

Staying Connected: Supportive Communication During the College Transition

Madeline E. Smith

Technology & Social Behavior
Northwestern University
Evanston, IL USA

1 Introduction

While it is typical for students in the United States to live with their families in high school, many move out of their family homes to attend college (Pryor et al., 2012). This chapter focuses on the transition to college for residential college students, a major life change for the many students who move away from their family homes for the first time (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Holmes & Rahe, 1967). When they arrive on campus, first-year students often experience a dramatically new environment, one in which they are expected to simultaneously perform academically, form new relationships, and become independent adults. This transition can be an extremely stressful one, plagued by homesickness, peer pressure, loneliness, and depression (Dyson & Renk, 2006). While many students are able to overcome these challenges and succeed, more than 40% of students who begin bachelors degree programs at four-year institutions fail to graduate from those programs within six years (Kena et al., 2014), and depression is a significant predictor of dropping out (Eisenberg, Golberstein, & Hunt, 2009). Reducing stress during the transition to college might help reduce experiences of depression and, in doing so, support emerging adults on their successful journey toward adulthood.

Social support (Cohen & McKay, 1984) can buffer the stressful effects of life changes, including the transition to college (Mattanah, Ayers, Brand, & Brooks, 2010). However, more than 60% of students move more than 50 miles from home to attend college (Pryor et al., 2012), physically separating them from family, the people most young adults rely on for significant social support (Licitra-Kleckler & Waas, 1993; Taylor, Doane, & Eisenberg, 2013). Today's college students use a variety of communication technologies (phone calls, texting, email, Facebook, Skype, and others) to communicate and maintain relationships with family members at home (Smith, Nguyen, Lai, Leshed, & Baumer, 2012). Such communication technologies can be used to provide social support just as effectively as face-to-face communication (Lewandowski, Rosenberg, Jordan Parks, & Siegel, 2011; Mikal, Rice, Abeyta,

& DeVilbiss, 2013) and students' use of communication technology during their transition to college is associated with successful college adjustment and perceptions of social support (DeAndrea, Ellison, LaRose, Steinfield, & Fiore, 2012; Gray, Vitak, Easton, & Ellison, 2013).

During the transition to college, many students are adjusting to living outside of direct parental supervision and dealing with changing family relationships (Lefkowitz, 2005). While supportive relationships with parents can smooth students' adjustment to college (Wintre & Yaffe, 2000) and distance from family can encourage the development of independence and autonomy (Arnett, 2000; Flanagan, Schulenberg, & Fuligni, 1993), overinvolved parents—often known as helicopter parents—can negatively impact students (LeMoyne & Buchanan, 2011). Finding the right balance is key, yet figuring out how to strike such a balance is not always clear or easy. What is clear is that students now communicate with their families more frequently than ever before (Chen & Katz, 2009), made possible by multiple affordable and accessible communication technologies. Yet, what remains unclear is how increased communication specifically impacts students' development and adjustment to college (Eisenberg, Golberstein, & Hunt, 2009; Hofer, 2008). This chapter reviews literature on college transitions, emerging adulthood, and social support and uses interview data to explore the role of mediated family communication in supporting new students during their transition to college.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Transition to College

Although beginning college can be an exciting opportunity for students, it also represents a major life transition. For many college students, arriving on campus is the first time they ever live away from their families. The transition to college involves a number of challenges, such as an unfamiliar environment, rigorous coursework, new peers and no parents to rely on. For some, it is an exciting opportunity to explore and enjoy freedom without the watchful eye of

parents. For others, the responsibilities of managing necessary life chores (laundry, cleaning, grocery shopping, and meal preparation) while also successfully balancing the new academic and social expectations is a struggle.

Life changes can have negative impacts on individual health and well-being (Rahe, Meyer, Smith, Kjaer, & Holmes, 1964; Scully, Tosi, & Banning, 2000). Holmes and Rahe (1967) identified 43 separate life events that are likely to cause illness, many of which occur as part of the transition to college, including: “changing to a new school,” “change in living conditions,” “change in working hours or conditions,” “change in residence,” “change in financial state,” and “change in sleeping habits.” Because new college students typically experience multiple and significant life changes, it is not surprising that the transition is viewed as one of the most difficult emerging adults face, and one that has been extensively studied (Fromme, Corbin, & Kruse, 2008; Gray et al., 2013; Kerr, Johnson, Gans, & Krumrine, 2004; Smith & Zhang, 2010; Taylor et al., 2013).

The adjustment to college is multidimensional, which can make it even trickier for students to navigate. Baker and Siryk (1984; 1986) introduced the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ), the four subscales of which measure students’ academic, emotional, social, and institutional adjustment. More than 30 years of research reveals SACQ scores to be predictive of student retention (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994; Krotseng, 1992) and academic performance (Credé & Niehorster, 2011; Young & Koplrow, 1997), suggesting the importance of students’ adjustment for a successful college experience and eventual matriculation.

Research is quite conclusive: Reducing stress during the college transition is important to increase the odds of successful adjustment to, and success in, college (Dyson & Renk, 2006; Eisenberg et al., 2009; Fisher & Hood, 1987). Many of the changes students experience while adjusting to college increase students’ stress and, as a result, negatively impact their physical and psychological well-being (Rahe et al., 1964). Research suggests millennial college students are often ill-equipped to handle such stress (Bland, Melton, Welle, & Bigham, 2012). The students who experience psychological issues during the transition to college are more likely to be students who find the transition difficult (Dyson & Renk, 2006; Fisher & Hood, 1987). Students who experience depression during college also have lower GPAs and are more likely to drop out of college than students who do not (Eisenberg et al., 2009).

2.2 Social Support

Providing social support to individuals navigating stressful life transitions is key to their well-being and success. According to Albrecht (1984) social support is “the way in which communication behaviors tie an individual to his or her social environment and function to enable the individual to positively relate to that environment” (p. 5), and can take the form of providing solutions and/or reducing the perceived importance of a stressful situation (Cohen & McKay, 1984). Social support helps people in four primary ways (Wills, 1985): (1) emotional support helps individuals feel valued; (2) informational support helps individuals understand and cope with problematic events; (3) social companionship helps individuals feel less isolated; and (4) instrumental support provides needed resources or services.

Research on social support demonstrate its usefulness for guiding people through various stressful situations and life changes (Cobb, 1976; Cohen & Hoberman, 1983). Recently, researchers have identified a number of ways social support benefits emerging adults during the transition to college. For example, Friedlander, Ried, Shupak, and Cribbie (2007) found that social support from friends improves students’ adjustment to college. Similarly, Mattanah et al. (2010) developed an intervention that provided social support to new college students and effectively improved their adjustment to college. Further, Taylor, Doane, and Eisenberg (2013) found students with higher levels of perceived social support were less likely to internalize depression and anxiety symptoms. With the many benefits of social support on students’ adjustment to college, how can we ensure that students access these crucial social support resources?

Most college students in the United States are residential students, and more than 60% move more than 50 miles from their family homes to attend college (Pryor et al., 2012). Research suggests students who live on campus—geographically separated from friends and family members who have provided social support in the past—perceive less social support and are more lonely and anxious than commuter students (Larose & Boivin, 1998). Fortunately for on-campus students, communication technologies make it more possible and likely to receive social support from a distance (Lewandowski et al., 2011; Oh, Ozkaya, & LaRose, 2014). Further, some researchers argue that computer-mediated social support can be superior to face-to-face social support when managing the stress of life transitions for it enables people to keep in touch with their existing

support networks while also finding and connecting with new support networks (Mikal et al., 2013).

Social media researchers have demonstrated that engaging with friends through Facebook and similar digital platforms can provide students with social support and positively impact their adjustment to college (Gray et al., 2013). Further, social media-based interventions, such as providing incoming students with access to a social media site designed to enhance their feelings of community on campus, have been shown to improve their expectations of support and overall adjustment to college (DeAndrea et al., 2012). Since most college students today are frequent users of computer-mediated communication and social media (Smith, Rainie, & Zickuhr, 2011) and many actually experience anxiety when asked to refrain from using communication technologies for a few days (Skierkowski & Wood, 2011), the role of such communication technologies in social support for college students deserves further research attention.

2.3 Changing Family Relationships

Developmentally, college students are emerging adults; they no longer see themselves as adolescents but don't consider themselves entirely adults yet either (Arnett, 2000). Their relationships with parents can play a significant role in their adjustment to college; specifically, students benefit from parental relationships in which parents and students treat each other as equals and engage in open communication (Wintre & Yaffe, 2000). These relationships are shaped in the adolescent years (Aquilino, 2006) but also change during the transition to college (Parra, Oliva, & Reina, 2013). As students adjust to college, they are developing independence and must renegotiate roles and establish new dynamics with their parents, who often have different expectations about their own authority and their children's autonomy than do the students themselves (Kenyon & Koerner, 2009; Padilla-Walker, Nelson, & Knapp, 2014).

Students today use a wide range of digital communication tools to communicate with their parents while adjusting to college (Smith et al., 2012), and some research indicates that students who communicate more frequently with their parents are better able to adjust to college (Sarigiani, Trumbell, & Camarena, 2013). Although there are indeed many benefits of student-parent communication during students' transition to college, other research suggests this increased communication can be problematic. For instance, students who communicate with parents most frequently are less autonomous and less

satisfied both with their college experience and their relationships with parents (Hofer, 2008).

Many college students are supported financially by their parents, which can complicate expectations and renegotiation of parent-child power structures and roles (Aquilino, 2006). Additionally, parents today are often more involved in their children's college educations than were parents in previous generations (Cullaty, 2011). Many students find this additional involvement helpful and often consult their parents when making important decisions during college (Pizzolato & Hicklen, 2011). In some cases, parents can become overinvolved, hindering students' development and well-being (Schiffrin et al., 2014). Parents who are highly involved in the lives of their emerging adult children are commonly referred to as "helicopter parents"—well-meaning parents who are more intrusive and hover more than is considered developmentally appropriate given the age of their children (Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2012). Some evidence suggests college students with helicopter parents are more depressed and less satisfied with their lives than their peers (Schiffrin et al., 2014). Although family support can help students adjust to college, too frequent communication with parents might discourage independence and autonomy, a crucial developmental task of emerging adults.

3 Interview Study

As the literature reveals, adjusting to college is a major life change, and one that can be quite challenging. Simultaneously, twenty-first-century students frequently use communication technology to seek social support and to communicate with family members during their transitions to college. Because little is known specifically about how new college students use communication technologies to seek and receive social support from family members, the following single research question guided this in-depth interview study:

RQ: How do first-year college students use communication technologies to seek and receive support from family members?

3.1 Participants and Methods

Twenty-eight first-year undergraduate students from a selective midwestern United States university participated in this study. Students were recruited with flyers on campus and social media posts, and were compensated with \$10 gift certificates to Amazon.com. All participants lived on campus at the time of the study and had grown up in the United States. Nineteen female students and nine male students participated; all were between the ages of 18

and 20 ($M = 19.31$). Students' hometowns ranged from 16 to 1730 miles from campus ($M = 539.76$). Five participants were undecided about their majors; the remaining 23 reported majors across a diverse range of fields including biology, cognitive science, engineering, journalism, and music. Participants' ethnicity reflected the racial breakdown of the overall freshmen class: Caucasian ($n = 15$), Asian ($n = 6$), Latino ($n = 4$) and African American ($n = 3$).

Each interview was semi-structured, followed an establish protocol, and was conducted by the author in a private room on campus between April and June 2013. Interviews began with general questions about the student, their family, and the student's overall adjustment to college. Participants were then asked to discuss specific situations that were stressful or challenging for them during their college transition. For each such situation, the students were then asked to describe what made the situation challenging, if/when they felt better about it, with whom they talked to about it, what (if any) technology they used to communicate with others about the stressor(s), and how/if those people were helpful or not helpful. At the end of the interview participants were asked about their general strategies for seeking social support and relieving stress.

After the interview, participants completed a short survey including demographic questions and questions about their communication technology practices. Specifically, students were asked how often (on an eight-item Likert scale from "never" to "multiple times a day") and with whom (romantic partners, close friends, other friends, acquaintances, parents, siblings, other family members, and other people) they used various communication technologies (phone calls, email, text messaging, instant messaging, video calling, social network sites, social games, and collaboration tools). Interviews lasted between 32 and 60 minutes ($M = 48:02$); all were audio recorded and fully transcribed for analysis, resulting in more than 23 hours of recorded audio and 411 pages of typed transcripts.

Interview transcripts were iteratively reviewed and coded to identify the themes presented next. The author first read through the transcripts and listened to the audio recordings using open-coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to identify themes in the data related to the research question. Next, notes were compared across interviews to identify themes from the codes, after which interview transcripts were reviewed again to identify sections of the interviews related to each code. This process was repeated as new themes emerged to locate all instances related to each theme. Spreadsheets were used to track codes and interviewee comments. Each transcript was then reread to identify

each situation discussed. These situations were then coded to identify the type of situation, whom the interviewee sought support from, and which type(s) of communication technologies were used. Results presented in this chapter focus on themes emergent in the data, including the stressful/difficult situations students faced, their use of communication technologies, and support-seeking practices. Specific examples from the interviews are used to illustrate these themes. All names have been changed to protect participant confidentiality.

3.2 Results

Key Findings

There are several key findings from this study. First, students face diverse challenges while adjusting to college—some directly related to the college transition, and others unrelated but made more difficult by the stressful adjustment process. Second, students consider a number of factors when determining which communication technology to use, including the richness of the medium, the privacy available in their current physical environment, and the preferences of their communication partners. Third, communicating with family members regularly provides students with opportunities for seeking and receiving support. And finally, students use communication technologies to maintain connections with and seek support from a variety of contacts, everyone from close family members to weak ties in their social networks.

Challenges Faced

Each participant described between two and five challenges ($M = 2.61$) they faced during their adjustment to college, resulting in a collection of 73 detailed accounts of challenging situations students faced during the transition to college. As one might expect, the majority of challenges students faced were *college-related*. For purposes of this study, this theme reflects challenging or stressful situations related to both academics (e.g., taking exams, choosing a major, or registering for classes) and campus life (e.g., making new friends, living with roommates, getting involved in student organizations, and learning to do things independently that parents had done in the past). For example, David felt overwhelmed by midterm exams his first term:

The first round of the midterms months [were stressful]. Just because I wasn't used to the amount of stuff I had to do to get ready for them. And so it was very stressful. And I spent a lot of time just reading through my notes and doing problem sets constantly. That was very, very difficult. I found it was much easier the second time around. But that first time was just [sigh].

David’s experience illustrates a trend among participants: Stressful and challenging transitions were often considered stressful simply because they were unfamiliar. Once students had been on campus for a few months and were more accustomed to how things worked, the same situations were often no longer perceived to be as challenging.

Financial concerns emerged as another common theme among the challenging situations students described. Participants struggled with issues including finding a job on campus, learning to pay their own bills, and finding scholarships to help with tuition. Even students receiving financial support from their families expressed these concerns. For example, Kayla, a first-generation college student whose parents immigrated to the United States from Mexico, described a disagreement with her parents about her intended major (film) and the cost of college:

My major was a big point of contention between my parents and I. And they were like “You are not going to make any money. You’re going to like waste all this money that we’re using to pay for your education on like this lame ass major.” And I’m just like “Well, this is what I want to do. I don’t want to do anything else.” [. . .] So I guess I feel kind of guilty doing this to them.

Although many participants expressed gratitude at the support their parents provided, many also felt they owed their parents more involvement in college decisions, limiting the freedom and privacy they expected when they moved away from home.

While the previous examples highlight challenges students faced that were directly related to starting college, students also described many challenges not directly related, including health issues, parents divorcing, death of a loved one, outing of one’s sexual orientation, breakups, and technology failures. Although not caused by moving to campus, students often reported that being away from home exacerbated the difficulty of dealing with these already stressful situations. For example, Kelsey was diagnosed with an aggressive breast tumor on the day she moved to campus. A month later she flew over 700 miles back to her hometown to have the tumor removed. Kelsey described the significant impact of her diagnosis and subsequent surgery on her college adjustment:

It was hard to focus on school and just try and be positive. It definitely affected me in the beginning of school because it was just constantly on my mind. And then after surgery I couldn’t do anything, like I couldn’t drink or I couldn’t exercise with any physical movement for two weeks, and I had a big bandage. And that definitely held me back a lot.

Because Kelsey had just arrived on campus, she felt uncomfortable sharing her diagnosis with new friends; instead, she relied on long-distance support from her mother and boyfriend at home.

Although dealing with such a serious health condition is an extreme example, Kelsey’s case illustrates the complexity of dealing with additional challenges on top of adjusting to college. Many participants described struggling to develop close friendships when they first arrived on campus, and did not feel comfortable talking about deeply personal issues and seeking the support they needed from their new college friends.

Regardless of the specific issues they face, social support from friends and family members can benefit new college students. The next theme reveals the ways students choose and use technology to communicate with family members and receive support when these challenges arise during their transition to college.

Technology Choices

Students use a variety of technologies to communicate with others. Table 1 shows how often and with whom students reported using seven types of communication technologies. Social network sites, text messaging, and email were the most frequently used technologies overall, with more than 90% of

	Phone Calls	Email	Text Messaging	Instant Messaging	Video Calls	Social Network Sites	Social Games	Collaboration Tools
Frequency of Use								
Multiple times a day	42.9%	85.7%	89.3%	50.0%	-	96.4%	10.7%	14.3%
Once a day	25.0	10.7	3.6	10.7	3.6	-	7.1	17.9
Multiple times a week	25.0	3.6	7.1	10.7	3.6	-	14.3	28.6
Once a week	-	-	-	14.3	28.6	-	7.1	10.7
Multiple times a month	7.1	-	-	3.6	28.6	3.6	7.1	3.6
Once a month	-	-	-	-	17.9	-	10.7	3.6
Less frequently	-	-	-	-	17.9	-	32.1	17.9
Never	-	-	-	10.7	-	-	10.7	3.6
Use with Family Members								
Parents	100.0	64.3	89.3	53.6	78.6	71.4	32.1	7.1
Siblings	100.0	57.1	85.7	17.9	67.9	39.3	14.3	3.6
Other Family	57.1	28.6	75.0	46.4	35.7	64.3	17.9	7.1
Use With Non-Family								
Romantic Partner	21.4	21.4	25.0	3.6	7.1	25.0	3.6	-
Close Friends	92.9	96.4	96.4	89.3	78.6	100.0	60.7	71.4
Other Friends	28.6	7.1	32.1	14.3	17.9	25.0	7.1	3.6
Acquaintances	85.7	17.9	92.9	85.7	71.4	100.0	50.0	25.0
Other People	35.7	21.4	82.1	75.0	14.3	92.9	35.7	21.4
	35.7	96.4	60.7	39.3	-	57.1	10.7	60.7
	3.6	7.1	-	-	-	-	3.6	-

Table 1: Percentage of participants using each type of communication technology

students reporting using them at least once a day. However, patterns of use were different between family and nonfamily contacts. All participants reported using phone calls to communicate with family members and a majority reported using text messaging, video calls, social network sites, email, as well as instant messaging. Social games and collaboration tools (such as Words with Friends and Google Docs) were used by a majority of participants with their nonfamily contacts, but only a few participants indicated using those technologies with family members. These differences indicate that first-year college students use technology to communicate in nuanced ways.

Many participants preferred using phone calls and video calls to communicate with family members because of the rich, personal conversations these media afford, as suggested by Media Richness Theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986). This was particularly true when students sought support during stressful situations. Alexis discussed the difficulties of having conversations about challenging situations via technology:

[Facebook Messenger] is definitely not as personal; I think that might be part of the reason why it didn't feel like that deep of a conversation. And even with the phone it's kind of weird talking about a pretty serious life decision. It's kind of weird that I wasn't having that conversation with my parents just sitting down on the couch on the living room.

Like Alexis, many participants preferred to discuss these matters face-to-face, but resorted to using communication technologies since they were far from home and unable to communicate with family members in person.

Distance is not the only factor limiting students' abilities to have conversations with family members in the ways they desire; other factors outside their control often impact their choices as well. First-year college students typically live with roommates in on-campus residence halls, and the presence of roommates sometimes influenced the communication choices students made. Chelsea, for example, described an amicable, but not close, relationship with her roommate. When she wanted to discuss a topic with family members that she did not want her roommate to overhear, she had to find a quiet place on campus to have the phone call. Another student, Jenny, reported that although her roommate was a close friend, she also was frequently unable to make phone calls from her room:

My roommate she started doing crew, the rowing team. So she would go to sleep around 10 at night [before early morning practices]. And that was the time usually when I was done with schoolwork and I had gotten back from other activities. So at that point I couldn't really talk to them.

Participants also reported considering the preferences and availability of the family members with whom they were communicating when choosing which technology to use. College students revealed having more free time and flexibility in their schedules than do many of their family members. Although students often had free time between classes during the day, they generally communicated with their family members in the evenings, when parents were home from work. However, evening student organization meetings, time zone differences, and irregular work schedules added more complications. To avoid interrupting potentially busy family members, students often used asynchronous communication technologies, such as texting, as Ashley described:

I usually text my grandma whenever I want to tell her anything, just because she works at night and I don't know when she works and I don't know when she's asleep. So I just send her a text and she'll respond to it whenever she can. I usually text my uncle too, because he also has a weird work schedule. Most people in my family actually have weird work schedules and I never know when they are awake or asleep so I'll just send them a text.

Although Ashley revealed she would prefer conversations on the phone, texting allows her to communicate at her convenience without interrupting her family members at work or while they are asleep. Students also consider family members' preferences and which communication technologies they use. Although all participants used social network sites such as Facebook, not all of their family members did. For example, Michelle reported using Facebook Messenger to communicate with friends and her brother, but not with her mom, who dislikes the site:

My mom really hates Facebook. She doesn't use it and she doesn't know that my brother and I use it either. [, ,] She doesn't like the computer in general and she feels like it's an invasion of privacy.

These findings reveal the type of complicated choices students make about which communication technologies to use when communicating with family members. Students must balance preferences for rich voice and audio calls with concerns for privacy in crowded campus residence halls, plus the needs and availability of family members. Such decisions are made even more difficult when students are faced with challenges during their adjustment to college.

Routine Connections

Before moving away to start college, many young adults lived and communicated with their family members every day. In those settings, routine family conversations around the dinner table serve to keep family members

updated on each another's lives and allow opportunities to provide and seek support when needed. While continuing this frequency of communication may have been impossible or prohibitively expensive for previous generations of college students, advancements in communication technologies allow today's students to keep in contact with families more regularly. Family communication while adjusting to college is not limited to instances when students are seeking support, and many participants described communicating with their families in regular and routine ways. For example, Anna's description of mundane calls to her parents was typical:

I call them a couple times a week and we see how we're doing. I just tell them about the things that I'm getting involved in and the stories I've been writing, and we just catch up. It's honestly not that weird at all, like I don't feel homesick ever.

For Anna, regular phone calls helped her stay connected to her parents after she had moved away from home. A few months later when she was feeling sick, Anna's mother noticed that her voice sounded different and encouraged her to visit the student health center. Because Anna was already communicating with her parents regularly, she received support during her illness without having to specifically seek it out.

Similarly, Rachel described communicating with family members every day. Most evenings she called the family home and caught up with her parents and sister on speakerphone. When Rachel was having issues with one of the girls in her dorm, she was able to bring up that tension and get useful advice from her mother during one of their routine family phone calls. In these examples, both Rachel and Anna faced relatively minor challenges that they likely would not have sought support for dealing with. But because they were already in regular communication with their families, they received support that they reported was quite valuable.

As these examples illustrate, regular family communication through communication technologies can create opportunities for students to seek and receive the support they need without any additional effort. However, such communication was often quick and lacked the rich, personal conversations that many students reported preferring when seeking support. Although many students described routine text messages to check in with parents, when difficult topics arose in such text message exchanges, students or family members would often shift to a phone call to continue and expand the conversation.

For example, Michael described getting support from his mother during a conflict with his long-distance girlfriend: "My mom asked me a couple of questions once she noticed something was up. [. . .] She asked via text message and then called me later about it." In this case, his mother picked up on cues in his text messages and recognized that he was struggling. The brief text exchange opened the door for a more in-depth, supportive conversation via phone call. Michael explained that when he is faced with a stressful situation, he prefers to spend time alone rather than seek support from someone else: "Just kind of step away for a little bit. Leave my phone in the room, go do whatever, just to kind of take a break." He is not the type of person to seek support, but recognized the value of mother's input and, by following her advice, was able to resolve the conflict with his girlfriend.

Although many participants described situations when they put in the effort to contact someone and seek support, routine family communication emerged as ripe opportunities for students to get support without specifically seeking it out, and without interrupting other family members' schedules and activities. However, regular family communication did not guarantee students would seek and/or receive support from family members. Consider Tyler, for example, who chose not to mention his dating concerns to his brother, although they communicate regularly via Facebook Messenger:

My brother tries to ask sometimes and I'll talk to him about it a little bit and you know he has the experience and has gone through college and such. [. . .] But I still try to keep the romantic aspect and drugs and alcohol a little bit separate from my brother, even if he likes to talk about them more than I do.

Tyler chose to keep his concerns about his relationship to himself, even though he regularly communicates with his family members and his brother specifically asked about the situation. Instead, Tyler sought support from a friend on campus with whom he felt more comfortable talking about his relationship.

This last example highlights an important distinction emerging in the data: Although maintaining regular family communication is frequently a way to open the door to support, frequent communication is not synonymous with support. Students can communicate frequently with their families without ever revealing the challenges they face. Further, although family members are one important source of support for students, they are not the only source, and it is not necessarily problematic when students do not receive support from family members, as revealed in the next theme.

Multiple Sources of Support

For many of my participants, family members were seen as the first line of defense and the people whom students immediately thought to contact they needed support. Ashley, for example, defaulted to asking her mom for help: “If I don’t know who else to call, I’ll call my mom.” Similarly, Rachel knows she can count on her family members to provide good advice no matter the situation:

The immediate person would just be my mom. I’ll just call her and be like “This is happening. What should I do?” And she’ll give me whatever advice. And then [my younger sister] would probably weigh in. I might talk to [my older sister] about it. And my dad, if he’s there, he’ll tell me what to do. He’s the greatest advice giver. He—I don’t know—he should probably be a philosopher. He’s awesome.

Given that students had spent their entire lives before moving to college living with their families, it’s not surprising that they continue to rely on their family members for support during college.

Like Tyler, who preferred not to talk about his dating life with his brother, students reported a number of situations in which they felt more comfortable seeking support from individuals outside their family. Participants often considered particular topics to be off limits with family members. Kelsey, for example, was comfortable talking to her mother about most issues in her life, but purposefully created conversational distance when it came to her romantic relationships:

I wouldn’t talk to her about boys, I guess. I mean, I had a boyfriend for two years and I would talk to her about more emotional problems with him. But I wouldn’t tell her anything sexual. I’m sure that’d be awkward and unnecessary. She doesn’t want to hear it.

Participants frequently considered sex, dating, drugs, and/or alcohol to be taboo topics and avoided discussing them with parents. Some participants identified other family members—such as siblings, cousins, or aunts—as someone they could turn to when they needed support related to topics they didn’t want to discuss with their parents, or in situations when they did not think their parents would be able to provide appropriate support. For example, Chris sought support from an older cousin, rather than his parents, when he was trying to decide whether to look for a summer internship related to his major or return to his lifeguarding job:

They [my parents] don’t pretend like they know very much about, about the film industry or anything. I mean they might know that one day I might have to go to LA, and they know that I need money. [. . .] I have a cousin who also lived in DC for a while and she’s like a 30-year-old professional and, at the same time I was looking for jobs, she was looking for a new job. So it was like a really great like parallel person to

talk to because she went through the same process and has way more experience than I have.

Like Chris, many students described using communication technologies to stay in touch with extended family members. These family members provided useful perspectives and expertise to their social support networks. Further, students often preferred social support from someone who had contextual knowledge of the situation. For challenges that arose on campus, interviewees reported peers were often already familiar with the situation and better able to provide immediate support than were family members who lacked background knowledge about the situation.

Just as communication technologies enable students to receive support from family members, interviewees revealed how they enable maintenance of a broad social network with diverse contacts. Social network sites such as Facebook allow new college students to keep in touch with people they would not typically call when they are upset or need support, and also provided for students opportunities to receive support in ways that were unexpected or surprising. Justin described “random” conversations with Facebook “friends”:

You know how on Facebook there are some people that are like available that you can chat? It’s just that random high school friend that is available to chat, and then sometimes you just talk. [. . .] Sometimes you just go on Facebook and then people message you. It makes you really happy and you just get these random conversations.

A spontaneous conversation with one of these contacts provided Justin with some useful support and perspective when he was stressed about his final exams.

Providing connections to such “weak ties” is a significant benefit of Facebook and similar social network sites (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2011; Rozzell et al., 2014). Weak ties often differ from students’ closest contacts, and such diversity can be particularly beneficial for new college students and other people seeking support (Granovetter, 1973; Wohn, Ellison, Khan, Fewins-Bliss, & Gray, 2013). Interview participants often described receiving support from multiple people about the same situation, including both strong and weak ties. These diverse perspectives helped them to understand the nuances of the situations and to better navigate the challenge.

3.3 Discussion

This study sought to shed light on first-year college students’ use of communication technologies for seeking and receiving support from family members while adjusting to college. The transition to college is often the most

significant life change emerging adults experience (Dyson & Renk, 2006; Fromme et al., 2008; Smith & Zhang, 2010); this study revealed the diversity of the challenging situations students face during this transition, as well as the way they turn to communication technologies for seeking and receiving support from family and others in their social networks during such transitions. Many of the challenges students face are directly related to college adjustment, similar to aspects of college adjustment identified in prior research (Baker & Siryk, 1984; Taylor et al., 2013). The data also revealed the significance of other, non-college-related challenges that students face during this time; we were reminded that while in the midst of a major life transition such as college adjustment, situations and problems that might normally be insignificant can feel insurmountable to students.

To help get through their challenging situations, students often communicate with and receive social support from family members via communication technologies. As suggested by Media Richness Theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986), students in the current study often prefer to use “rich” communication channels, such as videos and phone calls, for these personal conversations. However, students frequently turn to less rich, text-based communication channels when they don’t have the affordances of privacy in their room or somewhere quiet in the campus setting, or are unsure of their family members’ availability. Similar to Smith et al.’s (2012) study of student–parent communication preferences, this study’s data reveal a set of complex considerations students balance when choosing communication technology for these supportive conversations with family members. Prior work suggests these mediated interactions can provide students with social support and minimize the potentially negative effects of the stressful college transition (Cohen & McKay, 1984; Lewandowski et al., 2011; Mattanah et al., 2010; Mikal et al., 2013).

Similar to past research that suggests students use technology to communicate with their family members frequently (Hofer, 2008; Smith et al., 2012) and not only when they are seeking support, the current study reveals that many first-year college students communicate with their family members in routine and rather mundane ways using communication technologies, such as daily text messages or weekly phone calls. The data reveal communication in these ways creates opportunities for students to receive social support from their family members without specifically seeking the support. For example, a routine check-in conversation can reveal a need for support, which then can be

offered or given without an explicit request. Research suggests that even in situations when the student does not specifically seek out social support, offered support can be beneficial (Cohen & McKay, 1984). Such opportunistic support encounters might be particularly advantageous for those students who are less inclined to seek it (Taylor et al., 2004).

Communication technologies and social network sites, in particular, enable new college students to maintain relationships with and receive support from a variety of people, family or otherwise, they knew before moving to college (Shklovski, Kraut, & Cummings, 2008). These connections form a support network for new college students while they deal with the many challenges of adjusting to college. Maintaining connections to “weak ties” (Granovetter, 1973) diversifies students’ support networks, providing them with a breadth of perspectives and knowledge to supplement their families’ support. Those connections also provide support on taboo topics, very often those that young adults avoid discussing with family members (Rozzell et al., 2014; Wohn et al., 2013).

3.4 Limitations and Future Work

When interpreting the findings presented in this chapter, it is important to consider the limitations of the study from which they emerged. All participants in this study were college students at a single institution. Future research would benefit from studying students at multiple and various types of institutions, such as small liberal arts schools, large public schools, community colleges, and technical schools. Further, only students who grew up in the United States were included in this study; future work should consider college adjustment for international students. Finally, this study relied only on self-report data, and future research would benefit from examining digital traces and communication logs to observe actual, day-to-day communication between students and family members.

4 Application

4.1 For Students

Adjusting to college is a major life change and it is likely that you will face some setbacks along the way. Do not be discouraged; it is “normal” to face challenges as you learn your way around a new place, are challenged academically, and take on more personal responsibility. Moving to college is like learning to ride a bike with training wheels: Your parents are no longer pushing

you along so you must peddle on your own, but you still have training wheels to keep you on track. College is a time for you to explore your identity and learn more about what you want out of life, while you prepare to take the next big step. But you are not completely on your own yet; you have the support of your family and your campus to help you succeed.

Do not hesitate to seek support from your family members as you face unfamiliar challenges. That said, do not rely on them exclusively. Talk to your peers; they are often going through similar challenges, and you can lean on each other for support. Use social network sites such as Facebook to maintain connections with weak ties, such as former classmates or teachers. Even though you don't talk to these people every day, they may be able to provide useful advice when you need it. You should also explore the many other resources available on your campus—from counseling centers and academic advisors to student organizations and residence assistants—there are many resources available on college campuses to help you succeed. Learn about the programs that your college offers and take advantage of them. Be mindful of the many serious and often hidden challenges that your peers may be facing and offer your support when you can.

4.2 For Families

Create regular communication routines to remind your children you are there for them, and create opportunities for them to seek support when they need it. Avoid pressuring your students to share every detail of their life with you; it is beneficial for them to get input and support from multiple and diverse perspectives as they make decisions on their own. Encourage your emerging adult children to talk to and learn from others in the campus community. It can be hard to see your children grow up and move away, but it is important to give them the space and freedom they need to explore this new chapter of life. If your college student children come to you with questions, nudge them to find the solution on their own rather than handling it for them. Although they might make missteps along the way, and it might be painful to watch, know they are learning on their path to becoming independent adults.

4.3 For Researchers

The transition to college is a major life change, and students face a number of challenges during this time. Although some of these challenges are directly related to college adjustment, others may appear unrelated but are more difficult when combined with a major life change. When studying college

adjustment and other life transitions, researchers should consider not only challenges directly related to the transitions, but the aspects of peoples' lives that may be made more difficult. Researchers must take a broader perspective on families, beyond a focus on only the parent-child sub-system. Lastly, acknowledge that college students today use a variety of communication technology and take a communication ecological approach rather than limiting your study to one specific communication channel.

5 Acknowledgements

This material is based upon work supported by the National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship under Grant No. DGE-0824162. The author thanks Jeremy Birnholtz and Kathleen Galvin for supporting and advising this work, and the anonymous participants for sharing their stories.

6 References

- Albrecht, T. (1984). Social support and life stress. *Human Communication Research, 11*, 3–32.
- Aquilino, W. S. (2006). Family relationships and support systems in emerging adulthood. In *Emerging adults in America: Coming of age in the 21st century* (pp. 193–217). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Arnett, J. J. (2000). Emerging adulthood: A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties. *American Psychologist, 55*(5), 469–480.
- Baker, R. W., & Siryk, B. (1984). Measuring adjustment to college. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 31*(2), 179–189.
- Baker, R. W., & Siryk, B. (1986). Exploratory intervention with a scale measuring adjustment to college. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 33*(1), 31–38.
- Bland, H. W., Melton, B. F., Welle, P., & Bigham, L. (2012). Stress tolerance: New challenges for millennial college students. *College Student Journal, 46*(2), 362–375.
- Chen, Y., & Katz, J. (2009). Extending family to school life: College students' use of the mobile phone. *International Journal of Human-Computer Studies, 67*(2), 179–191.
- Cobb, S. (1976). Social support as a moderator of life stress. *Psychosomatic Medicine, 38*, 300–314.
- Cohen, S. E., & Hoberman, H. M. (1983). Positive events and social supports as buffers of life change stress. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 13*(2), 99–125.
- Cohen, S. E., & McKay, G. (1984). Social support, stress and the buffering hypothesis: A theoretical analysis. In A. Baum, S. E. Taylor, & J. E. Singer,

- Handbook of psychology and health* (pp. 253–267). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Credé, M., & Niehorster, S. (2011). Adjustment to college as measured by the student adaptation to college questionnaire: A quantitative review of its structure and relationships with correlates and consequences. *Educational Psychology Review*, 24(1), 133–165.
- Cullaty, B. (2011). The role of parental involvement in the autonomy development of traditional-age college students. *Journal of College Student Development*, 52(4), 425–439.
- Daft, R. L., & Lengel, R. H. (1986). Organizational information requirements, media richness, and structural design. *Management Science*, 32(5), 554–571.
- DeAndrea, D. C., Ellison, N. B., LaRose, R., Steinfield, C., & Fiore, A. (2012). Serious social media: On the use of social media for improving students' adjustment to college. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 15(1), 15–23.
- Dyson, R., & Renk, K. (2006). Freshmen adaptation to university life: Depressive symptoms, stress, and coping. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 62(10), 1231–1244.
- Eisenberg, D., Golberstein, E., & Hunt, J. B. (2009). Mental health and academic success in college. *The B.E. Journal of Economic Analysis & Policy*, 9(1).
- Ellison, N. B., Steinfield, C., & Lampe, C. (2007). The benefits of Facebook “friends”: Social capital and college students' use of online social network sites. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 12(4), 1143–1168.
- Ellison, N. B., Steinfield, C., & Lampe, C. (2011). Connection strategies: Social capital implications of Facebook-enabled communication practices. *New Media & Society*, 13(6), 873–892.
- Fisher, S., & Hood, B. (1987). The stress of the transition to university: A longitudinal study of psychological disturbance, absent-mindedness, and vulnerability to homesickness. *British Journal of Psychology*, 78, 425–441.
- Flanagan, C., Schulenberg, J., & Fuligni, A. (1993). Residential setting and parent–adolescent relationships during the college years. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 22(2), 171–189.
- Friedlander, L. J., Reid, G. J., Shupak, N., & Cribbie, R. (2007). Social Support, Self-Esteem, and Stress as Predictors of Adjustment to University Among First-Year Undergraduates. *Journal of College Student Development*, 48(3), 259–274.
- Fromme, K., Corbin, W. R., & Kruse, M. I. (2008). Behavioral risks during the transition from high school to college. *Developmental Psychology*, 44(5), 1497–1504.
- Gerdes, H., & Mallinckrodt, B. (1994). Emotional, social, and academic adjustment of college students: A longitudinal study of retention. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 72(3), 281–288.
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Chicago, IL: Aldine Transaction.
- Granovetter, M. S. (1973). The strength of weak ties. *American Journal of Sociology*, 78(6), 1360–1380.
- Gray, R., Vitak, J., Easton, E. W., & Ellison, N. B. (2013). Examining social adjustment to college in the age of social media: Factors influencing successful transitions and persistence. *Computers & Education*, 67, 193–207.
- Hofer, B. K. (2008). The electronic tether: Parental regulation, self-regulation, and the role of technology in college transitions. *Journal of the First-Year Experience & Students in Transition*, 20(2), 9–24.
- Holmes, T. H., & Rahe, R. H. (1967). The social readjustment rating scale. *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, 11, 213–218.
- Kena, G., Aud, S., Johnson, F., Wang, X., Zhang, J., Rathbun, A., . . . Kristapovich, P. (2014). *The Condition of Education 2014* (NCES 2014-083). U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Washington, DC. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2014/2014083.pdf>
- Kenyon, D. B., & Koerner, S. S. (2009). Examining emerging-adults' and parents' expectations about autonomy during the transition to college. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 24(3), 293–320.
- Kerr, S., Johnson, V. K., Gans, S. E., & Krumrine, J. (2004). Predicting adjustment during the transition to college: Alexithymia, perceived stress, and psychological symptoms. *Journal of College Student Development*, 45(6), 593–611.
- Krotseng, M. V. (1992). Predicting persistence from the student adaptation to college questionnaire: Early warning or siren song? *Research in Higher Education*, 33(1), 99–111.
- Larose, S., & Boivin, M. (1998). Attachment to parents, social support expectations, and socioemotional adjustment during the high school–college transition. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 8(1), 1–27.
- Lefkowitz, E. S. (2005). “Things have gotten better”: Developmental changes among emerging adults after the transition to university. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 20(1), 40–63.
- LeMoyné, T., & Buchanan, T. (2011). Does “hovering” matter? Helicopter parenting and its effect on well-being. *Sociological Spectrum*, 31(4), 399–418.
- Lewandowski, J., Rosenberg, B. D., Jordan Parks, M., & Siegel, J. T. (2011). The effect of informal social support: Face-to-face versus computer-mediated communication. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 27(5), 1806–1814.
- Licitra-Kleckler, D. M., & Waas, G. A. (1993). Perceived social support among high-stress adolescents: The role of peers and family. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 8(4), 381–402.
- Mattanah, J. F., Ayers, J. F., Brand, B. L., & Brooks, L. J. (2010). A social support

- intervention to ease the college transition: Exploring main effects and moderators. *Journal of College Student Development*, 51(1), 93–108.
- Mikal, J. P., Rice, R. E., Abeyta, A., & DeVilbiss, J. (2013). Transition, stress, and computer-mediated social support. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 29(5), A40–A53.
- Oh, H. J., Ozkaya, E., & LaRose, R. (2014). How does online social networking enhance life satisfaction? The relationships among online supportive interaction, affect, perceived social support, sense of community, and life satisfaction. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 30, 69–78.
- Padilla-Walker, L. M., & Nelson, L. J. (2012). Black hawk down? Establishing helicopter parenting as a distinct construct from other forms of parental control during emerging adulthood. *Journal of Adolescence*, 35(5), 1177–1190.
- Padilla-Walker, L. M., Nelson, L. J., & Knapp, D. J. (2014). “Because I’m still the parent, that’s why!” Parental legitimate authority during emerging adulthood. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 31(3) 293–313.
- Parra, A., Oliva, A., & Reina, M. D. C. (2013). Family relationships from adolescence to emerging adulthood: A longitudinal study. *Journal of Family Issues*, .
- Pizzolato, J. E., & Hicklen, S. (2011). Parent involvement: Investigating the parent–child relationship in millennial college students. *Journal of College Student Development*, 52(6), 671–686.
- Pryor, J. H., Eagan, K., Palucki Blake, L., Hurtado, S., Berdan, J., & Case, M. H. (2012). *The American freshman: National norms Fall 2012*. Los Angeles: Cooperative Institutional Research Program at the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA. Retrieved from <http://www.heri.ucla.edu/monographs/theamericanfreshman2012.pdf>
- Rahe, R. H., Meyer, M., Smith, M., Kjaer, G., & Holmes, T. H. (1964). Social stress and illness onset. *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, 8(1), 35–44.
- Rozzell, B., Piercy, C. W., Carr, C. T., King, S., Lane, B. L., Tornes, M., et al. (2014). Notification pending: Online social support from close and nonclose relational ties via Facebook. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 38, 272–280.
- Sarigiani, P. A., Trumbell, J. M., & Camarena, P. M. (2013). Electronic communications technologies and the transition to college. *Journal of the First-Year Experience & Students in Transition*, 25, 35–60.
- Schiffrin, H. H., Liss, M., Miles-McLean, H., Geary, K. A., Erchull, M. J., & Tashner, T. (2014). Helping or hovering? The effects of helicopter parenting on college students’ well-being. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 23(3), 548–557.
- Scully, J. A., Tosi, H., & Banning, K. (2000). Life event checklists: Revisiting the social readjustment rating scale after 30 years. *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, 60(6), 864–876.
- Shklovski, I. A., Kraut, R., & Cummings, J. (2008). Keeping in touch by technology: Maintaining friendships after a residential move. Proceedings of the ACM SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, 807–816.
- Skierkowski, D., & Wood, R. M. (2011). To text or not to text? The importance of text messaging among college-aged youth. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 28(2), 744–756.
- Smith, A., Rainie, L., & Zickuhr, K. (2011). *College students and technology*. Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project. Retrieved from <http://www.pewinternet.org/2011/07/19/college-students-and-technology/>
- Smith, M. E., Nguyen, D. T., Lai, C., Leshed, G., & Baumer, E. P. S. (2012). Going to college and staying connected: Communication between college freshmen and their parents. *Proceedings of the ACM SIGCHI Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work*, 789–798.
- Smith, W. C., & Zhang, P. (2010). The impact of key factors on the transition from high school to college among first- and second-generation students. *Journal of the First-Year Experience & Students in Transition*, 22(2), 49–70.
- Taylor, S. E., Sherman, D. K., Kim, H. S., Jarcho, J., Takagi, K., & Dunagan, M. S. (2004). Culture and social support: Who seeks it and why? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 87(3), 354–362.
- Taylor, Z. E., Doane, L. D., & Eisenberg, N. (2013). Transitioning from high school to college: Relations of social support, ego-resiliency, and maladjustment during emerging adulthood. *Emerging Adulthood*, 2(2), 105–115.
- Wills, T. A. (1985). Supportive functions of interpersonal relationships. In S. E. Cohen & S. L. Syme, *Social support and health* (pp. 61–82). Orlando, FL: Academic Press, Inc.
- Wintre, M. G., & Yaffe, M. (2000). First-year students' adjustment to university life as a function of relationships with parents. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 15(1), 9–37.
- Wohn, D. Y., Ellison, N. B., Khan, M. L., Fewins-Bliss, R., & Gray, R. (2013). The role of social media in shaping first-generation high school students' college aspirations: A social capital lens. *Computers & Education*, 63, 424–436.
- Young, J. W., & Koplou, S. L. (1997). The validity of two questionnaires for predicting minority students' college grades. *The Journal of General Education*, 46(1), 45–55.