
Parental Communication and Support During the College Transition

Madeline E. Smith

Technology & Social Behavior
Northwestern University
Evanston, IL 60208 USA
madsesmith@u.northwestern.edu

Abstract

Moving from their parents' home to college is a stressful transition for many students. Social support from parents can help to minimize the impacts of stress during this time, but is less accessible once students have moved away. In this paper I explore the ways in which students communicate with and receive support from their parents during the students' transition to college. Today's social media provide more opportunities for communication with parents, which can provide useful support for students as well as limit their independence. Thus, a careful balance between moving on and staying connected is required.

Author Keywords

Social support, college transition, parents, emerging adulthood, social media.

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

Introduction

For many young adults, going to college is the first time they move away from their family homes. While students explore newfound freedom of their college campus they must also adjust to a new environment, form new friendships, and keep up with rigorous

coursework. As with many other major life changes, this transition is often stressful which can have negative health consequences [7]. These negative effects can be minimized by social support from friends and family [3]. However, moving away from home for college separates students from their existing social support networks and makes such supportive resources less accessible.

In this position paper I explore the ways in which students use technology to communicate with their parents after moving away from home to attend college. I consider the ways in which this mediated communication can provide useful social support to help students through the college transition. I also discuss potential downsides to this communication and propose directions for future research in this area.

Transition to College and Social Support

As I mentioned above, the transition to college is a major life change for many students. As freshmen they are thrown into a new environment where they are expected to perform academically while forming new relationships and becoming independent adults. For many students this is an extremely stressful time plagued by homesickness, peer pressure, and loneliness. This transition is also associated with increases in depressive symptoms [4] and risk behaviors, such as alcohol and alcohol use as well as sex with multiple partners [6]. While many students are able to overcome these challenges and succeed in college, over 40% of those students who begin bachelors degree programs fail to graduate [12].

Social support from family and friends can have a buffering effect and prevent or minimize the negative

effects of stress [3] and reduce the loneliness many students feel during this time [9]. Unfortunately, students frequently move away from home to attend college, which separates them geographically from the people that they have come to rely on for such support. Many people turn to mediated communication technologies, such as e-mail and phone calls, to maintain these relationships and receive social support after moving [10]. Such mediated social support can significantly reduce the impact of stress from disruptive life events [8]. Thus, the negative effects and stress associated with the transition to college may be lessened by social support received through communication with distant friends and family members.

Although it is possible to receive social support from both weak and strong ties, I focus here on social support received from parents. For many students, starting college is the first time they have lived away from their parents. This distance from parents can be useful for students as they become independent adults [5], while maintaining a good relationship with their parents can help students transition successfully [13]. Students today use a variety of social media, such as mobile phones, video call services, and social networking sites, which allow them to keep in touch with their parents and sustain these relationships from a distance.

Communication Practices and Changing Relationships Between Students and Parents

In interviews with college freshmen [11] we found that students use many types of social media to communicate with their parents. While convenience and accessibility make mobile phones an appealing option,

students also considered additional factors when selecting which medium to use for a specific exchange. Commonly the students' preferences were considered alongside their parents' when making such decisions. For instance, although some students preferred the rich connection of a video call, if their parents did not have access to video equipment or the technical skills to operate it the students would switch to another medium. Students also considered the social norms of the medium and its alignment with the type of interaction they were planning before deciding on a tool. For instance, many students described email as a formal, impersonal medium that they preferred to use for task-specific purposes, such as sending financial aid forms, but felt was inappropriate for deeply emotional conversations.

While use of these social media allowed students to maintain relationships with their parents after starting college, these relationships were often changed during this transition. Some students were saddened by the distance between themselves and their parents and struggled to adjust to less frequent communication. Other students saw benefits to less frequent communication that was more treasured and led to fewer arguments. A number of these participants felt that their relationships with their parents had improved since they had moved away as their independence increased and they were less on their parents for support. These findings led us to conclude that students' communication with their parents both shapes and is shaped by these changing relationships [11].

In a small follow-up study I individually interviewed three college students and one parent for each. Semi-

structured interviews lasted approximately one-hour long and were conducted via phone or video calls roughly two months after the students began college. Interviewing both students and their parents allowed for a more nuanced understanding of these changing relationships and communication practices. Here I describe two relevant themes that emerged from open-coding of these initial interviews.

The first major theme is the changing expectations around the amount of communication and support between students and their parents. While students and parents communicate with each other less frequently after the student begins college, they are communicating more frequently than in previous generations. Parents reflected on the differences in the ways they communicate with their children today and how they communicated with their own parents in their own college days. Parents and students alike felt that the expectations of communication have increased because it is now easier to communicate across distances. Although it is technically possible to communicate nearly all the time, some students and parents made conscious efforts to limit the amount of communication in order to encourage the student to be more independent.

The second relevant theme that emerged is related to the shifting dynamics of the parent-child relationship. The transition to college takes place during a period of emerging adulthood wherein students are beginning to accept responsibility for themselves and starting to make independent decisions [1]. While many parents strictly enforced rules when their children were living at home, once the children moved away for college these expectations are often relaxed. The students described

turning to their parents for support and advice when making decisions such as deciding which courses to enroll in or whether to make a large purchase. The students no longer felt confined to obey their parents', though their lingering reliance on their parents sometimes conflated this independence. For example, one student described having the freedom to spend her money anyway she wished, but also being aware that their parents monitor the statements for her custodial bank account. Thus while students are actively taking on more independent roles, they are often still tied to and reliant upon their parents support.

Discussion and Future Directions

The above findings illuminate a few of the complex ways in which new college students begin to transform into independent adults while also hanging on to their parents for some support. Both the expanding technological landscape and the students' emerging adulthood change students' use of social media for communication with their parents during this transition. The wealth of communication technology available today encourages more connection with parents than was available in previous generations. This increased communication allows parents to support their children even after the children have moved away from home. Such support can buffer some of the stress that students experience during the college transition and have can have positive outcomes for the students both socially and academically [13].

There are also developmental benefits that students' derive by increasing their independence during this time. Some of the students and parents that I interviewed recognized the importance of reducing the students' dependence on their parents and described

conscious efforts to limit the amount of communication between them. Others described similar changes in their relationship even without the conscious effort. However, this is unlikely the case with all families. Some parents may see the ubiquity of social media as reason to communicate with their college-aged children as much as possible. Such "helicopter parenting" can encourage the student to continue relying on their parents for support rather than developing his or her own independence.

Thus increased communication between parents and students has the potential to be both beneficial and detrimental for the students' emerging adulthood and development. In my future work I aim to study how support from parents can benefit students during the college transition while considering the potential for negative consequences of too much support. Ultimately I plan to develop a tool to help students access social support from their distant family members during the transition to college. To do this I first need a deeper understanding of the benefits and limitations of such family social support as provided by existing tools.

Much of the social support literature emphasizes the benefits of one's perceived social support, even when not associated with enacted social support. In future work I plan to explore how students may benefit from the awareness that their parents are available to provide support if needed without directly communicating with them. Recent work by Bales and Lindley [2] showed that new college students derive a sense of connection to home through displaying and interacting with meaningful belongings. Based on this, a useful question for future research is whether this sense of connectedness can increase students'

perceptions of social support without requiring them to directly communicate with their parents?

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Jeremy Birnholtz and Steve Jackson for their advising during various stages of this work, as well as Mary Nguyen, Charles Lai, Gilly Leshed and Eric Baumer for their significant contributions to [11]. I also thank NSF for supporting my work through a Graduate Research Fellowship under Grant DGE-0824162 and participants for sharing their stories.

References

- [1] Arnett, J. Emerging adulthood: A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties. *American psychologist* 55, 5 (2000), 469–480.
- [2] Bales, E.S. and Lindley, S. Supporting a sense of connectedness: meaningful things in the lives of new university students. In *proc. CSCW '13*, ACM Press (2013), 1137–1146.
- [3] Cohen, S. and Wills, T.A. Stress, social support, and the buffering hypothesis. *Psychological Bulletin* 98, 2 (1985), 310–357.
- [4] Dyson, R. and Renk, K. Freshmen adaptation to university life: Depressive symptoms, stress, and coping. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* 62, 10 (2006), 1231–1244.
- [5] Flanagan, C., Schulenberg, J., and Fuligni, A. Residential setting and parent-adolescent relationships during the college years. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 22, 2 (1993), 171–189.

- [6] Fromme, K., Corbin, W.R., and Kruse, M.I. Behavioral risks during the transition from high school to college. *Developmental Psychology* 44, 5 (2008), 1497–1504.
- [7] Holmes, T.H. and Rahe, R.H. The social readjustment rating scale. *Journal of psychosomatic research* 11, (1967), 213–218.
- [8] Lewandowski, J., Rosenberg, B.D., Jordan Parks, M., and Siegel, J.T. The effect of informal social support: Face-to-face versus computer-mediated communication. *Computers in Human Behavior* 27, 5 (2011), 1806–1814.
- [9] Mattanah, J.F., Ayers, J.F., Brand, B.L., and Brooks, L.J. A Social Support Intervention to Ease the College Transition: Exploring Main Effects and Moderators. *Journal of College Student Development* 51, 1 (2010), 93–108.
- [10] Shklovski, I., Kraut, R., and Cummings, J. Keeping in touch by technology: maintaining friendships after a residential move. In *proc. CHI '08*, ACM Press (2008), 807–816.
- [11] Smith, M.E., Nguyen, D.T., Lai, C., Leshed, G., and Baumer, E.P.S. Going to College and Staying Connected: Communication Between College Freshmen and Their Parents. In *proc. CSCW '12*, ACM Press (2012), 789–798.
- [12] US Department of Education. *The Condition of Education 2011*. National Center for Education Statistics, 2012.
- [13] Wintre, M.G. and Yaffe, M. First-Year Students' Adjustment to University Life as a Function of Relationships with Parents. *Journal of Adolescent Research* 15, 1 (2000), 9–37.