Connecting Students and Families for Support During the College Transition

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Abstract

My dissertation work focuses on increasing students' perceptions of family support as they adjust to college, a challenging and often stressful life transition. This project draws on research in social support, college transitions, emerging adulthood, and family communication as well as my background in computer science and communication studies. I will be designing, building, and evaluating a mobile application that connects new college students to their families. Specifically, the app I design will provide students with family awareness in order to remind them of their existing family support systems and increase their perceptions of family support while they are adjusting to college.

Author Keywords

College Transition, Social Support, Family Communication, Mobile App Design

ACM Classification Keywords

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

Introduction & Background

When they arrive on campus, first-year students are thrown into a new environment where they are expected to simultaneously perform academically, form new relationships, and become independent adults. This can be an extremely stressful time plagued by homesickness, peer pressure, loneliness, and depression [4]. While many students are able to overcome these challenges and succeed in college, over 40% of students who begin bachelors degree programs fail to graduate within six years [13] and depression is a significant predictor of dropping out [5]. Thus, reducing stress during the college transition may reduce depression and dropout rates among new college students.

Social support [3] and even perceived social support, the "perception that one's network is ready to provide aid and assistance if needed" [14, p.78] can buffer the stressful effects of life transitions, including the transition to college. However, over 60% of students move more than 50 miles from home to attend college [11], which physically separates them from the people they

have come to rely on for such support. To bridge this physical gap, today's students use a variety of social media (including phone calls, texting, e-mail, Facebook, Skype, etc.) to maintain relationships with friends and family from home. These can increase perceptions of social support and reduce loneliness during the college transition [8,10].

Social networking sites (SNS), in particular, provide awareness of friends' activities, reminding students of their supportive friendships and increasing their perceptions of social support [9]. SNS may not be sufficient for maintaining perceptions of family support, however, since interactions with family members on these sites are much less frequent [2]. Additionally, study data I am currently analyzing suggest that students are not always comfortable seeking such support through existing social media. Students often worry about burdening others with their challenges instead of feeling comfortable seeking support from their social networks. To address this gap, my app will provide students with awareness of their family members with the goal of increasing their perceptions of family support.

While new college students adjust to living more independently and away from parental supervision, the relationships they have with their families evolve [7]. Supportive relationships with parents can smooth students' adjustment to college [15] and my prior work suggests that using social media with parents can help maintain and improve such relationships [12]. However, not all students have positive family relationships, and, for some, communication with family members may be more damaging than supportive. Additionally, students today communicate with their families more frequently than was historically possible, and it is un-

clear how this impacts students' development and college adjustment [5,6]. Thus, the goal of my app is to increase students' perceptions of family support, rather than communication frequency. My primary research question is: Can a mobile app be designed to reify students' family networks and increase their perceptions of family support during the college transition?

Work in Progress

To explore how students use technology for seeking and receiving support when faced with challenges during their transition to college, I recently conducted an interview study of 28 new college students. I am currently analyzing this data focusing on design implications and inspirations for my app.

One preliminary finding from this study points to the importance of ritualistic and routine communication. Participants commonly described challenges they were facing, such as academic, health, and financial challenges, that naturally came up in regular conversations with their family members; enabling them to receive support without requiring them to specifically seek it out. However, not all participants had such regular family interactions and some who did not avoided seeking support for fear of interrupting their family members. Based on this finding, one design possibility is an app encouraging students to remotely participate in family rituals [1,3], such as dinner conversations. Participating in family rituals could provide regular interaction opportunities and occasions for seeking support. Alternatively, students may only need to be aware of activities going on at home to be reminded of their family support systems and increase their perceptions of support available from their families.

My interview data also suggest that many students are able to seek and receive support using a variety of existing social media. For example, some participants valued Facebook Messenger for quickly initiating conversations with friends available online, similar to walking down their dorm hallway to find a classmate to talk with face-to-face. Family members were less accessible on SNS and students were often concerned about interrupting others when considering seeking support. Thus, another design possibility for my app is to integrate with existing data sources such as calendars and SNS to provide awareness about family members' current availability so students can quickly decide whom to contact when they need support.

Next Steps

After completing a deeper analysis of this interview data, I will expand on these and other initial design ideas with sketches and prototypes, iteratively refining my design based on interview findings, feedback from students, and testing with families. Before choosing a single app concept to move forward with, I will conduct focus groups with new college students on my campus, building on the relationship I have already established with the new student experience office. During these sessions potential users will interact with app mock-ups and discuss their current family interactions to provide feedback on possible app features and concepts. I will also conduct group interviews with families of college-aged children in the area to ensure that my app design is likely to be used by other family members as well. I will continue to iteratively seek feedback from potential users and improve the design while implementing my final app.

My major dissertation study will be a longitudinal evaluation of the use and effectiveness of the app, to be conducted during the 2014-2015 academic year. New college students will be recruited, along with members of their families, to participate in the study. These participant groups will be randomly assigned to either the app or no-app experimental conditions. Groups in the app condition will be instructed to use the app and annotate data logs of their interactions with one another both within and beyond the app. Groups in the no-app condition will not use the app, but will similarly document their communication behaviors. Participating students will complete questionnaires at the beginning, middle, and end of the study period to measure their perceived social support, family relationships, stress levels, and adjustment to college. At the end of the study period, families will be interviewed as a group to explore the support and communication behaviors they engaged in and the whether the app supported those activities. Data will be analyzed to evaluate whether app use is associated with increased perceived social support, improved family relationships, decreased stress levels, and increased adjustment to college.

Expected Contributions

This research will yield both theoretical and practical implications. The findings from my dissertation studies will provide insights about the ways in which families communicate and support one another during stressful times, the value of family support and communication during emerging adulthood, and the role of communication technologies in these processes. These findings will be of interest to family communication scholars as well as student affairs researchers and college administrators. The design implications from this work will also be relevant for designers of communication technologies

and social support systems. Finally, the aim of this work is to help ease the transition to college for students in order to ultimately help students to succeed in college and beyond.

Doctoral Colloquium Participation

As a participant in the CSCW Doctoral Colloquium, I will both benefit from others' feedback and provide helpful feedback to my peers. At that time I will be finalizing my app and evaluation study designs, which will be an excellent time for me to get feedback from a diverse group of researchers at the Doctoral Colloquium. In particular, methodological feedback about my study, such as which survey measures to include and how best to analyze the data, would be particularly beneficial. I would also benefit from conversations about framing my work for diverse audiences as I prepare to go on the job market. Additionally, my training in both social and technical fields will help me to provide feedback for other student participants and I am excited about continuing to build connections with other researchers in the CSCW community.

Acknowledgements

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