From Children to Friends: The Influence of Parental Relationships on the Developmental Journeys of Undergraduate Students
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Abstract

College has traditionally been a time when students become more independent from their parents as they transition to adulthood. However, some of today’s college students seem to be increasingly closer to, and in some cases dependent on, their parents. The findings in this study could help student affairs professionals better understand the relationship between college students and their parents and how to best support students in navigating college life amidst these relationships. Findings could also help illustrate the role parents play in their college students’ lives and how to best accommodate, include, and engage parents in higher education for the benefit of the parents, the students, and the institution.

Research Question

How do undergraduate, traditional-aged college students at UD describe their relationships with their parents, and how do these relationships affect the students' development and experience during their college years?

Literature Insights

- Parental involvement and support in college students’ lives has been on the rise
- This trend results in both positive and negative effects for students and higher education institutions
- Accommodating parents is becoming a necessity for higher education institutions

Sample & Methodology

Qualitative data was collected via one on one, narrative interviews with a sample of six college students in their senior year at UD: three men and three women. The sample was obtained through the snowball sampling method. Data was analyzed using Creswell’s (2013) narrative research guidelines.

Key Findings

Phase 1: Entry
- Participants strove to be independent early on and not need their parents, but at times realized they weren’t as “adult” as they thought
- Participants needed their parents’ help with minor challenges more early on in their college years

Phase 2: Crossroads
- Participants spoke of major decisions their parents provided input on
- Participants value their parents’ advice but also learned to make decisions for themselves
- Participants recognize the value of learning from mistakes

Phase 3: Transition
- Participants described how their parental relationships had evolved from a parent/child relationship into more of an adult friendship
- Participants said their parental relationships have grown stronger and want their parents in their lives for the future

Conclusions

From the students’ perspective:
- Parents are very invested in their children’s college experience and students often welcome their involvement and input
- Parents exert a significant influence on their children’s college experience
- Parents play a pivotal role in their children’s transition to adulthood

Recommendations

- Acknowledge the benefits of positive relationships between college students and their parents
- Provide parents with relevant resources they can utilize appropriately in their role
- Additional qualitative research on college students and their parents

Selected References


Acknowledgments

Thank you to the awesome seniors who participated in my study. Thank you to my professors in this program who have taught me so much. Thank you to UD and the Housing and Residence Life department for investing in me. Finally, thank you to my friends and family for believing in me and supporting me on this challenging yet rewarding journey. This study is dedicated to my own parents, without whom I would not have made it here and be who I am.