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Innovations in Research and Scholarship Features

Exploring the Parental Role in First-Year Students' Emotional Well-Being: Considerations by Gender

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During a time of growing parental involvement in the lives of college-going students, this study examines how interactions with parents relate to students' sense of emotional well-being and how this varies by gender. Using longitudinal data on first-year college students at one institution, the study reveals the importance of both quality and quantity of student-parent interactions, and describes how this varies by the gender of the student and the parent.

The historical concept of *in loco parentis*, whereby higher education institutions served “in the place of a parent” by assuming legal responsibility over students and closely monitoring student behavior, was replaced in the 1960s by an acceptance of college students as independent adults (Wartman & Savage, 2008). Since then, and especially over the last decade, parents have become increasingly engaged in the everyday lives of their college-going children (Carney-Hall, 2008; Wartman & Savage, 2008). This shift was prompted by increased college costs resulting in parents making a greater investment in their children's college experiences (Johnstone, 2005) and technological advancements that make it easier for parents and students to regularly communicate (Hofer & Moore, 2010). Parents' increased involvement may also be driven by “emerging adulthood,” an extended post-adolescent period during which individuals in their late teens through mid-twenties experience self-focused identity exploration, instability, and are uncertain as to the proper amount of interaction they should have with their parents (Arnett, 2006).

The literature is conflicted on how connected parents should be to their college-going children. The increased involvement of parents in college is often portrayed negatively in the media as “helicopter” parenting, a constant hovering behavior believed to stunt student growth (Hofer & Moore, 2010). Conversely, some research has found that more frequent communication with parents correlates with student growth and progress (Wolf, Sax, & Harper, 2009). Understanding how parental involvement relates to student development becomes increasingly important as the college student population connects more with their parents.

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Focusing on the first year of college as a critical period of transition (Reason, Terenzini, & Domingo, 2006), this study examines parents' roles in contributing to one dimension of student development—emotional well-being. Self-ratings of emotional health upon entering college have declined steadily over the past 25 years (Pryor, DeAngelo, Palucki Blake, Hurtado, & Tran, 2011) and continue to wane during the first year of college (Sax, Bryant, & Gilmartin, 2004). A gender gap persists, as women consistently report lower levels of emotional health than men (Pryor et al., 2011) and are more vulnerable to depression in adolescence and throughout adulthood (Gutman & Sameroff, 2004).

This paper explores how first-year students' ongoing interactions with parents relate to their sense of emotional well-being. The study also focuses on the gender dimension in part not only because of noted gender differences in students' self-assessed emotional health, but also because parental connection may affect women and men in different ways (Sax, 2008). Finally, this research addresses differences between mothers and fathers, a facet that has received very little attention in the literature.

Theoretical Perspectives

Psychosocial theories of human development suggest contrasting approaches to understanding parental influence on college student development. Separation-individuation reflects the process of separating from parents as necessary for functioning autonomously (Mattanah, Brand, & Hancock, 2004). Attachment theorists (Ainsworth, 1982; Bowlby, 1988) suggest that secure relationships with parents provide support and confidence during stressful transitions (e.g., college adjustment). Sax and Wartman (2010) recommend combining the theories of attachment and separation-individuation when studying the impact of parental involvement on college student development, noting that maintaining connection with parents serves to facilitate the process of individuation.

The gender dimension is also relevant, as theorists have suggested that women's development during the college years is especially dependent on their sense of connectedness and relationships with others (Gilligan, 1982; Josselson, 1987). Consistent with attachment theory, women describe themselves as closer to parents and seeking out more parental support than college men, but college women who describe themselves as more attached to their parents also report higher psychological well-being (Kenny & Donaldson, 1991). On the other hand, male identity development is thought to be achieved through separation from parents as a means of establishing independence (Chodorow, 1999; Gilligan, 1982). This study is guided by combining separation and attachment theories, as parents may have a particularly salient effect on women's sense of emotional health (Chodorow, 1999; Gilligan, 1982).

Emotional Health and the Role of Parents

Although research has addressed many factors that influence college students' emotional well-being, usually noting the gender disparity, the relationship between parental involvement and college students' emotional health is at this time largely theoretical. Reviewing the literature on the predictors of emotional well-being during college resulted in a limited body of research relating student-parent interactions to emotional health outcomes.

How College Affects Emotional Well-Being

Campus involvement is considered important in promoting positive emotional well-being among college students. Student behaviors shown to mitigate feelings of low emotional health

include: participating in sports and exercise (Parsons & Betz, 2001; Sax, 2008), engaging spiritually (Jenny, 2012; Sax, 2008), socializing (Sax, 2008), participating in student clubs and organizations (Jenny, 2012; Sax, 2008), and living in the residence halls (Jenny, 2012). Spending time using technology is negatively correlated with emotional well-being (Sax et al., 2004).

In terms of gender differences associated with emotional well-being, women appear to benefit from establishing independence from family. Despite theory suggesting that women's development depends on attachment to parental figures, attending a college farther from home predicts higher emotional well-being (Sax, 2008). In addition, certain measures of the campus environment are unique predictors of emotional well-being for men. Living on campus and the proportion of female faculty on campus enhance men's emotional well-being; attending racial/cultural awareness workshops increase feelings of being overwhelmed for men only (Sax, 2008).

Parents and Emotional Well-Being

Some research has examined the role of parents in college students' emotional health. Kenny and Donaldson (1991) found that positive attachment relationships with parents were associated with higher social competence and psychological well-being for first-year women. Secure attachment to parents also predicts higher psychological well-being and leads to positive social and emotional adjustment (Mattanah et al., 2004). Having a close rapport with parents contributes to well-being across the lifespan (Tanner, 2006). Hofer and Moore (2010) have argued that too much connection between college students and parents delays student growth and hinders students' ability to achieve autonomy.

Though research in psychology provides evidence regarding students' needs for attachment, separation, and autonomy from parents during the transition from adolescence to adulthood, very little consideration is given to the college context (Sax & Wartman, 2010). Higher education researchers have quantified parental involvement by assessing the frequency, nature, and mode of contact between parents and their college-aged children (e.g., National Survey of Student Engagement, 2007; Pryor, Hurtado, Sharkness, & Korn, 2007); yet with the exception of Sarigiani, Trumbell, and Camarena (2013), most literature does not distinguish between mothers versus fathers. Finally, though some recent studies examine the connection between parental involvement and student development outcomes, those studies rely only on cross-sectional data and call for research that examines this phenomenon longitudinally (e.g., Harper, Sax, & Wolf 2012).

Objectives

This study examines how student-parent interactions relate to changes in students' sense of emotional well-being over the first year of college. The following research questions guide this study:

1. What are the frequency, mode, and nature of students' interactions with their parental figure(s) during college, and how do these vary by gender?
2. What is the relationship between student-parent interactions and first-year emotional well-being controlling for student demographic characteristics and college experiences? How does this vary by gender?

Methodology

Data Source

Two surveys were administered to first-year students living in on-campus housing at a highly selective public research university in the Western United States during the 2011–2012 academic year. The first survey is the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Freshman Survey, a nationwide survey of entering college students administered during summer orientation in 2011 (Pryor et al., 2011).

In spring 2012, the institution's residential life office administered an online survey (RL Survey) to all students living in on-campus housing. In addition to questions related to students' experiences with residential life, the survey included measures of the frequency, mode, and nature of interactions between students and their parents.

Sample

The institution enrolled a total of 5,825 first-year students in fall 2011. Of these students, 4,184 (72%) completed the CIRP Freshman Survey and provided an identification number used to link to their RL Survey responses. A total of 3,413 students living in the residence halls completed the RL Survey in spring 2012. Not all of these students were first-year students; therefore, linking the CIRP Freshman Survey and the RL Survey resulted in a total of 1,331 respondents, of which 1,155 students completed the parent engagement module.

The majority of respondents (83%) indicated a mother and father—and no other parental figures—in their life. Four percent noted one parent together with a stepparent of the opposite gender; 9% indicated only one parental figure. An additional 4% identified communicating with two parental figures in an alternative arrangement, including either same-sex parents or legal guardians. Students then distinguished between the parental figure with whom they talked the most (Parent 1) and second most (Parent 2). In order to compare students' interactions with mothers and fathers, this study was restricted to the 995 students who indicated one mother/stepmother and one father/stepfather as the two parents they communicate with most. Parent 1 was typically described as the mother (82.3%), followed by the father (17.5 percent), stepmother (0.1%), or stepfather (0.1%). Parent 2 was typically described as the father (80.7%), followed by mother (17.5%), stepmother (0.1%), or stepfather (1.7%).

The gender breakdown of this sample is 63% female and 37% male. The racial/ethnic distribution was 43.8% Asian American, 32.5% White, 15.4% Latino/a, and 1.5% African American/Black. Among the sample, 14.6% are first-generation college students (i.e., neither of their parents attended college). The median income of the sample is \$86,575.

Measures

The dependent variable, Emotional Well-Being, is a six-item factor from the RL Survey. The first item measured students' self-rated emotional health in comparison to their peers. The remaining items pertained to the frequency with which students felt depressed, isolated, lonely, homesick, and overwhelmed by all that they had to do (all reverse-coded). Factor analysis using principal component analysis with promax rotation and internal reliability analysis confirmed that these variables held together ($\alpha = .74$).

In line with Astin's Input-Environment-Outcome model of college impact (Astin, 1993a), regression analyses included independent variables placed in temporally sequenced blocks so that student background characteristics and precollege inclinations were controlled prior to considering

the effects of the college environment and experiences on emotional health ratings. This temporal blocking is standard practice in research that aims to distinguish the effects of institutional structures and student experiences from the predisposing impact of students' characteristics and experiences prior to college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Drawn from the CIRP Freshman Survey and the RL questionnaire, independent variables consisted of the following blocks:

Pretest (block 1). An Emotional Well-Being pretest was created using three of the aforementioned items that were also included on the CIRP survey (self-rating of emotional health, feeling depressed, feeling overwhelmed) ($\alpha = .56$). Although the reliability of the pretest was low, the factor was a better predictor of the dependent variable than its individual components.

Demographic characteristics (block 2). These include first-generation college student status, family income, high school GPA, distance from home, and financial concerns. Race/ethnicity of respondents was measured at the time of the RL Survey and includes White, African American/Black, Asian American, and Latino/a American.

Perceptions of the college environment (block 3). This block included six variables measuring perceptions of the college environment: measures of personal growth, belonging to campus, getting along with roommate, having enough privacy, ease at developing close friendships, and getting to know neighbors living in the residential community.

College behaviors (block 4). A set of 23 college behaviors were selected based on measures found to have predictive power for emotional well-being in previous literature (Sax, 2008; Sax et al., 2004). Examples of these college behaviors included: adjusting academically, attending programs in the residence halls, participating in sports and student clubs, and spending time using online social networks.

Parent involvement (block 5). This block included 27 parent involvement measures, including: frequency of student-parent communication across all modes (combining face-to-face, e-mail, phone, text); nature of the topics discussed (e.g., academics, finances, health, and well-being); students' perceptions of their parents during their interactions (e.g., respectful, overly involved, helpful, intrusive); parents' influence on students' choice of classes, extra-curricular activities, and friends; and students' desire for more communication with a particular parent. Although these variables do not allow for a direct test of attachment or separation-individuation theories, they do enable us to consider parental involvement both as a facilitator of emotional well-being, as well as a potentially constraining force that can discourage healthy student development.

Analysis Procedures

T tests and Chi-square analyses were conducted to illustrate the frequency, mode, and nature of students' interactions with their parental figure(s) during college and how these interactions varied by gender. The initial model regressed the emotional well-being outcome on 66 independent variables, separately for men and women, revealing ten significant predictors for women and eight for men. In order to directly compare effects of parental involvement for men and women, the 14 variables that entered and remained significant ($p < .05$) for either gender were force-entered into the final set of regression analyses. Gender differences in the predictive power of these variables were assessed via *t* tests. Appendices A and B describe all items and factors used in the final regression.

Limitations

While this study contributes new knowledge on the relationship between parental involvement and students' emotional well-being, especially in terms of the different role played by mothers and fathers, several limitations must be addressed. In terms of generalizability, the study is based at a single institution with a large population of students, the vast majority of whom live on campus during their first year. The sample overrepresents women (63% in our study and 55% at the institution), Asian students (43.8% versus 38%), and White students; underrepresents African American students (1.5% versus 3.8%); but is representative of Latina/o American students (15.4% versus 16%).

Though the study contributes to the literature by analyzing the effects of student-parent interactions separately for mothers/stepmothers and fathers/stepfathers, restrictions in sample size prohibited us from distinguishing between biological and stepparents. Further, despite the increasing number of students raised in alternative family structures (Daniel, Evans, & Scott, 2001; Tierney & Auerbach, 2005), sample size limitations meant that we did not examine students' interactions with same-sex parents, grandparents, or legal guardians (e.g., adopted or foster parents).

Our student-parent interaction measures were students' perceptions of their communication and did not account for parents' perspectives. The survey did not ascertain whether students or parents initiated the interaction nor did they describe the content of the communication. Surveying parents and delving deeper into the content and sequence of interactions would provide a more nuanced portrayal of students' communication with their parents, and the extent to which parents involve themselves in their children's lives during college.

Another limitation relates to the self-reported nature of emotional well-being. Assessment of one's emotional health is highly subjective and does not reflect a clinical determination of one's psychological state. Further, individual students may have different understandings of these items, which may contribute to variation in responses.

Finally, our study is limited in the inability to determine causal relationships between student-parent interaction and students' emotional well-being. Though our interest is in identifying how parental involvement influences students' emotional well-being, these data do not permit us to presume causality. Measures of parental interaction are collected at the same time as the dependent variable. Though the study benefits from the inclusion of a pretest, it is unknown whether changes in students' sense of emotional health precede communication with parents or whether a high level of interaction with parents shapes their sense of emotional well-being.

Results

Our first research question concerns understanding gender differences in the frequency, mode, and nature of students' interactions with their mothers and fathers during college. Table 1 displays students' average level of communication with their parents while the university is in session. Across all groups, the most common form of student-parent communication is via phone, followed by text messaging and e-mail. Women are more likely than men to talk with their mothers on the phone, with 28% of women on the phone with their mothers at least once a day, compared to only 15% of men. Women are also more likely than men to speak with their fathers at least daily, though the rates are much lower than with students' mothers. Students report comparatively less frequent communication with parents via video chat or face-to-face. The least frequent modes are via online social networks and postal mail.

T tests compare communication with mothers and fathers both between genders and within gender. When communicating with mothers, text messaging is more frequent among women than

Table 1

Frequency and Mode of Student-Parent Communication, by Gender

	Communication With Mother/Stepmother ^a		Communication With Father/Stepfather ^a		Significantly More Interaction With One Parent?	
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)		
Mode of Communication	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Phone	5.08 (1.53)	5.61 (1.61)	4.32 (1.74)	4.38 (1.82)	Mother/Stepmother	Mother/Stepmother
Text message	4.15 (2.39)	4.79* (2.63)	3.40 (2.18)	3.49 (2.23)	Mother/Stepmother	Mother/Stepmother
E-mail	3.02 (2.11)	2.91 (2.08)	2.88* (2.11)	2.42 (1.82)		Mother/Stepmother
Face-to-face	2.74 (1.66)	2.85 (1.53)	2.83 (1.71)	2.85 (1.59)		
Video chat	2.10 (1.74)	2.03 (1.54)	1.95 (1.58)	1.87 (1.45)	Mother/Stepmother	Mother/Stepmother
Online social network	1.77 (1.61)	1.82 (1.65)	1.60* (1.52)	1.40 (1.21)	Mother/Stepmother	Mother/Stepmother
Postal mail	1.53 (1.12)	1.51 (0.92)	1.55* (1.41)	1.26 (0.81)		Mother/Stepmother
ALL MODES	20.29 (7.18)	21.44* (6.27)	18.34 (7.89)	17.56 (6.02)	Mother/Stepmother	Mother/Stepmother

^a *T* tests compare men and women; the higher scoring group is indicated by * ($p < .05$).

men; with fathers, communication via e-mail, online social networks, or postal mail is more frequent among men than women, though rates of communication are fairly low in the latter two categories. Across most modes and both genders, communicating with mothers is more common than communicating with fathers.

Results also show that, compared to men, women describe higher quality interactions with their mothers (i.e., respectful, helpful, and supportive; and not intrusive, uninterested, or critical) ($\bar{x}_{\text{women}} = 2.53$, $\bar{x}_{\text{men}} = 2.33$, $t = -2.167$, $p < .05$). No gender differences are evident in students' perceptions of the quality of interactions with their fathers. When comparing students' perceptions of their interactions with mothers with that of their fathers, no differences are observed among women or men.

Table 2 reveals how students feel about the level of communication they currently have with each parent. The vast majority of students report that they have "just the right amount" of communication with their mothers. Students are somewhat less satisfied with their level of communication with fathers: 62.1% of men and only 50.4% of women are satisfied with the current level of communication, with most of the remaining students report that current levels are less than desired. Most women and men are either satisfied with how much they currently interact with their parents, or they wish they could interact more, especially when it comes to daughters seeking more communication with their fathers.

Table 2

Satisfaction With the Amount of Student-Parent Communication, by Gender

Amount of Communication	Communication With Mother/Stepmother		Communication With Father/Stepfather	
	Men (%)	Women (%)	Men (%)	Women (%)
A LOT LESS than I would like	4.1	3.9	9.8	7.7
A LITTLE LESS than I would like	18.1	17.1	23.6	38.6
Just the right amount	70.8	72.3	62.1	50.4
A LITTLE MORE than I would like	5.7	5.6	3.5	2.4
A LOT MORE than I would like	1.4	1.1	1.1	0.8
Significant gender difference ($p < .05$)?	No		Yes	

Considering emotional health indicators, gender differences are evident on both the pretest and the posttest, with men's average scores on emotional health significantly higher than women's (Pretest: $\bar{x}_{\text{women}} = -.04$, $\bar{x}_{\text{men}} = .09$, $t = 2.3$, $p < .05$; Posttest: $\bar{x}_{\text{women}} = -.04$, $\bar{x}_{\text{men}} = .11$, $t = 2.47$, $p < .05$). The gender gap in students' ratings of emotional health remains significant during college, which is consistent with prior studies using similar questions with national samples (Sax, 2008; Sax et al., 2004).

The second research question addresses how parental involvement relates to students' emotional health during the first year of college. Using the 14 variables significant for either gender in the initial analyses, Table 3 displays final regression results separately for women and men. The total proportion of variance accounted for by variables in this model is 51% for men and 40% for women. The pretest emotional well-being (block 1) accounts for more than half of the explained variance in each group. *T* tests indicate that the pretest was a significantly stronger predictor for women than men. No other predictors revealed statistically significant gender differences. Parent variables account for a small but significant proportion of the variance for men (5 percent) and women (3 percent).

Before interpreting the predictive power of parent variables, it is important to review the role played by variables in prior blocks. Only one demographic characteristic—first-generation student status—was included in block 2 in the final model. None of the other demographic characteristics entered the initial models. In this case, being a first-generation college student is associated with a lower sense of emotional well-being for women; however, the predictive power of this variable disappears when accounting for the role of friendship development (since first-generation students tend to report more difficulty establishing close friendships in college).

Among the college variables (blocks 3 and 4), two measures of social integration—ease at developing close friendships and sense of belonging—positively predict emotional well-being for both genders. The role of academic adjustment in predicting emotional well-being is significant only for women, however, despite the fact that simple correlations are significant for both genders. For men, the predictive power of academic adjustment loses significance when accounting for the close friendships variable. In other words, men's emotional well-being is dependent on success-

Table 3

Predictors of Emotional Well-Being, by Gender

Variable	Women (n = 542)		Men (n = 305)	
	r	Final Beta	r	Final Beta
Block 1: Pretest				
Emotional well-being pretest	.47*	.35*	.56*	.49*
	(R ² = .23)		(R ² = .32)	
Block 2: Demographic characteristics				
First-generation status	-.09*	-.03	-.07	-.05
	(R ² = .23)		(R ² = .32)	
Block 3: Perceptions of the college environment				
Ease at developing close friendships	.39*	.16*	.44*	.21*
Sense of belonging	.43*	.21*	.39*	.19*
	(R ² = .35)		(R ² = .45)	
Block 4: College behaviors and experiences				
Ease at academic adjustment	.30*	.08*	.24*	.04
Hours per week: Working for pay	-.06	-.03	-.06	-.08*
Number of academic support programs attended	-.04	-.04	.01	.03
	(R ² = .37)		(R ² = .46)	
Block 5: Parent involvement measures				
Parental influence on college decision-making	-.05	-.04	-.10*	-.08
Discussions about leisure activities with mother/stepmother	.22*	.09*	.11	.07
Frequency of interaction with mother/stepmother (all modes)	-.02	-.08*	-.07	-.09
Quality of communication with mother/stepmother	.20*	.08*	.14*	.00
Quality of communication with father/stepfather	.19*	.04	.21*	.12*
Desiring more communication with father/stepfather	-.06	-.08*	.01	-.10*
Discussions about health with father/stepfather	-.04	.01	-.02	-.07
	(R ² = .40)		(R ² = .51)	

* $p < .05$

ful academic adjustment only to the extent that academic adjustment is associated with making friends. In addition, for men only, hours spent working for pay is negatively associated with emotional well-being.

Of the seven parental involvement measures included in block 5, four are significant for women and two for men in the final model (though all are much weaker predictors than the social engagement indicators discussed above). For women, three measures relate to communications with their mothers: quality of communications (positive), discussions about leisure activities (positive), and overall frequency of communication (negative). As noted in the limitations section, the direction of the effect is difficult to discern, and it is likely each of these three variables impacts the others. It is noteworthy that our measure of quality reveals a positive association for mothers and daughters, while the measure of quantity shows a negative relationship.

For both genders, lower emotional well-being is reported among those who desire more communication with their fathers. Recall from the descriptive results that many students (especially women) report wishing they communicated more frequently with their fathers. Again, the question arises whether lower emotional well-being results from students' dissatisfaction with how little they communicate with their fathers, or if the desire to interact more with fathers results from the emotional challenges students experience in college.

Finally, for men only, the quality of communication with fathers is associated with a greater sense of emotional well-being. It is worth noting that the "quality" variables (for both mother and father) are significantly correlated with emotional well-being for both genders, but the predictive power remains significant only for the same-gender pairs.

Summary

Today's population of students experience greater levels of interaction with their parents, as well as a declining sense of emotional well-being. This paper sought to measure the frequency, mode, and nature of students' interactions with their parents and understand the connection between student-parent communication during the first year of college and students' sense of their emotional health, with special attention to differences by gender. These findings contributed new knowledge about how college men and women differentially interact with mothers and fathers.

When students and parents communicate, it is most often via phone calls and text messaging; this remains true for both genders and regardless of parent. These results are consistent with recent research (Sarigiani et al., 2013; Wolf, Sax, & Harper, 2009). Patterns emerge when it comes to interactions with mothers versus fathers. First, though both women and men report more frequently communicating with mothers than fathers, communicating with mothers is more common among female students. Second, the lower rates of communication with fathers serve as a source of disappointment for many students. In fact, approximately one-third of men and nearly half of women report that they would like more interaction with their fathers. Students, and especially women, tend to communicate more with their mothers but desire more communication with their fathers, a conclusion also reached by Hofer and Moore (2010).

Regression results suggest that, although aspects of social integration (e.g., sense of belonging and ease at developing close friendships with other students) are most salient to students' sense of emotional well-being (Astin, 1993b), communication with parents further contributes to a sense of well-being for both women and men. Though causality from these data cannot be determined, certain aspects of the student-parent dynamic are worth addressing. Mainly, results suggest that both quality and quantity matter when it comes to student-parent communications during college. Emotional well-being is strengthened for students who view their parents as supportive, interested, help-

ful, nonintrusive and uncritical; this is especially true for mothers with daughters and fathers with sons. There is evidence then that same-gender pairings are especially pivotal to students in college.

While the quality of student-parent interactions is unsurprisingly linked with positive emotional health, the effects of quantity of interaction are more difficult to discern. Evidence from this paper suggests that the more female students communicate with their mothers, the lower their sense of emotional well-being. This finding may relate to women's need to separate from parents (e.g., attending college farther from home) in order to gain a sense of independence (Sax, 2008). As posited in the literature, perhaps female students strive to create both a geographical and technological separation from their mothers in order to gain independence, while simultaneously remaining attached through quality interactions.

For both genders, desiring more interaction with their fathers relates to greater declines in emotional well-being. As discussed, causal connections are impossible to establish with these data. The inclusion of the pretest emotional well-being enabled the accounting for the emotional states that might predispose students to more or less interaction with a parent, it remains uncertain whether changes in one's sense of emotional well-being result from or precede their interactions with parents.

Implications for Practice and Research

Though high-quality, supportive interactions with parents appear to benefit students' emotional well-being, colleges and universities should consider what role the institution can and should play in this process. The increase in resources devoted to parent-related programming at colleges nationwide over the past decade is a clear indication that higher education acknowledges the growing role of parents in their students' college lives (Wartman & Savage, 2008), however such programming is often not guided by empirical research on how best to involve parents (Sax & Wartman, 2010).

This research suggests that colleges might use orientation, parent newsletters, counseling and parent programming to educate students and their parents about the primacy of social integration to students' sense of emotional well-being, and to consider what role parents can play in encouraging their children to make friends and establish a sense of social independence away from home. Finally, in all interactions with students and parents, institutions ought to be sensitive to the needs of students from a range of family structures.

Parent and family program offices and administrators actively engage with both students and parents. Greater collaboration between these units is needed to provide both groups with resources that enable students to receive the necessary support to strengthen their emotional well-being. Despite not knowing the content of students' interactions with their parents, the majority of students indicate that they are satisfied with the amount of communication they have with their parents, thus challenging media images of hovering and intrusive parenting behaviors. These findings correspond to the value of students remaining attached to parental figures (quality), while also limiting the frequency of communication to immerse in campus life activities and engage socially with peers.

This study suggests that it is important for colleges to communicate to students and their parents that parental encouragement and support—perhaps especially from fathers—is important to maintain while students adjust to college. By the same token, institutions should caution against too-frequent interaction that may impede student development. Campuses also ought to remind parents and students about campus psychological health services that are available for students who need them, and to consider parents active partners in addressing students' health and risk prevention (Abar, Abar, Turrissi, & Belden, 2013).

The study also has implications for research. Perhaps the most important unanswered question from this study is the nature of causality. More longitudinal, multiple-time-point research is needed to determine the timing of parent interactions relative to changes in students' sense of emotional well-being. Research should also address the reciprocal and ongoing nature of these dynamics. Establishing directionality, while acknowledging the fluidity of the process, is vital to determining how to best support healthy student-parent relations.

Research is also needed to assess the potentially nonlinear relationship between student-parent interaction and student development. Is there an optimum level of interaction, and does it vary over time? A better understanding of who initiates the interaction and for what reason is needed, which will likely vary across different situations (e.g., students may call to get advice or ask for money, parents may call to report on a family situation or just to "check in"). These variations likely have different consequences on varying aspects of student development.

This study also raises a number of questions regarding the role of students' fathers. More in-depth qualitative research is needed to address why students (and especially women) tend to desire more communication with their fathers. It is unclear from this study if they simply want more interaction, or perhaps higher quality interaction. Hofer and Moore (2010) recommend for students living in two-parent households, scheduling conversations with parents in advance provide greater opportunity for fathers to be involved; otherwise, students tend to talk more with mothers.

An important issue that remains unresolved in this study is whether and how the effects of parental involvement vary across different populations. This study contributes some knowledge on variations by gender. As the college student population becomes increasingly diverse, administrators cannot presume that all students will benefit in the same ways from parental involvement. As discussed in Sax and Wartman (2010), forms of parental involvement that are beneficial to some students might be less helpful to others; and this may depend on background factors such as gender, race/ethnicity, class, and religion.

Finally, while the survey used in this study assessed a variety of family structures, ultimately the analyses were restricted to the predominant and traditional mother plus father family structure. As referenced in the limitations, including alternative family structures is essential in order to accurately represent the changing student population. Given small sample sizes, qualitative inquiry may be most appropriate here.

Conclusion

This study advances knowledge on the gender differences in the nature of student-parent communications during the first year of college and how these interactions may shape students' sense of emotional well-being. Results suggest that quality and quantity of interaction matters for both male and female students. Further, the role of mothers differs from that of fathers, an important addition the current body of literature that typically considers parents as a unit. While men's and women's desire for more communication with fathers was associated with declines in emotional well-being, students communicating more frequently with mothers report lower emotional well-being. Results from this study provide new information that can inform student affairs practice through such units as parent programs offices, orientation, and residential life.

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Appendix A

Variable Definitions and Coding¹

Dependent Variable	Coding
Emotional Well-being	Six-item factor (Appendix B)
Independent Variables	Coding
Block 1: Pretest	Three-item factor (Appendix B)
Block 2: Demographic characteristics	
First Generation status	1 = "no", 2 = "yes"
Block 3: Perceptions of the college environment	
Sense of belonging	Seven-item factor (Appendix B)
Ease at developing close friendships	1 = "Very difficult" to 4 = "Very easy"
Block 4: College behaviors	
Hours per week: Work for pay	1 = "None" to 8 = "Over 20 hours"
Ease of academic adjustment to college	Four-item factor (Appendix B)
Number of Academic Support programs attended	1 = "None" to 5 = "Four or more"
Block 5: Parent involvement measures	
Frequency of interaction with mother/stepmother	Sum of all seven modes, each ranging from 1 = "Never" to 8 = "4 or more times a day"
Desiring more communication with father/stepfather	1 = "A LOT MORE than I would like" to 5 = "A LOT LESS than I would like"
Discussions about health with father/stepfather	0 = "Less than Third Most" to 3 = "Most"
Discussions about leisure activities with mother/stepmother	0 = "Less than Third Most" to 3 = "Most"
Quality of communication with mother/stepmother	Sum (Respectful + Helpful + Interested + Supportive) minus (Overly involved + Intrusive + Uninterested + Overly critical)
Quality of communication with father/stepfather	Sum (Respectful + Helpful + Interested + Supportive) minus (Overly involved + Intrusive + Uninterested + Overly critical)
Parental influence on college decision-making	Three-item factor (Appendix B)

¹ Includes only variables considered in final regressions. A complete list of independent variables is available from the first author.

Appendix B

FACTORS

Factor	Loading
Emotional Well-Being ($\alpha = .74$)	
Self-Rating: Emotional health ¹	.55
Felt: Depressed ²	.79
Felt: Isolated ²	.67
Felt: Lonely ²	.79
Felt: Homesick ²	.33
Felt: Overwhelmed by all I had to do ²	.35
Emotional Well-Being Pretest ($\alpha = .56$)	
Self-Rating: Emotional health ¹	.49
Felt: Depressed ²	.49
Felt: Overwhelmed by all I had to do ²	.73
Ease of Academic Adjustment to College ($\alpha = .82$)	
Ease: Understand what your professors expect of you academically ³	.55
Ease: Develop effective study skills ³	.82
Ease: Adjust to the academic demands of college ³	.82
Ease: Manage your time effectively ³	.74
Sense of Belonging ($\alpha = .85$)	
Living on campus has helped me feel a part of (name of campus) ⁴	.78
I feel a sense of community on my floor in my house/building ⁴	.52
I feel a sense of belonging to this campus ⁴	.83
I feel that this campus welcomes diversity and promotes tolerance ⁴	.63
Knowing what I know now I would still choose to enroll at (name of campus) ⁴	.70
I am proud to be a (name of campus mascot) ⁴	.57
I have formed meaningful friendships in my community ⁴	.69
Parental Influence on College Decision-Making ($\alpha = .73$)	
Influenced your choice of classes ⁵	.63
Influenced your choice of extra-curricular activities ⁵	.65
Influenced your choice of friends ⁵	.81

¹ 1 = "Lowest 10%" to 5 = "Highest 10%"² 1 = "Not at all" to 3 = "Frequently"³ 1 = "Very difficult" to 4 = "Very easy"⁴ 1 = "Strongly disagree" to 5 = "Strongly agree"⁵ 1 = "Not at all" to 4 = "Extensively"