individuation and newer, relational theories. In the third section of the chapter, I will focus specifically on the literature that describes the experience of students and parents from the lowest socioeconomic classes.

History of the Student-Parent Relationship

Current Climate: “Helicopter Parents”

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, the popular image of the college parent is the mother drafting to-do lists, checking grades, reviewing bank statements, and logging into her child’s e-mail with the student’s personal password (ABC News, 2005). Human interest stories, positioned on the front pages of major media including The New York Times, present parents as being omniscient as they check in with cell phones and e-mail, edit their student’s paper, purchase their student’s textbooks, review course syllabi, help students find summer internships and jobs, and even guide their post-college career searches (Kantrowitz & Tyre, 2006; Lewin, 2003; Shellenbarger, 2005). These “kamikaze parents,” as one company’s director of college relations calls them, have even been contacting hiring managers to dispute pay packages and
renegotiate them (Shellenbarger, 2006). While some administrators have recognized the power of partnering with parents and working together to share important messages with students, most still approach the phenomenon with the attitude, “We just want them to go away” (Mullendore, 2008).

While administrators may express concern, however, students are not troubled by the level of involvement they have with their parents. According to data released by the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California, Los Angeles, most students perceive their parents’ involvement to be “just right” (Pryor et al., 2007). A Student Health 101 survey came to the same conclusion, and noted that 83 percent of students said their parents are “involved just the right amount” in their lives (Roarty, 2007, p. 9). What’s more, the topics that students discuss most with their parents just may be topics about which parents should have at least some input: finances, health and well-being, and career planning (College Parents of America, 2007). Discussions may change over the course of a college career: at one institution, parents of freshmen and sophomores report that their students are most frequently turning to them for information and advice on health/safety issues and academics; parents of juniors get the most questions about finances; and parents of seniors are most often asked for advice on career planning (Savage, 2006). Conversations may also vary depending on whom the student is talking to. According to the 2007 data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), students were likely to talk to their mother about personal issues, academic performance, and family matters. Academic performance was the most common discussion topic with fathers (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2007).

The focus of the conversation about the effects of parent involvement is just starting to shift. The results of the 2007 National Survey of Student Engagement showed that students who
frequently talk with their parents and follow their advice are likely to participate more often in college activities and are more satisfied with their college experience (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2007).

“Millennials”

As educators have looked for research to explain and guide this new phenomenon of parental involvement, they have found little in the way of scholarly, academic literature or empirical studies. What they have found instead are the generational theories of Neil Howe and William Strauss. Howe and Strauss’s description of “The Millennials,” or the generation of students born in or after 1982, has helped explain to administrators why increased parental involvement is occurring on college campuses. In their book, Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation, published in 2000, Howe and Strauss describe the attitudes and behaviors of this generation who were first noted as the “Babies on Board” of the early Reagan years. The authors followed up in 2003 with Millennials Go to College, which advises campus professionals on how they should respond to the arrival of these Millennials on campus, led by the high school graduates of the year 2000.

According to Howe and Strauss (2003), who draw their research primarily from anecdotes, there are seven core traits of Millennial students. One of the most significant characteristics is that they are “sheltered.” For Millennials, “the edifice of parental care has been like a castle that keeps getting new bricks added” (Howe & Strauss, 2003, p. 176). Millennial parents (the Baby Boomers) have been highly safety and security conscious since the birth of this new generation. This has resulted in the Millennials feeling that their parents will protect them—and perhaps overprotect them? Overall, Howe and Strauss say that the “generation gap” between parents and children is narrowing as Millennials and their parents maintain a significant
closeness. According to the parents Howe and Strauss (2003) have surveyed, Millennial children disclose extensive information about their daily lives, including the topics of sex, drugs, and alcohol, far beyond what the Boomers admit sharing with their own parents. Howe and Strauss (2000) say that two-thirds of today’s teenagers report that their parents are “in touch” with their lives and that it’s “easy” to talk to their parents (p. 187).

As generational theory pervades the conversation about today’s family involvement, there are some important questions to consider: Why do Howe and Strauss’s theories dominate the discourse on parental involvement? Are there any other explanations? Why is a source that draws its research primarily from anecdotes and even Howe and Strauss’s own children (Howe and Strauss are each a parent to two Millennials) so popular?

In his review of *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation*, David Brooks, author of his own piece on contemporary young people called *The Organization Kid*, says that Howe and Strauss’ work is a “very good bad book” (Brooks, 2000). Even though Howe and Strauss make huge generalizations- even some broad statements that Brooks says might make you want to “hurl [the book] against the wall,” he also acknowledges that it has some merit. “This is not a good book, if by good you mean the kind of book in which the authors have rigorously sifted the evidence and carefully supported their assertions with data…It’s stuffed with interesting nuggets. It’s brightly written. And if you get away from the generational mumbo jumbo, it illuminates changes that really do seem to be taking place” (Brooks, 2000). Perhaps Brooks is accurate in that Howe and Strauss’s style and their identification of change explain why the concept of Millennials has become so popular. Even though the research isn’t empirically or scholarly sound, maybe those who work closely with today’s traditional-aged college students embrace it because it rings true. Or perhaps they turn to it because there aren’t scholarly alternatives.
One characteristic about the current generation of students, identified by Howe and Strauss and confirmed in empirical studies is their frequent use of technology to communicate. Within the lifetime of today’s college students, there has been a rise in the use of technology, in particular, cellular phones, the Internet, e-mail, text messaging, and instant messaging. Students use all of these technologies, and most of them are used for communication with parents. According to the 2007 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), seven out of ten students said that they communicated “very often” with at least one parent or guardian during the academic year. It was more popular to communicate with electronic media than face-to-face (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2007).

In terms of cellular phone use, students are talking to their parents on the phone frequently. Richard Mullendore, a professor of higher education at the University of Georgia has called the cell phone "the world’s longest umbilical cord" (Shellenbarger, 2005). According to a survey by Junco and Mastrodicasa (2007), students reported speaking with their parents an average of 1.5 times per day, and 57.6 percent of the time it was the students who initiated the calls. It is possible that student-parent communications are as much of an interference in the parents’ lives as in the students’ lives. Although most of the conversations occurred while the parents were at home, many occurred when the parents were at work or driving their cars (Junco & Mastrodicasa, 2007). The most popular topics that parents and students reported talking about were simply checking in, academic success, and social life (Junco & Mastrodicasa, 2007).

In terms of other forms of technology, and the Internet in particular, college students today use computers to communicate at a higher rate than others in the general population. In the Pew Internet and American Life Project report The Internet Goes to College: How Students Are Living in the Future With Today’s Technology (2002), 86 percent of college students had
been online, compared with 59 percent of all Americans; 72 percent of college students checked their e-mail daily, while only 52 percent of all Americans with Internet access did so; and 26 percent of college students used instant messaging on an average day, compared with 12 percent of all Internet users (Pew, 2002). Unlike the previous generation, using technology to communicate when they go to college is nothing new for today’s students.

When considering student use of technology to communicate with their parents, there may be differences in technology use between students (and parents) of different cultural and socioeconomic groups. In a study of 272,821 first-year college students, Latinos and African Americans communicated via e-mail less than Whites and Asian Americans, when income levels were controlled (Sax, Ceja & Teranishi, 2001). In addition, according to a 2004 study based on census data, the Department of Commerce National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) found that just 37.2 percent of Latinos and 45.6 percent of African Americans used the Internet, while 65.1 percent of Whites and 63.1 percent of Asian Americans did. Only 12.6 percent of Latinos and 14.2 percent of African Americans lived in households with broadband Internet access, compared with 25.7 percent of Whites and 34.2 percent of Asian Americans. According to the NTIA study, Internet use and access to a broadband Internet connection at home is a linear function of income- the lower one’s income, the lower one’s use of the Internet, and the lower the likelihood that he or she can access it from home (NTIA, 2004; Junco & Mastrodicasa, 2007).

Institutional Response to Parents

As a result of the current phenomenon of parental involvement, increasingly, colleges and universities are debating the value and the cost of providing services and programming for the parents of their students. Data from studies conducted of parent programs by the University of
Minnesota in 2005 and 2007 show that schools are implementing services for parents or increasing the level or services that they already offer parents, expanding their efforts beyond one or two annual events to include regular communications, dispersal of student development information, inclusion of parents as members of advisory groups and as volunteers or mentors, and solicitation of funds (Savage, 2007; Wartman & Savage, 2008). Maintaining and cultivating parent relationships is a goal that has received increasing attention from universities, especially in recent years. Of the approximately 200 institutions that responded to the 2007 National Survey of College and University Parent Programs, almost half reported establishing their parent services since the year 2000 (Savage, 2007).

Just as the relationship between parents and their students in college has changed over time, so too has the relationship between student and institution and parent and institution. The overarching question that guides discussion on this topic and provides perspective to the shifting relationship between these three parties is: Are college students children or adults? In the context of the current phenomenon of over-involved “helicopter parents,” it is important to look at not only the shifting relationship between student and parent, but also the relationship between student and institution. Through these relationships we can see the expectations of responsibility that each of these parties have had for students’ care over time.

In Loco Parentis

_In loco parentis_ is Latin for “in the place of a parent” (Gifis, 1996). In his 1770 description of English laws, William Blackstone applied this phrase to educators: “The father may also delegate part of his parental authority…to the tutor or schoolmaster of his child; who is then _in loco parentis_, and has such portion of the power of the parent committed to his charge, viz. that of restraint and correction as may be necessary to answer the purposes for which he is
employed” (Zirkel & Reichner, 1987, p. 466). This doctrine of *in loco parentis* was later imported from English law as a protection for early American teachers who felt that it was necessary to administer corporal punishment to their pupils (Zirkel & Reichner, 1987). Over time, the *in loco parentis* doctrine has been adapted to changes in both schools and society (cited in Zirkel & Reichner, 1987).

In the context of higher education, *in loco parentis* was a central tenet of the early colonial colleges. According to Henry Dunster, president of Harvard College from 1640-1644, the mission of the College of the 17th century was, “You shall take care to advance in all learning, divine and humane, each and every learned student who is or will be entrusted to your tutelage, according to their several abilities; and especially to take care that their conduct and their manners be honorable and without blame” (Thomas, 1991, p. 34). From the beginning, American higher education institutions closely monitored their students’ behavior. This stance was supported by the courts in *Gott v. Berea College*, in 1913. In *Gott*, several Berea College students were expelled after violating a college rule that said that they couldn’t enter local places of establishment not controlled by the college. Gott, who owned a restaurant in the town, brought action against the college in an attempt to get it to do away with the rule. The court found in favor of the college, holding that the college may impose any rule or regulation “for the government or betterment of their pupils that a parent could do for the same purpose” (Thomas, 1991, p. 34).

*In loco parentis* was the predominant view of the relationship between the university and it’s students until the 1960s and 1970s when, as a result of students’ demand for more autonomy, there was a shift away from this model, and colleges began to take a more hands-off approach to student conduct. The 1960s and 1970s were considered to be a period of turmoil, where college
students continually challenged the administration’s policies and practices regarding student
rights, through both collective and individual efforts (Grossi & Edwards, 1997). At the same
time that the traditional power structure of the university was crumbling, so too was the
traditional power structure of the family. Increasingly, parents were losing their status authority
figures and control over the behavior of their children in college (Brubacher & Rudy, 1997).

As a result of the shift in philosophy about the relationship between student and
university during this time, new policies were implemented to reflect this increasing
independence of students. The Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) was passed
in 1974, placing restrictions on what information universities could share with parents. FERPA,
also known as the Buckley amendment, was an amendment to the Educational Amendments of
1974 and was sponsored by Senator James Buckley (Lowery, 2005). It is a spending clause
statute, which means that it applies to any school that receives federal funds from a U.S.
Department of Education program. FERPA grants three main rights to college students (or to
parents if students are under 18). 1) The right to inspect and review or the right to access their
education records; 2) the right to challenge the content of their education records; 3) the right to
consent to the disclosure of their education records (Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act,
20 U.S.C. §1232g (1974). Once a student is over age 18, the school must have written
permission from the student in order to release any information from his or her educational
record to any party. There are certain people who qualify as an exception to this rule, such as
school officials with “legitimate educational interest,” but parents of a student age 18 or older are
not exempt from the restrictions (Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, 20 U.S.C. §1232g
(1974)).
FERPA formalized a “hands-off” approach for colleges and universities not only in terms of communication with families, but also in terms of oversight of students. Regulations of visiting hours in residence halls, policies related to overnight guests of the opposite gender, and other restrictions related to personal lifestyle were relaxed. This hands-off approach was relatively short-lived, however. Beginning in the 1980s, colleges gradually began a return to controlling, regulating, and disciplining their students (Weigel, 2004). Students and their parents began to expect more services from colleges, such as career placement and tuition assistance, as well as protections against criminal attack, harm inflicted by others, and safeguards against injuries that resulted from their own carelessness (Gibbs & Szablewicz, 1988). As a result, today’s colleges offer a myriad of both services and protections for their students, from stricter codes of student conduct to security doors on residence halls and attendants at the front desks of the halls, who check in residents and their guests (Weigel, 2004).

Since the initial waning of in loco parentis, some have argued that it has made a return or comeback, as students, parents and the general public are requesting institutions to take increasing responsibility for student behavior.

Legal History

Lately, neither the university nor the students have been the primary actors defining their relationship. One of the strongest influences on this relationship and its new form has been the legal system. In many ways, the trend towards more control over student behavior reflects a general shift in the courts towards increasing protection for students.

After the shift in the student-institution relationship in the 1960s, and the demise of in loco parentis, the courts began to view the university primarily as a bystander, and the school’s liability for students’ actions was limited. Cases that reflect the trend in the courts during this
time include *Bradshaw v. Rollings* (1979), *Baldwin v. Zoradi* (1981), *Beach v. University of Utah* (1986), and *Rabel v. Illinois Wesleyan* (1987). In each of these cases, the courts looked at the university’s responsibility in terms of “duty” or “no duty,” (Bickel & Lake, 1999, p. 50). For example, in *Bradshaw*, a student was injured in a car accident when coming home from an off campus, school-sponsored sophomore picnic. *Baldwin* involved a student who was hurt in a car accident after consuming alcohol in a college dormitory. *Rabel* is a case where, as part of a fraternity initiation, a male student was to abduct a female student and run with her over his shoulder. As the male student grabbed the female student and attempted to do this, he fell, crushing her skull in the fall, which caused the female student permanent head injuries. In *Beach*, a student was on a camping field trip in the mountains of Utah, when she fell from a cliff and was eventually rendered a quadriplegic. In all of these cases, these newly empowered students were beyond the control of the university (Bickel & Lake, 1999). The university had “no duty” for the behavior of these students and their safety (Bickel & Lake, 1999, p. 57).

This period, and the institution’s role as “bystander,” was short lived. In the 1980s, courts began to hold colleges liable for personal injuries to students that occurred in a variety of different contexts. In the 1983 case *Mullins v. Pine Manor College*, an intruder came onto the Pine Manor College campus through an unlocked gate and raped a student. The court found that the college was responsible because of existing social norms and assumed duties. Once the institution assumes a particular duty, the courts say that the institution must fulfill it. For example, in *Mullins*, Pine Manor assumed a duty of care by having security personnel that patrolled the campus. However, the college did not fulfill its duty because no one checked to make sure the gate was locked. The holding stated that parents, students, and the general community have the expectation that reasonable care will be used to protect students from
foreseeable harm (Mullins v. Pine Manor College, 389 Mass. 47 (1983)).

*Mullins* was significant because it showed there was something special about the student-institution relationship (Gibbs & Szablewicz, 1988). Unlike a previous case just three years earlier, *Mullins* resulted in a ruling that did find the institution responsible for negligent behavior. In 1980, in *Relyea v. State*, the plaintiff sought damages from her public college after she was attacked on the college grounds. In *Relyea*, the court held that a landowner has the duty to protect others on his or her property from criminal acts if such acts are foreseeable, but that generally the landowner is not responsible for ensuring the safety of his or her invitees (Gibbs & Szablewicz, 1988).

Since the 1980s, colleges have increasingly been held responsible for unsafe acts that occur on their property, even acts of students. For example, the ruling in *Furek v. University of Delaware* led to increasing liability for student activity in fraternity houses on college property. In *Furek*, a student pledging a fraternity had lye-based liquid oven cleaner poured on him by another student during the pledges’ “hell week.” The university did not own the fraternity, but the fraternity house was on university property. Consequently, the Delaware Supreme Court found that the university was liable. In this case, the court determined that the university had assumed a duty to protect its students from incidents of hazing. The school had warned students about the effects of hazing and had tried to discipline some students for it. Since the university had knowledge that there were hazing practices occurring in fraternities, it couldn’t abandon its duty of care to protect its students from these acts of harm. *Furek* also emphasized the university’s responsibility to regulate and supervise foreseeable dangerous activities. Overall, in both *Mullins* and *Furek*, colleges were held liable, even when they might have tried to protect their students (White, 2005).
Many of the significant court cases involving increasing university responsibility for student behavior and even much literature on the possible resurrection of \emph{in loco parentis} (or the emergence of the new \emph{in loco parentis}) concern the 1980s when the trend for increasing responsibility for and therefore stricter control of students was just beginning. However, the trend does continue today, towards even more oversight of student behavior both on and off campus. Colleges have seen an increasing number of lawsuits, specifically arising from student deaths. For example, the parents of Scott Krueger, who died in 1997 from alcohol poisoning five weeks into his freshman year at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, brought suit against the university for their son’s death. Under campus housing policies at the time, first-year students had to decide whether to live in a dormitory or fraternity house, which was considered college-sponsored housing. Krueger chose to live in a fraternity house and then took part in the fraternity’s “pledge” process. On an “Animal House Night,” he and his fellow pledges were instructed to drink a prescribed amount of alcohol. Krueger ended up in a coma and later died (Reisberg, 2000). MIT eventually settled, acknowledging that it was partly responsible for Krueger’s death and paying six million dollars to the Krueger family (Reisberg, 2000). As a result of the Krueger case, MIT later changed its housing policy, requiring students to live in residence halls during their first year.

Even more recently, in the summer of 2007, two administrators, the dean of students and director of Greek life, at Rider University in Lawrenceville, New Jersey, were charged with aggravated hazing when an 18 year-old student died of alcohol poisoning after a fraternity initiation activity (Waley, 2007). This case was particularly surprising to legal experts because the charges brought against the college officials were criminal ones. Civil cases have been typically the avenue for issues of negligence. Although the charges against the two
administrators were eventually dropped, this case might represent an even further shift of the university’s legal responsibility for its students. Higher education is situated within an increasingly litigious society where parents are not only expecting colleges to look after the safety of their students, but also suing them if they don’t.

Even FERPA, the federal regulation that was the hallmark for ending *in loco parentis*, has changed to reflect the changing student-university relationship, and parents’ stake in that relationship. Since its inception, FERPA has been amended for a few additional provisions that allow additional sharing of information, in particular with parents. First, of all, an institution of higher education may release personally identifiable information from a student’s educational record to parents, without the student’s consent, if the student is considered to be a dependent on the parents’ tax record(s). Institutions have taken advantage of this provision in order to facilitate communication with parents (Lowery, 2005). FERPA was also amended to allow, but not require, institutions to notify parents when students under the age of 21 have violated campus policies regarding the use of alcohol and/or other drugs. Institutions have taken varying stances on parental notification. Some automatically send letters home as a result of a policy violation and others reserve the right to contact parents for more extreme circumstances. Still others have chosen not to notify parents on alcohol and drug violations.

Another significant policy change which shows the shifting student-institution relationship and parents’ role in shaping it is the Campus Security Act of 1990, or the Jeanne Clery Disclosure of Campus Security Policy and Campus Crime Statistics Act. As a result of this act, which was lobbied for by the parents of Jeanne Clery after she was raped and murdered by another student at Lehigh University, institutions must prepare an annual security report for students and employees and provide a summary to prospective students and employees (Jeanne
Clery Disclosure of Campus Security Policy and Campus Crime Statistics Act, 20 U.S.C. §1092(f) (1990)). This information is increasingly being used by parents to evaluate the schools their children are considering attending, as safety and security is one of the top concerns of parents of prospective students (Lowery, 2005; Warwick & Mansfield, 2003). In general, there has been an increasing trend of parents and the general public holding colleges accountable for taking care of their students, who have not quite reached adult status.

**College Students: Children or Adults?**

The purported return of *in loco parentis* raises some significant questions for higher education and for society that also affect the definition of the relationship between college students and their parents. The dominant, overarching issue is whether traditional-aged college students should be considered as children or adults. While cultural shifts caused the demise of *in loco parentis* in higher education, one place where it remained intact was in K-12 schools (Zirkel & Reichner, 1986). But the question is, “What makes a college student different from a high school student?” Does a birthday or a high school diploma grant adult status? What should these students be considered, children or adults? Can they be either, neither or both?

In some contexts, the college student is viewed by both the institution and society as a child (or adolescent), and in others he or she is viewed as an adult. College students can have credit cards in their own name, with or without having an income. They can drive, vote, and according to FERPA, they own their academic records. At the same time, though, college students cannot drink legally until age 21, must report their parents’ income on financial aid forms, and cannot rent a car until they’re 25. Overall, it is unclear.

For today’s traditional-aged college students, the dichotomy of child vs. adult is problematic. Perhaps there should be a new way of viewing college students and their
developmental stage that is more flexible. Arnett (2006; 2000a) suggests that college students have their own category—somewhere in between child and adult. He calls this period “emerging adulthood” and proposes a theory to describe the developmental period from the late teens through the twenties, with a specific focus on ages 18-25. According to Arnett (2006; 2000a) “emerging adulthood” is neither adolescence nor young adulthood, but rather theoretically and empirically distinct from both. It is defined by a relative independence from social roles and normative expectations (Arnett, 2006; 2000a). Its main features are identity exploration, instability, being self-focused, and feeling “in between.” According to Arnett, very few people beyond age 18 see themselves as adolescents, but they don’t see themselves as adults, either. Arnett’s theory applies to emerging adults of all backgrounds and social classes, although he says that emerging adults from lower socioeconomic statuses are unique in that they are even more likely than higher socioeconomic status emerging adults to believe that their lives will be better than their parents’ lives (Arnett, 2000b).

Pavela (1992) too suggests creating a new developmental category for college students, although he does so in the context of the legal relationship between student and institution. According to Pavela (1992), the term “adolescents” does not quite apply to college students, yet the term “young adults” suggests a level of maturity that he does not believe that college students possess. Instead, he calls college students between the ages of 18 and 21 “post-adolescent pre-adults,” or PAPAS, for short (Pavela, 1992).

What Do Students Think?

How do today’s traditional-aged college students answer the central question of whether they are children or adults? Very few studies ask students this question. However, Arnett (1994), surveyed college students about their conceptions of the transition to adulthood and their
own status as adults. Only 23 percent of those studied indicated that they considered themselves to have reached adulthood (Arnett, 1994). College students were also asked what characteristics were necessary to have reached adulthood. Most college students did not think it was necessary to have completed schooling to enter adulthood and only 27 percent considered full-time employment as necessary for adulthood (Arnett, 1994). Historically, getting married and having children have been seen as one of the most significant markers of adult status. However, only 15 percent of the students Arnett studied said that marriage was necessary in order for a person to be considered an adult and only 12 percent considered it necessary to be a parent.

For the students in Arnett’s study, the most significant criteria indicating the transition to adulthood included emotional markers. Relationship to parents played a strong role in the perception of their status as adults. While only 14 percent considered it necessary for adulthood for a person to be “not deeply tied to parents emotionally,” 72 percent agreed that establishing a relationship with parents on an equal standing was a necessary component of adulthood (Arnett, 1994, p. 220). Overall, the results of Arnett’s study indicate that not only is the definition of adulthood unclear to administrators and to parents, but it is unclear to students themselves. As noted previously, only one quarter of the students in Arnett’s study said that they think they have reached adulthood, and nearly two-thirds responded that they thought they had reached adulthood in some respects but not others (Arnett, 1994).

If today’s college students are neither children nor adults, how does this affect their relationship to their parents? Does it influence their view on their parents’ involvement in their lives? Perhaps. Students do not appear to be troubled by the level of involvement they have with their parents. A Student Health 101 survey noted that 83 percent of students said their parents are “involved just the right amount” in their lives (Roarty, 2007, p. 9). The most recent
(2008) results from UCLA’s CIRP survey of first-year undergraduates also show that students are, for the most part, comfortable with the roles their parents currently play in their lives. A majority of first-year students considered their parents' participation in their college careers to be the "right amount." Eighty-four percent said their parents were involved the "right amount" in their decision to go to college, 80.5 percent in their decision to attend the institution they chose, and 77.5 percent in communicating directly with college officials (Pryor et al., 2007). At the same time, almost one quarter report their parents displayed “too little” involvement in helping them choose their college courses and 22.5% wished their parents were more involved in helping them choose college activities (Pryor et al., 2007). Latino students and first-generation students in particular reported “too little” parental involvement (Pryor et al., 2007).

The contemporary parent-student relationship may be defined differently by those involved. To students and their parents, their relationship and communication frequency may be satisfactory. However, there is a concern that the dynamics in this new relationship will prevent students from developing as individuals (Wyer, 2007). The effects of the student-parent relationship on college student development are explored in the next section.

Student Development Literature

Separation-Individuation

In the context of higher education, the literature that describes the student-parent relationship is remarkably different. Traditionally, the prevailing theory about college student development was that acquiring autonomy and individuation were necessary components of emotional adjustment to college. The reasoning behind this theory was that students with a better sense of themselves as individuals would be better able to perform the new tasks required of them as college students, such as waking up on time, attending classes, arranging one’s course
schedule, and dealing with the dynamics of the college social world (Mattanah, Brand & Hancock, 2004). Separation-individuation is most frequently described as a developmental process that begins with separation from parents in order to achieve self-definition and the ability to function autonomously (Mattanah et al., 2004; Rice, 1992). This theory of individuation was used by Erikson to represent the central task of adolescence; it was normal for adolescents to “rebel against or withdraw from the parental environment” (Erikson, 1968, p. 246). It later became the prevailing theory used to predict the likelihood of college adjustment during the 1970s and 1980s (Mattanah et al., 2004).

Chickering uses this theory as the basis for his idea of autonomy development in Education and Identity, first written in 1969 and revised in 1993. According to Chickering (1993), a necessary developmental process for students is learning to function with emotional independence, or without the need for reassurance, affection, or approval. Movement towards this state begins with the separation from parents (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). In Chickering’s most recent version of Education and Identity, the vector of “autonomy” has been changed to “moving through autonomy to interdependence” to place greater emphasis on “respecting the autonomy of others and looking for ways to give and take with an ever-expanding circle of friends” (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 48); however, the description of the vector and its process remain basically unchanged from Chickering’s 1969 model (Taub, 1997).

Secure Attachment

Attachment theory, in the context of higher education, emerged as a competing theory to separation-individuation in the 1990s. Attachment theory challenges the traditional implications of separation-individuation, by suggesting that, for students leaving home, having parents as a secure base may actually support, rather than threaten, the development of competence and
autonomy (Kenny & Donaldson, 1992). The implications of this theory may impact how we view the relationship between parent and student. According to Kenny and Rice (1995) the attachment model suggests that calling home to talk with family or discuss a concern with parents may actually be examples of healthy behavior rather than acts which are cause for concern.

Human development research has contributed to the body of knowledge about these “leaving home” stages. Attachment theory was originally conceptualized by Bowlby in 1973 to explain the distress infants and young children experienced when separated from their parental caregivers (Schwartz & Buboltz, 2004). It is based on the idea that the infant’s ability to explore the world is a direct result of having a parent as a “secure base” (Schwartz & Buboltz, 2004; Vivona, 2000). According to Bowlby, individuals who are both emotionally stable and self-reliant are likely to have parents who are available to provide support when needed while simultaneously encouraging autonomy (Kenny & Rice, 1995). In *A Secure Base: Parent-Child Attachment and Healthy Human Development*, Bowlby defines attachment as “any type of behavior that results in a person attaining or maintaining proximity to some other clearly identified individual who is conceived as better able to cope with the world” (Bowlby, 1988, p. 26). According to Bowlby, the attachment relationship is most obvious when the subject is frightened, fatigued, or sick, and then is calmed through comfort and caregiving. At other times, however, the specific behavior is less evident. To know that an attachment figure is available for support can provide a strong sense of security that encourages the subject to value and continue the relationship. Attachment behavior is most obvious in early childhood. However, Bowlby (1988) says that it can be observed throughout the life cycle, especially in times of emergency.
According to Bowlby (1973), in adolescence, attachment takes the form of autonomy and independence with the maintenance of warm and supportive relationships (Sorokou & Weissbrod, 2005). When the framework of attachment is applied to the college context, traditional student affairs notions of separation-individuation are challenged. A number of human development theorists support this concept of attachment to more accurately describe the developmental relationship between parents and their college students. For example, according to Kenny (1987), secure attachment relationships offer support in times of stress, allowing students to confidently explore their new environment. Therefore, the process of leaving home for college students can be conceptualized as a new and stress-raising situation in which the availability of parents may support, rather than threaten, a student’s development of competence and autonomy (Kenny, 1987). Under this scenario, rather than needing a defined separation or break from parents, students may actually benefit from regular parental contact and support instead.

Sorokou and Weissbrod (2005) define attachment specifically in terms of the type of contact students have with their parents. In their research, they measured need and non-need based contact patterns (such as telephoning, e-mailing, visiting, etc.) between adolescents, during their first year of college, and their parents. They define need-based contact as “support-seeking behaviors at times of need” and non need-based as “behaviors for the purpose of touching base and maintaining contact” (p. 226). They found that there was a positive relationship between perceived quality of attachment and frequency of student contact with parents, both need and non need-based. In addition, in secure attachment relationships, the relationship was two-sided, with the non need-based contact initiated by parents as well the students. Frequency of student-initiated need-based contact was also positively related to student reports of parent-initiated non
need-based contact (Sorokou & Weissbrod, 2005). Therefore, in the theory of attachment
student-parent contacts such as a calling one another to “check in,” may be just as significant to
college students as contacting parents during times of trouble.

These findings are consistent with those of Trice (2002) who studied students’ use of e-
mail to communicate with parents and found that students contacted parents often by e-mail, just
to check in rather than ask for help or advice (need-based contact). According to Trice (2002),
“the development of e-mail has increased communication between students and parents
evernously” (p. 327). In a qualitative study of 48 first-year students (24 men and 24 women)
who were 18 or 19 years old, students were asked about their communication with parents via e-
mail (Trice, 2002). The content of the students’ emails to parents was coded primarily for the
issues of academics, social issues, and finances. Students in the study had an average of 6.03 e-
mail contacts with parents per week (Trice, 2002). During periods of academic stress, such as
exam time, contacts with parents increased. However, these students reported that the nature of
their contact with parents was not necessarily to seek advice. Students simply had more contact
with parents during weeks that were stressful than not stressful.

Some of the students’ e-mails requested assistance with a problem or an answer to a
question. Of the 578 total e-mails, 42 (7 percent) were about an academic problem, 31 (5
percent) were about a social problem, 24 (4 percent) discussed a financial problem, 22 (4
percent) asked for financial assistance or advice, 23 (4 percent) requested social advice, and 47
(8 percent) inquired about financial advice. Many of the e-mails included more than one of these
requests. However, it is important to note that 78 percent of all of the e-mails did not include
any requests for assistance or solutions to problems (Trice, 2002).

*Attachment and Gender*
According to Sorokou and Weissbrod (2005) males and females in their study had different contact patterns with their parents, which suggest that men and women in college may show attachment in different ways. Females tended to perceive a higher quality attachment to their mother, while males and females did not differ in their attachment to their father. There was a positive relationship between perceived quality of attachment and frequency of student contact, both need and non need-based. In terms of receiving contact from parents, females received more need-based contact than males from both their mother and father. Overall, this shows that female students may differ in not only their perceived attachment relationships, but their contact patterns as well (Sorokou & Weissbrod, 2005).

There are some theorists who argue that the relational nature of the attachment model supports the idea that women are more attached to their parents than men, and perhaps the attachment perspective on the student-parent relationship may better account for the experiences of female college students. According to Gilligan (1993), the relationship between self and other differs along gender lines with males favoring a process of separation and females favoring a process of attachment. For women, relationships are the main focus of attention and concern (Gilligan, 1993). Because they are socialized into feminine roles, girls develop a self, defined by relationships to others as well as a concern for sustaining these relationships (Kenny & Rice, 1995). Allen and Stoltenberg (1995) suggest it may be more important for women to retain close ties with family while in college than men.

Surrey (1991) proposes a theory of women’s identity development, very similar to attachment theory called “self in relation.” She situates her theory in contrast to traditional developmental theory, which emphasizes the importance of separation, because the construction of self for women may not be explained by this model (Surrey, 1991). According to Surrey, for
women, their primary experience is relational, and their sense of self is organized and developed in the context of important relationships. Surrey (1991) claims that the mother-daughter relationship is the “purest example” of this theory (p. 54). As the early mother-daughter relationship grows over the life cycle, it serves as a precursor to how women will learn, experience pleasure, and enhance themselves through relatedness (Surrey, 1991).

Combining Theories

According to Schwartz and Buboltz (2004), although there appears to be a tension between the concepts of psychological separation and attachment (as defined by Bowlby), they are not mutually exclusive; there is an equilibrium. This balance between attachment and separation may include a degree of conflict with both parents (Schwartz & Buboltz, 2004). Therefore, according to Schwartz and Buboltz (2004) and attachment theory, emotional connection and contact between parents and colleges students is healthy, but so is some conflict. It is ultimately both separation-individuation and attachment that lead to positive emotional adjustment.

Schultheiss and Blustein (1994) examined both the variables of separation-individuation and attachment, hypothesizing that separation-individuation may actually best be obtained through the context of adolescent-parent connectedness. In other words, students who are securely attached to their parents might have an easier time negotiating the process of individuating and adjusting to a new environment. In their results, they found that the combined effects of separation-individuation and attachment were a predictor of college student development for women and of college student adjustment for men (Schultheiss & Blustein, 1994).
In addition, Mattanah et al. (2004) proposed a mediational model where a history of secure attachment leads to better feelings about the process of separation-individuation and thus better adjustment. They found that the process of individuation was actually facilitated by the presence of secure relationships with parents, where parents were supportive of their students in college (Mattanah et al., 2004). For Josselson (1987), the definition of separation-individuation includes elements of attachment theory. According to Josselson (1987), the problem of separating, “is the problem of not only becoming different but of becoming different and maintaining connection at the same time” (p. 171). Therefore, even though it is necessary for students to become distinct individuals from their parents, maintaining the connection to their parents is an important component to separation-individuation (Josselson, 1987). These theories point out that attachment theory may not necessarily need to be positioned in opposition to separation-individuation. Rather, the two may be working together to have combined effects on student adjustment to college.

**Measured Effects of Attachment**

More recent empirical literature on parent-student relationships at the college level largely examines attachment theory and its effects. A number of positive correlations have been found between students having a secure base and experiencing success in the first year. These effects of attachment reflected in the literature include identity development, adjustment to college, academic success, career development and retention.

*identity development.*

Parent attachment in first-year college students has been positively linked to identity development. For example, Samuolis, Layburn, and Schiaffino (2001) found that a female’s identity relationship was related to her attachment to parents. They did not draw the same
conclusion for the male identity relationship, however, as identity was not significantly related to attachment of either parent. In addition, Samulois et al. (2001) concluded that thinking about parents and being in frequent touch with them may be healthy and beneficial for identity development, particularly for female students. Lapsley et al. (1990) found that parental attachment predicted personal social identity for both men and women.

*college adjustment.*

Wintre and Yafee (2000) studied how the discussion of university-related issues between students and parents impacted the transition to college. They found that relationships with parents, as well as discussion of issues, had direct effects on adjustment. This conclusion’s implications show that students may benefit from the off-campus support of family as well as the support of on-campus resources during their first year.

*academic success.*

Cutrona, Cole, Colangelo, Assouline, and Russell (1994) looked at attachment theory from the perspective of social support. They wanted to measure whether perceived social support from parents would influence academic performance in college during the first two years. They predicted that academic social support from family would cause students to have low anxiety and the low anxiety would, in turn, determine academic self-efficacy, or the belief that one has the ability to perform in ways that will allow him or her to meet his or her goals. Academic self-efficacy would then be a predictor of the student’s academic performance, which could be measured by his or her GPA (Cutrona et al., 1994). In fact, the study did show a positive correlation between parent support and GPA; parent support predicted GPA across a heterogeneous sample group of varying majors and abilities (Cutrona et al., 1994).

*retention.*
Through the literature, attachment has been showed to have a mostly positive impact on college student development, specifically in the areas of identity development, adjustment to college, and academic success. However, what effects do the college student-parent relationship and attachment have on student retention? According to Tinto (1993), strong relationships with members of the community before coming to college facilitate adjustment and retention. Although the literature does not directly reveal the effects of parental attachment on retention at the higher education level, perhaps Tinto’s theory could be applied to the student-parent relationship. This is an area in which more research is needed. Tinto’s theory of student retention will be discussed in more detail in the third section of this paper, in the context of the relationship between low-income, first-generation students and their parents.

**Attachment and Residential Status**

Some studies compare attachment effects by looking at residential and nonresidential populations of students. For example, Flanagan, Schulenberg, and Fuligni (1993) compared residential and nonresidential students, looking at ties to parents in both settings. The results showed that residential status had a significant effect on college students’ perceptions of their relationships with their parents. Students living away from home reported more harmony in their relationship with parents, independence, and support, and the students living at home reported more avoidant communication, rejection of parents as role models, and a greater tendency of parents to underestimate their sons and daughters’ levels of maturity.

Berman and Sperling (1990) also examined the effects of residential status on parent relationship and transition to college. Their results differed from those of Flanagan et al. (1993) in that they reported stronger attachment relationships for commuter students. They found that parental attachment for residential students actually decreases over the first semester, while it
remains unchanged for commuting students. According to the authors, this may be attributed to the resident student’s adjustment to the college environment and formation of new relationships that may take the place of the relationship with parents. By comparison, those students who maintain close physical proximity to their parents (commuters) were found to maintain a higher level of attachment, which the authors say may be because they do not establish comparable peer friendships to those who are in residence. (Berman & Sperling, 1990).

The tension in the student development literature over whether students should separate in order to individuate or remain securely attached, seems to mirror the struggle that administrators who work with college students are facing over the effects of parental involvement. Administrators are concerned that students are not developing into individuals as a result of increased parental involvement in their lives (Savage, 2003) while at the same time, many have noticed the benefits strong parent relationships can have on students, and they are implementing programmatic efforts to help them take advantage of these (Savage, 2007).

The studies discussed in this section on the student and human development literature predominantly employ quantitative methodologies. In addition, almost all of them reflect the student’s perspective of his or her relationship with parents rather than the parent’s view of the relationship to the child. The literature captures the broad developmental concept of the parent-student relationship, but does not allow for discussion of specific groups or individual cases. There has been research on women, as noted, as well as some limited research on students of color. However, these are few and predominantly focus on Black students. For example, Kenny and Perez (1996) considered family attachment and the degree to which it is related to psychological well being at the time of college entry for a sample including African American, Latino, and Asian American students. Hinderlie and Kenny (2002) studied attachment, social
support, and college adjustment among Black students at predominantly White universities in order to explain more about the relationship between these students and their parents. In the next section, which looks at literature particularly related to low-income, first-generation students and parents, qualitative methodology is much more prevalent.

**Low-Income, First-Generation Students and their Parents**

This section of the paper will examine in detail the segment of the college population not explicitly mentioned in the literature reviewed thus far; it will consider the parent-college student relationship along socioeconomic class lines by looking to the variables most often associated with the experience of students from the lowest socioeconomic class levels, income and parental education level. Therefore this section will address the experience of low-income, first-generation students and their parents in the context of higher education.

In considering the role of parents in the lives of low-income first-generation students it is necessary to draw from a variety of pockets of literature. This section of the literature review will first discuss parental involvement in K-12 education and the reported positive effects of parental involvement at this level. Next, it will explore class differences in parenting broadly, and within the context of school. Furthermore, it will examine what we know about parental involvement in the period leading up to college, pre-college preparation and access. Finally, it will look to the literature on the experience of first-generation students and explore students’ struggles with persistence, particularly during the first year.

*Parental Involvement K-12*

Most of the literature on the framework of parental involvement comes from the K-12 context. Although there has been not as much research on the effects of parental involvement on traditional-aged college students, the effects of the parent-child relationship on students from
early childhood through high school are better known. Admittedly, the developmental goals for high school and college students are different, and they require different types and amounts of parental involvement, in the same way that developmental goals differ in elementary and high school. The literature in this area provides a contextual understanding of parental involvement for both early childhood and elementary school students, as well as for adolescents in middle school and high school. For all of these students, high levels of parental involvement make a significant positive difference in personal and academic growth.

For students at all levels of K-12, including adolescents, parental involvement in these forms has been linked to many positive outcomes such as higher grades, school success, higher standardized test scores, higher self-esteem, social competence, reduction in substance use, aspiration for college, enrollment in college, and participation in out-of-school programs. (Harvard Family Research Project, 2007). Parental involvement is highly encouraged at all levels of K-12 education. In the K-12 arena, parent (or, more broadly, family) involvement can be defined by three main processes: 1) parenting, which considers the values and attitudes that parents have, which in turn, affect how they raise their children. 2) home-school relationships, which reflect the role of the institution in the parent-child relationship- they are the formal and information connections between the family and the school. 3) responsibility for learning- the parent’s emphasis on activities which promote the student’s growth, both socially and academically (Harvard Family Research Project, 2007).

Parental involvement is an important component of No Child Left Behind. In a U.S. Department of Education publication designed to help parents of K-12 students understand No Child Left Behind, the following actions for parents are suggested:

Work with your child’s teacher and school to keep the lines of communication
open. Partner with the teacher to enhance the academic success and social well being of your child. Attend parent-teacher meetings and stay informed about your child’s academic progress. Discuss with your child’s teacher what you can do at home to help your child. Go on field trips with your child’s class and volunteer to help the teacher in the classroom, on the playground or at special events. Talk with your child daily about school. Ask your child what he or she learned that day. Ask how the day went, and ask about your child’s friends. Review your child’s homework each evening, and consult homework Web sites if available. Be sure that your child completes all of his or her assignments. [U.S. Department of Education, 2007].

In K-12 education, unlike higher education, standards for parental involvement are clearly understood and clearly articulated.

What causes a parent to be involved? According to Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997), there are three main factors that cause parents to become involved in their children’s education. These include the parent’s construction of his or her role in the child’s life, the parent’s sense of efficacy for helping the child to succeed in school, and the institutional role, the general invitations and opportunities for parental involvement that are presented by both the child as well as the school.

According to both of these theories about how parents are involved and why they are involved, the role of the institution in the parent-student relationship is key. The degree to which a parent is involved depends not only on the relationship with his or her particular student but with the student’s school and the extent to which parents are included and encouraged to participate in their child’s educational process. (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). When
teachers, administrators, and other school personnel believe that parents should be involved, then the programs developed for parents at the school are stronger (Tierney, 2002).

According to Epstein (1995), just about all families care about their children and want them to succeed. At the same time, just about all students at all levels, from elementary to middle to high school, want their parents to know more about what is going on in school and are willing to play an active role in the communication flow between school and home.

Ideas about parental involvement in K-12 education have shifted over time. In the early 20th century, educators believed that parental involvement could actually harm children. This was one of the reasons behind the establishment of the Indian Boarding Schools created by the Bureau of Indian Affairs during this period. Native Americans parents were seen as impeding the assimilation of their children because of their adherence to tribal customs and traditions (Szasz, 1977; Tierney 2002). Later, a second wave of research showed that the greatest predictor for a child’s going to college was whether the child’s parent had gone to college him or herself. Thinking shifted, but parents were still largely irrelevant. Instead, the logic was that if one wanted to improve educational levels of low-income children, one needed to improve local schools (Tierney, 2002).

Eventually, both of these approaches, boarding schools and focusing on improving the actual school, failed because they assumed that parents were incapable of helping their children to learn (Tierney, 2002). Overall, few educational policies in American education over the past century have changed as dramatically as the perspective on the role of the family (Tierney, 2002). In general, there has been a shift from the belief that parents were harmful to a child’s welfare to a belief that parents were irrelevant in the context of school, to the current perspective
which embraces parents, encouraging them to play a central role in their child’s education (Tierney, 2002).

*Class Differences in Parenting*

Lareau (2003) documents some of the differences in upbringing for children from different socioeconomic class backgrounds in the early part of the 21st century, showing that parenting may indeed vary by social class and income level. Many of the children whom Lareau describes may now be in college or soon to enter college. According to Lareau (2003), one of the hallmarks of middle class upbringing is conversation between parents and children. For example, “Alexander,” a Black fourth-grader with a middle class upbringing, engages in conversation with his mother, answering questions about his opinions as she drives him to and from his private piano lesson. Alexander’s mother, by engaging him in this talk, sees herself as “developing” Alexander and helping him to realize his potential in his many areas of talent (Lareau, 2003, p. 1). According to Lareau (2003), middle class parents engage in a process of “concerted cultivation” in order to make sure their children have experiences that will best help them be successful as adults (p. 2).

For children from lower-income and socioeconomic status groups, contemporary childhood looks different. Poor and working class parents want the best for their children, just like middle class parents do. Tasks such as putting food on the table, paying for housing, protecting students from the problems in unsafe neighborhoods, arranging for health care, cleaning clothes, and getting children into bed for a good night’s rest are all challenging when economic resources are scarce (Lareau, 2003). These parents, unlike middle and upper-middle class parents, do not, however, consider developing their children through attendance at organized activities. Instead, children themselves have more control over what they do with their
“free time.” In general, these parents have a different construction of the role of parenthood and see a clear boundary between children and adults (Lareau, 2003). Unfortunately, as the educational system tends to privilege the values of the middle class, these children may be at a disadvantage at school compared to their “cultivated” peers (Lareau, 1987; Lareau, 2003).

Class Differences in Parent-Institution Relationship

Some literature from K-12 education shows that parent participation, or involvement in schooling, varies by social class. For example, Lareau (1987) concluded that there was a relationship between parental involvement and socioeconomic class when she studied elementary school classrooms at a “working class,” school and a “middle class” school. According to Lareau (1987), there were differences in the amount and quality of interaction that parents at the two different schools had with their respective schools. The parents at the middle class school were more involved. They responded at a higher frequency to teachers’ requests for involvement and had greater amounts of interaction at higher levels of quality than the parents at the other school. In some cases, teachers at the middle class school even reported examples of times when parental involvement was unhelpful. In particular, it was considered unhelpful when parents challenged the expertise of the teachers (Lareau, 1987). According to Lareau (1987), much of this behavior seemed to be based on the more flexible schedule of the middle class, allowing more time for school contact and teacher interaction. In addition, middle class parents had social networks from which they could learn about involvement opportunities, to which working class parents did not have access. Lareau (1987) also concluded that the institutions tended to promote the type of behavior exhibited by the middle class parents.

Can these conclusions be applied to higher education? Is there a link at the college level between socioeconomic class and parental involvement? Once students get to college, this is
relatively unknown and unmeasured. However, there is a fair amount of literature on social class and the parent-student relationship at the pre-college preparation phase.

**Low-Income, First-Generation Students- Pre College**

Research has shown that first-generation college students tend to be at a disadvantage when it comes to having basic knowledge about postsecondary education due to their lack of cultural capital (Pascarella et al., 2004). Individuals with highly educated parents may have an advantage over these students in understanding the culture of higher education (Pascarella et al., 2004). Parents of higher socioeconomic status groups play a strong role in “managing” their children’s pathways to college (Auerbach, 2004, p. 126; McDonough, 1997). Parents of students in lower socioeconomic status groups may offer support for their children’s desire to attend college. However, few of these families without a tradition of college-going themselves will have enough knowledge to be able to help their children navigate the pathways to college (Auerbach, 2004, p. 126). In general, first-generation students and their parents tend to have less congruity between the students’ values towards education and their parents’ values, and they receive less overall support from their parents towards their educational goals, both financial and emotional (Billson & Terry, 1982). Parent roles significantly impact the extent to which students from lower socioeconomic status levels experience “conflict and challenge” on the pathway to college (Auerbach, 2007, p. 250). Levels of parental involvement in the college admissions process have been found to be lower for students from lower socioeconomic status families than they are for students from higher socioeconomic status families (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000; 2001).

One area of literature about first-generation college students from low-income backgrounds that is applicable to this topic is the literature on college preparation programs.
These programs, many of which have a parental education component, help first-generation students and parents gain some of the cultural capital that they are lacking. One of the main functions of this aspect of these programs is to increase college awareness for parents so that their expectations for their children’s education are increased (Perna, 2002). College preparation programs can be defined as outreach activities designed to identify and assist under-represented students along their pathways to college. These programs are primarily funded through the efforts of educational institutions, state and federal governments, and local communities (Tierney, Corwin & Coylar, 2005).

A survey of 50 college access and parental involvement programs in California found that these programs were the main source of college information for the program participants (McDonough et al., 2000). Examples of how these programs, specifically the federally funded TRIO programs, provide this information to parents include: parent orientation programs, frequent phone calls to discuss their children’s progress in the program, parent/student advising sessions, inviting parents to participate in field trips and program activities, parent advisory boards, parent newsletters, parent handbooks, inviting families to graduation ceremonies and student presentations or exhibitions, and parent workshops (Becker, 1999; Zulli et al., 1998). However, despite these many initiatives, in a study of pre-college outreach programs that target low-income students, historically underrepresented minorities, and first-generation students, one of the biggest challenges was coordinating with parents. Tierney (2002) also says that there is still a discrepancy between the research saying that parental involvement in pre-college preparation programs is a good thing and the actual practice of family involvement in pre-college outreach programs- there should be more of these efforts.
Ceja’s (2006) qualitative study focused on parents and their role in the student’s transition to college. The participants in Ceja’s series of three interviews were Chicanas who were first-generation and college-bound from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Ceja, 2006). Although the parents wanted the best for their students, they did not have the same notion of college “fit” as parents of higher socioeconomic status groups since these parents did not attend college. Through his constant-comparative analysis of interviews, Ceja (2006) found that the role parents were able to fulfill during the college choice process was actually greatly limited. The parents lacked a formal understanding of the college choice process. This lack of familiarity was true for all of the Chicanas in the study, regardless of their level of academic achievement (Ceja, 2006). For example, one student in the study described how she felt the college choice process was entirely up to her:

I’ve told them the schools and I am going to [apply] and they ask me, ‘Where is that at,’ and ‘Why do you want to go there?’ I tell them that it is a good school. It’s like they don’t know anything about it and they [can’t] help me out with the college choice process. I think that’s all been left to me (Ceja, 2006, p. 95).

As a result of their parents’ lack of information about colleges and the college choice process, students in the study found that they were engaged in a “double-duty” task of learning and experiencing the college choice process themselves while also informing and familiarizing their parents with it (Ceja, 2006, p. 98).

Smith (2001) too, found that parents who did not attend college had a lack of clarity about the college choice process. In an ethnographic study at a high school in south central Los Angeles, Smith looked at the college choice process for low socioeconomic status Black students. He interviewed both parents and students. Ultimately, he concluded that the parents of
the students in his study had what he termed “soft knowledge,” or a fuzziness of knowledge about college applications, finances, admission procedures, and college life (Smith, 2001, p. 18). According to Smith, this “soft knowledge” is most visible in discussions about the SAT. For example, in an interview one parent expressed her confusion when she said:

But he’s still taking the SAT test to bring his average up higher, you know, so he can have a high SAT… one of the (coaches from the) schools that wants him to come play for them tried to explain a little bit of it to me too about the SATs (Smith, 2001, p. 18).

In this particular case, the student had to explain to his mother what the SAT is for and why it is important. Like the students in Ceja’s study, the student in this particular example takes on the role of trying to educate his mother about the college process while trying to navigate it himself. This parent’s input is not very useful to the student in the college choice process (Smith, 2001).

If a student’s parents attended college, the experience is significantly different than that of first-generation students. Karp, Holmstrom, and Gray (2004) interviewed 30 sets of upper-middle class parents for a grounded-theory study of the ways college-educated parents evaluate the meaning of their children’s leaving home to attend college. The authors observed that the parents in their study expressed many worries about their students’ transition to college. However, these fears were different than those expressed by parents of first-generation college students. In particular, a central concern of parents was whether their children had made the right college choice. Parents seemed to have the idea that the “fit” at some colleges on their students’ lists of potential choices might be better than at others (Karp et al., 2004, p. 367).

According to the researchers’ analysis, these parental worries were often rooted in parents’ own experiences of leaving home to attend college. For example in one interview a parent stated, “Yeah, I think it’s very important to find a place that’s a good match, that’s, you know, a match
for his ability and it’s an environment that will be supportive of him. I had a rough time my first semester in college” (Karp et al., 2004, p. 367). Parents who did not attend college may not express the same fears, especially about the idea of college “fit.”

Parental involvement and encouragement is important to all students in their college choice process, but particularly to students from low socioeconomic class groups because these students are less likely to consider college as an option early in their schooling and also less likely to persist if they do enroll (Stage & Hossler, 2000). Parental support and encouragement are the best predictors of postsecondary educational aspirations (Stage & Hossler, 1989; Hossler, Schmidt & Vesper, 1999). Parental encouragement can be defined by the frequency of parents’ and students’ discussion about parents’ expectations, hopes and dreams for their children in regards to attending college. Parental support is more tangible and includes behaviors such as parents saving money for college, visiting college campuses, and attending financial aid workshops (Hossler, Schmidt & Vesper, 1999). Parental support and encouragement play a much more significant role in shaping educational aspirations of their children than either their educational background or income level (Hossler, Schmidt & Vesper, 1999).

**Student Experience of Parents’ Role in College Transition**

What is the student experience of parental involvement in the transition to college? How do the students in these studies view their relationship to their parents? What role do parents play in the college admission and adjustment process, according to these students? Some students view their parents as playing strong roles in setting the expectation that the students will even pursue higher education. For example, Attinasi (1989) conducted an exploratory study from Mexican-American students’ point of view regarding the context surrounding their decisions to persist or not persist in higher education. Through his interviews of 18 students, he
found that oral communication of expectations was extremely important to students. Parents played an important role in that they communicated to their students the fact that they belonged in the category of college-goers (Attinasi, 1989). A student’s willingness to “stick it out” once in college seemed to reflect a certain socializing for college from parents (Attinasi, 1989, p. 270).

Some students reported experiencing anxiety over a changing relationship with parents and other family members. For example, students in Terenzini et al.’s (1994) focus groups for a study on the transition to college, particularly those from Black, Hispanic, or Native American families, reported that as parents (or other parental figures such as grandparents) realize that their students might never metaphorically, “return home,” they have tried to maintain a consistent relationship that the students realize may be changing (Terenzini et al., 1994, p. 66). For example, one student describes this tension:

My grandmother. Even though she is a big inspiration to me, uh, she has this way of clinging. She hates to let go of things. And I can understand. I think that’s why she takes in a lot of us, as we’re going along. She hates to let us go (Terenzini et al., 2004, p. 66).

In the transition to college, students’ development of independence and their own identity formation is influenced by these relationships with parents. For example, Torres (2004) looked at the familial influences on the identity development of Latino first-year students through a longitudinal study of first-year students and a grounded theory analysis. She found that family members were the primary conveyors of cultural heritage for students and that the development of students’ ethnic identity was determined by the degree to which parents were acculturated or the degree to which they intermingled Latino and Anglo cultures (Torres, 2004).
According to London (1989) one of the biggest challenges for first-generation students is reconciling the tension that emerges between requirements of family membership and upward mobility. For many first-generation students, a personal growth from their student experience may be accompanied by a loss in their relationship to their family (London, 1989). Some parents give students conflicting messages: to both stay at home and to achieve in the outside world, which causes an internal struggle for this population (London, 1989). Students speak of this push-pull and their struggle to find their own voices amidst the echo from home (London, 1989). As one student in London’s (1989) study mentioned about her experience with her mother, “she has this idea that I’m way up there somewhere and she wants to drag me back” (p. 160).

Because of this tension, first-generation college students may internalize feelings of shame rather than taking pride in their upward mobility (Duffy, 2007).

When students move into this “other” culture, they may have to renegotiate relationships with their families, and also with themselves (London, 1992, p. 6). These students find themselves living on the “margins of two cultures” (London, 1992, p. 7). One student in London’s study said she felt she was “living in both worlds” (p. 8). The very act of going to college may signify to the family that the student is interested in moving into the middle class and attaining a white collar position not previously held by a member of the family (London, 1992). Even if students are not necessarily concerned with upward mobility, they still may struggle when they find themselves in a new social status group at college. Sometimes, they test the reactions of their family members by “trying on” and experimenting through displaying cultural symbols and artifacts of this higher social status group (London, 1992, p. 7). This may cause concern on the part of the family about the student’s outward changes.
Rendon (1992), an education professor and scholar, describes the “pain of separation” (p. 58) she personally experienced as a poor, first-generation college student in her essay *From the Barrio to the Academy: Revelations of a Mexican American “Scholarship Girl.”* She talks about the fear that both her mother and she experienced during this transition. When Rendon asked her mother why she was afraid of Rendon’s leaving home to be on her own, be by herself, her mother told her, “I am afraid- I don’t know why” (p. 59). Rendon too was scared:

I sensed that deep in my mother’s soul she felt resentful about how this alien culture of higher education was polluting my values and customs. I, in turn, was afraid that I was becoming a stranger to her, a stranger she did not quite understand, a stranger she might not even like. (p. 59).

*Parent Experience of Student’s Transition to College*

What about parents’ perspective of their children’s transition to college? How does the literature reflect this experience? This viewpoint, too, may be influenced by where students attend college and if parents perceive that students are “leaving home” or not. This expectation may also be based on socioeconomic class. The parents in Karp et al.’s (2004) study experience this phenomenon as their students are preparing to attend residential, four-year institutions. However, Karp et al. (2004) point out that “Separation and individuation are issues that must be faced by all human beings, but leaving home in its American sense is not [universal]. Especially for upper-middle class families, leaving home for a residential college is a major rite of passage for both children and their parents” (Karp et al., 2004, p. 358). Therefore, according to this analysis, even if some students are not permanently moving out of their parents’ residences when they are attending school, parents may view them as symbolically “leaving home” because of the individuation traditionally associated with the act of attending college.
It seems that all parents experience at least some anxiety about their children “leaving home” regardless of socioeconomic class and their own educational level. Most parents also share the value of wanting students to seek higher education, even if parents lack knowledge about the college admissions process. Ceja (2006) concludes that a lack of parental understanding of the college process should not be confused with a lack of support or encouragement. According to one student in Ceja’s study, her mother did not understand her approach of applying to many different schools in order to expand her college choices. However, her mother was nonetheless supportive of her daughter’s decision to attend college. The student noted “all she tells us is just to pick a good school somewhere, [to] pick the best one” (Ceja, 2006, p. 94).

Karp et al. (2004) point out that “empty nest syndrome” is largely class-based as there are different meanings associated with a child’s “leaving home.” Even though parents in the Karp et al.’s (2004) study did report anxiety over the transition to college, the empty nest period is largely defined as positive by these parents. Perhaps this is due to different expectations for independence and attachment, or perhaps this is a result of the fact that upper-middle class parents with greater resources might have greater life options than less affluent parents whose children no longer live at home (Karp et al., 2004).

Another potentially class-based parent experience that emerges from the literature is parents’ reaction to college officials and administrators in the college choice and transition process. According to Smith (2001), in a study of Black students at a low socioeconomic high school, as a result of the lack of clarity that parents experience in the college admissions process, they feel a general mistrust of college admissions personnel and college representatives in
general. Parents in Smith’s study perceive college staff as a malevolent “collective they” (Smith, 2001, p. 18).

There is a body of literature that describes the role of parents in the college choice process of students from low socioeconomic status groups. However, as I mentioned in Chapter One, once those students actually enter college, the literature that describes the effect of these relationships is limited. In addition, although the student’s experience of their separation from their parents is captured, the parents’ experience of the separation is less represented; it is primarily described by the students’ interpretation of what this experience is.

The First Semester

The first semester is a particularly critical time for low socioeconomic status students because this group struggles with persistence in general. According to Tinto (1993) widely cited in terms of retention literature, it is the first-year of college, and particularly the first semester that is the most important year in the process of persistence. It is during the first semester of college that students need to separate themselves from their past communities and associations and make the social and academic transition to the challenging environment of college (Upcraft, Gardner et al., 1989). The incidence of students’ withdrawing from college is highest during this time period (Tinto, 1993). Most students who depart college do so in the earliest part of the first semester, usually prior to the first grading period, in the first six to eight weeks (Tinto, 1993). According to Tinto (1993), the students who have this difficulty transitioning to college usually have either an inability to separate themselves from home peer groups and/or difficulty separating from their parents and other family members:

College students are, after all, moving from one community or set of communities, most typically those of the family and local high school, to another, that of the college. Like
other persons in the wider society, they too must separate themselves, to some degree from past associations in order to make the transition to eventual incorporation in the life of the college (Tinto, 1975, p. 94).

Although Tinto’s model points to the importance of the first-semester of college, this work has been criticized. For example, Tierney (1992) argues that Tinto’s theoretical construct of college retention could have potentially negative consequences for members of marginalized racial and ethnic minority groups, especially Native American students. The concept of college as a universal “rite of passage” (Tierney, 1992; van Gennep, 1960), is problematic. This assumes that individuals must forgo their former traditions and rituals in order to take part in new ones. It is up to the individual to adapt to the system, rather than the system to adapt to the individual (Tierney, 1992). Like Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) theory of separation-individuation, Tinto’s theory of student departure may also not fit with the experience of today’s diverse population of college students. Do students really have to break away from their parents and families in order to adjust to college and then to stay there?

Since low-income, first-generation students struggle with access and retention, most of the literature clusters around parental roles in these outcomes. Significant gaps include literature on the parent-student relationship once students actually matriculate as well as studies that capture the perspective of parents themselves during this time. In addition, there is a general lack of literature on the experience of students and parents who are not only low-income and first-generation, but also immigrants or non-English speakers.

Summary

In this chapter, there are three distinct sections that each draw upon different types of literature. The first section, which describes parental involvement in the current context of higher
education as well as the evolution of the student-parent-institution relationship relies primarily on anecdotal information, media articles, publications popular with practitioners as well as historical texts and legal sources. The body of literature used in this section contains very few empirical studies measuring the effects of parental involvement. The second section, on student and human development theory, contains conclusions about the parent-student relationship drawn primarily from quantitative studies. In the third section, which looks closely at the experience of students from the lowest socioeconomic status groups and their parents, qualitative studies comprise the bulk of the studies in addition to a couple of quantitative studies measuring parents’ influence on students access and retention, generally.

Overall, the literature broadly helps to define the college student-parent relationship. However, more information about the effects of parental involvement on individual student experiences is needed. It is also important to capture the parent perspective of the parent-student relationship in addition to the student perspective. The experience of working class and low-income students and their parents, beyond the point of matriculation, especially needs to be illuminated, as it is largely absent from the discourse about parental involvement in the current context of higher education.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Methodology

As I mentioned in Chapter One, my primary research focus was to examine the lived experience of the relationship between students and their parents during the first semester of college, specifically for working class and low-income students who attended a high school where parental involvement was supported and encouraged. What constitutes “parental involvement,” for this population?

To uncover the lived experience of the parent-college student relationship for members of the lowest socioeconomic class groups, I conducted a qualitative study, using a phenomenological approach. I interviewed students and their parents, separately, over the course of the student’s first semester at college. I conducted three interviews with each student and two interviews with each parent. The students and parents in the sample were from a high school that has a high population of low-income and working class students, a college preparation program, and a culture of parental involvement.

Qualitative Research

Only recently have researchers attempted to measure the phenomenon of parental involvement, and they have done so quantitatively. As I mentioned in Chapter One, The Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at UCLA amended its Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) instrument in 2007 to include questions about levels of parental involvement. (These questions did not appear on the 2008 instrument.) Again, most students who took the CIRP in 2007 perceived the level of parental involvement in their lives to be “just right.” However, Latino students and first-generation students, in particular, were more likely than their peers to report “too little” parental involvement (Pryor et al., 2007).
Quantitative research, like the CIRP, has traditionally been the dominant form of student affairs research. Qualitative research methods may have been underestimated in student affairs because of the value that the best research is generalizable and statistically significant (Harper & Kuh, 2007). Quantitative data can reveal broad trends, but it cannot reveal individual points of view the way that qualitative research can (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). For example, according to the CIRP, Latino students may experience parental involvement differently than students of other racial backgrounds, and first-generation students may differ in their interactions with parents from students whose parents did not go to college. Although we have this important information, without qualitative research, we do not know what this experience looks like.

I knew that if I was truly to understand the relationship between working class and low-income students and their parents, and the phenomenon of parental involvement, I must look at the context of this particular phenomenon (Harper & Museus, 2007; Patton, 2002). Qualitative research best allowed me to uncover this context (Harper & Museus, 2007). In addition, a qualitative approach to research allowed the study participants to create their own meaning of the phenomenon of parental involvement, rather than measuring a pre-determined definition of this term (Creswell, 2007). As I explained in Chapter One, the current definition of parental involvement in higher education is problematic and may be based on patterns of behavior established by the middle and upper-middle classes (Lareau, 1987).

In addition, qualitative research is particularly suited to understanding the population I intended to study, working class and low-income college students and their parents. Qualitative research is helpful in revealing the experiences of those who are members of marginalized groups as they may experience campus culture in different ways than those in majority populations (Museus, 2007). I do recognize, however, that even though qualitative methodology
is helpful in capturing the experience of those whose voices are not heard, sometimes these voices are intentionally hidden (Dodson & Schamalzbauer, 2005). It can be challenging to gain accurate representations of experience from people in poor and marginalized communities because low-income and vulnerable people often hesitate to share their worlds (Dodson & Schamalzbauer, 2005).

**Phenomenology**

A phenomenological study was an appropriate approach to this research on working class and low-income students and their parents as phenomenology describes individuals’ meaning of their lived experiences of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). In this case, it also seems that the phenomenon of parental involvement in higher education cannot be completely understood without paying close attention to the lived experiences of this particular subset of parents and students (Creswell, 2007). Through the use of a phenomenological approach, it was possible to distill the “essence” of the experience of this population, learning “what” they experienced and “how” they experienced it. (Moustakas, 1994). This ultimately led to a deep understanding of the experience of low-income parents when their children go to college as well as these students’ relationship to their parents while they are in college (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994).

Since phenomenology is rooted in philosophical traditions, it is important that I discuss the philosophical approach I used in this study (Creswell, 2007). Many qualitative studies lack a link between the method used and the philosophical underpinnings that guide the method (Lopez & Willis, 2004). I took a descriptive approach rather than an interpretive approach to my phenomenological study (Lopez & Willis, 2004; Moustakas, 1994). I primarily followed the tradition of Husserl, whose view was that the researchers should shed previous knowledge about the topic in order to try and provide an objective view of reality (Lopez & Willis, 2004;
Moustakas, 1994). Using this method, I will tell the “comprehensive story” of each parent and student in Chapter Four (Moustakas, 2004, p. 19).

“Bracketing” one’s own experience is an important step in conducting descriptive phenomenology. According to Moustakas (1994), who is most frequently cited regarding procedures for this approach, an important step is “setting aside the predilections, prejudices, predispositions, and allowing things, events, and people to enter anew into consciousness, and to look and see them again, as if for the first time,” (p. 85). This stage is also called the epoche (Moustakas, 1994). My disclosure of experience with the topic appears in the positionality section of this chapter.

Sample

Qualitative research literature stresses the importance of forming relationships and building trust with research participants. Gaining trust is essential to the success of interviews, especially unstructured ones (Fontana & Frey, 2005). This trust is particularly important to working with the population of students and parents I intend to study, since members of these marginalized socioeconomic class groups are often reluctant to share their experience, or may have a fear of saying what is really going on (Dodson & Schmalzbauer, 2005). However, it is not only important to gain the trust of individuals one wishes to conduct unstructured interviews with. In addition, it is also critical that the researcher establish rapport with her participants (Corbin & Morse, 2003; Creswell, 2007; Fontana & Frey, 2005; Johnson, 2002). The goal of unstructured interviewing is understanding, so the researcher must be able to see the phenomenon from the participant’s viewpoint (Fontana & Frey, 2005).

One possible approach to gaining access to working class and low-income students and their parents in order to learn about their lived experience during the first-semester of college
would have been to sample students and parents once the students have begun college, recruiting participants from a particular college or university. However, I chose to sample students and parents from a particular high school, as I believed that this would give me the best opportunity to build trust and establish rapport with participants. Using this strategy, I was able to build trust and establish rapport well before the students even matriculated at college.

Population Site

The Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical Center (the Met) is a network of six small public high schools in Providence Rhode Island. It is part of a larger network of about 50 schools founded by the Big Picture Company. It serves a population of predominantly low-income students from various racial and ethnic backgrounds. Most of the Met’s recruitment of students takes place in middle schools that serve the poorest neighborhoods in Providence (Levine, 2002). Seventy-five percent of Met students come from Providence and 25% are from other areas of Rhode Island (The Met, 2008). Sixty-eight percent of Met students qualify for the Federal Free and Reduced Lunch Program (The Met, 2008). The Met is unique because of its curriculum, which is tailored around student internships in the community, as well as its focus on college preparation. Most Met students take at least one course at a local college, and during their senior year of high school, students are required to complete three to five college applications along with a college portfolio (The Met, 2008). Ninety-nine percent of Met students are accepted to a college, and approximately 70% enroll, compared to the national average of 54% of low-income students who enroll in college (Adelman, 2004).

In addition, the Met also places a significant emphasis on parental involvement. When a student applies to the Met, both the student and the parents have to write an essay describing why they want to be part of the Met school community (Littky, 2004). Parents are regularly invited to
participate in activities at the Met (Levine, 2002). According to data from Rhode Island’s School Accountability for Learning and Teaching (SALT) survey from 2005, the Met ranked number one in the state for parent involvement. The survey measures how involved parents feel with the school and how comfortable they are with teachers and the school environment (The Met, 2008). The Met’s average was 84% compared to the state average of 68%.

Parents take an active role in their child’s education and work with the student and the student’s advisor to help develop the student’s individualized curriculum, or learning plan (The Met, 2008). They serve as panelists at the student’s quarterly exhibitions, where students present what they have learned to an audience. Here is a message to parents that appears on the Met’s website:

We invite you to become more involved at the Met, whether it’s contributing to our college scholarship fund or sharing your time and talents. Consider leading a Pick Me Up (a whole school community meeting) or running a workshop related to your career field or interests. Ask your child’s advisor how you can help. We encourage you to visit the Met and to continue to check our website for news and events. (The Met, 2008).

The definition of “parental involvement” at the Met is broad and purposeful. The Met views families as an integral part of the education process (Littky, 2004). Because the Met encourages parents to play an active role in their children’s education, in a way, they promote standards of parental involvement that are more consistent with middle class behaviors. Parents from lower socioeconomic class groups typically see teachers as responsible for their students’ education and do not play as much of a role in schools as middle class parents do (Lareau, 1987).

In addition, Met staff members have close relationships with students, especially around their preparation for college. Students at the Met are grouped into advisories, or groups of about
15 students in the same year, who have an advisor (teacher) who stays with them for all four years of high school. The advisor works with each student and his or her parents to develop an individualized learning plan each quarter and helps students formulate their post-graduation plans (The Met, 2008). The Met also has a College Transition Team that develops relationships with colleges and assists the Met students in their transition to college and other post-secondary opportunities (The Met, 2008). These counselors assist students in the college application process, hold workshops for students and families about financial aid and scholarship opportunities, and stay connected to students once they graduate from the Met, advising them when they are in college, and holding reunions for alumni (The Met, 2008). The Met considers itself responsible for the success of its graduates and has an alumni relations program (The Met, 2008).

The Met’s population of students from low-income backgrounds, focus on college preparation, and emphasis on parental involvement, as well as the school’s relationship and connection to its students and families once they graduate, made it an ideal setting from which to identify a subset of parents and students to study. Because of these factors, I consider the Met to be a critical case institutional sample (Patton, 2002). According to Patton (2002), a critical case sample is based on the idea that “if it happens here, it will happen anywhere” (p. 236). Using this sampling method, the researcher picks the site that she believes will yield the most information and have the greatest impact on the development of knowledge (Patton, 2002). By studying parents and students who come from a high school like the Met, where parental involvement is clearly defined and part of the institutional culture, I can gain a clearer picture of parental involvement for this population at the college level.
As I discussed in Chapter Two, the literature shows that there is a difference between the institutional expectations for parental involvement at the K-12 and higher education levels, with K-12 typically expecting and promoting more parental involvement and higher education expecting and promoting less. Looking at the relationship between low-income and working class parents and their students, who come from a school where there is a clear definition of parental involvement, would better help define parental involvement for this population at the college level. If parents in this study do not fit the higher education definition of parental involvement that is established by the middle and upper-middle classes, it is likely that parents who did not come from a high school with strong parental involvement also do not meet this definition of parental involvement.

Sample

As I mentioned in the previous section, building trust and establishing rapport are essential in qualitative research, especially when the researcher is working with marginalized groups and wishes to conduct unstructured, open-ended interviews. In order to build this trust and establish rapport with potential participants for my research study, I spent time as a participant-observer at the Met. I visited a total of four different senior advisories (classes) at the high school. I worked with two advisories from November, 2007 to June, 2008 and the other two from April, 2008 to June, 2008. I was introduced to the teachers and given access to the school by a former administrator who is a consultant for the Met.

In conducting this fieldwork, I assumed the role of participant-observer. I participated in the “daily routines” (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995) of the four advisories I worked with. I spent about one day a week at the Met, splitting the day between the classrooms. In order to “get close” (Emerson et al., 1995, p. 1) to potential subject participants and those who have a lot of
information about subject participants, I knew that I could not simply sit in the back of the classroom and take notes, attempting to “be a fly on the wall” (Emerson et al., 1995, p. 3). Instead, I helped students when they or the teacher asked me to: editing research papers, preparing for exhibitions, working on college applications etc.

In addition to establishing trust and rapport with students, I also tried to get to know parents through my role as participant-observer. I attempted to play a role in events where parents were present, from parent nights where student work was displayed, to financial aid nights where parents received help filling out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), or signing for loans. I also attended student presentations and learning plan meetings.

In these interactions with parents, I introduced myself as a researcher from Boston College. Through my fieldwork, I was able to understand the culture of the school (VanMannen, 1988). This was particularly important as I am an outsider to this culture. In order to help me best make sense of what I was observing and uncover information-rich cases for my study, I wrote ethnographic fieldnotes in a research journal. These notes described the experiences and observations I had while participating in the field as well as my perception and interpretation of these experiences (Emerson et al., 1995).

In order to sample the individual participants, the students and their parents, I used criterion sampling (Patton, 2002) to choose students enrolled in college from the Met’s class of 2008 who met the criteria of being working class or low income. Students in the study were limited to those who were attending accredited four-year colleges or universities because these are the types of institutions where students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds struggle the most with persistence. In addition, for the sample, each student needed to have at least one parent who was willing to be interviewed; having two parents participate in the study was not
necessary for inclusion in the study. Furthermore, I did not define the qualifications for someone to be classified as “parent” in strict terms, because for many of the students in this population, the role of “parent” is not necessarily occupied by their biological mother and/or father. For the purposes of this study, a “parent” could be a grandparent, guardian, or other adult who plays the “parent” role in the student’s life. The students identified this person themselves.

Before sampling, I anticipated that the number of parent-student pairs included in the study would be between four and six. For a phenomenological study, Dukes (1984) recommends studying between three and ten participants. I ultimately had six students, six parents, and one grandparent in the sample. (I interviewed one parent of each student, except for one student; I interviewed both of his parents.) The final number of subjects was determined by who met the criteria and who was willing and wanting to participate. In order to find out who was interested in participating in the study, I created a form (see Appendix E) that asked students whether they would be interested in participating in interviews during the fall and whether they thought their parents were interested. It also asked for their contact information so that I would be able to get in touch with them after they graduated. In order to recruit participants, in two of the classes, in June, I distributed the forms to students during a class meeting time. In the other two classrooms, since the college transition counselor was meeting individually with each student at the end of the year, she gave the forms to the students and asked them if they were interested in participating in the study.

Once I found out, through the forms, who was interested, and who thought their parents would be willing to participate, I purposefully sampled the students and parents for the study, so that I could include the most information-rich cases (Patton, 2002). One challenge to sampling students from the high school level is that in the spring it is not yet clear who will actually go to
college. I could not really be sure who was going to attend a four-year college until the students matriculated in the fall. I tried my best to identify which students were most likely to attend four-year colleges by talking to the students’ teachers and college counselors, learning about the students’ plans and asking who was most likely to follow through these plans. Ultimately, I waited to contact the students who were interested in participating in the study until they had enrolled in college in the fall.

I also identified, through teachers and college counselors, which of these students they consider to be low-income or working class, with parents having not gone to college or having limited college exposure. In my sample, I wanted to make sure both genders were represented. In addition, I also particularly want to include Latino students and parents in the study, because of the finding from the 2007 CIRP, which reported that Latino college students report that they wish they had higher levels of parental involvement.

As I mentioned in Chapter Two, research on parents’ role in their children’s education has typically been limited to those parents who speak English. Non English-speaking parents provide a critical perspective. It is important that their voices are heard since they have previously been silenced in related research. Therefore, if a parent did not speak English, she was not excluded from the sample for this study. I interviewed parents who did not speak English using a translator. Because of the importance of gaining trust and establishing rapport with qualitative research participants, I used a translator who was affiliated with the school, a college transition counselor at one of the high schools that I worked with. Before engaging in interviews with parents I spoke with the translator ahead of time so she understood that I needed the responses to be translated verbatim (Patton, 2002).
In the end, I included every student in the sample who had expressed interest in participating in the interview study, had said they thought their parents were willing to participate, and who qualified by attending a four-year college and having been identified as being working-class or low-income. I actually followed up with seven students about participating in the study. I believed that one of the students in the study was working class, but after interviewing her and her mother for the first time, I doubted this. Her mother had gone to college and also drove an expensive car, which caused me to question the student’s resources. I went back to the school staff member who recommended this student for the study and asked her how she would define this student’s class status. She replied, “middle class.” At that point, I decided to continue to interview the student and the parent, but not to analyze their interviews or include them in the results. I do include a brief discussion of this student’s experience and how it compares to the other participants’ experiences in Chapter Five.

A description of the six student participants and their parents appears in Figure One. When I had contacted and followed up with the students in the fall and set up interview times with them, I asked them if their parents would be willing to meet with me. Students then informed me of the best way to get in touch with their parents- they either told their parents I would be contacting them and gave me their parents’ contact information, or they arranged a time for the interview with their parent and communicated directly with me about these arrangements. I interviewed at least one parent for each student. Only two students had parents that lived together, at home. For one student, Manny, I interviewed both of these parents together. For another student, Clara, I interviewed only her mother because it was easiest for her to meet me during the day when her husband was at work, and because Clara had reported having a primary connection to her mother. Two of the parents in the study, Jazmin’s mother
Ana, and Manny’s mother Angelica, did not speak English, so the translator interpreted all of the conversations with them. Carlos, Manny’s father, spoke limited English. He could converse in English but felt more comfortable speaking in Spanish. Parts of his interview were conducted in English and parts were conducted in Spanish.

Overall, the sample included three female students and three male students (this figure excludes the middle class student). Three students attended public colleges and three attended private colleges. Three students attended college within 30 minutes of their homes, and three students attended college between two and five hours away from home. Three Latino students, one Black student, one White student, and one Native American student were included in the sample. Three of these students are working class, according to the definition I outline in Chapter One, and three of these students are low-income.

Figure 1. Study participants and characteristics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Student College</th>
<th>Parent Education Level &amp; Occupation</th>
<th>Demography</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Charlie Marie</td>
<td>Public 4-year</td>
<td>Some college Museum work</td>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>Charlie does not know his mother and has never lived with father. Charlie has lived with his grandmother since he was 10.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clara Rosa</td>
<td>Private 4-year</td>
<td>Mother- No college Unemployed</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>Clara’s mother Rosa and father Jose are married. Jose is involved in Clara’s life but was not a study participant. Rosa has had a few strokes and is in poor health.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant</td>
<td>Student College</td>
<td>Parent Education Level &amp; Occupation</td>
<td>Demography</td>
<td>Notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------</td>
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<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jazmin Ana, Jazmin’s mother</td>
<td>Public 4-year in state Lives on campus (but spends most nights at home) No college Unemployed</td>
<td>Latina Low Income</td>
<td>Ana does not speak English. She moved to the U.S. from the Dominican Republic 19 years ago. Jazmin was born in the U.S. Ana is in poor health. She has heart problems and was hospitalized during the fall. Jazmin’s parents are divorced. Her father lives close by but she has limited contact with him.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manuel (Manny) Carlos, Manny’s father Angelica, Manny’s mother</td>
<td>Private 4-year In state Lives on campus Mother- No college Unemployed Father- No college Maintenance</td>
<td>Latino Working Class</td>
<td>Carlos and Angelica moved to the U.S. from the Dominican Republic 25 years ago. Angelica does not speak English. Carlos speaks limited English.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter Theresa, Peter’s mother</td>
<td>Public 4-year In state Commuter student Mother- No college Unemployed (formerly medical assistant)</td>
<td>Black Low Income</td>
<td>Theresa moved to the U.S from Liberia when Peter was 7. Peter was born in Liberia. Theresa moved back to RI to support Peter (she had been living in the Midwest) and is now in between jobs. Theresa and Peter’s father are divorced. Peter’s father lives about 5 hours away. Peter has regular contact with him. Peter’s older sister, Leah, went to the Met and is now a junior at a college in the Midwest.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tegan Sadie, Tegan’s mother</td>
<td>Private 4-year Art School Out of state Lives on campus Mother - No college Office work</td>
<td>White Working Class</td>
<td>Sadie is recently divorced from Tegan’s father. Tegan does not have much contact with her father. Sadie is a recovering alcoholic.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I provided compensation to students and parents who participate in the study. According to Bernard (2000), “if the informant is not wealthy and has to make a financial sacrifice to talk with us, then clearly some material compensation is needed” (p. 354). I gave the students gift certificates to Amazon.com in the amount of $100 that they could use to buy books for the second semester. One reason I gave them gift certificates rather than cash is because cash payment for participating in interviews is considered income and therefore taxable (Patton, 2002). Although this compensation went directly to the student, it benefited both student and parent.

Data Collection

In order to best capture the lived experience of the relationship between working class and low-income students and parents during the first semester of college, I conducted three open-ended, qualitative interviews with each student and two with each parent. In phenomenology, data collection typically consists of multiple in-depth interviews with participants (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). According to Moustakas (1994), “phenomenological interviewing involves an informal, interactive process and utilizes open-ended comments and questions. Although the primary researcher may in advance develop a series of questions aimed at evoking a comprehensive account of the person’s experience of the phenomenon, these are varied, altered, or not used at all when the co-researcher shares the full story of his or her experience of the bracketed question” (p. 114).

The interviews with participants were largely unstructured and included a lot of casual conversation. I asked a main overarching question, but also had some probes available that I could use as sub-questions if I needed to use them (Corbin & Morse, 2003; Creswell, 2007;
Patton, 2002; Warren, 2002). For the students, the main overarching question I asked was, “What influence has/have your parent/parents had on your college experience?” Probes included how often they talk to their parents, what modes of communication they use to talk to their parents, and what they talk to their parents about, as well as how they would compare their relationship to their parents in college to the relationship they had to their parents in high school. (See student interview protocol, Appendix A.) I also discussed their general college experience with them, asking what they had experienced in terms of challenges and successes. In addition, each interview built on the previous interview (Patton, 2002). During the second and third interviews, I brought up topics from the other interviews and inquired about them. As I saw themes emerging from the data, I tested them by asking students questions related to these themes. I also used the final interview as a way to member check. I asked students if they felt they had given me accurate information through the three interviews and asked them if there was anything that they would like to change about what they said.

The parent interviews were also unstructured, open-ended interviews with a similar format. (See Appendix B for parent interview protocol.) I also had a large overarching question and a number of probes available for me to use. For parents, the main, overarching question was, “What has your life been like as the parent of a college student?” Probes included how often they talk to their student, what modes of communication they use to talk to one another, and what they talk to their student about, as well as how they would compare their relationship to their student in college to when he or she was in high school at the Met. I also discussed their general concerns about their college students and how they perceived their role in their college students’ life. As with the student interviews, I revisited topics that came up in each interview.
(Patton, 2002) and pursued emerging themes. I also offered the final interview as a chance to verify what they had already told me and amend their testimony.

By using unstructured interviews-- also called informal, conversational interviews, and open-ended interviews-- in my data collection (Corbin & Morse, 2003; Fontana & Frey, 2005; Patton, 2002), I had the flexibility to pursue different areas of interest as they related to my overarching interview question (Patton, 2002). This type of interviewing also put more control of the interview in the hands of the person being interviewed (Corbin & Morse, 2003). The interviewees were the central actors of the interview, telling their stories, and providing “deep” information and knowledge (Corbin & Morse, 2003; Johnson, 2002, p. 104). They could control the course of the interview and determine what they thought was important. Because of the trust and rapport I had established with participants, especially the students, I wanted to talk about students’ general experience at college, not necessarily strictly confined to the parent-student relationship. Opening up the interview in this way, allowed students to “take side trips” (Corbin & Morse, 2003, p. 343) in talking about their experiences; this conversation also often connected back to the main overarching question. In the interview I tended to “go with the flow” (Patton, 2002, p. 343). At the same time, however, just because the interviews were unstructured does not mean they were unfocused (Patton, 2002).

As I mentioned, I conducted the interviews with students three times over the course of the students’ first semester of college. I interviewed parents, separately, twice during the semester, for the most part between the student interviews. In particular, I chose the first semester because, as I mentioned in Chapter Two, this is the time when students are most likely to decide if they will persist in college. During my pilot study, which I will describe in further detail in the next section, I interviewed two Met alumnae when they were sophomores at a four-
year college. I asked both students which points during the first semester would be best to conduct interviews. One participant suggested that the middle of the semester was the most important time to capture. “Sometime in the middle. For me that’s when I had my tough time…. in the end, once you overcome the middle you can make it to the end…so it’s the middle.” I did interview students during the middle of the semester, in November, before Thanksgiving. I also interviewed students at the beginning of the semester, after the first month, between the end of September and mid-October. The third interview with students took place in December, after students had completed their final exams and projects and finished for the semester. I interviewed parents in between the student interviews, in October and at the beginning of December.

For the students, I conducted the first two interviews at or near their college campuses, in locations that students chose. I digitally recorded the interviews. For two of the students who went to college out-of-state, I took them out to eat at restaurants off campus. One student, Clara, particularly enjoyed this and noted, “it was nice to also get off campus cause it’s so small and like not be with my friends for once and be myself.” On other campuses, I met with students in the student center, cafeteria, or outside on a park bench. Whenever I visited the students’ campuses, I spent some time walking around and observing the campus, getting a feel for the environment.

The student who went to school the farthest away (about five hours from his home), I only visited once. Charlie said that he preferred we meet when he was at home over Thanksgiving. We made plans to meet, but he had a family event and was unable to come and meet me. Instead, I conducted a phone interview when he arrived back on campus, in early December. Therefore, for Charlie, the timing of the second interview occurred later than it did
for the other students in the study. I realize that in the telephone interview I was not able to see the non-verbal communication of the interviewee (Creswell, 2007; Shuy, 2002). However, given the location of this student’s school, this seemed like a reasonable way to have a second interview. I conducted third interviews when students had completed their semesters. These took place in or near students’ homes. One interview took place at the student’s home when his mother was not there. Others occurred in student-suggested public locations: donut shops, pizza places, fast food restaurants, and diners.

In terms of parents, I also tried to conduct interviews in settings that were comfortable for them. I let parents choose the location of the interviews. All interviews with parents were conducted in their homes, except for one. The first interview, with Peter’s mother Theresa, took place in the student center of his college, when she was there to drop him off at school. When I conducted the second interview with Theresa, in her home, she seemed much more comfortable and opened up much more about her background and family life. I also digitally recorded these interviews with parents.

In terms of communicating with students to schedule interviews and follow up about questions, the online social networking site Facebook was an effective way to get in touch. I communicated with about half of the students this way. Both of the students in the pilot study had actually suggested that Facebook would be an effective way to get in touch with study participants. For the students who were not regularly on computers, they told me they preferred I contact them by phone, and I found text messaging an easy, effective way to communicate. In terms of communicating with parents to set up interviews, about half of the parents I called on the phone. As I mentioned earlier, for the rest of the parent interviews, students organized the
logistics of the interviews and then communicated directly with me. The only direct contact I had with these parents was at the interview itself.

Pilot Study

I had a chance to test my overarching interview question for students in a pilot study I conducted with two graduates of the Met class of 2006 who were sophomores at a four-year college. I conducted unstructured interviews with both participants, asking them about the influence their parents have had on their college experience. I used some of the probes in the interview, and also asked specific questions to inform my research study, such as when to interview students and how to communicate with these students. This pilot study confirmed the effectiveness of open-ended, conversational interviews in getting at the “essence” of the student’s lived experience of their relationship with their parents (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 2004). In one of the interviews, I directed the conversation more through the use of probes. This interview did not go as well, as I found the participant waiting for me to ask her the next question.

The pilot study also confirmed that I had chosen an important research question. Neither of the experiences of relationships between the students in the study and their parents matched the description of parental involvement established by the middle and upper-middle classes and described by the media. For example, although one participant spoke with her mother almost every day during the first semester of college, her mother never contacted the student’s institution. In fact, if there had been a problem the participant wasn’t even sure her mother would know whom to call.

If my mom wanted to check in on me whether it’s coming up, calling me or popping up, coming over, speaking to someone about an issue- it hasn’t happened….she probably
wouldn’t know who to call. I don’t think she even knows my number (on campus). The only number she has is my cell phone. If I had (a difficult) situation, what would she do? I have no idea…I don’t think she even knows numbers out of Rhode Island.

Other themes from the pilot study which did not match the current discourse on parental involvement include: high school staff playing the role of pseudo-parent, a disconnect between college life and family life, and students acting almost as “helicopter children, so concerned about the parents they have left behind that they want to protect them. As one student mentioned, “I choose not to talk to my mom as much since she gets stressed a lot at home. When I’m not there, she has no one… all she has is the cats.”

Data Analysis

In analyzing the data, the first step I took was to transcribe the interview data. In the original transcription of the interview data, to protect the identity of the participants, I assigned pseudonyms to the students and their parents, as well as anyone else whom they mentioned in telling their stories. When transcribing the interviews that were conducted in Spanish, I transcribed the translator’s English translation of what the participant said.

Throughout the study, I kept a research journal where I recorded my fieldnotes as well as my thoughts and perspectives on the research. This allowed me to understand my own perspectives so that they did not influence the outcome of the study (Mertens, 1998). Through writing in the research journal, I also engaged in some preliminary analysis of the data. I recorded thoughts about each interview before in engaging in the next interview. I would make notes of themes or connections between themes. This was part of the memoing process.

Although it is more common to use this process with grounded theory research, I did memo during the preliminary analysis as well as the actual analysis of the interview data. Writing
down ideas about evolving themes helped me to see emerging categories as well as connections between categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

For the most part, in conducting the data analysis, I followed the method Moustakas (1994) suggests for phenomenological studies as a primary guide in my analysis. First, as I discussed, I “bracketed” my own experience with the phenomenon, so that I could be clear which was my experience and which is the experience of the participants (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). I did this through writing in my research journal. A reflection on my own background and experience appears in the positionality statement in this chapter. Next I examined the interviews in text form, attempting to “horizontalize” the data, or go through it highlighting sentences or quotations that provided an understanding of how the college students and parents experienced their relationship. I looked for actual words or phrases that described particular aspects of the lived experience. (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994; Richards and Morse, 2007). From these statements, I derived meaning units for each individual case (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). Then, I took these units and clustered them into common themes in order to develop conclusions about experiences across cases, a group or universal description (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994).

As I mentioned before, I used memoing to help with the analysis process, both with the open coding and axial coding. After “horizontalizing” the data, the open coding process, I axially coded to collapse the data into an intermediate code list and then grouped these codes into four dominant themes. The four themes are: Parent-Student Communication, Autonomy and Individuation, Persistence: Struggles and Supports, and Parent-Student-Institution Relationship. For the purpose of organizing the codes, I also included a fifth category called Background Information. An example of the intermediate code list, grouped into these categories, appears in
the appendix. I include codes on this intermediate list that appeared in the interview transcripts 10 or more times. The codes are listed in order of frequency and some of the codes are included in more than one category.

Finally, I wrote about the experience of the students and parents focusing on “what” the participants in the study experienced with the phenomenon and “how” the experience happened (Creswell, 2007, p. 159; Moustakas, 1994, p. 118). I incorporated the individual experiences of the participants into a composite description of the lived experience of working class and low-income students and parents during the first-semester of college, allowing the original language of the participants to remain dominant in the description (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). I used the four dominant themes to structure and organize how I told the story of this experience.

Rigor and Validity

In order to provide rigor to this study, I have tried to be as transparent as I can about any role I might play in the data and meaning-making process. I have fully disclosed and bracketed my relationship and history with the participants as well as any expectations that I had going into collecting or analyzing the data. I use the pronoun “I” to make it clear when I am speaking from my own experience.

One potential limitation of this study is that because I formed relationships with the participants prior to their entering college, I somehow influenced the data and had a “consequential presence” (Emerson et al., 1995, p. 3). In order to be fully transparent about this issue, I asked the student participants what impact they believed my role in their lives and participation in the study played in their transition to college and overall college experience. I disclose the responses in the positionality section of this chapter.
The process of interpretation leads to validity (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Therefore, in order to add rigor to my analysis, I asked a peer to also interpret my data. Peer review provides an external check of the research process (Creswell, 2007). It helps to reduce the bias that can occur when one person engages in the data collection (Patton, 2002). A peer, a professional in the field of student affairs who is familiar with both qualitative research methods and this study’s topic, coded three of my interviews (after I had added pseudonyms and removed identifying characteristics from the interview text). We then met to compare codes. We found that our codes were very similar; the main difference was that my codes had a higher level of detail.

In order to confirm the findings and further eliminate any bias that I might have as a researcher, I used the final interviews with both students and with parents as a chance to verify what they had told me. These “member checks” help to confirm the accuracy of the data (Dodson & Schmalzbauer, 2005; Patton, 2002). For example, at the end of the conversation with Manny during our third interview, I emphasized to him how I wanted to tell his story and asked him if he thought that I had the full picture of his experience- if he had told me all that he had wanted to. Manny hesitated; he thought something might be missing, “I just feel like I know you got the pretty broad aspect of it. Like you got most of it, you know. I just feel like there’s.. I might be wrong- I just feel like there’s something else.” He added some more thoughts about his family support, his college experience, and his goals for the next semester. When he was ready, he brought the conversation to a close and told me, “I feel like we got it. I feel like we got it.”

I also followed established protocols for conducting research with human subjects. This study was approved by the Boston College Institutional Review Board in August, 2008. I made sure that all participants consented to the study. I had both students and parents sign Institutional Research Board-approved consent forms that stated the purpose of the study as well as any
perceived risks. (In this study, there were none.) Participants were given the opportunity to opt out of the study if they became uncomfortable participating at any time. In addition, it is possible that during qualitative interviews, especially unstructured ones, participants might become upset because they are sharing personal, often intimate, aspects of their lives (Corbin & Morse, 2003). Therefore, I had resources available to which I could refer participants.

Positionality

As a highly-educated White woman with college-educated parents who grew up in upper-middle class suburban area, I was an outsider to the experience of the relationship between working class and low-income students and their parents. Even though I have a strong desire to work with this population that stems from some of the experiences outlined in Chapter One, and a social justice orientation to my work, my background limited me in that I could not personally relate to these students and parents’ experiences. On one hand, my particular background was positive in that my own experiences did not color what I was observing. I was coming to witness the experience with fresh eyes. In this way, I had less to “bracket” than if I had been approaching the relationship from a similar background (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). I heard what students and parents told me without my own narrative mixed in. Even though I had worked with many low-income and working class students in a school environment before, visiting their homes in particular was a new experience to me. With these fresh eyes, I noted in my research journal that I had never even been in homes like these before, and I recorded their appearance. What particularly struck me was the number of repairs certain homes needed, from duct tape holding together the carpet, to soot damage from a fire, that parents didn’t have the resources or the time to fix.
Despite my own background being different than theirs, and my limited exposure to life in working class and low-income families, through the relationships I formed I was ultimately seen as an insider by both students and parents. With the students, I became an insider because even though they knew my role to be one of researcher, they saw me as someone who was connected to their high school, since this is where I had met them and first established our relationship. This was evidenced by the way that students sometimes referred to me. For example, I once asked Manny who he keeps in touch with from the Met, and he replied, “so it’s probably like four or five people from my advisory... kids from my advisory that I still talk to, but staff members its (an advisor), (my college transition counselor), and you.”

Students also considered me an insider because they viewed me as someone who was part of the world they were trying to become part of. They knew I had gone to college, had gotten a Bachelor’s degree, Master’s degree, and was working towards my PhD. When talking with me, they indicated that they thought I understood them and their struggles because of my background in both the academic and social aspects of college. For example in a conversation with Manny about his struggles in math, he said he assumed that I knew the specific math terms that he was using, like the order of operations, “PEMDAS,” something he omitted when talking to his parents. (This was a correct assumption.) In an interview with Charlie, he was talking about the drinking culture on his campus and described a particular drinking game, assuming I would know about the anatomy of a keg (another correct assumption).

... we play this game, everyone has a cup, right? And for each keg, you know the top of the kegs, right? You went to college, you know. Well you keep the tops, and you walk around to anyone with that cap and you put it in their drink and they have to chug it.
I ultimately became an insider and developed relationships with all of the students in the study. Each of my interviews with students began and ended with hugs. Students said they enjoyed meeting with me and participating in the study. For example, during our second interview, Tegan told me that she had been looking forward to our meeting all week and that she found our conversations, “fun.” In our final interview, the students indicated that they wanted to continue our relationship beyond the conclusion of the study.

I also formed relationships with parents and ultimately they saw me as an insider as well. They also viewed me as being “from the Met,” since that is how their students described me to them. Two of the parents, Jazmin’s mother Ana and Charlie’s grandmother Marie, I had met previously at the Met, during an exhibition and financial aid night, respectively. These particular parents saw me as being from the school since that is where they first saw me. In general, because parents had positive relationships with Met staff, they extended these feelings towards me. My translator was Manny’s college transition counselor at the Met who has a previous relationship with his parents. The feelings that the parents had towards her were then transferred to me. Manny’s mother cooked dinner for us and when we made a fuss telling her she shouldn’t have, she told us, “You are our daughters.”

Also, families saw me as someone who was pursuing something that they valued, higher education. In this way, I was also similar to their students. Marie, Charlie’s grandmother, described how she felt about her grandsons continuing with their education and what she would do if one of them got a PhD:

I don’t care what they study as long as they get a Bachelor’s degree. And if they get a Master’s degree, you’ll hear me singing outside. And if they get a PhD, I’m hiring a
blimp. And I’m having it go all over from here to Mississippi where my daughter lives. And saying that, you know, they have a PhD.

The parents told me that they wanted to support my efforts in my studies. Manny’s father, in our last meeting, after the recorder had been turned off, while the translator and Manny’s mother Angelica were catching up on the details of Manny’s love life, spoke to me and gave me some advice about persevering and accomplishing my goals. He told me that he thinks it is great that I am getting my PhD and that I am working hard:

Remember, people are going to throw rocks at you along the way. No, not literally rocks (I must have looked concerned), but obstacles. They’ll say, “you can’t do it.” Instead of throwing the rocks back, you collect them and have a big pile of all of the rocks and stones. Then take all of the rocks and stones and build a staircase. Climb that staircase and look down on everyone from where you are....You can think of that and think, “Manny’s dad told you that.”

The interviews with some parents were lengthy and took frequent “side trips” (Corbin & Morse, 2003, p. 343), including many other topics besides their relationship to students in college. For example, during my first interview with Clara’s mother Rosa, I spent three hours at her home. We talked for two hours at the kitchen table and then she showed me around her house and yard. We stood outside by my car and talked some more. My first interview with Sadie was similar, I spent two and a half hours at her home and our interview ended with a tour. Parents also showed me many photographs of different family members and the students when they were younger, from Marie’s parents in traditional Native American clothing, to Jazmin in a gown on her Sweet Fifteen, to Tegan’s sister doing an aerial gymnastics move, and Manny in first grade.
Did the relationships that I formed with the students in the study somehow influence their first year at college and overall experience? This was a concern I had going into the data collection, and as I mentioned earlier, I asked each student during our third interview what effect the study had. In general, students said that participating in the study gave them an opportunity to reflect on their college experience and their relationship with their parents. According to Jazmin, “Like I thought about my mom and our relationship and how that is and how it was before I went to college. It’s kind of like different so, I noticed that…I think it makes you kind of reflect and kind of notice stuff that you don't notice.” Manny said that he also reflected and he often made a note if something happened that I would be interested in. “So it’s really not like this made me do different things but just being aware of it…and there were things that were more interesting than others that I thought- oh, I could talk to Katie about that.”

Tegan was the only one who questioned whether participating in the study caused her to act in a way she might not normally have. She told her mother that she wished her mother called her more often, and Tegan said she might not have done this so quickly if she hadn’t been thinking about it.

I'm trying to think. I guess maybe it might have like swayed me in the way of actually vocalizing the things that I wanted to tell my mom faster than I would have. Cause I was thinking about it and I was like if I just told (Katie) why am I not telling my mom so, maybe that, but even so I think I still would have told my mom those things anyway. It didn't like drastically influence me to tell her something I never would have. Like I was still doing the things I was doing anyway.

For Tegan, she was used to meeting with other people connected from the Met, and she didn’t see our meetings as much different than those.
I meet with a lot of people. I meet with (my mentor) all the time and I meet with (a staff member at the Met)...so I'm constantly meeting with people one-on-one and talking about this or talking about that.

It was in the context of these close relationships that I conducted the interviews for this study.

Limitations

Even though students said that they didn’t believe their relationship with me, nor their participation in the study, influenced their college experience, it is impossible to know exactly what the “investigator effects” (Patton, 2002) were. I may have had a “consequential presence” (Emerson et al., 1995, p. 3) in my role as researcher conducting this study. I attempt to neither overestimate nor underestimate my effects but to take seriously my responsibility to describe what those effects are (Patton, 2002).

My own identity and background may have influenced the data collection and may have affected interview content. As I described in the previous section, I was an outsider to the experience of my participants because I am a White, highly-educated woman with a middle class background and college-educated parents. I was able to become an insider in a couple of ways, such as through my connection to the Met and my membership in a community that the students were becoming part of. In other ways, my background as a researcher may have influenced the topics that participants felt comfortable discussing. For example, the only student who mentioned the issue of race, was Tegan, who was White. In one of our interviews, she discussed her perspective on what it was like to be one of the only White students at the Met. It is possible that the other students did not talk about issues of race with me because of my own racial background.
Another limitation of this study is that its results cannot be broadly generalized. There are a number of characteristics unique to the students and parents in this sample. First of all parents, self-selected into a school where there was an active model of parental involvement that was more consistent with middle class parent behaviors (Lareau, 1987). In addition, the students in the study were the students from their high school who matriculated at four-year colleges the fall immediately following graduation. This means that these students possessed particular qualities such as academic proficiency, independence and an ability to persevere. Students also had a unique experience from attending the Met, an alternative high school with curriculum that emphasizes real-world learning and relationships with adults (Levine, 2002). What about students who do not have characteristics like the students in this study or who did not attend a high school like the Met? What about parents who did not display an active level of parental involvement in when their students were in high school?

Please note, however, that although this can be considered a limitation, I believe that most of the characteristics of these particular students and parents contribute to the strength if sample, rather than its weakness. This is why I chose parents and students from this particular high school as a critical case sample (Patton, 2002). I picked the site that I believed would yield the most information and have the greatest impact on the development of knowledge. If these parents, who had a middle class level of involvement in high school were not as involved in college, then it seems other parents who did not have this level of involvement and had less of a connection to their students’ institutions would be less likely to be. Qualitative research, and critical case samples, do allow for logical generalizations such as this, even though broad generalizations cannot be made (Patton, 2002). While research from this study cannot be
broadly generalized, it can form a “working hypothesis” (Cronbach, 1975; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) that can be tested on other populations.

The next chapter will highlight the experience of the low-income and working class parents and students in this study. It will explain the four dominant themes that emerged from the interviews: Parent-Student Communication, Autonomy and Individuation, Persistence: Struggles and Supports, and Parent-Student-Institution Relationship.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

This chapter presents study findings on working class and low-income students’ relationships to their parents during the first semester of college. Four dominant themes emerged from the parents’ and students’ lived experience: 1) Parent-Student Communication, 2) Autonomy and Individuation, 3) Persistence, and 4) Parent-Student-Institution Relationship.

Parent-Student Communication refers to the communication that parents and students had with one another. It includes how they communicated, how frequently they communicated, who initiated communication, and what the parents and students talked about with one another. The theme Autonomy and Individuation refers to development; it shows that, for the most part, students are autonomous from their parents and that their parents view them as adults. Persistence: Struggles and Support describes the struggles students encountered during their first semester and how parents were and were not able to support them. When parents could not advise students, the students turned to other sources, which I also describe as part of this theme. Finally, Parent-Student-Institution Relationship addresses parental involvement, or the dynamic between the three parties of parent, student, and institution and especially the relationship between parents and the institution.

The four themes are not mutually exclusive. There are a number of different ways that I could have organized the data, and some of the findings can easily fit into multiple categories. These particular four themes provided the stable, most convincing, categorization of the data.

Parent-Student Communication

*Communication Frequency*

The parents and students in the study spoke with one another rather frequently. Most students spoke to their parents every day, but the times per week that parents and students talked
ranged from one or two times a week, to sometimes multiple times a day. For example, Clara described how frequently she talks with her mother, Rosa:

Sometimes I talk to my mom for like- there's times where I talk to her for like 10 minutes, or 20 minutes, or half an hour, or like 10 seconds, cause I like woke her up or something like that. But I probably talk to my mom, like I call my mom, some days I call her like three times a day, some days I call her like at night, some days I'll be so busy and forget to call her, so I'll call her in the morning like after class or something like that.

The two students and parents who did not communicate every day said that they spoke once or twice a week. One student, Tegan, was not happy with this level of communication and said she wished that her mother Sadie would call her more often. Communication frequency was related to the individual student-parent relationship dynamic, how much the parent and student had communicated before the student went to college. For example, Tegan said that she and her mother Sadie didn’t communicate that frequently, that they never really had, partly due to their different schedules. “And its always kind of been that way. Like we never just like sit down and talk. And we don't have family dinner because we're all kind of moving around doing things at different times and stuff.”

Both parents and students initiated communication with one another, but the frequency of communication was ultimately dictated by the students. Sometimes the parents were afraid to call their students because they didn’t want to bother them at college. Tegan and her mother Sadie are a good example of this dynamic. Sadie was hesitant to call Tegan, fearing that she would disturb her. She was also conscious of not being an overbearing mother:
I avoided calling her at first because I did not want to be that kind of protective mom even though I was curious, like what's going on, and how are you doing. So, I did not call for, I think, three days after I dropped her off.

Tegan gave Sadie permission to call her more often. Tegan described her communication with Sadie:

She like hardly ever calls me. I think she's called me like twice without me having called her and asked her to call me…But I always tell her, you can call me. I like it when you call me. I like talking to you. You're my mother. I don't know if you get this. I know a lot of other kids don't like to talk to their Moms and their Moms call them all the time…and she's like I know but I feel bad because I feel like I'm being a bother and I'm like no…you don't bother me.

Tegan telling Sadie about how they should communicate helped Sadie feel more comfortable calling Tegan:

I told her that I- you know I did not want to bother her. And, she told me I could call her…I call occasionally just to say hello…like I tend to make my phone calls when I walk the dog at night, because you know I'm walking around. And I can do that with my cell phone. And it's kind of nice. And so, I'll just call. And, I know that's usually a time when she's winding down or available. So, I'll just you know call up and just say hi. Just, you know how's it going? What's happening? You know and sometimes she tells me some great stories about her roommate or some of her friends.

Even though parents were interested in talking to students, the terms of communication and how frequently the students and parents talked were ultimately dictated by the students, either by the students themselves calling, telling their parents to call, or in one case, not calling, like Jacob did
when he was told not to call home for two weeks as part of his fraternity initiation, causing his grandmother Marie to worry about him.

Although overall parents were happy to have a lot of contact with their students, some of the parents who spoke with their students every day did worry that the students were calling too much. Clara’s mother Rosa joked that Clara’s calling was sometimes “to the point of annoying,” and Ana thought Jazmin was calling her so often because she was worried about her mother, and Ana was concerned that Jazmin stay focused on her schoolwork.

**Communication Mode**

For the most part, the students and parents communicated with one another by phone. All of the students had cell phones and half of the parents did. Those parents without cell phones spoke to their students at home from their land line phones. One student, Manny, did not have a cell phone at the beginning of the semester because he sold his phone to get some extra money to put towards his college expenses. In October, his father found a way to buy Manny a new phone and then noticed a significant increase in their communication frequency. None of the parents and students e-mailed one another although Clara did instant message her father Jose occasionally at work at his office job.

How frequently students spoke with their parents in person depended on how often those students went home. The students who either lived at home (n=1) or went to school near their homes (n=2) spoke to their parents in person more frequently. For example, Peter, the one commuter student, said that most of his conversation with his mother happened in the car when she was driving him to and from school. The three students who went to school farther away from home (a 2 ½ hour drive or more) only went home once or twice over the course of the semester. Jacob and Clara only went home for Thanksgiving, and Tegan went home for
Thanksgiving and Columbus Day weekend one for a break in October. Although they didn’t communicate in person as frequently, these parents communicated with their students at college through care packages. In these packages, parents included reminders of home such as photos, food, or fun items that the parent thought the student would enjoy. Clara described getting a care package from Rosa. “She went and she found me this sweet and sour sauce that I really, really love and she sent it to me. I was so excited!”

Communication With Mothers vs. Fathers

The primary source of communication and connection for the students was with the mothers rather than the fathers. For half of the students, their father played a minor role in their lives, and they therefore had limited communication with them. For example, Jazmin’s communication with her father consisted of calling him occasionally and asking him for money on behalf of her mother:

I talk to him. Most of the time cause him and my mom have an agreement. He had to give her 40 dollars every week. He doesn't do it so my mom will make me call him and be like (the) messenger.

The three students who described their relationships to their fathers as positive and supportive still said that their primary emotional connection was with their mothers; they were emotionally closer to their mothers and spoke to them more frequently. For example, Peter, whose parents are divorced, spoke to his father who lives in another state, every day or every other day, but still said that his relationship to his mother was more emotionally close:

If anything, me and my mom…we talk about everything. Like my mom is probably my best friend…she tells me about her grown up problems and I tell her my stuff. I mean I could tell my dad if he was around but…
Manny described the difference between communicating with his mother and with his father. Like Peter, even though he says he has a solid relationship with father, it is not the same relationship that he has with his mother:

It would be like if my dad picks up (the phone) I would talk to him and then tell him to put on my mom, but if it's the other way around I talk to my mom. It's not like I talk to my mom and hang up, I talk to my mom and tell her, oh put dad on, after… so it's not like we lose touch, it's just on a different level. I'm not saying that I'm as much of a man as my father but we're both men, you know what I mean, and it's not harder, but it's a different relationship.

Manny says that even though he and his father are close, there are certain more emotional topics that he doesn’t feel he can talk to his father about, like his love life:

I don't really talk to him about girls or anything like that, like I would talk to my mom about girls, or to my brothers… he is…the father figure of the house, and he's the strong one, you know what I mean, it's hard for him to go from that to saying oh how do you feel son? You know what I mean? He does it, and you can see the struggle that it takes for him to be affectionate and to be loving, not necessarily that he's not, but it's just tough. I'm hoping that you understand me, like it's not really like he's not loving, but just him being so strong, it's a big step for him to let me go, first of all, and then for when he sees me to say oh how are you doing or something, or how are you feeling, how are things going. So he does it, and it's good to see it, but it's tough. It's different.

For Manny, and all of the other students in the study, the primary emotional support they received was from their mothers, and the students communicated with their mothers in ways that were different than how they communicated with their fathers.
Communication Content: Need vs. Non Need-Based

Students engaged in both need and non need-based contact with their parents (Sorokou & Weissbrod, 2005). Need-based contact is defined as “support-seeking behaviors at times of need” and non need-based contact consists of “behaviors for the purpose of touching base and maintaining contact” (Sorokou & Weissbrod, 2005, p. 226). Non need-based contact was the most popular type of contact. Clara describes the type of non need-based contact she has with her mother. “I'll be sitting there after class and I'll be like I'm going to call mom, see what she's doing. I'll call her…like ‘Oh, what are you doing?'” Rosa talked about receiving this type of contact from Clara:

There's days where she calls me two to three times for stupid stuff. Asks me stupid stuff.
She could be just walking and for no reason, she'll call me. Hey old lady, what ya doing? I was like what ya mean what am I doing? And she's like is the baby asleep? Are you watching your soap operas? I was like yes, its 2 o'clock, its’ my soap opera time.

Charlie doesn’t call his grandmother Marie as frequently as Clara calls Rosa. But she also describes receiving this type of non need-based contact.

One day last week he called. I don't know, he had a good day and he was just feeling good and he just wanted to call and talk to his grandmother. So that was good. It made me feel good.

Although students initiated more non need-based contact, parents also initiated this kind of contact. Manny describes the non need-based contact that he has with his mother. She was able to have more of this type of contact with him after his father replaced his cell phone.

We talk all the time… she'll call me some times at night…she was scared to call before when I did not have a cell phone because she did not want to wake up any of my
roommates and stuff but now that I have a cell phone she calls me before she goes to bed, and before like if I'm up I'll probably be studying and stuff and she'll call me before she goes to bed just to say goodnight and call me in the morning just to say what's up, you know.

Students and parents engaged in non need-based contact much more frequently than they engaged in need-based contact. Some parents said that they had very little, if any, need-based contact with their students. According to Jazmin’s mother Ana, “most of the time it is checking in and saying hi…. But never because she really needs things.”

The need-based contact that students and parents did have primarily consisted of students wanting to discuss a financial concern with parents or asking parents for money. (Students were primarily financially responsible although they did talk to their parents about finances or ask parents for money.) According to Charlie, “sometimes it is that I need a little bit of money or something (but) I call just to touch base most of the time.”

Asking their parents for financial support was difficult and uncomfortable for the students, and it was something they only did when they felt it was absolutely necessary. Clara describes the experience of asking her parents for money:

It feels like when I was in middle school and I noticed that we did not really have that much money and it would take me like days... like if I knew I was going to the movies on Friday night on like Monday night I would try to be really sneaky about it even though I knew and I'd be like mom, so I really wanted to go to the movies and I'd be like hey, can you give me a ride and she'd be like ok and then I'd be like well, I need money, cause I'm 12, I don't have like a job, but it would take me like three hours to ask my parents for money. Even now my mom told me she'd pay for my birth control but I haven't asked her
for the money for it because like I have the money. I'm not going to ask her but I feel bad because like I have my own job. I don't really need.... I could use extra money just to save but its not a necessity, it's not dire. Unless I direly need money, that's when I'll ask them.

Most of the students were primarily responsible for their finances and figuring out how to pay for college, but they did discuss financial issues with their parents and occasionally asked them for help or advice with this process. Tegan consulted Sadie when a question came up about her college bill and said “If it has to do with billing at all or anything involving the school process, I'll call her.”

*Role Reversal With Parents*

Students sometimes experienced a role reversal with parents and demonstrated filial responsibility (Kuperminc, Jurkovic & Casey, 2009), taking care of parents or worrying about them. I use the term “filial responsibility” because it is value neutral (Kuperminc et al., 2009). In general, other terms used to describe children’s instrumental caregiving (maintenance of the physical household) and emotional caregiving (maintenance of family members’ psychological well-being) have negative connotations in the family development literature (Kuperminc et al., 2009). In a way, these students can be called “helicopter” children because they watched over their parents at home while they were at school. However, I also hesitate to use the term “helicopter” because it too is negatively loaded. This role reversal was one of the primary findings that emerged from my pilot study. Students regularly worried about parents and engaged in non need-based contact to make sure that the parents were ok. Both parents and students talked about this. For example, Carlos said, “(Manny) now takes the role of taking care of us.”
All students to some degree played a role in caring for their parents. But Jazmin’s experience during her first semester is the best example of the phenomenon. In October, Ana was admitted to the hospital because she was having trouble with her heart. Jazmin didn’t miss any class during the week her mother was in the hospital, but she did stay at home that week so that she could look after her younger sister. For Jazmin this experience was “stressful” and she “couldn’t concentrate.” She had a history test during the time her mother was in the hospital, and she failed it. After her mother got out of the hospital, however, Jazmin said she wasn’t any less worried about her mother; Jazmin still worried about her mother all of the time and called Ana to check up on her.

Besides being concerned about her mother’s health, Jazmin worries about her mother’s day-to-day living expenses. Jazmin said that she pays for her education with loans and that most of her paycheck from working at a local fast food restaurant goes to helping Ana. Her mother, who doesn’t work, has Section Eight housing that covers half of the rent, but Jazmin and her brother, who works in a liquor store, pitch in to cover the rest of the rent as well as the cable bill and other household expenses.

*Communication Content: Limited Topics*

All of the students said that they limited certain topics in conversation with their parents. Even students who claimed that their parents knew “everything” admitted there were some things they purposefully did not share. Students limited both academic and social information when speaking to parents. In general, students limited their conversation with parents about social or personal issues because they desired to protect their parents, and the students did not want their parents to worry about them. Manny gave an example of limiting conversation with his mother in order to protect her and to save her the stress of being concerned about him.
…it’s like I'd rather not tell my mom that my stomach hurts, just so she won't get worried, you know, just so she won't be at home thinking that anything- like everything is that big of a deal. You know what I mean? So just to keep that stress off her, I would tell her that I went out, you know what I mean, but I would not tell her I was doing this, you know what I mean, just because she's at home, of course she's going to think of the worst, and just keep that stress off her. So she knows what up, you know what I mean, but it's not like I tell her in detail.

Tegan too limited her conversation in order to protect her mother. Because of Sadie’s experience with alcoholism, Tegan did not talk about her own experience drinking with her mother:

No. No, no, no, no. That's a no, no zone. She will as long as I live not know that I ever drink anything ever. Because she was an alcoholic and she's sober now and there's no way that I would ever, ever. No, no, no. That's the one thing I'll never feel comfortable telling her unless it gets to the point where I am an alcoholic in which case I'll come out and tell her like mom, I started drinking. I am in the same situation you are, or were, and I'm looking for help.

In addition to limiting topics that they believed would cause their parents to worry, students limited topics that they didn’t feel parents would understand. For example, Charlie limited his conversation about his alcohol use at college when conversing with his grandmother. According to Charlie, he didn’t feel that his grandmother would understand that drinking socially was part of his college experience, and he feared that his grandmother might want him to leave college and come home if she learned of this behavior, that she might perceive him as “not ready for college.” According to Charlie:
Yeah I go to parties and all that. I go out sometimes and I may go to a party or two but nothing outrageous. I don't go every single night and not go to class or anything. I don't do that. I'm paying for college so I might as well go (to parties)…If my grandmother knew I was partying, she'd scalp me.

Instead Charlie tells his grandmother, “about what activities I'm doing that week or something. Basically all the good things she wants to hear.”

It was more common for students to limit academic topics that they didn’t think their parents would understand. If they shared academic topics with parents, the students tried to tailor these topics to the parents’ own lives, or explain these topics in ways that the parents would understand and could relate to. Even though students didn’t always let their parents know exactly what they were doing in their academic courses, however, they usually shared how they were doing, or their grades. For example, Peter discussed what he told his mother about his academic life at school and his courses:

…not that much. I probably tell her my schedule, when I am going to go to school and come back, but…I don't like tell her about my classes or anything. I mean, I don't, like, there is not a lot that I tell her; like, she probably would not even understand if I told her, oh, Mom, I am taking this. She will understand, but like she like- I don't know, how to explain it.

Peter shares his grades with his mother and also discusses topics from class when he thinks she might be interested in them:

…she knows I'm going to school, you know, knows my grades and stuff but she doesn't know what I'm doing in the classroom. I mean probably a few times maybe we would discuss something in the class that's interesting that has something to do with like stuff
that we talk about at home, and I will like let her know if there's something…for example, we talked about something about Obama in my urban sociology class and I just told her about it because I found it interesting and I did not think she knew about it so.

The conversation that students and parents have about academics is limited to what parents understand and what parents are interested in. For example, Manny will talk about an idea for a class assignment or paper if he can discuss it in a way that will make sense to his mother:

Well of course I wish there are certain things that she could understand… and I try to put it so that she understands. It's not like she's…really that behind, she's smart, she's a pretty smart woman for the circumstances that happened…education wasn't that big of a deal for them back in the Dominican Republic.

Manny was clear, however that he didn’t believe that his parents’ lack of college knowledge limited their support of him:

And there's certain things that they do understand like I talk to them about philosophers and stuff like that and certain other things that I'm doing and they understand it and they'll support me the same.. the support's there, you know. I think that's the role that they play…What else can they do?

What students shared about their academic lives was all that parents knew of the college academic experience. They did not get their information from other sources. In general, the amount of college knowledge that parents had can be defined by Jazmin who, when asked how much her mother knows about college replied, “what I tell her.”

*Communication Content: Expectations for Persistence*
In their communication with students, parents expressed an expectation of persistence—that they wanted their students to finish school and graduate. Nancy talked about the expectations she had for Peter and his sister Leah, who is a graduate of the Met and a junior at a college in the Midwest:

I talk to them. You guys are lucky to come here from Africa and go to school. You guys get all the opportunities here and you're young. Peter was like 7 years old when we came. Leah was like 9 or 10 when we came. Basically they were born here. They need to go to school and finish. There are people in Africa who don't have the means to finish school...I encourage them. Cause right now you guys are the future for tomorrow. We're going to be dependent on you. And you're in America where you've got everything to go to school and learn and you don't want to do it. That's a shame. So I always encourage them and they're doing good. They listen to my advice in general.

Rosa talked about communicating her expectations for graduation to Clara. She wants Clara to finish at all costs, despite Rosa’s concerns about her own health:

Yeah, recently... so I told Clara, I made her promise me. Even if I dropped dead, she won't leave school. Do not leave to watch (your nephew), do not leave to chase after (your father). Do not leave for anybody. You stay in that school. And I even told her what she had to do to apply for social security if I died...So I told her, I don't want you to use me as an excuse. I'm come down here and haunt your ass. You'll never get rid of me. I told her that. I'll be messing with you all night long.

Autonomy and Individuation

*Students are Autonomous*
Parents perceived their students as autonomous. They described the relationship with their students as having changed since the students started college. They talked about having to “let go” to a certain degree. The parents also commented that they trusted their students, referring to individual student characteristics, saying that the students were “responsible,” “mature,” and “independent.” For example Marie, Charlie’s grandmother, described the shift in their relationship, “It's just me letting go, not being in control…it's like okay; he's in college. He's grown. You know you kept him right underneath you. And you got to let him fly….and I know he'll do well.” Manny’s father provided another example of a parent viewing the student as autonomous. “I trust my son a lot. I know that he's very mature. He walked away very mature from this house and he knows that he's making the right decisions and its not like he's going to go out and do anything that he'll later regret.”

Even though the parents whose students moved onto campus did talk about being sad that their students were leaving home, their perception that their student was autonomous helped them with this process. Sadie thought that the process of saying goodbye to Tegan would be much more difficult for her, but she found herself prepared to say goodbye; she trusted Tegan:

I mean, that's what I thought about, too, when I did drop off Tegan. I thought that I would be like, feel really sad and I thought, oh, my God, I am going to cry and I am going to do all this stuff, but I was just like really happy for her.

Students too, saw themselves as autonomous. They articulated this in terms of having freedom. Even Peter, the one commuter student, reported a shift in his relationship with his mother even though he still lived at home:
I definitely get more freedom. Well, I had freedom in high school, too, but basically I am more - they treat me like an adult now, so I basically go where I want and come home when I want, and basically do what I want.

Manny described his freedom from his parents. He believed his parents had done what they could to raise him well, and now was the time to put those skills to use on his own.

I think there's certain things where a parent walks you through something and then there's certain things where the parent gives you the flashlight and the tools for it, you know, and tells you to go, and I think in my situation it’s more of the flashlight and telling me to go.

**Students Are Not Sheltered**

According to Howe and Strauss (2003), one of the seven core traits of Millennial students is that they are “sheltered.” For Millennials, “the edifice of parental care has been like a castle that keeps getting new bricks added” (Howe & Strauss, 2003, p. 176). Howe and Strauss’s (2003) theory is that students who are Millennials come to expect this support. The students in this study can be considered Millennials because they were born in or after 1982 (Howe and Strauss, 2000). All of the students in the study were born in 1990. However, these students are not “sheltered.” During their first semester of college, they didn’t expect financial support from their parents, and when they received it, they wanted to pay it back. Manny gave an example of this attitude:

As long as I'm surviving, you know. Physically. Like they try to, you know (give me money). “How much do you need? How much do you need?” I don't need nothing. What I need is for them to- I don't need it. I plan on being pretty financially stable in the future so. I try to laugh to be able to laugh later on so. The giggling helps me get by sometimes. It's all good.
According to Manny’s father, Carlos, Manny not wanting to rely on his parents, and then wanting to pay his parents back for their financial support is a characteristic he has had for a long time. Carlos told a story about when Manny was younger and Carlos and Angelica used to buy clothes for Manny and his brothers at local flea markets:

When (Manny) was younger we would go to the flea markets a lot. I would take Manny and my other three sons to the flea markets. And when (Manny) was younger he would say, “I don't like to be in this place,” because there was a bad odor in the flea market. He said, “I want one day that you and mom never come back here again.” So what I would do then is leave the kids here at home. Me and my wife would go to the flea market, pick up the nice shirts and things like that, wash them, iron them, and then present them to our sons so they would not think that they came from the flea market. They grew up with a lot of limitations. But (Manny) would say, “Dad, when I'm okay, you won't have any needs of anything.” That’s Manny.

Clara’s parents’ credit was not good enough to get a loan to help her pay for school. When she found out that she could not get someone to co-sign on a loan for her after asking both an aunt and a friend, her father took $6000 out of his retirement account to pay the balance. Clara wanted to try and secure a way to pay for college on her own, but when she could not, and had to take the support from her parents in order to go, she too talked about paying them back:

When I get out of college I will get a good job and help you guys out on that one…I told my dad, I'll do you a solid when I get out of college. I'll buy my dad like a new car when I get like my Master's or something like that. I'm going to do something really nice so. I was like I'll buy them their motor home or something so they can get away.
If students found they needed financial support, like Clara did, they would take it. But they became frustrated with their parents if their parents gave them financial support that they thought they didn’t really need. Charlie gave an example of this:

Say I need 50 dollars or something right? Say it involves money and my paycheck comes in a couple of days. I tell her not to send me money, cause I know my paycheck is coming in, and she'll send me money anyways, which I know isn't that big of a deal, but its very irritating when your family is low income and she's spending money on you when she could be spending money on say food, her own gas, gas for the house.

Financial Responsibility

Students’ autonomy from their parents can also be shown through students’ financial responsibility in paying for college. Parents did give students financial support by helping students to pay for college and college-related expenses. I will discuss forms of parental financial support in the next section. In considering students’ autonomy, however, it is important to point out how students were primarily responsible for managing financial information. A good example of this dynamic comes from Charlie and his grandmother Marie. At the end of the semester, Marie received a letter addressed to Charlie from his college, at her house, which she read. The letter said that Charlie’s college account still had a balance of about $5,000. Marie called Charlie to tell him about the letter and, according to Marie, Charlie told her that he would go to the financial aid office the next day to try and resolve the problem:

When we talked that office was closed, but he would go there tomorrow and talk to them and see about getting a personal loan or something. I don't know. I mean he's very independent about that. He knows I don't have the money.
Charlie talked about his experience when he found out about the outstanding balance. He said that a Stafford loan that he was supposed to get did not come through. When he went to talk with the financial aid office at his school, they told him that they could not release his grades or transcript until he paid the money that he owed. His idea for a solution was, “I'm going to get a student loan, a private student loan and pay. It’s going to be very irritating but I have to do it…I'm probably just going to go and do it on my own.”

This dynamic between Charlie and his grandmother illustrates Charlie’s autonomy and financial responsibility. Charlie’s goal is to “go and do it on (his) own,” while his grandmother’s goal is to “figure out how can I help this boy help himself.” In general, unless like Marie, they opened mail addressed to their students sent to their homes (which they did do occasionally), parents acquired financial information about college in the same way that they gained other forms of college knowledge (through what the student tells them). According to Clara, her parents didn’t know about her tuition payments and financial aid, “unless I tell them.”

*Always Independent*

Parents did talk about students’ autonomy as a shift in their relationship- a change since students went to college. However, parents also talked about students’ independence as a characteristic that the students had long before going to college, like Manny’s parents did when they talked about him as always wanting to pay them back. Sadie often referred to Tegan as a child saying that she was “three going on thirty.” In addition, Rosa gave an example of Clara’s sense of independence growing up, something Clara, too, had since she was much younger:

Clara I have no qualms whatsoever (with her going away to school). She's always been that way. She was born that way. When she was a child she used to make me cry cause I
would tell her. “c'mon let mama help you” (and Clara would say) “No, go away! I do it myself!”

Theresa talked about both Peter and his sister Leah as having been independent in the context of school, and completing their assignments:

When they were in 4th grade, 5th grade then I used to have problems with them cause they go to the Catholic School and then they had to stay for after school programs. But when they started doing their own homework understanding their lessons, they do everything for themselves. I don't have to come behind them. They come home and do their homework before they can eat, which was good. I used to be really happy because some kids you'll be: go do your homework, go do your homework. He comes, he puts his bag down, takes his homework, does his homework before he can find food to eat. So they've been serious that way since (they were younger).

Parents also compared their children in college to their other children who did not go to college or weren't planning on going to college, saying that the children in college were more independent. Rosa compared Clara to her two older sisters, one never went to college and one went to a technical school but then dropped out:

One out of the three ain't bad. My other two daughters, they did not get that. I guess I spoiled them too much. They weren't like that when they were young. They were like Clara when they were young. They just got this attitude in their 20s. Mama will help me. I told them, Mama's not helping no more.

Carlos compared Manny’s independence and inclination towards college to his siblings—one who had a child at a young age, one who became a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA), and one who “was motivated… but influenced wrongly by friends”: 
Every son was different. You know that in public a lot of times parents publicly say that they want all their kids to be the same. But there’s always this secret that parents have where there is always one who probably inclines himself to discover things on his own…. that’s Manny.

Ana compares Jazmin not only to her older brother, who did not go to college, but to her younger sister who Ana believes lacks motivation to go to college. “Out of the three kids, Jazmin will be the most successful because she's the most responsible, she's the most mature. I have idea where my daughter's going to end up, where my son's going to end up.”

Students, too, acknowledged that they believed that they had been independent before going to college. One of the reasons students said they were independent was because of what they had already experienced in their lifetime. Manny talked about being exposed to difficult topics, such as his family’s financial struggles:

Like there's just stuff that I'm not supposed to know that I do, you know. And I think there was a lot of things that I've seen that I wasn't supposed to see, arguments that I heard that I wasn't supposed to hear. And its not because like you hide stuff from your children- like family problems. The kids should be part of it, obviously, they're part of the result; whatever happens to the family happens to the children too. But there's just certain things like I wish I did not understand.

Tegan, too, provided a good example of having grown up early due to her experience with more adult topics at a young age. “At (age) seven…mom started telling me about the financial problems in the family. And my mom never treated me as a child growing up… she told me, we don’t have any money.” Students’ filial responsibility, or family caregiving efforts, (Kuperminc et al., 2009) contributed to their early independence. The independence that both parents and
students talked about can be defined as functional independence, or an ability to manage and
direct personal affairs (Hoffman, 1984).

Children or Adults?

These students were forced to grow up early, parents saw them as independent from a young age, and they are autonomous from parents now that they are in college. Are these college students children or adults? This is an important question to consider as college students tend to be at a stage in between children and adults (Arnett, 2000a; 2006). According to Arnett (2006; 2000a), very few people beyond age 18 see themselves as adolescents, but they don’t see themselves as adults, either. For the most part, students in this study thought that they were adults, although a few students did identify what they saw as exceptions, moments where they still believed that they acted or felt like children, and a couple of students said that they felt in between. For Clara, sometimes she just wants her parents to comfort her, like the time she called home at one o’clock in the morning because she didn’t feel well. Peter said he was mostly an adult, but not completely, because as a commuter student he was still living at home with his mom and didn’t buy his own food. He considered his sister Leah to be an adult because at college she lives off campus with her fiancé. For Charlie, he thought he might still be a child because he loves playing video games. He also wasn’t sure if he was completely an adult because he didn’t have a “stable job” like his friends who did not go to college.

Any hesitation that students had about whether they were children or adults came from within themselves. With one exception, they all said that their parents treated them like adults. Manny described his parents viewing him as adult, by using a sports metaphor, something he often did to describe different personal situations:
I would just say like when there's a guy that doesn't take a shot, and he takes that shot and he makes it, they're going to pass him the ball a lot more, you know what I mean, after they realize that he can take the shots. So there's a lot of situations that I've been in with my parents that I've had to step up, and I have, you know what I mean, and they realize, they see that I'm growing, that I'm a man.

Manny’s parents treat him like an adult, even though there are times when, his mother says, “You're a kid, you're a baby, you know, cause I'm her baby.” He is both an adult and still his mother’s child.

The one student who did not say he felt his parent treated him like an adult was Charlie. Charlie thought that his grandmother still treated him like he was 15, or in high school. According to Charlie, this feeling came from his grandmother’s lack of understanding of his life at college:

She thinks I'm going to drink, smoke, have sex and all this and that and I'm not. I'm not that kind of kid so. I mean I know I can. If I really wanted to, I know I could. But I don't want to.

He wished that his grandmother would give him more freedom to make his own mistakes instead of assuming what he might do with freedom. “I'm old enough to know what not to do and what to do, what's right and what's wrong… but she doesn't seem to understand that.” Ironically, this contrasted with the way that Charlie’s grandmother described how she saw her role in his life. She said that she saw Charlie as an adult.

Parents Do Not Hover

In the first two chapters I introduce and discuss the phenomenon, of so-called “helicopter parents” who hover over their students academic and social lives at college, immediately coming
to the rescue at the first sign of distress. The parents in this study do not fit the description of “helicopter parents” portrayed in both the media and in student affairs administrators’ stories; these parents are not hoverers and specifically tried not to be. One parent, Sadie had not heard of the term “helicopter parent” but learned about it at an orientation for parents at Tegan’s college and thought it was hilarious even though she said she didn’t identify with the label. She talked about this experience:

There was another guy, maybe he is in housing…and he was really good because he did this thing that was so perfect because he had the – they (show) a little slide show there, and he put this picture of a helicopter up, and he said, okay, you see, this helicopter is you, parents. You have been hovering over your children, which is okay, because if you need a helicopter every now and then, they are good to have, but right now you need to stop hovering. It’s time to let them go. They needed you; now, it is time to let them make it on their own, make or break kind of thing. So, I was like already ready.

This image reminded Sadie of behavior she had observed earlier that day when Tegan’s roommate and her mother were moving in. While Sadie said that she was “not a hoverer,” she said that this mother definitely was.

Yeah. So, we had gone in the first -- when (Tegan) first moved in and they had the beds as a bunk bed and we were like, no, no, we are going to switch this around. So, we moved everything around then, and it was good because then the other girl came in, and the other girl’s mom was doing the, put this over here. You have space over there. Put that there. Do this there, and I was just like thinking, well, okay, this is her room, right? You are not living here; she is. So, like she is in college now. And it was just weird. I was…I did not say anything because, you know, that's not my place.
Theresa, too talked about purposefully trying not to hover over Peter and Leah. She described her parenting style, compared to other parents. Instead of pushing them, she backs off and lets her children do things on their own. As long as her children do what they need to do, she doesn’t see a need to get involved:

(Other parents are) like pushing, pushing, pushing. I don't want to, cause they’re already doing it on their own, I don't want to be there like pushing them if they're doing it you know? It makes them mad so. I see them doing something and I talk to them. And thank God they will listen to me.

*Collective Success*

In summary, students did not want a break from parents; they wanted to remain attached. In addition, they also experienced a role reversal with parents at times. Students developed not only autonomy from, but also an interdependence with their families. This can be shown through how they described their college experience as a collective success; they saw parents as also part of their college experience despite their limited college knowledge. For example, Jazmin said:

Because, I don't know, my Mom she's a big…I don't know she's like she's a single parent…she doesn't have a job. She has arthritis in her hands and in her legs. So…I feel like everything I'm doing is like not just for me, but also for her.

According to Manny, his success at college is a success he shares with his entire family:

There's certain things you learn not because you want to, not because you tried but just because but from now on it’s because of me. It’s because of something that I'm doing. And that me isn't just me. It’s everybody that's with me….it’s a collective me.
Students’ interdependence and desire to stay attached is also illustrated by the non need-based contact they had with parents, described in the previous section of this chapter.

Persistence: Struggles and Supports

The theme of persistence consists of students’ struggles and the supports that they used to address these struggles. Parents did provide financial and emotional support, but students sought support from other sources when parent college knowledge was not sufficient enough to help them. The main struggles that students encountered can be grouped into financial, academic, and personal categories.

Struggles: Financial

All of the students struggled financially. These were the most significant struggles that they faced. Each student was obviously able to get to the point where he or she had paid for the first semester of college and enrolled. This process too, was a struggle, especially for Clara and Manny, who came very close to not coming to college because they had to come up with additional funds over the summer to meet the tuition balances that they owed. Once students were enrolled, they found they had very little money left over and struggled to pay for any additional expenses. They did not seem to have the college knowledge that would allow them to account for unforeseen costs. Charlie described his financial situation. At the beginning of the semester he said that he was not stressed about paying for college at that point, but he was stressed about not having “money in my pocket.” He found he had very little spending money, and felt that he couldn’t even afford to buy soda, “If I want to buy a drink, like a legit 12 pack of Mountain Dew or something I don't have the money to.” Every student in the study felt that having this type of money, money in their pockets, was a struggle for them. Although students were frustrated by their lack of spending money, they were used to living this way; they didn’t
need much. Tegan said, “I know I can live poor. I know. Like I’ve been doing it my whole life. I know I can live on five dollars a week if I really need to.”

Because of the very few funds left over once the college bill had been paid, in addition to not having any spending money, many students also struggled to pay for books and supplies. Most of the students said that they had not anticipated how much these would cost. For example, Manny described the process of having to buy books and being shocked by their price, “I really did not think there was going to be anything out of this world, you know what I mean, there was like books that are 150 dollars. I did not think that was going to happen.” Because Manny could not afford to buy the books he needed, he then struggled to gain access to them in order to complete his assignments. This too, was more difficult than he anticipated. He told a story about a time he tried to borrow a book from a female classmate:

So there's certain classes like I don't have the books for and I'm doing ok in the classes and I'll tell some of the kids as a secret, you know. I'll tell them, I confess to you, I don't even have the book. Like sometimes I have to borrow it. There's certain girls that have the books like there was one situation where I called a girl to get the book off her like I don't even look at her like that- she's nice or whatever but I don't even look at her in that way, and I called her to get the book and her boyfriend picked up the phone and he was like, “Hey, stop calling my girlfriend!” and it was funny because if it was that situation, like I was trying to use studying to get closer to her, but it’s not even like that, you know. I just wanted the book and he got mad and stuff, but it was nothing. There’s always been situations like that.

The other main financial struggle students had was with transportation. Those students who went to college found it too expensive to go home and students who lived closer struggled
to get back and forth to school and their jobs because they couldn’t afford cars. For example, Peter commuted to both school and his job from home. His job at a fast food restaurant took ten minutes to drive to in a car, but one hour to get to on the bus. It also took him one hour to get to and from his college campus; he had to take two buses to get there.

Students had other financial struggles, specifically problems with financial aid, that arose during the year. One example is Charlie’s situation that I described earlier, finding out that he owed $5000 at the end of the semester because one of his loans hadn’t gone through. In addition, Tegan had a significant delay in getting a refund check for $200, which she was counting on to buy art supplies that she needed for school:

It was like 200 dollars so I was really kind of wondering where it was. So it was 200 dollars and I was like I kind of would like to get this…I don't like having about 40 dollars in my bank account. I would feel much more financially sound and I know cause this was right before I had to do the extensions project, so I was like I know I'm going to have to buy glue sticks…I don't want to get into a place where I can't buy the supplies that I need for finals. I don't ever want to be in that spot, you know…so then I finally got an e-mail that said you can come and pick up your check which was a week and a half or two weeks…it finally got issued to me but I did not get it until like the first week in November.

Every student, or his or her parent, talked specifically about losing a $200 grant for the second semester from the state of Rhode Island due to a cut in funding. Some students had limited knowledge that this cut had occurred and were confused why they owed $200 more. This also placed a significant stress on students financially and affected how they thought they
were going to pay for college and expenses the next semester. Peter talked about finding out he had lost this funding:

They sent me some paper that said something about tuition went up and I don't think my loan covers it. Its only 200 but they're like you've got to pay it now. Yeah they said if I don't pay it now they're going to drop my classes or something.

Peter said that he didn’t know how he was going to come up with the money; he didn’t think he could earn $200 at his job working at a fast food restaurant in time to pay his bill.

The loss of the $200 triggered Tegan to think about other options for paying for college in the future:

The thing is, if I continuously get loans taken away from me I might not be able to come back to college next year cause I might not have a way to pay for it and if I don't have a way to pay for it, my suggestion to my mom was I'm going to move somewhere where nobody knows me, cause I have lots of friends who live all over the place and I'm going to be a stripper for a year, and I'm going to come back in the summer with a ton of money, like I'll go somewhere and I'll stay with a friend for a week or two and then find an apartment. I'll find a strip club and be a stripper for a year, you know work for a year and then go back to school. That's Plan B. If anything goes wrong, I'm going to work on going somewhere and...I'm going to make a lot of money and I'm going to go back to school. Cause I can't just let it.

In addition to being a reaction to a financial struggle, this quotation from Tegan also serves as an example of a student coming up with a solution to a struggle on her own. In the second part of this section, I will outline the supports that students used, both from their parents, and from other sources, which supplemented parental support. It is important to point out that students did not
always seek support for their struggles. Sometimes they came up with ideas to solve problems by themselves. In this particular case, even though Tegan had come up with this “Plan B,” she had discussed it with Sadie and said that Sadie supported the idea.

Struggles: Academic

Not every student struggled academically. But for those who did, it was a significant part of their college experience that they spoke about frequently. Both Manny and Jazmin had the most difficult academic struggles in the first semester. Jazmin was failing psychology throughout the entire semester; the strategies she used were not working even though she went to every class, sat in the front row, and took notes. She especially had trouble taking tests, both in psychology and her other courses. “When I'm taking the test like sometimes I can't remember like the information. It’s like I know the information but... I don't know how to explain it. It’s frustrating.”

Manny struggled in a couple of subjects, earning an “embarrassingly” low score on an early economics exam. His main struggle, however, was math, which he didn’t feel his academic background at the Met had prepared him for. Manny felt that he was behind compared to his peers, and he lacked the basic information he needed to catch up to them in knowledge:

I'm not sure if I told you about it last time you came, but I talked to one of my math teachers… and I started telling her how in the Met we don't have regular Algebra classes and math classes how other high schools do and she was like completely in shock and there was a girl that sat behind me in that class. The teacher said oh, we're going to be multiplying binomials today and the girl says oh I hate them things and I look back and I'm confused and in the back of my mind I'm saying I've never even heard of this.
Other students struggled with computer and Internet access and said that this affected their ability to do their work, especially when it came to completing assignments at home. I will discuss family Internet access in more detail in the next section of this chapter, but only one family of the six had Internet access in their home. Jazmin went home frequently because her job was much closer to her house than school. Since she didn’t have a computer, and didn’t have Internet access at home, she found it difficult to complete her assignments when she was there. She had been given a donated computer through a senior project of one of her Met classmates, but she said that it had broken. At school, she either went to the computer lab, or used her roommate’s laptop (a childhood friend who was also a Met alumna). In addition, a professor of Clara’s e-mailed her when she was at home to let her know of an assignment she was to complete. She did not even learn of this communication until a friend called her to tell her about it.

In addition, the struggle to pay for books led to academic struggles. For example, Peter didn’t have books at the beginning of the semester. He later got them or gained access to them by sharing them with peers. He described how this affected his academic work:

At the beginning, yeah, I was stressed about money because like it was like- it was a while before I got my books and it was like everybody had their book and stuff, and I did not have my book. So…I could do my homework and stuff because I knew people with the books, but like, I could not like take it home to do a reading, or something, not (like) I do now, now that I have the book.

Manny’s struggle to buy the books he needed for his classes also affected him academically, potentially even jeopardizing his scholarship, which required that he maintain a 2.8 grade point average over the year in order to maintain his eligibility for the following year:
In philosophy I did not have the book at the beginning. It was like 91 dollars or something like that…but I used to listen a lot. And I used to go to every class. I think I missed one class the whole semester. I used to listen a lot and that's how I did that test, from what I listened and note-taked because I could not read, obviously. The only times I read were things that were extremely necessary that he says you need to do this, and I would have to go and borrow the book, and I told you about the situation when I called the girl and her boyfriend took the phone and was like, “Hey stop calling my girlfriend,” and it wasn't even that type of thing…I just wanted the book, and I had a D+ which is passing, but its not that good…and the grade point average is something that matters because of my scholarship and stuff.

Struggles: Social/ Personal

The other main struggles that students faced this semester can be classified as social or personal struggles. These ranged and varied by the individual student experience. Some students found they struggled in the transition to college and said that they were homesick. Students also had specific personal struggles that affected them during their first semester. For example, one student broke up with her long-time boyfriend in the middle of the semester. Another student was grieving over a friend who had died prior to her coming to college. Manny described his general struggle in the transition to college:

The friends that I have back home are friends that I've know since I was- I don't even remember when I met them. So it's pretty tough to go from something like that, like such a longtime relationship that I know their parents and I know everybody in their family, to come in to meet new people and how to trust them, and sleeping with them in the same room and stuff.
Parental Support: “Whatever I Can Do, I Do”

First of all, it is important to note that the parents were aware of the major struggles that the students had, which I described above. They did not always know the details of the struggles, especially the academic ones. But they too, talked to me about the same struggles that the students did. Even though students did limit some topics with their parents, as I discussed in the second section of this chapter, their most significant struggles were not among them. They kept their parents informed about these. For example, in our conversations, Carlos talked about Manny’s inability to buy books, Angelica talked about Jazmin’s failing grade in psychology, and Rosa talked about Clara’s recent break up.

Parents were willing to take whatever measures they could to support their students, even if it included making a personal sacrifice. This support was limited in that there were areas where they couldn’t help their students, areas that they couldn’t control. When talking about the support she gives to Peter, Theresa said, “Whatever I can do, I do.” This statement applied to all of the other parents as well. For example, Carlos, described his support of Manny, “I try to provide him everything he needs; don't think about anything. I try to do whatever I can. Just, you know, put attention to your class or work.” Sadie, too, articulated how she views the general support that she gives to Tegan:

It would probably be it's a mix of everything…I think it's more really it is just emotional and financial support. You know because you know it's just basically checking in and seeing how things are going. And, what are your needs? You know and if I can help you, I will. And if I can't, I'm going to tell you I can't. You know and…I'll do the best I can.
Sadie saw her support as primarily a blend of financial and emotional support. In general, the parents’ support can be placed in these two categories. Financial support ranged, depending on the means of the individual family and the needs of the individual students. Parents gave what financial support they could to help students with their individual struggles. For example, Carlos helped Manny to buy two of the books he needed for class. The other books Manny shared with friends. In addition, Theresa was living in another part of the country during Peter’s senior year of high school. After Peter started college, Theresa moved back to Rhode Island so she could help support Peter by driving him back and forth to school:

I support Peter any way I can because right now he needs a ride, I'm here. I take him to school, I go for him, take him to work, sometimes his friends help him, sometimes he takes the bus, it depends. Most of the time I pick him up, especially Mondays and Thursdays he comes like at 9 o’clock at night so he needs a ride and that's one of the things why he wanted me to come because he needed a ride. I can help him go to school because he's got a license but he don't have a car so and you know about insurance. It’s very expensive for here.

Furthermore, Ana got the Internet in her apartment so that Jazmin could have an easier time completing assignments when she was at home.

Parents also spoke about giving extra money to students when they could, so that the students could have some spending money, even if it was as little as five dollars. Marie described this kind of financial support:

So, I just, you know, try to make sure he has money for his laundry and, you know, a little spending money. You don't want to be up there with no money! You know if you want to go out to eat with your friends or something together. I don't know.
Sometimes parents automatically sent money directly to the students, but sometimes in order to access their parents’ financial support, students had to ask for it, a process they found very difficult. According to Charlie, he would ask his grandmother for money, “only if I’m desperate.”

How did students describe the support they received from parents? As I mentioned in the previous section, most did not expect support from parents, so they were satisfied with the support they got. They also privileged emotional support over financial support. Manny described support from his parents:

…the love and the support and everything that they do for me, you know…the involvement exceeded my expectations, and if I was able to trade this for being financially stable and having every book, and you know never needing a dollar for social situations and stuff, obviously I would not. I would not do it for double that.

When parents did not have the college knowledge to support students, they other sources of support who did, usually people who were attending or had attended college such as family members, friends, and sometimes campus personnel. Marie talked about referring Charlie to
other resources for support, if he did not feel he could turn to her for a particular question about college:

I have told him. I said if you are having a problem and you don't want to tell it to me, my sister's a schoolteacher. He had a mentor (from a college access program for Native American students) who is a college professor. And, I said, you can e-mail them. You can, you know, talk to them. So, you can pick up the telephone. But, there are people at the school that if you're having a problem, whatever it is, and you don't want to share it with me, don't be afraid.

I will discuss how students used these sources of support in more detail in the next section.

**Support: Family and Friends**

The other forms of support that students accessed to help them with their struggles included non-college supports such as greater family and friends; college-based supports, and supports from their high school, the Met. Students had a large network of family and friends that they were able to access, either on their own or through the referral of their parents.

Family, including siblings and extended family- cousins, aunts, uncles etc. were important forms of support for many of the students. Carlos described his family and how they were willing to support Manny in college:

My mom and all of my brothers called (Manny) and said you know, you have your parents, your two parents as a support network, and you have God, but you also have us. Please feel free to call us because we're here for you.

Some of the students were the first in their greater families to go to college. But those who knew other family members who were in college or had gone to college, talked to them about their experience. Peter was the only student in the study who was not the first in his
immediate family to go to college; his sister Leah was a junior at a college in the Midwest. She was a very valuable resource to Peter. According to Peter, he and Leah talk “most days” at least “every other day.” “Well, we talk, and we will start talking about college on the phone, and stuff, like then she starts giving me advice and stuff.”

Other supportive adults, some of whom took on a family-like role, also make up students’ support network outside of their parents. These people sometimes helped students to solve some of their struggles. For example, Clara regularly turned to her boss from her summer job, whom she referred to as “her second father.” And it was a friend of the family, an old neighbor, who helped Jazmin fix her computer:

Yeah cause the laptop that they gave me at the Met…some guy he kind of fixed it. Well he used to live on my last street, he was a guy, he lived upstairs from us. And he just became our... he's like a big brother.

Support: Campus-Based

Students also accessed a number of campus-based supports including academic advisors, academic support center staff, admissions officers, counselors and their professors. When they had the knowledge to be able to do so, parents referred students to these resources, like telling them to speak with their professors.

All of the students reported having a personal connection to at least one adult on campus. Two of the students in the study reported a significant personal connection with their admissions counselor, which they maintained once they got to school. Charlie said that this is the first person he would seek out if he ever encountered difficulties at college. Manny went back to his admissions counselor a couple times over the course of the semester to share his struggles and successes with her.
Tegan sought out help from a counselor at her college, an experience which she said was positive. Tegan went to see the counselor proactively, because she was dealing with the death of her friend and also because she thought it would be helpful in terms of her past struggle with depression:

…because like for me it's like the - - I've been in therapy since I was seven so like the whole depression thing, like it's easier to go to someone who you know…when you're in a state where you don't wanna talk to anybody… (I was) like hi my name is Tegan. I'm here to introduce myself now while I'm perfectly fine so that if I happen- if I have problems you know who I am…and you know me like that.

All students reported making a connection with a professor outside of class. If they needed academic help, they asked their professors for it. Some students also took the initiative to get to know their professors, even if they didn’t necessarily have a problem. Jazmin talked about making a connection with the professor of her psychology class, the class she was failing. “So I went ahead, I talked to him… (and) he knows. He sees me like every time. I go to every class. He sees me that I sit in the front. He knew who I was so that helped.”

Manny too went to the professor of the class he was failing for support. Because of the relationship he formed with her through this process, and she was aware of his background and struggle, she expressed her pride when he had done well on a test after failing most of the semester:

I got this 96, which is something I'm extremely proud of and like it feels like the celebration's not only mine but the professor's…she literally grabbed my arm and she looked at me and said you got the second highest grade in the class…I (had) talked to her and I told her what I was going through, you know, and she obviously can't give me the
answer, you know. She can't sit down with me and set up meetings unless I go. I did go a few times, but there's only a certain amount of things that she could do and she's just there like my parents, like my brothers, like an observer...so when I did get that 96 like it felt like again, like the celebration wasn't just mine. She was really proud of me and you could tell.

Manny attributed his education at the Met with teaching him how to reach out to his professors:

…the Met has the communication piece of- like how advanced they are with communication is amazing... Cause the way I talk to my professors and the relationships I have with my professors, I highly doubt that any other kids could articulate the struggles and can say what they're going through the way that I could because of the Met, because of having the relationship with advisors and staff members and stuff.

Peers were also an important part of on-campus support. Each student had some form of a peer networks on his or her campus. For example, Clara and Manny had developed particularly close relationships with their roommates. For Clara, it was her roommate and her friends from her residence hall who comforted her during her homesickness. She called them “my college family.” Charlie reported feeling close ties to members of his rugby team and fraternity.

Students who spent more time at home (Peter who was a commuter and Jazmin who went home most nights) said that their primary peer supports were friends whom they knew before college, as well as other students at their college who had also gone to the Met. Jazmin and Peter regularly interacted with these students and each other, and relied on this network for support. For example, Jazmin and Peter shared a math book with one another and with two other Met peers.
Support: The Met

The students also reported maintaining relationships with Met staff and using these adults for support during their first semester. Every student was still connected with at least one Met staff member, whether it was a college counselor, advisor (teacher), or someone else who worked at the school. All except one of the students in the study returned to their high school on the day before Thanksgiving to reconnect with Met staff, peers, and speak to current students. Charlie, who did not attend, said that he had really wanted to but that his grandmother had made plans for him to visit family that day.

The three students who went to school in Rhode Island talked about seeing Met personnel on their campuses, both formally and informally, as being particularly helpful. Manny talked about how he saw a former advisor at the Met who was now getting her Master’s degree at his university as a potential support. In addition, two of the students met regularly with a staff member named Gina from the Met whom they said was hired to help them and the other Met graduates at their school. According to both Jazmin and Peter, Gina is an alumna of their college, who was hired by the Met to meet with them. Both Jazmin and Peter met with her weekly throughout the semester, along with some of their Met peers. Both reported that this was helpful and that Gina was a good source of information for them. She was able to point out resources and tips for navigating their campus. According to Peter, it was Gina who came up with the idea that the Met graduates all share the one math textbook. Jazmin described Gina, “Yeah she's helpful. And since she knows the campus and she graduated from here. She pretty much knows everything.” Jazmin and Peter also occasionally saw other Met college transition staff on their campus, which Jazmin said was “cool.”

Parent-Student-Institution Relationship
This final theme is titled Parent-Student-Institution Relationship and primarily relates to the connection (or lack of connection) that parents had to their students’ college. Parental involvement, by definition, refers to the relationship between parents and their child’s school (Connors & Epstein, 1995). Parental involvement in the K-12 context consists of parents taking responsibility for their sons and daughters’ education at home and forming positive connections with the school (Harvard Family Research Project, 2007). In Chapter One I state that parental involvement in higher education refers to the recent phenomenon reported by student affairs administrators where parents have high amounts of contact with their students and with their student’s college or university, on their students’ behalf. Therefore, parental involvement in the context of higher education implies a direct connection and some contact between the parent and the institution. This final theme, Parent-Student-Institution Relationship addresses this dynamic and the definition of parental involvement in the context of higher education.

**Parent-Institution Communication**

Overall, there was a lack of a connection between the parents in this study and their students’ respective institutions. Only one parent contacted a college or university, and she did so only one time. Parents also reported receiving very little communication from their students’ institutions. In general, students served as intermediaries in any relationship that the parents had to the institution.

Parents did not perceive that they had a direct relationship to their student’s college or university. Even though they all reported having a connection to the staff at the Met, they didn’t think that they had any connection to their student’s current school. Any connection that they had was through their student. Ana described how she perceived this relationship:
I have to trust my daughter a lot more and my daughter's the middle man. With (Jazmin’s advisor) before I would call her, we would understand each other although there was the language barrier, but I always felt a connection to the school. Now, not so much. I feel that colleges are a lot more liberal than the Met is and it’s tough because (Jazmin) has four different professors and it’s like do they want to talk to the parents? It’s very different so I have to go through my daughter. But I feel good about it.

Ana says that she doesn’t know if the professors want to hear from her or not. Theresa, too, showed confusion over whether the lack of relationship and connection to Peter and Leah’s colleges was the right thing to do. In our interview, after she told me that she did not perceive a relationship, she asked me, “But I don’t know, is it good or bad?”

Sadie was the only parent who had contacted her child’s college. She called the financial aid office when Tegan did not get her refund check. However, after she spoke with someone in the financial aid office and got some basic information about the refund check, she passed this information on to Tegan who “handled it from there.” In addition, Carlos did talk to the admissions counselor that Manny had made a connection with, but only during the summer before college when they were having difficulty coming up with the remaining funds that they owed, and Manny was present. Manny, Carlos, and Angelica went to speak with the admissions counselor along with Manny’s college transition counselor from the Met. Carlos had not contacted the admissions counselor since Manny started college.

Carlos went through Manny when he had an occasion to contact the college. For example, when Manny had a balance of $150 on his student account, Carlos said:
I went and paid it because I know what that does for (Manny’s) persona. Manny now is just kind of relaxed when he goes into second semester. Now when he goes into second semester he knows he won't have that debt from first semester. Rather than going directly to the college to pay the bill, however, Manny came home and Carlos gave him the money to go and pay his bill. Again, Manny was the intermediary between Carlos and the billing office. Furthermore, Rosa didn’t contact Clara’s school even when there was an emergency. Due to a major ice storm, the power went out on campus and the college closed, sending students home early for the winter break. Clara described her mother’s reaction: “She had watched the news and said that people were going without power or whatever, and she did not try calling or anything. She figured that if something was wrong I'd call her.”

For the most part, not only did parents not contact the institution, nor did they visit the institution’s website. Again, Sadie was the only parent who had gone onto the school’s website, and she had only viewed it once; she had pre-registered for Family Weekend online. Sadie was the only parent who had Internet access in her house, and she said that she rarely used it. It was primarily her younger daughter, a sophomore in high school, who went online. Sadie did have Internet access at work and said she uses e-mail as part of her job, but does not use the Internet or e-mail for “personal work.” Sadie and Clara’s father Jose were the only two parents who used a computer at their jobs. Marie didn’t have Internet access and knew that she could get Charlie’s brother to help her with getting information about Charlie’s school this way, but she didn’t want to. She didn’t want a direct connection to the university, only to her grandson:

Yes. I could go on the web. I could get (Charlie’s brother) to pull it up for me and go through there. But if I can't talk directly to Charlie or if I can't drive up there and spend the weekend, then I'm not…I don't want to.
Parents also reported receiving very little direct contact from the university. Rosa described what information she had received:

…it comes through her. The school really doesn't. They send you like when they first start, you know how they do, they send you freshman stuff and from time to time they send me something… I remember a couple of weeks ago, after Parents’ Day, they sent me something they were having some kind of Thanksgiving festival or something. There really is nothing.

Parent Interest in College Experience

Parents reported having no relationship to the college or university and very little contact with the institution. However, this does not mean that the parents were not interested in what their students were doing at college, or in general information about the college. Parents were very interested in learning more about the institution and their student’s college experience.

All of the parents had spent time on their students’ college campuses. A few parents had visited before college started, either in the spring or over the summer. Of the five residential students, all except one parent had accompanied their students in on move-in day. Jazmin’s mother Ana did not help Jazmin move in because, according to Jazmin, Ana did not have access to a car at that time. Instead, Jazmin moved with the help of her friend’s parents (her friend was another Met alum and Jazmin’s roommate.) Ana came to visit Jazmin on campus shortly after she had settled into her residence hall room. The parents whose students went to school farther away went to campus to pick their students up and drive them home for breaks. The parents whose students went to school close to home occasionally went to campus to see their students in this context. Even Theresa, the parent of a commuter student, had been to campus many times, although Peter did say that for the most part, she just picked him up and dropped him off and
didn’t get to see much of the campus. Carlos described visiting Manny at college. He enjoyed visiting Manny’s campus and seeing Manny there:

I love to see the interaction and the environment and kind of hang out for a little while and see how things are going…it’s very inspirational and motivational every time I go to campus because I see so many different cultures and just a lot of diversity there, and I always sit back and think all these kids are here to have a better future.

Ana too enjoyed visiting Jazmin on campus and found the university “to be really nice and comforting.” She saw visiting campus as an important part of supporting Jazmin, even if she didn’t understand or appreciate everything that she saw when Jazmin gave her tours of campus:

Jazmin takes me to walk around the different buildings. (She explains what they are.) I don’t remember. I see all of the names. I make sure that I go and every time Jazmin has to explain them. I don’t remember, but I feel like it’s good for my daughter to show interest.

Seeing their students on campus was very important to parents and reassured parents of their students’ safety. According to Sadie, “I just sort of wanted to see where she…how she was like settling into her living space.”

A few of the parents had gone to college-sponsored events, which they said that they had enjoyed. Both Rosa and Sadie had gone to Parents Weekend at their students’ schools. Rosa did not attend any of the organized events. Sadie went to a couple of the events that were held as part of Parents’ Weekend and particularly enjoyed a campus tour where she got to see some new art studios. She had wanted to go to a breakfast where she could meet the president, but opted to spend time with Tegan instead. In addition to Family Weekend, Sadie had also gone to a Parent
Orientation session when Tegan moved in, which I discussed in the second section of this chapter.

Prior to Manny enrolling in school, the previous spring, Carlos attended a dinner for parents and their students who had received the same scholarship as Manny, a $22,000 merit scholarship for students of color. Carlos really enjoyed attending this event. One of his favorite parts of the evening was getting the opportunity to meet the president of the university, which he felt was an honor. He talked about having met the president and other officials from the university multiple times throughout both of our interviews:

At (the) dinner, about 50 others students who got the scholarship and their parents (were there)…. The president spoke and some current students spoke. We wanted to see the president speak…it’s very motivating because the president when he was going to school, a lot of people told him he would not make it, he would not succeed, so it was nice to hear that story…that alone is a good motivator for students to say I can do it, you know.

Carlos was very interested in learning everything he could about Manny’s college experience and thought that this dinner helped him do so: “…every letter I receive from (Manny’s university) I read it. Every invitation I try to be there. I met the president. I met the vice president, one of the vice presidents. I talked to other students. I want to be part. I want to be involved.”

Parent Concerns

The lack of communication between parents and the institution didn’t mean that parents weren’t interested in their students’ college experience. It also didn’t mean that they didn’t have concerns. The parents expressed many of the same concerns that campus administrators report speaking to other parents about.
For example, Carlos and Angelica in particular were concerned about Manny’s housing situation. He had been placed with two other students in a room meant for only two. Housing officers call this an “expanded occupancy triple.” Carlos was uneasy because he thought that the room was too small, and he wanted Manny’s housing situation to change.

You know we were happy with the campus and that it was a safe place. The only question we have is about three guys in one room. We consider the rooms too small. It’s really small for three people. For three guys and I hope eventually in the short future, you know, maybe if I can talk to someone or suggest to someone over there because I believe that type of room is good for two kids. For three I feel it is too much.

Carlos did not contact someone from the college with his concern, however; he said he just hoped that the situation would get better.

Ah, well. I hope this, after the second year or by the end of the second semester, maybe they can give it to someone else. Yeah, I hope so…most of the time they share they are in the classrooms and they just go over there for sleep or to take a nap so. You know, they share, but I’m going to feel much better eventually with two in one room. Much better.

Carlos was also under the impression that Manny would be in the triple occupancy room for all four years of college when Manny was to pick a new room the following year. This lack of college knowledge contributed to his concern.

In addition, earlier I shared the example of Marie receiving a letter addressed to Charlie at home saying that he owed $5,000 on his first semester term bill. Marie was very concerned, and thought that the situation might even be “more stressful…for me” than it was for Charlie. Still, she did not contact the financial aid office to talk about her concerns. She talked to Charlie and asked him to go speak with someone in financial aid.
Other concerns that parents had included students’ safety and concern for their overall health and wellness. For example, when Rosa visited campus, she said she was primarily concerned with the location of “panic buttons.” “I worry about where's the panic buttons. That's all I wanted to know and near each building if they're close enough you can hit a panic button and run. That's all I care about.”

These parents had many of the same concerns as other parents of college students, but they didn’t contact the student’s college with their concerns. The students were the ones who followed up on these concerns. The next chapter will discuss how these parents did not fit with the current literature on parental involvement in higher education and suggest a new model based on the parent-student-institution relationship described here.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This chapter will first review the key findings from this study on working class and low-income students’ relationship to their parents and address how these findings relate to the research questions. Then it will present three main conclusions based on the findings: an additive model, access to social and cultural capital, and a new definition of parental involvement in higher education. It will also suggest implications for institutions, theory, and research. The chapter will conclude by highlighting additional ways in which this topic could be studied.

The primary research question in this study is: What is the lived experience of the relationship between working class and low-income students and their parents, particularly during the first semester of college, and specifically for students who attended a high school where parental involvement is supported and encouraged? This question is answered primarily through the first three dominant themes that emerged from the analysis of interviews with working class and low-income students and their parents: Parent-Student Communication, Autonomy/Individuation, and Persistence: Struggles and Supports. A fourth dominant theme, Parent-Student-Institution Relationship suggests a new model of parental involvement in higher education.

In terms of parent-student communication, students and parents communicate with each another frequently, as frequently as other Millennials. Both students and parents initiated communication, although parents sometimes resisted contacting their students because they feared bothering them. Students ultimately dictated the frequency of communication with their parents. Mothers served as the primary point of communication rather than fathers. In addition, the telephone (cell phone for students, cell phone or landline for parents) was the preferred mode
of communication. None of the parents and students e-mailed one another; only one parent had Internet access at home. In terms of communication content, students and parents engaged in both need and non need-based contact, with non-need based, calling just to touch base and check in (Sorokou & Weissbrod, 2005), being the most dominant type of contact. All of the students said that they limited communication with their parents in some content areas, especially when they did not want their parents to worry about them. Students also limited conversation topics that they did not think their parents would understand, like their academic course content. They tried to tailor conversations to what parents would understand. Parents used conversations to communicate their expectations for persistence.

The second dominant theme is Autonomy and Individuation. Both parents and students perceived the students as being autonomous. The students in the study were not “sheltered,” a trait attributed to the Millennial generation (Howe & Strauss, 2003). They didn’t expect financial support from their parents, and when they did receive this type of support, they wanted to pay their parents back. Students’ autonomy was also shown in their primarily responsibility for managing financial information. Both students and parents talked about how students had been independent from a young age and for the most part, the students in the study considered themselves adults, rather than children. The parents in this study did not meet the description of “helicopter parents” portrayed by the media; they were not hoverers, and specifically took actions not to be. If anyone in the parent-student relationship was constantly monitoring the other it was the students watching over the parents. Students worried about and regularly checking up on their parents. Even though students saw themselves as autonomous; they were interdependent with their parents. They wanted to maintain a connection to their parents and stay attached to them.
Persistence: Struggles and Supports refers to the struggles students encountered and the supports they turned to help them with these challenges. The main obstacles students faced were financial struggles. Other difficulties included academic and personal or social struggles. Parents were aware of the major struggles that students faced, and they did what they could to support the students. When their parents couldn’t help, they suggested other sources of support that they knew about. The other forms of support that students accessed to help them with their struggles included non-college supports such as extended family and friends, college-based supports, and supports from their high school, the Met. All students reported making a connection with at least one adult at their colleges and all also retained connections to staff members from their high school.

The secondary research question of this study is: What constitutes “parental involvement” for working class and low-income students and parents in the context of higher education? This question is primarily addressed through the last dominant theme of the findings, Parent-Student-Institution Relationship. Parental involvement is fundamentally about the relationship of the parents to the institution and this theme explores that relationship, as well as the student’s position in this dynamic. The parents in this study did not have a direct relationship to their students’ institutions. Only one parent had contacted her student’s college, and only one time. Parents also reported receiving very little communication from the colleges and universities. In general, students were intermediaries in the relationship between parents and the institution.

What can we learn from these findings? What do they mean in the context of higher education and for those who work with students and parents like these? Three main conclusions
come from the findings: An additive model, access to social and cultural capital, and a new
definition of parental involvement in higher education.

An Additive Model

The definition of parental involvement in higher education is described from a negative,
deficit perspective. Both the media and college personnel tell tales of “helicopter parents” who
regularly contact both their students and the institution. In addition, many faculty, staff, and
administrators in higher education consider parental involvement alarming, based on their
concerns that parental involvement interferes with students’ development to become autonomous
individuals. However, from the results of this study, it is clear the image of the helicopter parent
does not address the parent-student relationship for students for all socioeconomic status groups;
that metaphor cannot be used to describe the behavior of this group of working class and low-
income parents and their relationship to their students. The third conclusion section will address
the relationship between the student, parent, and the third player in parental involvement, the
institution, more in the third conclusion section, a new definition of parental involvement in
higher education. This section will focus specifically on the parent-student relationship.

Overall, the parent-student relationships highlighted in this study were positive and
supportive, an additive model of parental involvement in higher education. Currently, the
definition of parental involvement in higher education is a negative, deficit one. It suggests that
parents are a nuisance to college staff and that they interfere with their students’ development of
autonomy. This definition did not fit the parents in this study. An additive model is more
similar to the model of parental involvement used to describe the relationship between parents
and students in the context of K-12 education; parental involvement is beneficial to students’
development and leads to a number of positive outcomes. In Chapter Two, I suggest that
attachment theory may be a better alternative to the theory of separation-individuation in explaining the relationship between today’s college students and their parents. Attachment theory challenges the traditional implications of separation-individuation by suggesting that, for students leaving home, having parents as a secure base may actually support, rather than threaten, the development of competence and autonomy (Kenny & Donaldson, 1992).

According to Bowlby (1973), in adolescence, attachment takes the form of autonomy and independence with the maintenance of warm and supportive relationships. The students and parents in this study had formed positive attachment relationships as well as interdependence with parents. Parents served as secure bases for their students; they provided support while simultaneously encouraging autonomy and functional independence (Hoffman, 1984; Kenny & Donaldson, 1992). At the same time, students also sometimes served as secure bases for their parents.

According to Kenny and Rice (1995) the attachment model suggests that calling home to talk with family or discuss a concern with parents may actually be examples of healthy behavior rather than acts which are cause for concern. This is supported by the relationship between the students and parents in this study. For the students, the non need-based contact, the regular touching base and checking in that they did with their with parents, was key to their perception of their parents’ emotional support. Students wanted to maintain this connection, so they frequently engaged in this type of contact. In terms of developing positive attachment relationships, calling just to check in may be just as important as calling in times of trouble (Sorokou & Weissbrod, 2005). Students also used non need-based contact to check up on their parents and to make sure that they were ok when they worried about them.
These low-income and working class parents did not prevent their students from developing as individuals. Students were autonomous and functionally independent and parents, through their parenting style, encouraged this. According to Schultheiss and Blustein (1994) students who are securely attached to their parents might have an easier time negotiating the process of individuating and adjusting to a new environment. This seemed to be true for the students in this study; having a secure base seemed to allow the students to develop individually. In addition to being reinforced by parenting style, there also appear to be class-based differences that might contribute to this development of autonomy in this population. Students talked about feeling that they gained functional independence, or an ability to manage and direct practical affairs (Hoffman, 1984) early on in life. This was sometimes due to their being exposed to difficult, adult topics as a result of their socioeconomic status. Students also experienced a role reversal with parents and demonstrated filial responsibility for their family caregiving (Kuperminc et al., 2009). This filial responsibility could have positively impacted students and contributed to their developmental maturity. It is also possible, however, that these students individual characteristics of being independent could have led them to take more responsibility and caregiving in their homes (Kuperminc et al., 2009).

The students in this study seemed to perceive themselves as more adult-like than students who form the basis of Arnett’s theories; they were further along developmentally. Arnett suggests that college students have their own category- somewhere between child and adult. Only 23% of students in Arnett’s (1994) study said that they considered themselves to have reached adulthood. Arnett claims that his theory applies to students of all socioeconomic classes. However, most of the students in this study unequivocally saw themselves as adults. The students who didn’t see themselves as complete adults said they didn’t for somewhat trivial
reasons (like calling home when one doesn’t feel well, or enjoying video games) and would still place themselves much closer to the adult end of the spectrum than the child one.

Even though it didn’t clearly emerge in the findings, another factor that likely contributed to the student-parent dynamic, and the students’ autonomy and individuation, as well as interdependence with parents and family, is culture. The sample included one White student and five students of color. In general, family ecologies for ethnic minorities differ from those of majority students (Harrison, Wilson, Pine, Chan & Buriel, 1990). Defining family as extended family and viewing family as a collective social network is a characteristic of minority families because of their past struggles (Harrison et al., 1990). In addition, because of their collectivist family nature, ethnic minority students attempt to incorporate their cultural community into their campus community rather than experiencing a complete separation (Padilla, Trevino, Gonzalez & Trevino, 1997).

The study included one African American student, one Native American student, and three Latino students. Each of these ethnic groups is known for its collectivist family values. For example, African American families tend to view family as an extended family support system (Harrison et al., 1990). Native American families also value extended family and Native American students tend to be family-oriented (Harrison et al., 1990; Heavyrunner & Morris, 2006; Terry, Dukes, Valdez & Wilson, 2005). In addition, students from Latino families also typically have strong solidarity with parents and extended family members, which leads them to have high levels of contact with their family members (Harrison et al., 1990). They are known to be very family-oriented and consider their primary commitment to be to a group rather than an individual (Padilla et al., 1997). Families from each of these particular cultural backgrounds also typically stress interdependence as a goal for their students’ development (Harrison et al., 1990).
The students from immigrant families whose parents did not speak English, in particular Jazmin and Manny, could additionally have developed interdependence with their parents because of their role as language brokers. A language broker can be defined as children of immigrant families who translate and interpret for their parents, members of their family, teachers, neighbors, or other adults (Buriel, Perez, De Ment, Chavez & Moran, 1998; Morales & Hanson, 2005). When considering the role of culture in the parent-student and also student-family dynamic, it is important to remember that broad generalizations do not apply to every member of these groups.

In general, students are satisfied with the relationship that they have with their parents. Even though they perceive themselves as autonomous, they still demonstrate their desire to maintain their relationship with parents through their communication frequency. Like most students who answered the 2007 Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) study from the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at UCLA, these students too found the level of parental involvement in their lives “just right.” The findings from the 2007 study, however, showed that certain populations of students, specifically Latino and first-generation students were more likely to report “too little” parental involvement (Pryor et al., 2007). This involvement referred to domains such as the college application process and choosing college courses and activities. The students all fit one or both of these characteristics and they did not feel this way (all of the students were first-generation and three students identified as Latino). Therefore, these students supported the conclusion for the overall population in the CIRP study, but not the conclusion for this sub population.

This disagreement in response can most likely be attributed to the way that the students interpreted the term “involvement” and in what context this question was asked. On the CIRP,
the question used to make a conclusion about students’ involvement satisfaction was: “How involved were your parents (or your legal guardians) in your: “decision to go to college, application(s) to college, decision to go to this college, dealings with officials at your college, choosing college courses, and choosing college activities.” The response choices were “too little,” “right amount,” and “too much” (Pryor et al., 2007). I asked students “Are you satisfied with the level of involvement?” and the definition of involvement was subject to the students’ own interpretation. It is true that the parents in the study did not possess the tacit knowledge, or college knowledge, to be able to assist students in navigating all situations. Therefore, if students had been asked questions about involvement in a college academic context, perhaps they too would say that their parents could be more involved. However, the students in this study seemed to equate “involvement” with “emotional support.” This further shows the need for a clear definition of parental involvement in higher education. It is also important to point out that the definition the CIRP questions are based on appears to be a deficit model of parental involvement, an assumption that parental involvement interferes with, rather than supports, student development. It is also necessary to note that the CIRP is administered at the beginning of a student’s college experience, and although it is frequently used to draw conclusions about student populations in higher education, it may actually say more about the student’s experience before coming to college.

As I mentioned before, the relationships between these working class and low-income students and parents do not fit the theory of separation-individuation, which states that students must separate from parents in order to achieve self-definition and the ability to function autonomously (Mattanah et al., 2004; Rice, 1992). According to Erickson (1968) it is normal for adolescents to “rebel against or withdraw from the parental environment” (p. 246). The students
in this study were able to individuate and develop autonomy through strong attachments to and interdependence with their parents. In addition, the findings from this study also conflict with literature and theory on first-generation college students. According to London (1989), for many first-generation students, a personal growth from their student experience may be accompanied by a loss in their relationship to their family. This was not the case for these students. They did not experience a separation, break, or loss in their connection to their families. If there was tension around student’s upward mobility (London, 1989), they reconciled this by taking their parents with them and viewing their experience as a collective success. As Manny said, “it’s everybody that’s with me… it’s a collective me.” Students may not have experienced this tension because of the timing of this study; the students were only in their first semester and had not yet experienced the personal growth that accompanies this change.

A generational shift and general rise in technology use could be causing the misalignment between students’ experiences and these theories’ ability to explain them. The parent-student relationship is likely influenced by the ease at which students can contact their parents, the accessibility of their secure base. For example, all of the students in the study had a cellular phone (although Manny was without his for the first month of school after selling it to get some money for college-related expenses). With all-inclusive cellular phone plans that include a certain amount of minutes, students may think of the cost of a phone call as a payment per month, rather than a payment per minute, which was the rate before the widespread use of the cell phone. They likely think differently about the cost of a phone call, whether or not it is actually less money over time to make phone calls this way.

All of the students talked about their cell phone bills as being one of their college expenses, a payment they had to make each month, something that they sometimes struggled
with. They saw having cell phones as a necessity. When Manny sold his phone, he considered that an emergency situation. One of the first ways his father provided him with financial support was through buying Manny a new phone. Talking on the phone allowed students and parents to engage in frequent non-need based contact. Cell phone use likely also enabled this type of contact because of one’s ability to use a cell phone almost anywhere. For example, Clara often called Rosa when she was walking around on campus between classes. Richard Mullendore, a higher education professor at the University of Georgia, is frequently cited as calling the cellular phone “the world’s longest umbilical cord” (Shellenbarger, 2005). This popular phrase, however, does not apply to how the students in this study used their cell phones to contact their parents. The term “umbilical cord” implies that students are still connected to their parents in a negative way that limits autonomy.

Even though students used their cell phones to contact their parents, the results of this study show a digital divide in terms of technology use. All of the students in the study had cell phones, but only two of the parents did, and one of these parents shared the phone with her husband because she did not have a landline phone. (I believe students were still able to engage in frequent contact with their parents who did not have cellular phones because most of these parents did not work and spent a lot of time in their houses.) In addition, only one parent had Internet access at home (which she hardly used) and two parents had Internet access at their jobs. Students and parents never used the computer to communicate with one another by e-mail. According to a 2004 study based on census data, the Department of Commerce National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) found that Internet use and access to a broadband Internet connection at home is a linear function of income- the lower one’s income, the lower one’s use of the Internet, and the lower the likelihood that he or she can access
it from home (Junco & Mastrodicasa, 2007; NTIA 2004). The parents in this study certainly support that finding. Some technologies were affordable (student cell phones) because they were deemed necessary. But anything beyond that was considered a luxury.

If the parents in the study did Internet access in their homes, they still may not have accessed college information via the Web. In general, the information they received about college was through their student, and they preferred it this way. In Chapter Four, I described how Marie made note of this. She only cared to learn about the college experience through the lens of her grandson:

Yes. I could go on the web. I could get (Charlie’s brother) to pull it up for me and go through there. But if I can't talk directly to Charlie or if I can't drive up there and spend the weekend, then I'm not…I don't want to.

In terms of generational characteristics, there are some ways in which the students in this study are like their peers, and some ways in which they differ from them. Clearly, they also use technology to communicate with their parents, but not to the degree that other, wealthier students do. They also communicate with their parents frequently, which is a characteristic of the Millennial Generation. According to the 2007 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), seven out of ten students said that they communicated “very often” with at least one parent or guardian during the academic year (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2007). However, as I mentioned in Chapter Four, due to their socioeconomic status and life experiences, these students did not meet the characteristic of being “sheltered,” which Howe and Strauss say is one of the dominant characteristics of this generation (Howe & Strauss, 2003, p. 176). Both students and parents disproved this idea. Students did not expect financial support and wanted to pay it back when they received it. Parents purposefully tried not to be “hoverers” and refrained from
calling students when they were concerned that they would interrupt or bother them at college. Students experienced a role reversal with parents and often were the ones who took care of parents. Some called home frequently for the purpose of checking up on parents and making sure that they were alright. Although there are some shared characteristics of students from a particular generation, it does not appear that most generational theory and tenets about the Millennials can be used to accurately describe the relationship dynamic between the working class and low-income parents and their students in this study.

Another finding from the study about the parent-student relationship was that students had a primary connection with one parent- their mother (and in one case, grandmother) and had different communication patterns with mothers than fathers. Students talked to their mothers more frequently, and about different topics than they talked to their fathers (those students who had contact with their fathers). This is consistent with research about students’ communication with their mothers and fathers. According to data from the 2007 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), students were likely to talk to their mothers about personal issues, academic performance, and family matters. Academic performance was the most common discussion topic with fathers (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2007). In general, more personal topics were the subject of conversation with mothers.

Some theorists claim that attachment theory may better explain the parent-student relationship for female students than male students because of females’ relational nature. For women, relationships are a main focus of attention and concern (Gilligan, 1993). According to Sorokou and Weissbrod (2005), male and female college students have different contact patterns with their parents. In this study, there did not appear to be gender differences in terms of frequency of communication, communication topics, and primary attachment to mothers.
However, women’s relational nature perhaps could be added to the reasons why students were primarily connected with their mothers over their fathers.

In general, these parents were very supportive of their students in college. They provided students with a secure base that they could regularly turn to for support, yet still develop on their own. Students were very satisfied with the format of this relationship. The dominant description of the parent-student relationship in higher education is a deficit one where parents are suspected of limiting students’ autonomy and thwarting their personal growth. It appears that it is middle class and upper-middle class parents who might be exhibiting more of these types of behaviors. Perhaps these middle class and upper-middle class parents could take some cues from these low-income and working class parents in how to have positive attachment relationships and be supportive secure bases for their students who foster their children’s individuation and autonomy.

Access to Social and Cultural Capital

Although parents were supportive, there were areas where parents’ support was limited. This was primarily due to their lack of tacit knowledge, or college knowledge. Instead they had what Smith (2001) calls “soft knowledge.” In their communication with students, parents expressed their expectations for students’ persistence, but they often could not provide them with specific information about how to be successful. Instead the parents referred their students to other sources of support when they had knowledge of these. Parents could point out the general direction, but they could not point out any landmarks along the way.

Compared to their middle and upper-middle class peers, these working class and low-income students lacked cultural capital, the high status cultural signals of social and cultural selection processes (Bourdieu, 1984; Lamont & Lareau, 1988). They also lacked some of the
social capital that is typically passed from parents to their children. Social capital refers to the possession of valuable relationships that aid in gaining other kinds of tangible and symbolic resources, such as human capital, or education (Coleman, 1988). Instead, they had other forms of capital, other funds of knowledge. The theoretical concept of funds of knowledge is based on the basic premise that people are competent, have knowledge and that their life experiences have contributed to that knowledge (Gonzalez et al., 2005). In many ways, funds of knowledge represents an alternative viewpoint of the capital present in low-income and working class families (Kiyama, 2008). For example, in this study, families may not have had specific college knowledge, but they did have knowledge about perseverance as well as knowledge about the importance of a college education. Students turned to other sources when there were forms of social and cultural capital that they could not access through their parents.

According to Stanton-Salazar (1997), even though parents are the primary source of social capital, students can also gain social capital from sources outside of their families, such as school personnel, when they form caring relationships with these individuals. This was certainly the case for students in this study. The social capital that they gained from their connections to staff at the Met, helped them to access cultural capital, specifically forms of tacit knowledge. First, they gained social capital when they were actually in high school. The education these students received at the Met taught them how to later use their social networks and relationships to their advantage in college. Then they were then able to access forms of cultural capital from on-campus sources. Students also accessed a number of campus-based supports including academic advisors, academic support center staff, admissions officers, counselors and their professors. All students in the study had formed a relationship with at least one adult on their
college campus. They had learned to form meaningful and resourceful relationships with adults through their high school curriculum and school climate and culture.

The students also maintained connections to their high school while they were in college, which additionally helped them to access cultural capital. All students talked about having an ongoing relationship with staff at the Met, whether it was a college transition counselor, advisor, mentor, or other staff member. For two students in particular, having support from someone who was hired by their high school to assist them in college was very valuable. Working with Gina who “pretty much knows everything” because she had attended their college helped these students to access the tacit knowledge that they may not have otherwise received. The students recognized that Gina was an insider who could provide them with useful information about their college experience because she “knows the campus and she graduated from here.” Stanton-Salazar (1997) suggests that high schools can provide students with social capital when the students are still in high school. The Met takes this one step further. It provides its students with social capital when they are in high school, but also continues to provide students with access to key relationships (and therefore forms of cultural capital) after high school graduation, when they are actually in college.

In a way, the Met takes on college-educated parenting for these students. As a reminder, the definition of parent that I outline in Chapter One is, a relationship with a child that includes acts of caring, nurturing, and protecting. The definition of parenting is assuming responsibility for the emotional, social, and physical growth and development of a child. Neither the role of parent nor the act of parenting requires that there be a biological relationship with the child. The Met staff becomes the parent, providing resources to its students that college-educated parents would normally be able to supply. In its role as quasi-college educated parent, the Met provides
social capital to its students, which helps them to access forms of cultural capital and tacit knowledge. In addition, in its role as quasi-parent, in the context of attachment theory, it becomes an additional secure base for students. The Met, as a representative for the individual relationships with staff members, is a place where students know they can turn for support, but that ultimately also fosters independence and autonomy.

What about students who had more access to social and cultural capital? As I mentioned in Chapter Three, I accidentally included a student in the study who was middle class, likely due to a miscommunication with a Met staff member about this student’s socioeconomic class status and also because she has some working class characteristics. I interviewed the student, Bianca, three times, and her mother, Rosalie, two times over the course of the semester, although I did not include their interviews in my data analysis. Bianca is a student at an out-of-state private college. Bianca is not a first-generation student; her mother Rosalie went to college and has a degree in business. Rosalie also went to law school for one year. During her first semester, Bianca maintained her connections to the Met, but received more support from her mother than other students did in terms of how to navigate the college experience. Bianca said she felt that she could talk with Rosalie about her academic experience, such as picking courses; she didn’t talk about limiting the information that she shared with her mother. Overall, Bianca also struggled less than the other students did during their first semester, both financially and academically.

Rosalie talked about how she was able to use her own tacit knowledge to give Bianca advice about managing her time during her first semester:

I think (my own experience has helped me advise Bianca), talking about freedom and the free time... trying to talk to her about how (she is) doing (her) work. Its very easy to
confuse your free time and manage it and then all of a sudden it’s, oh my God! So I try to
tell her that. I said you should never feel as though...I go to college and I have freedom
because...some kids go and they’re like party time!

Ultimately, because of her class status and parent’s education level, Bianca had more access to
social and cultural capital than the low-income and working class students did.

A New Definition of Parental Involvement in Higher Education

Parental involvement reaches beyond the relationship between parents and students to a
key third player, the institution. The definition of parental involvement in both K-12 and higher
education includes the institution. Parental involvement refers to how involved parents are in
students’ lives and also how involved they are with the school. In the K-12 context, parental
involvement is considered from an additive perspective; it consists of parents taking
responsibility for their sons and daughters’ education at home and forming positive connections
with the school (Harvard Family Research Project, 2007). Parental involvement in K-12
education has been linked to many positive outcomes such as higher grades, school success,
higher standardized test scores, higher self-esteem, social competence, reduction in substance
use, aspiration for college, enrollment in college (Harvard Family Research Project, 2007).

In higher education, parental involvement is considered from a negative perspective and
includes parents having high amounts of contact with their student’s college or university, on
their student’s behalf. This new dynamic reflects a shift over time in the student-parent-
institution relationship (Wartman & Savage, 2008). This dynamic has evolved from the doctrine
of in loco parentis with parents expecting the university to take care of their students, to this new
dynamic where parents have a direct relationship to the university (Henning, 2007).
The parent-student-institution dynamic in this study does not fit the definition of parental involvement in higher education that I state above and outline in Chapter One. In this study, there was no direct connection between parents and their students’ institutions. Only one parent had contacted a school, and only one time. After receiving the information she was looking for, she turned the responsibility for handling the issue over to her daughter. Parents also reported receiving very little communication from the colleges and universities. In general, the students were intermediaries in any relationship that parents had to the institution.

As intermediaries, students pass information from the college to the parent and vice versa. As I mentioned in Chapter Four, Jazmin’s mother Ana described her connection to the college through Jazmin as the “middle man.” All of the students in this study served as the “middle man” in the relationship between their parents and the university. In addition, when I asked Jazmin what her mother knew about college, she replied “what I tell her.” For the most part, everything that parents knew about college had been filtered through the lens of their students. Parents did not learn about the institution directly through contacting an administrator or from researching information online. Also, since these parents had limited or no college experience themselves, they didn’t have any prior connection to a higher education institution that informed their experience as parents of college students.

Part of students’ role as intermediaries includes serving as translators in the relationship between parents and the institution, transferring college knowledge and the signs and symbols of higher education into language that the parents could understand. Since students were part of both worlds, they could translate this college knowledge for their parents, who do not have this information from a prior experience or source. When translating, students also limited certain
topics and left of pieces of information that they believed could not be translated because their parents did not have the background to understand.

As I outlined in Chapter Two, some literature from K-12 education shows that parental involvement, or participation in schooling, varies by social class. Lareau (1987) concluded that there was a relationship between parental involvement and socioeconomic class when she studied elementary school classrooms at a “working class” school and a “middle class” school. The parents at the middle class school were more involved; they had greater amounts of interaction. Based on the results of this study, it appears that there are also class-based differences in parental involvement in higher education. The parent-student-institution dynamic is different for middle class and upper-middle class parents than it is for the low-income and working class parents in this study.

Figure Two illustrates the current model of parental involvement in higher education. This figure shows that each of the parties has a relationship to the others. There is also a direct connection and line of communication between the parent and the institution.

![Diagram of parental involvement in higher education]

Figure 2. Parental involvement in higher education, current model (middle and upper-middle class parents and students) (Henning, 2007; Wartman & Savage, 2008).
Figure Three shows the relationship between parent and institution that emerged in this study of low-income and working class parents. In this figure, parents are still connected to the institution, but students are intermediaries in that relationship.

![Figure 3. Parental involvement in higher education, model based on study findings (working class and low-income parents and students)](image)

I propose a new model for parental involvement in higher education, based on the current definition of parental involvement in higher education as well as the results of this study, that may be a better fit for working with parents from all socioeconomic classes (Figure Four). I will explain more about what this model might look like in practice for institutions in the implications section of this chapter.
In this proposed model of parental involvement in higher education, all three main players have a relationship to one another. The parent and student have a relationship and the student and the higher education institution have a relationship. The parent and the institution also have a relationship. However, this takes two forms: a direct connection (as represented in Figure Two) where the student is an intermediary (as shown in Figure Three). This way, the parent-institution relationships exhibited by middle and upper-middle class parents, and well as by the low-income and working class parents in this particular study are all represented. This new model should be used to understand the relationship between students, parents, and the institution for students and parents from all socioeconomic class levels. Not every working class and low-income parent will have a relationship to the institution where their student is an intermediary, and not every middle class and upper-middle class parents will necessarily have a direct connection. It is also important to note that in this model, the student is at the center. The parent-institution relationship exists for the purpose of affecting the student’s college experience.
The model of parental involvement shown in Figure Four provides an alternate way to understand the relationship dynamic between students, parents, and the institution. This model does not represent uninvolved; the parents in this study can hardly be called uninvolved. They are just differently involved. The communication pathway where students are intermediaries in the relationship between parents and the institution is also not a deficit model—that is it is not a lesser model. It is just a different model, another way of communicating.

Institutions need to consider both communication patterns when working with parents and think about how parents are involved differently. It is possible that parents’ “soft knowledge” (Smith, 2001) is what prevents them from contacting the school directly and instead causes them to refer to their student, who is an insider to the college experience. In addition, Lareau (1987) found that one of the differences between the involvement of middle class and working class parents was that middle class parents had social networks from which they could learn about involvement opportunities, to which working class parents did not seem to have access. Therefore, it is also possible that parents do not contact the school because they are not part of a peer group that engages in this type of behavior. This sense of entitlement is not part of their habitus, or the context of family, friends, background, and cultural surroundings (Bourdieu, 1984; McDonough, 1997).

The institutional response to the phenomenon of parental involvement, and the direct communication between parent and the institution has been to provide programs and services for parents in an attempt to actively direct this involvement. When colleges don’t hear directly from parents, however, they should not assume that parents do not want to be involved. Parents in study were enthusiastic about students’ experiences and wanted to learn about college. This finding is consistent with K-12 literature. For example, Becker and Epstein (1982) found that
teachers report that parents are not interested in becoming part of their child’s education. But parents overwhelmingly report that they need to be involved in their children’s education and that they are trying to help their children at home. In addition, in K-12 education, one of the reasons parents become involved in their children’s education is because of the general invitations and opportunities for parental involvement that are presented by both the child and by the school (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). In this study, parents responded to these invitations from their students, but perceived that they had been given few invitations to become involved from the institution.

In K-12 education, there does tend to be different levels of involvement based on socioeconomic status. The parents from lower socioeconomic status groups are less involved. However, the parents from this study were not less involved in the context of K-12 education. They were involved in their students’ academic lives in high school and had direct connections to the institution. The Met places parental involvement as a priority and both invites parents to be involved and directs them how to be involved (Levine, 2002). As I mentioned in Chapter Three, when a student applies to the Met, both the student and the parents have to write an essay describing why they want to be part of the Met school community (Littky, 2004). Parents take an active role in their child’s education and work with the student and the student’s advisor to help develop the student’s individualized curriculum, or learning plan (The Met, 2008). They serve as panelists at the student’s quarterly exhibitions, where students present what they have learned to an audience. The Met views families as an integral part of the education process (Littky, 2004).

For example, Ana described her involvement when Jazmin and her brother, who also attended the Met, were in high school:
When Jazmin and her brother were at the Met I'd go…to the Met to see what they were doing, how everything was going…like an example would be both of them would have to go in at nine and maybe I'd go on an (internship) shadow with Jazmin and then her brother would get out early so I’d have to go pick him up because Jazmin would stay late…and I had to take her to all her after school activities, take Jazmin to basketball or whatever it was that she was doing. I’m happy I did it that way because that way I was on top of the two.

Because the students of the parents in this study went to a high school where parental involvement was encouraged and supported, these parents actually followed more of a middle class model of parental involvement in high school. These parents to K-12 parental involvement in a way that is more consistent with middle class parent behaviors. The institution had welcomed them to participate when the students were in high school, yet when the students were in college, these parents saw their relationship with the school as being different. What about low-income and working class parents who did not have a model of being involved in high school? It is not likely that they would have had a stronger relationship with the college, or more of a connection. Because they would not have been socialized to middle class standards of parental involvement, they would have had the same or even less of a connection.

Therefore, since the parents in this study do not fit the higher education definition of parental involvement that is established by the middle and upper-middle classes, it is more likely that parents who did not come from a high school with strong parental involvement also do not meet this definition of parental involvement. Overall, the current definition of parental involvement in higher education is problematic as it is based on behavior from middle and upper-middle class parents. Looking to the new model of parental involvement in higher
education, and using this along with the old model, will help schools address the needs of all parents. I will discuss this more in the next section when I talk about implications for institutions.

Implications: Colleges and Universities

In recent years, colleges and universities have increased their programmatic components for parents. Popular parent services include Parent and Family Weekends, parent orientations, family events on move-in day, parent newsletters, parent handbooks, parent associations, and fundraising (Savage, 2007; Ward-Roof, Heaton & Coburn, 2008; Wartman & Savage, 2008). In addition, institutions have determined certain messages that they would like to portray to parents when they interact with them (Price, 2008). According to an article in Managing Parent Partnerships: Maximizing Influence, Minimizing Interference, and Focusing on Student Success, a recent New Directions for Student Services publication that outlines best practices for working with parents, student affairs professionals should deliver messages to parents that focus on the college environment, campus resources, the types of challenges their students may encounter, and how institutions and parents can work together to overcome these challenges (Price, 2008).

Institutions should consider why they are involving parents and families. If parent services are primarily driven by fundraising efforts, then they will not serve all parents. Cultivating fundraising relationships with parents can be helpful to institutions, and should be explored, but should not drive programming, or it will exclude many parents who want to be involved (Wartman & Savage, 2008). Colleges and universities should also consider whether their programmatic efforts and outreach to parents is solely based on a response to observed parent behaviors. It appears many of these programmatic elements have been reactive in nature designed “to accommodate and embrace the increase in parental involvement” (Ward-Roof et al.,
Since the definition of parental involvement in higher education (a negative, deficit mode) appears to be flawed, and predominantly reflects middle class and upper-middle class behaviors, basing programs, outreach, and communication with parents solely on this definition is problematic.

In Lareau’s (1987) study that led to the conclusion that there were socioeconomic class-based differences in K-12 education, she also found that institutions tended to promote the type of behavior that middle class parents exhibited such as frequent contact with teachers. If institutions are basing programming for parents on middle class and upper-middle class parent behavior, they likely are reinforcing this standard. When creating services for parents and trying to direct parental involvement, institutions should exercise caution around this. Instead, they should consider their goals for why parents should be involved and strive to include all parents, not just respond to the ones making all the noise.

Even schools that have expressed a public commitment to reaching all parents, however, may not be taking the best approach to do so. Institutions need to consider not only what messages to deliver, but also how to give messages to parents about involvement. Many of the current best practices for parent services do not fit with the results of this study. For example, one best practice is to address first-generation parents and their needs, providing them with foundational information about the financial process of higher education, on-campus housing (Price, 2008). The mode of addressing parents needs to fit with this population as well as the message, however since many parents do not have Internet access. Assumptions should not be made about the best ways to communicate information to parents.

The new, alternate model to parental involvement that I propose based on this study’s findings about the parent-institution relationship (See Figure Four) allows for the option to
position the student as an intermediary in the relationship between parent and institution. By using this model, institutions should be better able to reach low-income and working class parents who have not gone to college. Because, for these populations, students are more likely to be intermediaries in the relationship between parents and the institution, following this model, communication to parents would go through the students. For example, students would be notified about events specifically for parents as well as where parents can find information in which they might be interested. Communicating directly to the students, the institution would also be able to reach out to parents who do not speak English, like some of the parents in this study. Because there are many parents who certainly do have a direct connection to the institution, colleges should continue to offer many of the services to parents that they already do. By following the two communication pathways, and using the second one to specifically address the needs of first-generation students, institutions will be able to more effectively communicate with parents.

Also, when wanting to communicate with parents, institutions should also be aware that the digital divide does still exist and that many parents do not have Internet access, nor are they regular Internet users. Electronic outreach and communication are also listed as best practices for working with parents. “Technology can be an effective way to reach parents and family members, because most are now somewhat familiar with navigating web pages, downloading newsletters, or maintaining a website” (Ward-Roof, 2008, p. 49). Schools should provide alternatives to online communication or have students help parents in accessing these online resources.

In addition, from this study, it is clear how important it is to parents that they see their students in the college environment, and to know that they are safe. All parents stressed the
significance of campus visits. Colleges could benefit from providing parental travel vouchers to those families who may particularly struggle with the costs of a campus visit, either on move-in day or at another time during the fall semester. These vouchers would be restricted funds in a student’s financial aid package.

Why would institutions want to involve all parents and not just parents who can contribute financially to the college or the parents who ask to be? Informed parents, as a form of support for their students, may ultimately help with persistence and therefore for colleges, retention efforts. In addition, colleges may even want to consider working with parents before students even matriculate (Wartman & Savage, 2008) and focusing efforts in the area of enrollment. In this study, the connections that parents did report having to college staff were with admissions and financial aid counselors.

**Implications: High Schools**

From this study on low-income and working class students and parents, it is clear that the student-institution relationship from high school can last beyond high school graduation and can also impact the student-institution relationship when that student is attending a college or university. Relationships formed in high school provide students with social capital that in turn allows them to access forms of cultural capital such as tacit knowledge. More high schools should follow the lead of the Met, and form strong relationships with its students, built upon a culture of mutual trust and respect (Littky, 2004).

As I mentioned in Chapter Three, a core value of the Met is strong relationships. Met staff members have close relationships with students. Students at the Met are grouped into advisories or groups of about 15 students in the same year, who have an advisor (teacher) who stays with them for all four years of high school. The advisor works with each student and his or
her parents to develop an individualized learning plan each quarter and help students formulate their post-graduation plans (The Met, 2008). The Met also has a College Transition Team that develops relationships with colleges and assists the Met students in their transition to college and other post-secondary opportunities (The Met, 2008). These counselors assist students in the college application process, hold workshops for students and families about financial aid and scholarship opportunities, and stay connected to students once they graduate from the Met, advising them when they are in college, and holding reunions for alumni (The Met, 2008). The Met considers itself responsible for the success of its graduates and has an alumni relations program (The Met, 2008).

When these relationships are strong and last beyond high school graduation, the high school staff becomes a quasi-parent that can be a secure base for its graduates in college, a place of security for them to touch base with and check in, etc. Through targeted outreach initiative, the high school has the chance to further impact its graduates’ success through relationships. Not all high schools will take on the role of supporting their students once they graduate, but if they do, they can play a role in their college students’ success.

In particular, specific outreach efforts on the part of the Met, once students had already graduated were very effective. All of the students in the study maintained valuable relationships they had formed with staff members when they were in high school. Most of the time the relationships were with the people that they actually knew when they were in high school, whether they were advisors, internship mentors, college counselors, or other staff, and whether they still worked at the school or not.

In addition, students also maintained relationships with people in particular roles, even if the individuals in those roles had changed since the students had graduated. For example, a
student in the pilot study who was a sophomore kept going back to her college transition counselor for help even though this person had changed two times; she trusted the person in this role and understood the role as one of support. The Met supports the maintenance of these relationships through alumni outreach and also through alumni reunions and events. All but one student in the study attended the school reunion held over Thanksgiving. In addition, the staff member who worked with the students at the college was valuable to their success. They saw her as an insider to their college experience and even though they did not know her when they were in high school, they trusted her in part because she worked at the Met.

For the most part, the parents in this study followed a middle class model of parental involvement when their students were in high school, but not once their students entered college. The high school played a role in inculcating these middle class standards of active parental involvement. Could the Met or other high schools influence parent behavior and support of their students in college? One idea is to hold an event for parents where high school staff members talk about the college environment, beyond admissions and financial aid policies and procedures. Alumni who are in college and their parents could also be part of this presentation.

Implications: Theory

Theoretical implications come out of this research as well. I have suggestions for teaching theory and using it in practice. First of all, generational theory and theories about the Millennial generation are used very widely to explain not only the phenomenon of parental involvement, but also general characteristics of all 18-22 year olds currently in college. There are certainly some things that can be explained by generation. However, in the huge generalizations (Brooks, 2000) that Howe and Strauss (2000, 2003) make in their texts *Millennials Rising* and *Millennials Go to College*, respectively, do not hold true for everybody.
Administrators should exercise caution when applying generational theory and higher education professors should contextualize and explain its purpose if they choose to teach it.

The other implication for theory is related to student development theory, and specifically attachment theory. In this study, attachment theory with a sense of interdependence best explained the relationship between these low-income and working class students and their parents. The theory of separation-individuation, which suggests that students need a separation or break from parents in order to develop autonomy, seems to be outdated. There did not appear to be separation or break between these students and parents. Attachment theory that accounts for an interdependence may better explain the relationships between parents and students today, especially these particular parents and students, and should be taught in graduate courses as an alternative to separation-individuation.

In general, a traditional, linear model of student development does not hold for the students in this sample. The students in this study did not move through autonomy to interdependence (Chickering & Reisser, 1993); they were able to be both functionally independent and emotionally interdependent at the same time. Their development included a balance between individuality and connectedness (Grotevant & Cooper, 1986). In addition, Arnett’s (2000a; 2006) idea of delayed adolescence also does not hold for the students in this study’s sample, due to their life experiences and filial responsibility (Kuperminc et al., 2009). For the most part, the low-income and working class study participants believed they had already reached adult status.

Research Issues

As I stated in Chapter Three, building trust and establishing relationships with research participants before this study was essential since members of these marginalized socioeconomic
class groups are often reluctant to share their experience, or may have a fear of saying what is really going on (Dodson & Schmalzbauer, 2005). It was only through forming these relationships that I could accurately see the phenomenon from the participant’s viewpoint (Fontana & Frey, 2005). I was fortunate to be able to form these relationships with students and parents by volunteering with students at the high school level, even though this process was time consuming. For others conducting research with this population forming these relationships might prove more difficult.

I do not believe that I would have been able to achieve the same results through this study had I sampled participants at the college level, and reached out to students once they had matriculated at college. Without deep relationships and trust, I would not have gotten the whole story of the phenomenon. Also, I may not have even been able to get a willing sample of participants. During the time when I was asking students whether they wanted to participate in the study, right before high school graduation, in a conversation one of the advisors whose class I worked with described how she perceived my role. As an innovative high school that is of interest to many researchers, the students there sometimes feel like “lab rats” and are often asked to participate in meetings with visitors or to complete surveys. The advisor said that the students complain about these kinds of efforts, but that their response to my request would be different, because I knew them. She told me:

It’s good that you’ve been here since November. There are a lot of people coming in and out and it gets a little much sometimes. The kids complain about it a little bit. But with you- they know you. They’re like- “It’s for Katie?” and it’s no big deal.

Even though I feel that sampling students at the high school level was the best choice, and I was able to build the trust and establish the relationships that ultimately led me to
identifying a sample, this sampling process was challenging. Even though I knew the students well, I could not tell who would actually be enrolling at a four-year college the following fall. For example, in my fieldnotes I recorded a conversation between two students, Britney and Cassandra who I was convinced would go to four-year colleges and ultimately be in the sample. I knew that they met the other qualifications in terms of being low-income, first-generation and having parents who would be willing to be in the study, as I had met both of their parents. In their conversation, which took place on May 2, the day after both had submitted tuition deposits at four-year institutions, they were talking about going to college the following fall. “I can’t wait to go to college,” Cassandra said. Both began talking about their “dorm rooms” and what they planned to bring to school. “I’m getting a fridge, a microwave, and a TV,” Britney said. Britney had already been to Accepted Students Day at her chosen institution and was also discussing with Cassandra the benefits to having a greater or less number of roommates. She reasoned that if she lived with three people, she could have a private bathroom, and she liked that idea. Through this process of visualizing the following year, Britney and Cassandra were engaging in “anticipatory socialization,” in which students take on the behaviors and attitudes of college students in order to “rehearse” their future role (Attinasi, 1989, p. 266).

Despite this anticipatory socialization process, their eagerness to attend, and having submitted tuition deposits, neither Cassandra nor Britney went to a four-year college this past fall. I ran into Britney in the mall during the summer. She told me she had decided that her chosen college was too expensive and that she had instead decided to attend a public four-year institution that she could commute to from home. In September, I learned from her classmate that Britney had enrolled at the local community college and was planning on transferring to a four-year college the following spring. Cassandra did not attend college that fall at all. I did not
speak with her directly but found out from her classmate that over the summer, she could not come up with the remaining money needed to attend the four-year institution she planned on. Her mother had been denied for a parent PLUS loan and she could not find a funding alternative. Her mother moved to the South, and Cassandra went with her to take care of her younger siblings. She planned on trying to enroll in a four-year college at a later date, possibly the following year, in the fall of 2009.

For low-income, first-generation students the summer is a time of great uncertainty. During this time they revisit their decisions about whether, or even if, to attend college (Arnold et al., 2008; Washor, Arnold & Mojkowski, 2009). In addition, even advisors and college transition counselors who know the students well are unable to accurately predict where students attend the following fall (Arnold, Wartman, Castleman, Napier, Fleming & DeAnda, 2008). These factors made it impossible to identify a sample until September when I confirmed which students had actually enrolled at four-year institutions.

Another difficulty I encountered in sampling was identifying students’ socioeconomic class. I told the advisors and college transition counselors I was working with of the criteria for eligibility in the study and asked that they indicate who met these. I included one student in the sample, thinking that she was working class, but later finding out that she was actually middle class. When I found out that her mother had attended college and saw that her mother drove an expensive car, this caused me to question this student’s class status. I spoke with the college transition counselor who had told me that she would qualify for the study and asked her, “How would you classify this student’s socioeconomic class.” She said, “middle class.” How did this happen? It certainly could have been simple miscommunication on one or both of our parts. However, from my fieldwork at the Met, I also have the impression that since the majority of the
population at the school is working class and low income, and many students struggle with financial and serious personal issues, regardless of class status, it is easy to assume that all students in the school population are marginalized. Because of the strong relationships that the staff members form with students, they also want to help them as much as possible. For example, in another classroom the advisor expressed her frustration at wanting to give vouchers to all of her students, even though the college transition counselor told her she couldn’t because it could damage the school’s reputation with colleges. The advisor felt that even though a student may qualify as middle class, she still struggled financially and needed assistance. I also got the impression that many of the students at the Met who do qualify as middle class, like the student who the advisor wanted to help, and like the student I included in my sample, are much closer to being lower-middle class than upper-middle class. The lines between classes are often blurred because of the struggles that all students face.

Areas for Further Study

I have identified a few areas to explore further based on the results of this study. First of all, I do realize this study is limited in that it only chronicles four months of these students’ lives and their relationships with their parents. All students persisted and made it through the first semester. However, we could better look at the effects of the parent-student relationship on persistence over a greater period of time. An in-depth longitudinal study that follows students until college graduation would be able to capture how these relationships evolve and what further effects they may have on persistence. In their final interviews, all of the students in the study said that they would like to maintain our relationship and continue to be in touch. I will continue to ask them how they are doing, but not through a formal relationship or study.
This study helps to clarify the definition of parental involvement in higher education. Through this paper, I have redefined parental involvement in terms of socioeconomic class. Further studies could deepen the parental involvement definition so that it is based on more than just anecdotal information measuring perceptions of behaviors of a phenomenon. A study measuring involvement from a broad range of students, parents, and institutions may bring us even closer to a cohesive definition of parental involvement in higher education.

In general, these students did not fit all of the dominant characteristics of the Millennial generation outlined by Howe & Strauss (2003). The one way these students do seem to be like other students in their use of technology and communication frequency with parents. Attachment theory seems to be student development theory that best fits this population as technology may be influencing the accessibility of the secure base. However, most of the attachment theory studies were conducted before college students widely used cellular phones. There is limited research that considers parent-student relationships in the context of students’ technology use. Further research could be done in this area.

Finally, in this study, I focused on the experience of parents and students at four-year institutions particularly because these are the types of institutions where students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds struggle the most with persistence. It would also be beneficial to look at the relationship between parents and students at community colleges where there are higher populations of low-income and working class students and test model. This would be a good opportunity to test the alternative model of the parent-student-relationship that I propose in this chapter (see Figure Four).

Final Thoughts
“Helicopter parent” is literally the new buzz word in higher education. I am brought back to Sadie’s story of hearing about this term at Tegan’s orientation session:

they had the parent orientation...we went, and they had like the president of the college speak, the dean. There was another guy, maybe he is housing... and he was really good because he did this thing that was so perfect... they a little slide show there, and he put this picture of a helicopter up, and he said, okay, you see, this helicopter is you, parents. You have been hovering over your children, which is okay, because if you need a helicopter every now and then, they are good to have, but right now you need to stop hovering....I thought that was hysterical.

Sadie claimed she was not a helicopter parent, and neither were any of the other parents in this study, yet this term has consistently been used to represent all parents of college students, even though examples of helicopter parent behavior are largely socioeconomic class-based.

The current definition of parental involvement in higher education is flawed. The hovering helicopter parent is not the most accurate portrayal of the relationship between parents and their children in college. A new definition of parental involvement has emerged from this study. For low-income and working class students, despite parents’ “soft knowledge” (Smith, 2001), and lack of tacit knowledge, or college knowledge, parental involvement can be supportive, and encourage the development of autonomy as well as interdependence.
Appendix A

**Interview Protocol: Students**

*What influence has/have your parent/parents had on your college experience?*

**Probes:**

- Parent contact - communication frequency and modes of communication
- Ways parents have been supportive or unsupportive
- Parent relationship compared to high school
- Parent relationship compared to peers
- Satisfaction with amount of support from parents
- General experience at college - academically and socially
- Challenges at college
- Any changes in the relationship since the previous interview
- Follow up on items from prior interviews
Appendix B

**Interview Protocol: Parents**

What has your life been like as the parent of a college student?

Probes:

- Contact with student - communication frequency and modes of communication
- What do they talk about with their student
- Relationship compared to high school
- How student has been doing at school - academically and socially
- What challenges has student faced - what concerns do they have about student?
- How they perceive role in college students’ life
- What has changed since student started college
- Any changes in the relationship since the previous interview
- Follow up on items from prior interviews
Appendix C

Informed Consent: Students

You are being invited to participate in a research study being conducted by Katie Lynk Wartman, a doctoral student in higher education at the Lynch School at Boston College. The research conducted in this study will be used in my dissertation. The purpose of the study is to understand more about the relationship between students and their parents during the first semester of college. You have been chosen to participate in this study because you attended a high school with a strong model of parental involvement, and you plan to attend a four-year college. Please ask any questions you may have before agreeing to participate in the study.

You will meet with me three times over the course of the fall semester to talk about what your experience at college has been like since you started college. We will meet at a time and in a place that is convenient for you. During the interview, I will ask you about your relationship to your parent(s) and your parent(s)’ role in your life during college. I anticipate that each interview will take 60 to 90 minutes. During the interviews I will take notes, and with your permission, record our conversation.

The interviews will be confidential- I will take steps to disguise your identity so that your name cannot be linked with what you say. I will, however, need to tell someone if there is reason to believe that you might hurt yourself or someone else.

The records of this study will be kept private. Any sort of public report will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. Research records will be kept in a locked file.

Participation in the interviews is voluntary and you may choose to stop participating at any time. I anticipate that there is minimal risk involved in participating in the interview. You may benefit from participating in the interview through the opportunity to reflect upon your experience at college and your relationship to your parent(s). There is no cost to participate in the study.

For participating in the interviews, I will give you a $100 gift certificate to Amazon.com in order to buy books for your college classes. If you choose not to finish the interviews, you will still receive the gift certificate.

If you have any questions about this study, you may contact Katie Lynk Wartman, Ph.D. student in Higher Education at Boston College at 617-521-3519 or by email at wartmank@bc.edu.

If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact: Director, Office for Human Research Participant Protection, Boston College at (617) 552-4778, or irb@bc.edu

I acknowledge that I have read this form and consent to participation in the interviews. I understand that I will get a copy of this consent form to keep.
Name ______________________

Signature ___________________

Date ______________________
Appendix D

Informed Consent: Parents

You are being invited to participate in a research study being conducted by Katie Lynk Wartman, a doctoral student in higher education at the Lynch School at Boston College. The research conducted in this study will be used in my dissertation. The purpose of the study is to understand more about the relationship between students and their parents during the first semester of college. You have been chosen to participate in this study because you are the parent of a student who attended a high school with a strong model of parental involvement, and your child plans to attend a four-year college. Please ask any questions you may have before agreeing to participate in the study.

You will meet with me three times over the course of the fall semester to talk about what your experience has been like since your child started college. You will meet at a time and in a place that is convenient for you. During the interview, I will ask what your life has been like as the parent of a college student. I anticipate that each interview will take one hour. During the interviews I will take notes, and with your permission, record our conversation.

The interviews will be confidential- I will take steps to disguise your identity so that your name cannot be linked with what you say. The records of this study will be kept private. Any sort of public report will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. Research records will be kept in a locked file.

Participation in the interviews is voluntary and you may choose to stop participating at any time. I anticipate that there is minimal risk involved in participating in the interview. You may benefit from participating in the interview through the opportunity to reflect upon your experience as the parent of a college student and your relationship to your student(s). You may also ask me questions you have about college. There is no cost to participate in the study.

For participating in the interviews, I will give your child a $100 gift certificate to Amazon.com in order to buy books for his or her college classes. If you choose not to complete the interviews, he or she will still receive the gift certificate.

If you have any questions about this study, you may contact Katie Lynk Wartman, Ph.D. student in Higher Education at Boston College at 617-521-3519 or by email at wartmank@bc.edu.

If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact: Director, Office for Human Research Participant Protection, Boston College at (617) 552-4778, or irb@bc.edu

I acknowledge that I have read this form and consent to participation in the interviews. I understand that I will get a copy of this consent form to keep.

Name ______________________
Signature ___________________

Date ______________________
Appendix E

Recruitment Form *(Note: the focus group was omitted due to student interest level)*

**Katie’s Study of Student-Parent Relationships- Fall 2008**

*Katie is conducting a study about the relationship between graduates of the Met and their parents during the first semester of college. A few students will be individually interviewed three times during the fall semester and others will meet with Katie in a group.*

---

I am willing to...

- [ ] Meet with Katie for an interview three times during the fall (at your school or place convenient for you)
- [ ] Participate in a focus group, a conversation with a group of other students next year at the Met
- [ ] Communicate with Katie over the summer and in the fall by (fill in all that apply):
  - E-mail
  - Phone
  - AIM
  - Text
  - MySpace
  - Facebook
- [ ] No, thanks

---

I think my parent(s) would be willing to meet with Katie three times for interviews during the fall (can be someone who plays the role of parent in your life if not actual parent).

- [ ] Yes
- [ ] No
- [ ] Unsure

---

My contact information so Katie can get in touch with me about the study:

**Name:**

**Address:**
E-mail 1: 

Cell phone: 

MySpace User Name: 

My parent(s) names and contact information:

________________________________________________________

My current plans for next fall are:

I plan to live on campus:
  - Yes
  - No
  - Not sure
### Appendix F

#### Intermediate Code List Grouped Into Four Dominant Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parent-Student Communication</th>
<th>Autonomy and Individuation</th>
<th>Persistence: Struggles and Supports</th>
<th>Parent-Student-Institution Relationship</th>
<th>Background Information</th>
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<td>Parent Relationship College</td>
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