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Parental Involvement During the College Transition: A Review and Suggestion for its Conceptual Definition

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Abstract The transition to college is a salient ecological shift in emerging adults' lives that has important implications for renegotiating parental involvement as youth gain independence while navigating the world of higher education. However, the construct of parental involvement itself lacks clear characterization in literatures spanning higher education and developmental psychology, which is of significant concern given the universality of parental programming across college campuses nationwide. Therefore, the current article aimed to review and integrate theoretical and empirical literatures across higher education and developmental psychology to suggest a definition of parental involvement that is appropriate for the developmental period of emerging adulthood and the context of the college transition. We define parental involvement as a multidimensional construct composed of *parental support giving, parent-student contact*, and *parental academic engagement*, and provide a unified theoretical perspective on how changes in parental involvement are inherently linked to emerging adults' development of self-sufficiency via integration into the autonomy-supportive context of college. We conclude with a brief review of research linking parental involvement and student outcomes, with a focus on identifying key limitations to formulate practical suggestions for future work, notably the need to consistently adhere to a clear and appropriate definition of parental involvement.

Keywords Parental involvement · Emerging adulthood · College transition · Higher education · College student outcomes

Introduction

Emerging adulthood (Arnett 2000, 2015a) has been distinguished as a developmental period that bridges the end of adolescence and the beginning of young adulthood (approximately ages 18–25). During this time, emerging adults focus on achieving the criteria integral for adulthood, including increasing responsibility for themselves, independence in their decision-making, and financial independence to progress toward adulthood. Development of this self-sufficiency entails a gradual separation from parents, such that as youth gain more confidence and experience with their endeavors they shift from parental- to self-dependence (Arnett 2004; Tanner 2006). Because the college transition is embedded in the developmental stage of emerging adulthood, it provides a unique opportunity to study parents' involvement behaviors as youth acquire autonomy amidst navigating the world of higher education. The maintenance of connections to parents in emerging adulthood, both emotional and practical, may pose challenges for renegotiating the type and level of parental involvement during this developmental stage. However, little is known about the characteristics and impact of parental involvement during emerging adulthood and in the context of the college transition.

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This gap stands in stark contrast to the established body of literature on parental involvement during the developmental periods of childhood and adolescence and in the contexts of elementary and middle school. Researchers in these fields typically define parental involvement as "parents' interactions with schools and with their children to promote academic success" (Hill et al. 2004, p. 1491), and have consistently found that involvement benefits children's and adolescents' school success (e.g., Gonzalez-DeHass et al. 2005; Hill and Tyson 2009; McWayne et al. 2004). Given this robust scholarship, it is a hallmark of federal education policy such as No Child Left Behind [No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), 2002], which has explicit mandates to encourage parental educational involvement. At the theoretical level, the most widely cited frameworks developed by Epstein (1992), Grolnick and Slowiaczek (1994), and Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995) clearly describe parental involvement as a multidimensional construct consisting of direct and indirect avenues through which parents can be engaged in their children's education. At the operational level, parental involvement is commonly quantified as parents' communication with teachers (direct school-based strategy), assistance with homework (direct home-based strategy), and conveyance of educational values (indirect value-based strategy) (e.g., Bronstein et al. 2005; Driessen et al. 2005; Gutman et al. 2002; Steinberg et al. 1992). Importantly, scholars have noted that parents' strategies for involvement should change in correspondence to the developmental needs of their child and school contexts. Research has supported this perspective by documenting the appropriateness of indirect parental involvement strategies for adolescents because it fosters their growing autonomy and is independent of relationships with teachers (e.g., Hill and Tyson 2009; Wehrspann et al. 2016).

It follows that parental involvement should once again change during the college transition to align with the unique developmental needs of emerging adults and the separate context of higher education. For example, parents might incorporate more indirect strategies that support emerging adults' growing self-sufficiency, bridge the geographic distance that often accompanies living on-campus, and respect the independent functioning of the college system. Concrete examples of these strategies include asking "what are you learning in your classes," versus calling the registrar's office to inquire about grades, or texting throughout the week to maintain contact versus texting every day to monitor whereabouts. Simply put, the way parents are involved during childhood and adolescence does not scale up to emerging adulthood. Despite this commonsense conclusion, there is little literature articulating the theoretical and operational definitions of parental involvement that is developmentally appropriate for emerging adults in the context of college. In fact, it has been noted that, in the field of higher education, "parent involvement is a floating term that is poorly defined in empirical studies and policy talk" (Tierny and Auerbach 2005, p. 32). This issue is greatly magnified when considering the ubiquity of parental programs across campuses nationwide that have been created to accommodate the increasing presence of parents in the college transition (Savage and Petree 2011, 2013, 2015). Thus, without valid and reliable measurement of parental involvement and its association with student outcomes, how can programming efforts be accurately informed, implemented, and evaluated? Furthermore, since about 70% of high school graduates attend college in the United States (U.S. Department of Labor, 2015), defining the role of parental involvement during the college transition represents an important issue concerning a large proportion of the emerging adult population.

Unpacking parental involvement during the college transition is of timely historical importance considering the incredible growth in the diversity of the students (e.g., racial/ethnic minorities) pursuing a higher education, as well as the multiple different paths (e.g., community college) upon which emerging adults can embark to transition to postsecondary education. For instance, the proportion of undergraduate females (56% in 2014) now exceeds that of males (Snyder et al. 2016), and first-generation students (i.e., parents without a college degree) represent about one-fourth of undergraduates (Chen 2005). From 1976 to 2014 the proportion of White college students decreased from 84 to 58%, and across the same time the proportion of Hispanic and Black college students rose to 17 and 14%, respectively (Snyder et al. 2016). The proportion of students with disabilities (e.g., learning disability, deafness, orthopedic handicap) seeking a college education has almost doubled from 6.3% in 1992 (Snyder 1995) to 11.1% in 2011 (Snyder et al. 2016).

There is also growing diversity in the various paths to college. For example, 38% of the 2015 U.S. undergraduate population attended 2-year institutions, with 61% of these students attending part-time, which reflects the increase in the number of emerging adults working while in school. While attending a 4-year institution is still the most common college enrollment pattern (i.e., 62% of the 2015 U.S. undergraduate population), the 4-year degree has become almost non-traditional: Among the first-time students enrolled full-time at 4-year institutions in 2008 for an undergraduate degree, about 40% completed their degree in 4 years, while 60% did so in 6 years (Snyder et al. 2016). Engagement in distance education courses has risen, as the percentage of undergraduates enrolled in at least one distance course has increased from 8% in 2000 to almost 30% in 2014 (Snyder et al. 2016). Taking a year off in-between high school and college to garner life experience, which is commonly referred to as a gap year, has also become more

popular. While the proportion of students who take a gap year in the U.S. is very small, the growing body of research on this trend indicates it can increase academic motivation and reduce time-till degree completion (e.g., Hoe 2015).

By understanding how parents are part of this richly diverse modern-day college transition, researchers, administrators, and policymakers alike can work together to better serve the needs of today's college students. Programming efforts for underrepresented racial/ethnic minorities may especially benefit from this work, as family support and involvement have been positively associated with minority students' college enrollment, retention, and graduation (e.g., Perna and Titus 2005), but families often feel very disconnected from the US educational environment starting from the elementary level (Baquedano-López et al. 2013). Thus, identifying how to incorporate these families into a context in which they have felt persistently excluded is of great importance for supporting minority students' college success.

While two key articles written almost a decade ago proposed a working definition of parental involvement in college (Wartman and Savage 2008) and detailed a research agenda to bring consensus to this definition (Sax and Wartman 2010), the scholarly community has not thoroughly realized their contributions. For instance, the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE), which encompasses the professional and administrative realms of higher education, recently acknowledged parent's engagement as a partnership opportunity to best promote student outcomes and discussed many ways parents can be positively engaged (Kiyama et al. 2015). However, a listing of multiple parental engagement behaviors is not equivalent to concisely characterizing the construct of parental involvement, and the authors themselves also report struggling with exactly how to best capture parental involvement in the college context (Kiyama et al. 2015). The inaugural Oxford Handbook on Emerging Adulthood (Arnett 2015b) includes four chapters on family relations, one of which discusses the developmental context of the family and provides a thorough historical analysis of trends in parental involvement, including the effectiveness of this involvement (Fingerman and Yahirun 2015). However, involvement is not defined in relation to the educational context which it is taking place (i.e., college), reflecting a departure from the longstanding body of scholarship on this construct.

The Current Article

The purpose of this article is to review and integrate theoretical and empirical literatures across higher education and developmental psychology to suggest a definition of parental involvement that is appropriate for the developmental period of emerging adulthood and the context of the college transition. Our definition is informed by the integration of these literatures, and aligns with the aforementioned working definition which states that (Wartman and Savage 2008):

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

Assimilating these sources, we define parental involvement as a multidimensional construct, composed of three distinct involvement strategies including *parental support giving, parent-student contact*, and *parental academic engagement*.

Our review first begins with discussing the key theoretical frameworks that inform our understanding of the role and characteristics of parental involvement during the college transition. Next, we discuss the major developmental tasks accomplished during the life stage of emerging adulthood, and attend to how scholars have uniquely positioned parents in those tasks. Then we transition to higher education literature and discuss how college student development theories have incorporated parents, and provide a chronological account of the empirical work in the field of higher education that has aimed to assess parental involvement nationwide. Following is a brief recap of the current article's definition of parental involvement, which serves as a bridge into our discussion of the developmental psychology literature characterizing each facet of involvement, specifically parental support giving, contact, and academic engagement. We conclude with a brief review of the research linking these three aspects of involvement to student outcomes, and identify limitations that have important implications for future work. Our overall hope is that this review is a constructive step towards achieving a clear and united definition of parental involvement that is appropriate for emerging adults in college. Parents do not disappear during college, so rigorous scholarship on their involvement should not either.

Review of Theoretical and Empirical Literature on Parental Involvement: Integrating Higher Education and Developmental Psychology

Theoretical Conceptualization of Parental Involvement during the College Transition

Several theoretical perspectives are used to inform our understanding of the role and characteristics of parental involvement during the college transition. The theory of emerging adulthood (Arnett 2000, 2015a) provides a broad conceptual framework for the current review. It contends that parents continue to represent key socialization agents during emerging adulthood because the developmental task of attaining self-sufficiency involves youth's reliance on parents for support as they undergo the gradual process of becoming autonomous. More specifically, the process of attaining self-sufficiency happens in relation to parents: As emerging adults gradually become responsible for themselves, make independent decisions, and obtain financial independence they rely less on parents to regulate their behaviors, make their decisions, and pay for their expenses, respectively. In turn, parents respond to their emerging adults' growing maturity by respecting their decisions and supervising them less. Simply stated, "they learn to see each other as persons, as individuals, rather than being defined for each other strictly by their roles as parent and child" (Arnett 2015a, p. 81). These changing perceptions prompt the development of new relationships that are characterized by intimacy and mutual respect. Given that parenting practices such as involvement occur in the emotional climate of the parent–child relationship (Darling and Steinberg 1993), the changes in relationship quality that occur during emerging adulthood should diffuse into parents' involvement strategies and be actualized into behaviors that are less hierarchical and directive. Thus, the theory of emerging adulthood provides a holistic lens to view how parents are tied to their children's development during this life stage, and how development of self-sufficiency incorporates a steady decrease in reliance on parents.

To provide a more refined lens on how changes in parental involvement may be connected to emerging adults' development, we drew from Tanner's (2006) concept of *recentering*:

> Recentering is the critical and dynamic shift between individual and society that takes place across emerging adulthood during which other-regulated behavior (i.e., behavior regulated by parents, teachers, and society) is replaced with self-regulated behavior toward the goal of adult sufficiency, the ability to meet the demands of adulthood (p. 22).

Tanner (2006) thus positions recentering as the fundamental process underlying the achievement of self-sufficiency during emerging adulthood. In the first stage of recentering, youth transition from adolescence to emerging adulthood by seeking out contexts that support autonomy. Pertinent to the current review, Tanner (2006) noted that college is a main context for recentering in that it structures an environment that supports learning how to become independent from parents and serves as the primary educational vehicle for developing the skills that are necessary for obtaining careers in the modern century.

As emerging adults incorporate themselves into autonomy-supportive environments, they rely less on parents. This transition reflects the start of stage 2 of recentering, in which emerging adults "remain connected to, but no longer embedded within, his or her family-of-origin and contexts of adolescence" (Tanner 2006, p. 29). Complementing the current review, the freshman year thus reflects a key time to renegotiate the level and type of parental involvement to match the developmental needs of students and educational context of college. For example, parents may become less directly involved as freshmen become more integrated, independent, and comfortable with their new social environments (e.g., peers and academic advisors) during the first year in college. The recentering process concludes with stage 3 in which enduring commitments to adult roles are made which signify complete self-sufficiency (e.g., career and marriage). In sum, recentering helps unpack the process of attaining self-sufficiency by explaining how shifts in contexts, notably the transition to higher education, prompt parents to change their involvement behaviors to better fit with emerging adults' gains in autonomy.

Lastly, life course theory was used to complement our theoretical framework for the review, as it emphasizes the interdependence of family members' life trajectories and clearly articulates how family processes and individual development are associated (Elder 1984, 1994). Interdependence is the process by which transitions in one person's life often involve transitions for other people. Interdependence is also known as the principle of linked lives. Elder's (1984, 1994) model of the dual dynamic of family development expands the principle of linked lives by specifying that family relationships change in response to individual development, and that changes in family relationships also have the capacity to shape individual development. The dual dynamic model of family development thus provides a specific, testable paradigm for how changes in parental involvement are associated with changes in emerging adults' development during the college transition.

Through the synthesis of these three complementary theoretical perspectives, our consideration of parental involvement as a salient parenting behavior during emerging adulthood is well grounded. Importantly, this synthesis offers a novel, unified theoretical lens to understanding the antecedents prompting necessary changes in parental involvement, and how those changes are inherently linked to emerging adults' development of self-sufficiency. Finally, our unified theoretical lens suggests that these changes in parental involvement, or lack thereof, have important implications for shaping a broad range of emerging adult outcomes throughout the college transition.

Emerging Adulthood: A Distinct Developmental Stage

In a seminal article in 2000, Arnett proposed that because the traditional markers of adulthood had become delayed and extended (i.e., marriage, parenthood, and higher education), they lost their relevance in defining adulthood status. In turn, the period in between adolescence and adulthood reflected more than just a brief transition, and merited a developmental stage that he named *Emerging Adulthood*. Importantly, these delays have continued into the turn of the twenty-first century in the U.S. and other countries (Arnett 2015a, b). For example, from 1950 to 2016 the median age of first marriage in the US increased from 22.8 to 29.5 for men and 20.3 to 27.4 for women (U.S. Census Bureau 2016), and the mean age of mother's first birth peaked at 26.4 in 2014 compared to 21.4 in 1970 (Mathews and Hamilton 2016). Regarding higher education, from 1950 to 2014 the number of full-time US college students jumped from 2.3 million to 20 million, and about 60% of students today complete their undergraduate degree in 6 years, rather than 4 (Snyder et al. 2016). Arnett (2000) argued the delay of marriage and parenthood and the rise and length of participation in higher education altogether changed the nature of development during this period because it offers the opportunity and flexibility to change one's life course before settling into the commitments required by adult roles.

As such, Arnett (2000) contended that emerging adulthood was both empirically and theoretically distinct from the adolescence that precedes it and young adulthood that follows it. For instance, emerging adults are not "late adolescents" because they have completed puberty and obtained the legal status of an adult; in parallel, emerging adults are also not "young adults" because most have not undergone the discrete role transitions typically associated with adulthood and feel they are adults in some ways but not others. In 2004, Arnett proposed a full theory on emerging adulthood and articulated five distinguishing features. First, *identity exploration* was acknowledged as the central feature, because being free from adult roles and mostly independent from parents facilitates the prime opportunity to self-explore. Compared to adolescence, however, identity explorations during this stage are focused and deliberate, as they are geared toward preparation for adult roles. For example, attending college provides the opportunity to pursue multiple educational choices and reframe ones' beliefs and values outside of the influence of parents. Given the centrality of identity exploration, emerging adulthood is also considered to be a time of *self-focus*. The freedom associated with identity explorations can also make this period a *time of possibility, instability*, and *feeling in-between*. As such, emerging adults are optimistic about their future because they have the chance to "transform their lives, to free themselves from an unhealthy family environment, and to turn their lives in a new and better direction" (Arnett 2006, p. 13). Simultaneously, emerging adults feel instable because they are in-between adolescence and adulthood. For instance, Arnett (2001) found that 46% of emerging adults (aged 20–29) reported they felt they had reached adulthood compared to 86% of midlife adults (aged 30–55) and 19% of adolescents (aged 13–19). This ambiguity stems from the intangible qualities of the three criteria deemed most important for adulthood, specifically accepting responsibility for oneself, making independent decisions, and becoming financially independent. As previously mentioned, these criteria are fundamentally linked to parents.

Other prominent scholars have also written about the transition from adolescence to young adulthood (Settersten et al. 2008; Settersten 2012; Shanahan 2000). Like Arnett (2004), these scholars note how the passage to adulthood has assumed a new meaning for those on the journey as well as those guiding the journey, especially parents who are now charged with facilitating a successful passage. Recently, Settersten (2012) discussed three hallmarks that distinguish the young adult years today: (a) the need to manage uncertainty, (b) the need for fluid self-definitions, and (c) the need for interdependence. Settersten noted the need to manage uncertainty was the most important, as the ability to constructively negotiate one's responses to the "changing opportunity structures, limited support of the welfare state, and the absence of normative controls and clear life scripts" (p. 12) that currently dominate the young adult years is important for a successful transition to adulthood. The need for fluid self-definitions, or being open to a wide array of possible selves, was also viewed as vital for maximizing success amidst the fluctuating social and economic spheres of the young adult years. These hallmarks are similar to Arnett's (2004) features of emerging adulthood as an age of instability, possibility, and identity explorations. Importantly, Settersten (2012) argued for interdependence, or the provision of support to actualize the passage into adulthood:

> One could argue, in fact, that the sheer number and density of experiences that accompany the transition to adulthood, and the degree to which this juncture also involves movement into and out of multiple social institutions, leave it unparalleled in its significance relative to other life periods—and in its power to shape the subsequent life course (p. 22).

Settersten (2012) identified parents as key figures for supporting interdependence, which echoes Arnett's (2004) perspective that parents continue to represent key socialization agents during emerging adulthood because developing self-sufficiency depends on parental support. Taken together, this literature indicates that multiple scholars acknowledge and agree upon the existence of the distinct life stage of emerging adulthood, its developmental tasks, and the integral position that parents assume during this time. Thus, emerging adulthood should be viewed as "a new life stage rather than as a generational shift that will soon shift again" (Arnett and Schwab 2012, p. 2).

Higher Education Literature on Parental Involvement

Theories of college student development: where do parents fit? Traditional college student development theories place parents at the periphery of socialization influences, and instead focus on students' interactions with the university environment (e.g., Pascarella 1985). This focus reflects the historical time when these theories were constructed. The abandonment of the model of *in loco parentis* and the implementation of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) during the 1960s and 1970s redefined the relationship among students, parents, and institutions of higher education, in which students gained rights to control dissemination of their educational records to families. These shifts left little room for parents' roles in college student development theory, as students were to be viewed as adults (Henning 2007; Wartman and Savage 2008). Cohen's (1985) book, *Working with the Parents of College Students*, reflects this from the vantage point of student affairs professionals at that time: "We do not consider parents part of our client population" (p. 3).

In concert with the cultural and demographic shifts that brought about the developmental stage of emerging adulthood and the extension of active parenting throughout this period, college student development theories have increasingly incorporated the role of parents. This change in the balance of the student-institution-parent triad has been fueled by an increasing acknowledgement of FERPA as a barrier between institutions' efforts to communicate with parents (Kiyama et al. 2015), whom now primarily finance their child's education given the 150% increase in the average university tuition price alongside cuts to federal grant aid and state funding (Baum and Ma 2013). Combining the extension of active parenting that is normative during emerging adulthood with the perspective of families as valuable consumers of college education, a natural consequence is tension and uncertainty regarding how to share information with parents in the context of higher education when FERPA restricts institutions from doing so. To alleviate this tension and best support student success, there has been an intentional paradigm shift toward promoting collaborative relationships between parents and institutions. As Henning (2007) noted, institutions should now seek "in consortio cum parentibus, translated as 'in partnership with parents,'… to guide the work of student affairs professionals, including policy implementation, program development, and student interactions" (p. 551). Thus, in 2010, the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education established specific standards to guide the development and implementation of parent and family programs across the U.S. (CAS, 2012). As such, the current paradigm of these programs seeks to support student success and transition into the independent context of college via the incorporation of parents.

Despite this current acknowledgement of parents as key stakeholders or partners in student success, there has been conflict between college student development theories regarding parents' role. Chickering and Reisser (1993) noted that the primary task of acquiring autonomy during college first begins with a necessary separation from parents. This process of separation-individuation has been the prevailing perspective and postulates that developing emotional and functional independence from parents is integral to meeting the demands of the college context. Application of Bowlby's (1988) developmental theory of attachment to the study of college student development has challenged the separation-individuation model, as attachment theory postulates that a secure connection to parents is conducive to promoting autonomy across the lifespan. Findings from this work indicate that secure attachment relationships between students and parents enable students' confidence to explore the college environment and offer support during stressful times (Mattanah et al. 2011; Sorokou and Weissbrod 2005).

This debate has mostly been resolved as researchers have validated a model that views attachment and separation-individuation as complimentary and interrelated processes that facilitate student development (Mattanah et al. 2004; Schwartz and Buboltz 2004). Succinctly summed up in earlier work by Josselson (1987), this perspective reflects "the problem of not only becoming different but of becoming different and maintaining connection [to parents] at the same time" (p. 171). More recently, Lapsley and Woodbury (2015) attest to the power of integrating attachment and separation-individuation as they are both necessary for "successfully navigating the strange situation of emerging

adulthood…[because they] share the same task of constructing workable conceptions of self and other in a way that underwrites the capacity for autonomy, identity, and intimacy" (p. 148). Thus, the ongoing role of the family has since been incorporated into more current college student development theories (e.g., Perna and Thomas 2008). In sum, the parental role has transitioned from an external background factor to a core component in college student developmental theory. Despite these advances, it is important to note that a clear definition of parental involvement is not provided in these theories. Moreover, it is crucial to acknowledge that attachment to parents is a different construct than parental involvement: The former reflects the psychosocial development of an internal working model during infancy via parental sensitivity and responsiveness that translates into a lifespan pattern of interaction with one's social environment, and the latter reflects parent's current, active behaviors for supporting educational pursuits.

Nationwide efforts in higher education to assess parental involvement Parental involvement has become a focal research topic in higher education over the past decade, as universities have sought to handle the increasing presence of parents in college student's lives (Wartman and Savage 2008; Sax and Wartman 2010; Kiyama et al. 2015). Since 2003, the University of Minnesota Parent Program has conducted a biannual survey of parental programs in colleges and universities across the U.S. to document trends in the types services provided. Their most recent report revealed that from 2003 to 2015, the proportion of universities offering a parental/family orientation increased from 61 to 98.3%, and those with a parental website increased from 8.3 to 100% (Savage and Petree 2015). Universities vary in the placement (e.g., student affairs, enrollment management) and staffing (e.g., undergraduate or master's degrees ranging the fields of communication and psychology) of these programs. There is consistency in services, in that most provide information about admissions and the college transition and highlight campus resources to help students transition (e.g., obtaining counseling, joining clubs). Unfortunately, little is known about the developmental content of the programs including how parents can be involved to help their child adjust to college (Savage 2008). Furthermore, very few programs report being empirically grounded or engaged in conducting research to determine if parental participation in educational programming is related to student outcomes (Savage and Petree 2013). As previously mentioned, we view this as a serious mismatch between program implementation and research that needs to be addressed by the scholarly community at large.

While documenting structural changes in parental programs is important, it more so reflects a proxy for quantifying parental involvement during college. To address this gap, three large-scale and established surveys of college students added items on parental involvement to their surveys over the past ten years. In 2007, the Cooperative Institutional Research Program's (CIRP) annual Freshmen Survey included six items to examine incoming freshmen's perceptions of their satisfaction with their parent's involvement in college-related decisions (N = 375,000). Despite popular contentions of the over-involved "helicopter parent," overall results indicated most students reported their parents were involved the "right amount" (Pryor et al. 2007). For example, about 75% of students reported that their parents were involved the "right amount" in both assisting with college applications and choosing college courses. Interestingly, about one-fourth reported that their parents were involved "too little" in choosing courses. Although this research was a constructive step forward, it only elicited information from incoming freshmen, and thus did not capture involvement during the first year on campus. Additionally, because the items focused on satisfaction with involvement, they provided a narrow perspective on the characteristics and actual amount of parental involvement.

Also in 2007, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) added items to tap freshmen and seniors' reports of parental involvement, including the frequency, method, and topic of parent-student contact (N = 9000). About 70% of students reported that they communicated "very often" with their parents throughout the academic year, mostly via electronic means, and that personal issues, academic performance, and family matters were the main topics. Up to 28% of freshmen reported that their parents "sometimes" intervened with college officials to help solve problems. In 2006, the University of California Undergraduate Experience Study (UCUES) incorporated items to assess parental contact and involvement in academic decisions. Reports by researchers investigating the UCUES data (N = 10,760) have found that students frequently (i.e., "a few times a week") communicate with their parents via telephone, and that high levels of contact are negatively related to academic, social, and developmental outcomes (Harper et al. 2012). Regarding academic involvement, most students "agreed" that their parents were interested in their academic progress (67%) and emphasized obtaining good grades (60%). Freshmen reported the highest levels of academic involvement and contact (Wolf et al. 2009).

Recap of the current article's definition of parental involvement These large-scale investigations represent significant advancements in characterizing parental involvement in college at a descriptive level, and convey that parents and students communicate frequently, especially about academic and personal issues, and that parental-institutional interactions are somewhat commonplace among freshmen. Absent from this literature is a consensus on the

conceptual definition of parental involvement in the college context. Thus, in 2008, Wartman and Savage provided a working definition of parental involvement to fill this gap, and, as previously mentioned, we utilize it as a part of the foundation for our operational definition.

Specifically, we define parental involvement as a multidimensional construct, composed of three distinct involvement strategies including *parental support giving, parent-student contact*, and *parental academic engagement*. Developmental psychologists have also conducted research on these constructs over the past decade. While often studied in isolation, the accumulated scholarship on these constructs offers a more detailed description of the characteristics reflecting parental involvement during the college transition. Next, we review this body of literature.

Developmental Psychology Literature Characterizing Parental Involvement

Parental support giving Parents remain a source of tangible (e.g., financial, practical) and nontangible (e.g., advice, emotional, listening) support during emerging adulthood. A robust body of literature indicates that parents provide considerable financial support (Schoeni and Ross 2005; Yelowitz 2007) and frequently listen to their children and give them advice, typically around a few times a month, during emerging and young adulthood (Fingerman et al. 2016, 2009, 2010; Pettit et al. 2011). Theories of intergenerational support (Antonucci and Akiyama 1987; Becker 1981) identify four reasons for parents' continuance of support: (a) to help children in need (altruism), (b) to maximize reproductive success (evolution), (c) to derive support from children in older adulthood (exchange), and (d) to improve chances for success (investment). As such, Fingerman and colleagues (2009) found that parents provided more financial and practical support to youth in need (e.g., experienced financial or health problems, younger in age) and more listening and advice support to youth viewed as successful (e.g., educational or career achievement). Similarly, Pizzolato and Hicklen (2011) found that over half of their sample of college students reported frequent recruitment of their parents for consultation (e.g., listening and advice) about important decisions.

Longitudinal research has documented that parents provide support to youth undergoing transitions to foster progress across the adulthood transition, and that relationship qualities also play a key role in determining the provision of support (Mortimer 2012; Swartz et al. 2011). Swartz and colleagues (2011) found that parents acted as "scaffolding" and "safety-nets" to assist children en route to adulthood. For example, school attendance increased parents' provision of financial support by 52% and housing support by 36%, and marriage decreased the odds of providing financial and housing support by 50 and 35%, respectively. Higher levels of maternal closeness increased the odds of providing economic and housing support at age 24, leading the researchers to conclude that "those who were closer to their mothers also received other types of parental aid… that could have contributed to their ability to become self-sufficient" (p. 426). A prospective longitudinal study by Levitt, Silver, and Santos (2007) found that changes in support post-high school to college transition positively predicted and accounted for the most variance in post-transition relationship satisfaction with parents. Because post- and not pre-transition support was related to relationship satisfaction, the authors concluded that the college transition provided impetus for changes in family relationships. Levitt and colleagues (2007) also noted the integral nature of support for sustaining positive relationships into emerging adulthood: "The provision of additional parental support at this time thus enhances the young person's satisfaction with the parental relationship, whereas failure to provide needed support diminishes relationship satisfaction" (p. 61).

Across the board, researchers have documented a general decrease in both tangible and intangible support from late adolescence, through emerging adulthood, and into young adulthood (Cooney and Uhlenberg 1992; Hartnett et al. 2012). A recent study by Harnett and colleagues (2012) provided an important contribution to this literature by investigating if the declining age pattern of financial support was mediated by offspring needs, acquisition of adult identity, geographical distance, and emotional closeness. As hypothesized, declines in the frequency and amount of financial support accelerated from the late 20 s to early 30 s, and parents engaged in more frequent transfers of higher amounts of money to younger offspring (i.e., 18–22 year olds received $1000 over the past 12 months). Age of the child continued to be a strong predictor of these declines, even after controlling for parental and offspring background characteristics and including alternative explanations (i.e., adult identity statuses, geographical distance, and emotional closeness) linking age to changes in financial support. Offspring needs (e.g., employment and student statuses), however, did slightly attenuate the effect of age on financial support, leading the authors to conclude that while age remained the strongest predictor of declines in financial support, "this decline [was] partially explained by the fact that the needs of offspring decline with age" (p. 27).

Parent-student contact Rapid advances in communication technologies, such as email, cell phones, smartphones, Skype, texting, and social networking sites, have facilitated families the opportunity to maintain good relationships and provide support, even when geographically distant (Lefkowitz et al. 2012). Case in point,

the Pew Research Center (2017) recently reported that 100% of 18–29 year olds in the U.S. own a cell phone, and that and 97% of them use their phones primarily to send and receive text messages with friends and family (Duggan and Rainie 2012). These same sources found 98% of adults ages 30–64 in the U.S. own a cell phone, and 82% of them also primarily use their phones to text. The omnipresent nature of these modern technologies, especially the cell phone and smartphone, has provided parents and emerging adults with a relatively inexpensive means to engage in immediate and frequent communication. This point is especially relevant for college students, who are most often living away from home for the first time in their lives (Arnett 2006). A growing body of literature has documented that college students and their parents utilize the internet and the cell phone to communicate on a frequent basis, and that most students use communication technologies to support positive family relationships (Aoki and Downes 2003; Chen and Katz 2009; Fingerman et al. 2016; Gentzler et al. 2011; Stafford and Hillyer 2012; Smith et al. 2012). For example, Chen and Katz (2009) found that students reported that their cell phone was the most important tool for keeping in touch with their parents because it enabled direct and instantaneous contact, despite geographical distance. Students also reported that the cell phone facilitated better relationships with their parents, as it provided an avenue to share experiences and garner emotional and material support when needed without infringing upon their independence.

Researchers have sought to quantify the frequency of contact between students and parents across these communication technologies. For instance, Hofer (2008) found that on average freshmen and sophomores communicated with their parents 13 times a week, mostly via cell phone, which led the author to call the cell phone an "electronic tether." Similarly, up to 60% of students in the 2007 UCUES study reported phone contact at least few times a week, with lower level students reporting the highest levels of contact (Wolf et al. 2009). A recent study utilizing a student-athlete sample found that about 40% reported daily texting contact with parents and that freshmen reported the highest levels of overall contact frequency (Dorsch et al. 2016). Student needs also seem to prompt differential contact, as Sorokou and Weissbroad (2005) found that freshmen utilized the cell phone and internet to initiate need-based contact (e.g., material and emotional needs) a few times a semester and non-need based contact (e.g., touching base to maintain connections) up to a few times a week. Studies have also found positive links between contact frequency, parental support giving, and relationship quality, indicating that contact provides a means for support giving, which also promotes higher levels of relationship satisfaction with parents (Gentzler et al. 2011; Gordon et al. 2007).

Parental academic engagement Three studies have described parental academic engagement during college as a singular factor consisting of parents' assistance with course selection, discussion of course material, interest in academic progress, and emphasis on good grades (Dorsch et al. 2016; Harper et al. 2012; Wolf et al. 2009). Results from two of these studies revealed freshmen reported the highest level of parental academic engagement and seniors reported the lowest levels (Harper et al. 2012; Wolf et al. 2009). At the item level, it is important to note that most students reported their parents engaged in behaviors that emphasized academic performance rather than academic learning. For instance, up to 65% of students "strongly agreed" their parents emphasized getting good grades, while up to 22% of students "strongly agreed" they had discussions with their parents about what they were learning in their classes (Wolf et al. 2009). From this report, because only about 13% of students "strongly agreed" that their parents were involved in choosing courses, it also seems that most parents are interested in academic success and that students "generally do not view them as encroaching on their academic decision making in college" (Wolf et al. 2009, p. 346). Although results from Dorsch et al. (2016), which utilized a student-athlete sample, did not find class-level differences, they did find that 56% "strongly agreed" their parents were engaged in their academic endeavors.

Discussion

The exponential increase in parent and family programs over the past 20 years on campuses across the U.S. is a strong indicator that parental involvement has become a prominent and important part of the college transition (Savage and Petree 2015; Wartman and Savage 2008). Despite this recognition of parental involvement as a viable tool to promote student success, there is little agreement in the scholarly community regarding its theoretical and operational definitions, which creates a significant gap between program implementation and research (Sax and Wartman 2010). Investigating the characteristics and influence of parental involvement is warranted to identify the best strategies that parents can employ to support their emerging adult's academic success and socioemotional development during the transition to college. This research is especially timely, considering the noteworthy increase in the diversity of the students and their paths taken to pursue higher education (Snyder et al. 2016). As such, the current article aimed to review and integrate theoretical and empirical literatures across higher education and developmental psychology to articulate a clear definition of parental

involvement that best aligned with the developmental period of emerging adulthood and the context of the college transition. By assimilating these literatures, we defined parental involvement as a multidimensional construct composed of *parental support giving, parent-student contact*, and *parental academic engagement*, and provided a unified theoretical perspective on how changes in parental involvement are inherently linked to emerging adults' development of self-sufficiency via integration in the autonomy-supportive context of college (e.g., Arnett 2000; Elder 1984; Tanner 2006). This integrated theoretical and operational definition of parental involvement during the college transition is the first of its kind, and is thus a novel and integral contribution to the field's pursuit of more constructive and consistent research on this construct. Below, we conclude with a brief review of research linking parental involvement and student outcomes and focus on key limitations to formulate feasible next-steps for future work.

Links Between Parental Involvement and Student Outcomes

The transition to college involves a salient ecological shift in emerging adults' lives that has important implications for shaping student outcomes, notably academic success, well-being, and self-sufficiency. The stress associated with encountering higher academic demands and adjusting to moving away from home can place freshmen's academic success and psychological well-being at risk. For example, researchers have documented that freshman year GPA is significantly lower than high school GPA (e.g., Wintre et al. 2011). Freshmen also report notable increases in depression (e.g., Dyson and Renk 2006) and engagement in risky behaviors (e.g., Wetherill et al. 2010), especially drinking (e.g., Johnston et al. 2010) across the transition to college. Transitioning to college provides youth with the opportunity to develop individuation, which is a gradual process of developing self-sufficiency whereby youth become less dependent on emotional (e.g., need for approval) and functional (e.g., managing daily affairs) support from parents (Arnett 2000, 2015a; Hoffman 1984; Lapsley and Woodbury 2015). Upperclassmen report higher levels of individuation than lowerclassmen (e.g., Wachs and Cooper 2002).

Researchers have explored parenting as a means for promoting positive adjustment to college. For example, a high provision of emotional support has been positively linked to academic outcomes including GPA and intentions to persist in college (e.g., Cabrera et al. 1999; Cutrona et al. 1994). Conversely, freshmen who frequently communicate with their parents and whose parents frequently contact the university to intervene on their behalf tend to have lower GPAs (Shoup et al. 2009). A recent study by Hamilton (2013) also found that parental financial support had a negative effect on GPA, leading the author to conclude that this funding enabled satisficing, or "the ability to meet the criteria for [academic] adequacy on multiple fronts, rather than optimizing their chances for [academic success]" (p. 1). Studies have also documented that high levels of support and communication with parents is related to lower levels of depression and engagement in risky behaviors. For instance, Mounts, Valentiner, Anderson, and Boswell (2006) found that more social, academic, and financial support during the college transition was associated with less loneliness and depression among freshmen. Small, Morgan, Abar, and Maggs (2011) found that talking with parents for as little as 30 minutes across the course of 2 weeks was linked to a 32% decrease in the likelihood of engaging in heavy drinking. Importantly, LaBrie and Cail (2011) found that parental contact, especially among mothers and daughters, buffered the effect of peer norms on drinking behaviors among freshmen. With a few exceptions (i.e., Dorsch et al. 2016; Cullaty 2011; Kolkhorst et al. 2010), however, there is very little research exploring the links between involvement and individuation. Qualitative work (Cullaty 2011; Kolkhorst et al. 2010) has found that students convey parental support aids their autonomy development, but that the amount of support recruited was more than expected. Quantitative research by Dorsch et al. (2016) found that models including parental involvement (i.e., support, contact, athletic engagement, and academic engagement) uniquely predicted about 34% of the variance in student-athletes' emotional and functional independence. Importantly, parental involvement negatively predicted both types of independence, leading the authors to conclude that the "results strongly imply more parental involvement may inhibit the developmental task of becoming autonomous for student-athletes during emerging adulthood" (Dorsch et al. 2016, p. 21).

Current Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

A key limitation to the previously reviewed research on the three facets of parental involvement and their links to student outcomes is that most of this literature did not assess involvement factors beyond one or two measurement occasions. Thus, the ability to estimate intra-and inter-individual change over time was negated, and prevented assessing how changes in involvement may be related to changes in student outcomes in this body of research. Longitudinal research that includes multiple waves of data is needed to accurately assess how parental support, contact, and academic engagement change across the first year in college. Only through this analytical design can true change in parental involvement be distinguished from its measurement error (Singer and Willet 2003). This design

is also most appropriate for capturing if and how change processes in involvement are linked, reciprocally and concurrently, to changes in student outcomes across the same time spectrum. Importantly, the theoretical foundations for the current review, notably life course theory and the dual dynamic model of family relationships (Elder 1984), call for the necessity of longitudinal research.

Another key limitation to this research is the adherence to *what* constitutes parental involvement, as most studies referred to parental support, contact, and academic engagement by either that specific construct's name or by more broad terms such as parental engagement or relationship quality. As initially mentioned in our introduction, this critique is at the heart of our review and, given our theoretical underpinnings, we highly recommend scholars across all disciplines who study college students and parents consider involvement to be composed of all three facets. By consistently operationalizing parental involvement as a multifaceted construct in singular studies, the field can begin to accumulate a clearer picture of the quality and quantity of parental support, contact, and academic engagement. Furthermore, because the studies reviewed seem to suggest differential associations between involvement factors and student outcomes, including all three facets as predictors of student outcomes in future work will also help clarify what types of involvement are linked to a variety of student outcomes.

In sum, by modeling associations between the change trajectories of each facet of parental involvement and student outcomes, future researchers can fill a large gap in the literature on the role of parental involvement across the first year in college. These analyses could, for instance, begin to unpack if the negative associations documented in previous literature between involvement and academic achievement (e.g., Shoup et al. 2009) and individuation (e.g., Dorsch et al. 2016) are child-driven effects. Determining if parents become involved because they perceive academic difficulties or struggles with autonomy, versus if lower levels of academic achievement and self-sufficiency are the result of increases in involvement, is crucial for informing both research and practice with emerging adults transitioning to college. Such information would thus be integral to incorporate into the college parental programs delivered nationwide, especially given the lack of evidence-based programming (Savage and Petree 2013).

Conclusion

Given the strong theoretical rationale for the continuance of parental involvement during emerging adulthood, and the positive implications associated with involvement evidenced by the empirical research reviewed, we believe that parents can be utilized as a low-cost resource and the development of parental programming across the nation is justified. However, to best understand how to leverage the positive aspects of parental involvement, we call upon researchers across the social sciences to investigate our multidimensional definition of parental involvement, which consists of parental support giving, parent-student contact, and parental academic engagement. By collaborating on this research and maintaining consistency in defining parental involvement, we can finally begin to match the longstanding literature soundly assessing parental involvement during childhood and adolescence. This scholarship will be integral to determining how involvement may change over the transition to college and, most importantly, identifying how these changes may be linked to changes in student outcomes.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

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