In recent years, parental involvement in college students’ lives has received growing attention within student affairs (Daniel, Evans, & Scott, 2001; Keup, 2007; Merriman, 2007). Annual meetings...
Parents’ Influence on College Students

of NASPA: Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA—formerly the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators) and the ACPA: College Student Educators International (ACPA—formerly the American College Personnel Association) increasingly offer presentations on parental involvement and parent-related programming (Keup, 2007). Popular media also has focused on parents, parent programs, and the “helicopter parent” phenomenon: The Chronicle of Higher Education has released articles on these topics, and the U.S. News and World Report now identifies the colleges that offer parent and family programs (Keup, 2007).

Increased levels of parental involvement have been attributed to rising college costs (resulting in a sense of entitlement among tuition-paying parents), increasing reliance on communication technologies (resulting in greater parent awareness of students’ everyday lives), societal emphasis on parenting (resulting in a generation of parents accustomed to heavy involvement in their child’s activities), and the growing number of students whose parents attended college (resulting in parents who are familiar with college expectations and bureaucracies, and willing to engage the institution; Wartman & Savage, 2008). These factors have led to a more visible, active, and sometimes intrusive role of parents in college students’ lives.

Attitudinal shifts also are evident among higher education scholars, who “have moved from a stance that assumed parents were harmful to a child’s welfare, to a position that assumed they were irrelevant, and now to a perspective that assumes that parents, siblings, and extended families play a central role” (Tierney, 2002, p. 590). This changing perception of parents has led college personnel to strategize ways to encourage productive parental involvement (Mullendore & Banahan, 2007), leading to increases in the quantity and quality of parent programs and services offered nationally on college campuses (Cutright, 2008; Wartman & Savage, 2008). Some programs, such as parent orientation, are targeted at first-year students, whereas others, such as fundraising, engage parents throughout their student’s college career and beyond.

Despite this widespread attention toward levels of parental involvement, scholarly literature has paid little attention to the consequences of involvement (Sax & Wartman, 2010; Wartman & Savage, 2008). It is unclear whether parental involvement contributes to or detracts from healthy student development during college or whether parents’ influence on college outcomes depends on students’ background characteristics. That is, are students from different demographic groups affected in different ways by the extent and nature of their parents’ involvement during college? This study explored how parental involvement during college contributed to three outcomes—students’ sociopolitical awareness, academic development, and social satisfaction with college—and further investigated how this varied by gender, race/ethnicity, social class, and year in school.

**Conceptual Framework**

In general, college student development theories have had “little to say” about the role of parents in students’ lives (Taub, 2008, p. 15). Research examining parents’ impact on development has been largely guided by two theoretical camps: (a) psychosocial theories on human development,
including attachment and separation–individuation theories, and (b) college impact models. Attachment theory (Ainsworth, 1982; Bowlby, 1988) has been used to understand how the parent–child relationship influences students’ development from childhood through young adulthood, including the college years. Secure parental attachment has been shown to facilitate the personal, social, and academic development of college students (Kenny & Donaldson, 1991; Samoulis, Layborn, & Schiaffino, 2001).

In contrast to attachment theorists, separation–individuation theories (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Josselson, 1988) describe how balanced levels of parental separation and connection promote competence among college students. Some scholars have suggested secure parental attachment, coupled with successful separation, maximizes student development and adjustment to college (Kalsner & Pistole, 2003; Rice, Fitzgerald, Whaley, & Gibbs, 1995). Although this scholarship suggests the quality of the parent–child relationship may influence development, it is unclear how student development is influenced by specific involvement behaviors.

College impact models (see Astin, 1993; Pascarella, 1985; Tinto, 1993; Weidman, 1989) also can address the influence of parental involvement on student outcomes; however, the specific role of parents is not central to any of these models. Instead, college impact research has often integrated the parental role into pre-entry characteristics, such as parental income, education, or occupation. Some college impact models (Tinto 1993; Weidman, 1989) acknowledge student–parent relations as one of many socializing factors that influence development, but parents are included within an external or noncollege reference group. Although these theories and models have guided research on college students, the parent-related behavioral mechanisms or processes linked with student development remain unclear.

**Empirical Literature**

Although research has shown a positive influence of parental support and involvement during college on outcomes such as adjustment, academic achievement, persistence, and general well-being (Herndon & Hirt, 2004; Kenny & Stryker, 1996; Wintre & Yaffe, 2000), few have examined parents’ influence on students’ self-perceptions of academic, social, and personal gains. Because of this gap, this section reviews what research has revealed about the role of parents in each of these three domains.

**Parents and academic outcomes.** There is some evidence parental involvement promotes college students’ academic competence. Strage and Brandt (1999) argued parental involvement and support provides college students the confidence to challenge themselves academically. Cutrona, Cole, Colangelo, Assouline, and Russell (1994) found higher academic achievement among students who discussed their interests and concerns with their parents and whose parents expressed belief in their skills. However, Wintre and Yaffe (2000) found no direct effects of parental involvement on students’ academic adjustment to college and found negative effects of some parenting behaviors on female students’ academic performance.
Parents and social outcomes. At a time when students begin to individuate from their families, social adjustment to the college environment is particularly important (Friedlander, Reid, Shupak, & Cribbie, 2007). The quality of parent–student relations, as reflected in healthy attachment to parents, parental support, or parents’ expressed interest in the students’ college experience, serves to facilitate social adjustment to college (Kenny & Donaldson, 1991; Mattanah, Brand, & Hancock, 2004; Wintre & Yaffe, 2000).

Parents and sociopolitical awareness. College provides not only new experiences for students to explore, but it also provides exposure to new ways of being, thinking, and understanding the world. Classroom and cocurricular experiences that expose students to diverse perspectives and issues have been shown to influence students’ social and cultural awareness (Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002). However, research has yet to address parents’ role in promoting students’ experiences with diversity and gains in personal and sociopolitical understandings.

Conditional effects. Previous research has descriptively explored parents’ involvement in the academic lives of college students (Wolf, Sax, & Harper, 2009). What remains unclear is whether and how the effect of parental involvement on college student outcomes varies across students. Understanding conditional college effects is critical given the diverse characteristics of today’s college students (Pascarella, 2006; Sax, 2008), cultural variations in parenting styles, as well as persistent differences in the familial roles played by daughters and sons. Some aspects of parental involvement may be more influential for some groups than for others, or the direction of the effect may differ. Though sparse, research on the conditional effects of parental involvement has suggested that student–parent relationships have different consequences when considering students’ gender (Lopez, Campbell, & Watkins, 1986; Samoulis et al., 2001; Sax, Bryant, & Gilmartin, 2004), race/ethnicity (Herndon & Hirt, 2004; Maramba, 2008; Torres, 2004), social class (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000; Hossler, Schmidt, & Vesper, 1999; McDonough, 1997), and year in school (Wartman & Savage, 2008). Research on conditional effects has revealed possibilities about how the impact of parental involvement may vary across different student populations; however, such research is limited in scope and quantity.

Objectives

As suggested by the literature review, there are several gaps to fill in research on parental involvement in college. In their review of research on this topic, Sax and Wartman (2010) proposed the following questions as

1. What is the nature of parental involvement in higher education?
2. What are the effects of parental involvement on college student development?
3. What does this phenomenon look like for different populations?

To help address these gaps, this study focused on two distinct dimensions of parental involvement and three outcome domains in addressing the following research questions:
1. Are measures of parental involvement and frequency of parental contact significant predictors of students’ academic development, social satisfaction, and sociopolitical awareness?

2. Does the strength and direction of the relationship between parental involvement or contact and the outcomes vary by students’ race, gender, social class, and year in college?

**Methods**

**Data/Instrument**

This study used data from the 2006 University of California Undergraduate Experience Survey (UCUES). The UCUES survey is a joint venture across the University of California campuses and is housed at the UC Berkeley Center for Studies in Higher Education. The survey, developed and revised by institutional researchers, faculty, and administrators, was pilot tested annually between 2002 and 2005 to test for and establish the survey’s reliability and validity (Chatman, 2007). Validity was established via focus groups and open-ended survey items (Chatman, 2007). The 2006 UCUES was administered via a census approach. Invitations were sent to all registered undergraduates in the winter quarter at eight undergraduate-serving institutions of the University of California system. The system-wide response rate for the 2006 UCUES was 38% and ranged on individual campuses from 31% to 48%. Because response rates to online surveys have decreased over time and tend to be lower than paper administrations (Carini, Hayek, Kuh, Kennedy, & Ouimet, 2003; Sax, Gilmartin, & Bryant, 2003), the UCUES survey response rates were well within acceptable levels. Further, the sample obtained was representative of the population, and there was no nonresponse bias associated with the measures used in this study (Chatman, 2007).

The UCUES survey comprises a core set of questions given to all respondents along with five unique modules—(a) academic engagement, (b) civic engagement, (c) student development, (d) student services, and (e) a campus specific module—that were each randomly assigned to a subset of the respondents (approximately 20%) on each campus. The analyses for this study included items drawn from the core and the student development module. The items in the core pertained to students’ background characteristics, academic and personal development, academic engagement, satisfaction, and evaluation of the major. The student development module addressed students’ relationship with their parents, goals and aspirations, personal growth and development, time allocation, and perceptions of campus climate. The 2006 administration of the UCUES survey was chosen for this study because it contained 11 questions addressing specific aspects of the student–parent relationship. Further, the sample was large enough to conduct the disaggregated subgroup analyses required to address the research questions.

**Variables**

The study’s focus on parental involvement and its relationship with students’ development across personal, academic, and social domains guided the choice of variables. There were three outcomes for this study: self-reported gains in sociopolitical awareness (seven-item factor,
Parents’ Influence on College Students

Table 1

Factor Loadings and Reliabilities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey items</th>
<th>Factor loading</th>
<th>Cronbach’s alpha</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gains in Sociopolitical Awareness factor</strong>a</td>
<td></td>
<td>.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gain: awareness/understanding of . . .</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>. . . my racial/ethnic identity</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>. . . social problems facing nation</td>
<td>.78</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>. . . social problems facing world</td>
<td>.78</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>. . . social class/economic differences</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>. . . racial/ethnic differences/issues</td>
<td>.68</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>. . . gender/sexual orientation differences/issues</td>
<td>.58</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>. . . myself</td>
<td>.53</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Academic Gains factor</strong>a</td>
<td></td>
<td>.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gain: Analytical and critical thinking skills</td>
<td>.82</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gain: Ability to write clearly and effectively</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gain: Read and comprehend academic material</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gain: Understanding of a specific field of study</td>
<td>.69</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Parental Involvement and Concern factor</strong>b</td>
<td></td>
<td>.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent(s) involved in choice of courses</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent(s) involved in discussing course material</td>
<td>.75</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent(s) interested in academic progress</td>
<td>.73</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent(s) stress good grades</td>
<td>.65</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\( a \) Gain items were calculated by subtracting students’ self-reported proficiency upon college entry from their current proficiency level, measured on a six-point scale ranging from 1 (very poor) to 6 (excellent).

\( b \) Factor items measures on a six-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree).

Cronbach’s alpha = .83; satisfaction with the social experience (six-point scale); and self-reported academic gains (four-item factor, Cronbach’s alpha = .76). Information on all independent and dependent factor variables is provided in Table 1. The key independent variables used in this study were (a) parental contact, which measured the frequency of student–parent communication via phone, e-mail, text messaging, or in person on a six-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 6 (usually everyday), and (b) parental involvement and concern, a four-item factor reflecting parents’ interest and/or involvement in students’ academic progress and decision-making (Cronbach’s alpha = .71).

Sample

The final sample included 10,760 undergraduate respondents. The sample was 41% male and 59% female and represented a diverse array of ethnicities. The largest ethnic groups were White/Caucasian (35.9%), Chinese/Chinese American (17.5%), Chicano/Mexican American (9.5%), and Filipino/Pacific Islander (5.3%); each of the remaining 11 ethnic categories (including “decline to state” and “other”) held 5% or fewer students. The racial and ethnic categories used reflect the wording that appeared on the UCUES survey. Over 37% of respondents self-identified as “middle-class,” 10% indicated a “low-income or poor” background, and 2% identified themselves as “wealthy.” The majority of respondents (61.8%) were either juniors or seniors. Generally, the
characteristics of the respondent sample were a good reflection of the UC undergraduate population (Chatman, 2007).

## Data Analysis

To examine the extent and types of parental involvement in students' college experience, an exploratory factor analysis (principal component analysis with varimax rotation) was conducted among the variables of interest. Consistent with common practice in social science research, only variables with individual factor loadings of .50 or higher within factors comprising at least three items and having strong reliabilities were included in the analyses (Costello & Osborne, 2005; Peterson, 1994). This analysis produced six factors, two of which were used as outcome measures (gain in sociopolitical awareness and academic gain; see Table 1) and one that was used as an independent variable (parental involvement).

In order to determine whether parental contact and involvement were significantly associated with students' personal, academic, and social development, ordinary least squares regression analyses were conducted. The independent variables chosen for the regressions were limited to the items appearing in the core or student development module of the UCUES survey, as described above. This included certain key background characteristics, such as gender, race, class, parental education, and parents' immigration status, as well as salient college experiences such as hours per week studying or working, whether the student sought help from an instructor on a paper, and perceptions of campus climate.

Conditional effects by students' self-reported race/ethnicity, gender, class, and year in school, were analyzed through separate regressions to determine whether these relationships were significant for certain students but not others, or perhaps were in opposite directions (e.g., positive for freshmen and negative for seniors). This resulted in 66 separate regression analyses for subgroups ranging in size from a high of 6,224 (women) to a low of 60 (American Indians), with a median subgroup sample size of 1,857.

## Limitations

It is important to acknowledge some limitations in the two parental involvement measures. Although these measures distinguish parental contact from involvement, which is a contribution in itself, these measures do not differentiate mothers from fathers and/or indicate whether students were from a single-parent home. Therefore, although some students may have reported the average involvement of both parents, others may have reported the involvement of the most involved parent. Second, the survey did not elicit information about the duration of, nature of (i.e., what do students and parents talk about?), or students' feelings about these interactions.

Another limitation is that, due to available data, the regression analyses did not account for other aspects of students' experiences that could have contributed to these outcomes. In some cases, variables existed in the UCUES dataset but appeared in other modules of the
survey instrument. For this reason, caution must be used when interpreting the significant relationships revealed between the parental variables of interest and outcomes. This study could not determine causality in these relationships; it does, however, offer a compelling picture of the differences between parental contact and involvement and how these might differentially influence students.

Finally, although this study aimed to address student development, it was not longitudinal. The outcomes that addressed change over time (gains in academic abilities and sociopolitical awareness) were measured via students’ own retrospective assessments. Though there is demonstrated validity in students’ self-assessed growth, it would be preferable to measure changes in these characteristics longitudinally.

Results

The regression results presented below reveal a number of significant relationships between parental contact and/or involvement and students’ development across the three outcome measures. Within each outcome, the discussion focuses solely on the independent variables of interest: parental contact and parental involvement/concern.

Gain in Sociopolitical Awareness Factor

The gain in sociopolitical awareness factor comprised seven items capturing students’ self-reported gains in personal awareness and understanding of social issues. For six subgroups of students the influence of parents on gains in awareness produced significant relationships, half of which were negative (see Table 2). These results, differentiated by parental contact and involvement, are discussed below.

Parental contact. Frequency of parental contact was significantly related to self-assessed gains in sociopolitical awareness for two groups but in opposite directions. For students identifying as low income or poor, greater parental contact was associated with larger reported gains in sociopolitical awareness. Among East Indian and Pakistani students, more frequent parental contact was negatively related to sociopolitical awareness gains.

Parental involvement/concern. The parental involvement factor was positively related to gains in sociopolitical awareness for freshmen but was negative for sophomores and seniors, suggesting an interaction between the role of parents and students’ year in school. Parent involvement initially related to gains in sociopolitical awareness for students identifying as upper-middle class or wealthy, though the relationship lost significance when other variables were controlled.

Academic Gains

The second outcome is a four-item factor related to students’ self-assessed growth in college in their analytical and critical thinking, writing, and reading. Parents’ influence was significant
among five subgroups (see Table 3). These results, differentiated by parental contact and involvement, are discussed below.

**Parental contact.** Frequency of contact with parents was negatively related to academic gains only among upper-middle class and wealthy students, meaning that higher-income students who interacted less frequently with parents perceived more growth in their academic abilities.

Table 3

**Regression Results for Academic Gains Factor (N = 10,456)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student characteristic (n)</th>
<th>Parental contact</th>
<th>Parental involvement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Entry</td>
<td>Final</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>β</td>
<td>b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women (6,224)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian (60)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social class</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper-middle/wealthy (3,205)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year in college</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First-year student (1,983)</td>
<td>.07**</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophomore (2,043)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior (3,621)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Only statistically significant results are shown.
* p < .05. ** p < .01. *** p < .001.
Parents' Influence on College Students

Parental involvement/concern. In contrast to the findings for parental contact, students identifying as upper-middle class or wealthy reported more growth in academic domains when they felt their parents showed interest and concern for their academic success. This association lost significance after accounting for other individual or college-level variables. Among American Indian respondents, parental interest was positive and significant at every step in the model. In contrast, parental interest or concern was negatively related to academic gains for women and sophomores.

Satisfaction with the Social Experience

The third outcome is a single-item measure of self-reported satisfaction with the social dimensions of the college experience. This outcome produced the greatest number of significant relationships of the three outcomes examined in this study, the vast majority of which were positive (see Table 4). These results, differentiated by parental contact and involvement, are discussed below.

Table 4

Regression Results for Satisfaction with the Social Experience (N = 10,456)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student characteristic (n)</th>
<th>Parental contact</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Parental involvement</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Entry β</td>
<td>b</td>
<td>Final β</td>
<td>b</td>
<td>Entry β</td>
<td>b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women (6,224)</td>
<td>.15***</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.05**</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men (4,232)</td>
<td>.13***</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race or ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black/African American (213)</td>
<td>.11**</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.17***</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.08*</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese (1,857)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Indian/Pakistani (305)</td>
<td>–.19*</td>
<td>–.32</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filipino/Pacific Islander (556)</td>
<td>.16*</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.27*</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thai (290)</td>
<td>.18*</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnamese (499)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White (3,736)</td>
<td>.06**</td>
<td>–.09</td>
<td>.10***</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social class</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low income/poor (1,090)</td>
<td>.14***</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working class (2,228)</td>
<td>.13***</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.08*</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle class (3,892)</td>
<td>.06**</td>
<td>–.08</td>
<td>.10***</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year in college</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First-year student (1,983)</td>
<td>.15***</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.08*</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophomore (2,043)</td>
<td>.13***</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior (2,818)</td>
<td>.15***</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior (3,621)</td>
<td>.28*</td>
<td>.29</td>
<td>.29**</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>.29*</td>
<td>.15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Only statistically significant results are shown.  
*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.
Parental contact. Parental contact was positively associated with social satisfaction among college seniors and respondents identifying as Chinese or Thai. Frequent contact with parents yielded negative relationships with social satisfaction among respondents identifying as White, East Indian or Pakistani, or middle class.

Parental involvement/concern. In contrast to parental contact, which produced both positive and negative relationships with social satisfaction, parental involvement was only positively associated with this outcome. Before accounting for any other variables, the results revealed that parental involvement was positively associated with social satisfaction among students identifying as male, White, Filipino/Pacific Islander, Vietnamese, middle class, upper-middle class or wealthy, sophomores, juniors, or seniors. For these groups of students, feeling that parents were interested in their college progress related to social satisfaction with college; however, parental involvement lost significance by the final step.

Among students identifying as women, Chinese, Black or African American, working-class, and first-year students, however, parental involvement entered significant and positive and remained so at the last step. This suggests that parental involvement, not contact, is associated with social satisfaction for students from these groups. Interestingly, both parental contact and involvement were positive for Chinese students.

Summary and Discussion

This study examined the degree to which parental contact (measured by frequency) and parental involvement (measured by students’ perceptions of parental interest and concern about their academic success in college) corresponds to students’ self-assessed academic development, social satisfaction, and sociopolitical awareness. The findings suggest that parental factors do relate to students’ perceived development but to varying degrees, with parental involvement producing more than two-thirds of the significant relationships detected (22 of 31). The vast majority of the associations with parental involvement were positive, whereas parental contact was negatively associated with outcomes in half of the significant relationships detected. These findings provide evidence that higher education research and practice should differentiate the frequency of contact between students and parents from whether parents are involved in students’ academic progress and decision making. Below key findings across each outcome area are summarized.

Outcome Areas

Parents and sociopolitical awareness. Parental involvement produced more significant associations with sociopolitical awareness than did parental contact. Perhaps this is because of the reflective, conscious, and identity-related measures comprising the sociopolitical awareness factor. It is likely that the level of reflection and communication required for parents to have an impact on their students’ sociopolitical awareness depends more on the quality of the interaction, rather than sheer frequency of communication. Attachment perspective suggests that parents have a strong influence on students’ identity development by shaping their internal
working models of the self and others in the formative years (Bowlby, 1988). In other words, parents serve as an important source of socialization for students in their identity development, exploration, and commitment before they enter college. The findings suggest that this socialization extends into the college years.

Parents and academic gains. Academic gains yielded the fewest significant associations with the parent measures. This was surprising given that parental involvement in this study referred specifically to engagement in students’ academic lives. It is possible that other aspects of students’ academic experiences not assessed in this study would have a stronger impact on students’ academic development than parental engagement. Some studies have suggested that institutional characteristics, such as class size and resource investment in students, and acquired characteristics, such as hours spent studying and peer and student–faculty interactions, have a significant impact on academic gains (Astin, 1993; Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006; Toutkoushian & Smart, 2001). Furthermore, organizational forces, such as supportiveness of students’ holistic needs and high expectations for students’ academic engagement, may have a greater impact on academic gains for lower-division students than does parent involvement (Reason, Terenzini, & Domingo, 2006).

Parents and social satisfaction. Social satisfaction had the greatest number of significant associations with the parent measures, particularly the parental involvement factor. This trend is consistent with the literature, which has suggested that the quality of parent–student relationships often facilitates social adjustment to the university. Students who have healthy parental attachment levels often feel secure enough to pursue new social activities and goals. Parental contact was both positively and negatively related to students’ social satisfaction. Conversations in which students share their social interests and goals could elicit reactions from parents either encouraging or discouraging further investment into social activities.

Conditional Effects

Supporting the notion of “conditional” effects of parent measures, the results reveal that the influence of parents on the outcomes in this study were not uniform across students.

Gender. Parental engagement had more of an impact on the academic, personal, and social development of college women than men. Neither parental contact nor involvement were significant predictors of any outcome for college males in the final model, whereas these measures predicted academic gains and social satisfaction for college women (albeit in opposite directions). Among women, parental involvement was negatively associated with academic gains but positively associated with satisfaction with the social experience. These findings lend support to attachment scholars who argue that relationships are more central to women’s psychological development (Josselson, 1988).

Race/ethnicity. Results do indicate varying roles of parental involvement across students’ racial/ethnic background, though clear patterns are difficult to discern. For example,
parental contact was negatively related to social satisfaction for East Indian/Pakistani students only. This is especially noteworthy because earlier research indicated that frequency of parental contact was highest among East Indian/Pakistani students relative to all other racial/ethnic groups (Wolf et al., 2009). Similarly, parental involvement was positively related to academic development among American Indian students and to social satisfaction for African American and Chinese students, and earlier research noted these racial/ethnic subgroups among those providing below-average levels of parental involvement in college (Wolf et al., 2009). Taken together, these reinforce the idea that level of parental–student engagement and the influence of that engagement are different matters.

Finally, parent variables were not significantly associated with any of the outcomes among students identifying as Chicano, Latino, Japanese, or Korean. These results are consistent with previous research, at least among Chicano and Latino students, which found friends to be more influential than parents in students’ psychological well-being and adjustment to college (Rodriguez, Mira, Myers, Morris, & Cardoza, 2003). Given the paucity of parental involvement research among these groups, future research needs to test whether such parents are indeed less influential than other factors or perhaps have a more influential role on student outcomes not addressed in this study.

Year in college. The effects of parental involvement appear to be dependent on year in school and are most beneficial for first-year students. Parental contact, by contrast, did not reveal a consistent pattern of conditional effects by year in school. Additional research must explore the nature of parental involvement and how it varies over time.

Social class. The results by social class support a building body of research stating that involvement and encouragement are important to the persistence of underserved students (Castillo & Hill, 2004; Herndon & Hirt, 2004; MacPhee, Fritz, & Miller-Heyl, 1996; Tinto, 2006), as parental involvement was positively related to social satisfaction among self-identified working class students. Parental contact was also a significant predictor of sociopolitical gains among students identifying as low income or poor. The negative association between parental contact and academic gains, however, among the upper-middle class and wealthy students might reflect the “helicopter” phenomenon so frequently cited in the literature (Wartman & Savage, 2008). It may be that these upper-class students seek help from their parents when they are struggling academically and parents who step in and solve their problems could impede students’ growth and development.

Implications

Research

This study offers several noteworthy contributions to research on parental involvement and college student development, while also raising new questions. First, this study distinguished between the frequency and the quality of parental involvement and demonstrated they are not
synonymous. Research must go beyond assessing the frequency of student-parent conversations and examine qualitative dimensions, such as who initiates the conversation, the topics discussed, and students’ perceptions of parents’ attitudes (e.g., supportive versus judgmental). Further, research on “parental involvement” should expand to focus on “family involvement” given the variation in family structures and prominence of nonparental figures in students’ lives.

Second, research should examine a broader range of outcomes, including psychological health, identity development, autonomy, grades, and degree attainment. The variation in effects across the three outcomes examined underscores the notion that the “effects” of parental involvement cannot be simplified; parental involvement is likely both helpful and harmful depending on the nature of involvement and the outcome in question.

Third, because students mature during college and because the nature of parent involvement changes from year to year, future research should approach this topic longitudinally. Questions to consider include: How does the nature of parental involvement change over time? What are the short- and longer-term effects of parental involvement? How do these associations vary as students progress through college?

Finally, although this study contributes knowledge of the conditional effects of parental involvement, it scratched the surface in terms of understanding how parental involvement varies by student characteristics. Additional large-scale and diverse quantitative studies could help validate the conditional effects identified here, whereas qualitative methodologies are critical in understanding the impact of parental involvement given the full context of students’ lives. Qualitative research could differentiate the involvement of each parent, explore the nature of student and parent conversations, and reveal the aspirations and values guiding parent and student behavior.

**Practice**

As more parent programs are developed, practitioners should remember that parental involvement does not affect students equally and that institutions can be more strategic with their advice to parents. Much of the dialogue concerning parental involvement suggests a negative tone and implies overly and intrusively involved parents (Mullendore, Banahan, & Ramsey, 2005; Wartman & Savage, 2008); the results of this study reveal this to be untrue for many students, particularly for students identifying as low income or poor, working or middle class, Black/African American, American Indian, or Chinese. The negative influence of parental involvement held true for only a few groups, including East Indian/Pakistani, White, upper-middle class, and wealthy students. Some research has suggested offering multiple family programs that target different groups or learning objectives in order to address varying needs (Mullendore & Banahan, 2005). At a minimum these findings suggest that when institutions develop strategies for parental involvement—whether to encourage or discourage parents’ engagement in students’ college lives—practitioners should avoid a “one size fits all” approach. As research on parental involvement continues to evolve,
practitioner success at serving the needs of diverse populations will depend on staying informed of how students’ cultural backgrounds shape the consequences of their ongoing interactions with parents.

Parental interest in students’ academic progress was more influential on the outcomes examined than simply the frequency with which students spoke to parents. Thus, practitioners might suggest that parents engage their students in more frequent discussions about course-taking and academic progress, at least during the first year of college (as the data suggest possible negative consequences of parental involvement for sophomores and seniors). These findings support the need for parent orientations that provide guidance on the college transition but also enlighten parents about the changing student–parent dynamics across years in college (Mullendore & Banahan, 2005).

Frequency of contact with parents was not only less salient than parental involvement, but produced negative associations for several groups: students identifying as middle class (social satisfaction), upper-middle class and wealthy (academic gains), East Indian or Pakistani (gain in sociopolitical awareness and social satisfaction), and White (social satisfaction). In other words, as discussed by Wartman and Savage (2008), students are communicating with their parents more frequently but often without awareness of the consequences of these exchanges. These results support the need to for practitioners to distinguish parental involvement from parental contact and to become aware of how this varies by students’ demographic characteristics across key student outcomes. The more that research provides evidence of the varying consequences of parental involvement, the better equipped faculty, academic advisors, and counselors will be to suggest remedies for students facing academic or social challenges.

**Theory**

The complex relationships revealed in this study provide support for the inclusion of parents in theories of college students. Parental influence on student development has been addressed within psychosocial theories and college impact models, and this study’s results create recommendations for both theoretical camps. From the psychosocial perspective, the idea that secure parental attachment coupled with successful separation maximizes student development is largely supported by the results of this study. The parental involvement/concern measures produced the majority of the significant positive relationships found, whereas half of the parental contact relationships were negative, indicating support for a balanced relationship between students and parents by which students sense and receive support from their parents, particularly about their academic lives, while also experiencing some level of separation in direct contact.

These findings expand on college impact models by providing specific examples of the ways parents can serve as agents of socialization and environmental influence on student outcomes during college. The impact can be positive or negative, depending on the population and students’ stage of development. Variations in parental impact by year in college further support the need for
theories that address both the long-term (precollege to graduation) and intermediate (e.g., sophomore to junior year) impact that parents have on students’ development. Theorists should offer models that account for the magnitude of impact that parents have at different stages in the undergraduate experience.

**Conclusion**

This study highlighted the continuing influence of parents in the lives of college students and revealed conditional effects of parental involvement as dependent on gender, race, class, and year in school. As research evolves, it will be important to modify existing college impact models (and develop new ones) that specify various forms of parent–student and parent–institution interactions and how their influence on outcomes might vary across different student populations. Such information will enable researchers to more adequately account for the full range of influence on college students and will provide valuable information for practitioners whose work involves increasingly diverse populations of students and parents.

**References**


Keup, J. (2007, November). How do we use this information? The connection between research and practice. Presented in The parents of today’s college students: Hovering too close to the
Parents’ Influence on College Students

ground? Symposium conducted at the Association for the Study of Higher Education Annual Meeting, Louisville, KY.


