

Using Survey and Focus Group Research to Learn About Parents' Roles in the Community College Choice Process

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Introduction

Background and Purpose

Colleges and universities continually seek new approaches to recruiting students and creating new linkages with parents, who generally play an important role in their students' choices to attend a particular school and to persist at that institution. Researchers are investigating the role parents play in their children's choices of four-year schools (see literature review below), but little is known about the role parents play in these decisions for community college students. Consequently, colleges lack key insights that could help them to improve the ways in which they communicate to parents of potential and current students. Moreover, parents are themselves potential community college students. They are also community residents whose taxes support institutions and may be employers who send employees to community colleges and hire community college students and graduates. Thus, even if their children ultimately decide against attending the community college, communications with parents can influence enrollments and financial support at the community college.

The literature about college choice is remarkably silent about the role of parents in the college choice process for community college students. It is also silent about the role parents see for themselves as their students enroll in and attend college. The purpose of this study was to learn more about whether parents are involved and do see a role for themselves as their children choose the community college and spend a semester or more at the institution.



Limitation of the Study

This research was conducted at a single institution located in an affluent suburban area with a highly educated population and high schools that promote college attendance for all students. Being in proximity to more than 24 four-year colleges and universities, many of which have fairly liberal or open enrollment policies, enables students to have a wide choice of colleges even while remaining at home.

Literature

Research shows that parents of four-year college students often play important roles throughout the college choice process, both in terms of setting expectations for their children and taking the more proactive approach of discussing college plans and saving for college expenses (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000a; Cabrera & La Nasa 2000b; Choy, Horn, Nuñez, & Chen, 2000; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; Conklin & Dailey, 1981; Flint, 1992; Keller & McKewon, 1984; Hossler, 1999; Stage & Hossler, 1989). Schneider and Stevenson (1999) suggest that parents have high educational expectations for their children, yet many do not see it as their responsibility to help their adolescents formulate realistic plans for the future. Students misalign their academic preparation and ambitions as a result.

Recent studies (Bodfish, 2000; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; Hurtado, Kurotsuchi Inkelas, Briggs, & Rhee, 1997; McDonough, 1997) suggest the college choice process may differ among racial, ethnic, and income groups. Bateman and Kennedy (1999) found some differences in college predispositions of children from single- and two-parent families. Parents were important for both groups of students, but mothers were of primary importance for students from single-parent families. Hossler (1999) and Hossler, Braxton, and Coopersmith (1989) suggest the parental role in college choice is greater during the earlier years of high school than later (i.e. when the disposition to attend college is formed). Kinzie, Cummings, Jacob, Hayek, Hannon, and Hossler (2000) suggest parents' roles in the choice process vary with students' decision-making styles. Many studies show that parents' level of education is associated with students' college choice process, including preparation for college (Nuñez & Horn, 2000; Bodfish, 2000). Some studies indirectly explore the parental role in the college choice process by examining their views about or behaviors in



financing education (Miller, 1997; Stringer, Cunningham, O'Brien, & Merisotis, 1998).

Most literature about college choice is based on research of students attending four-year colleges and universities. Bers and Smith (1989) conducted one of the few studies of the role of parents in the college choice process for community college students. Bers and Smith concluded that while parents reported they were involved and informed during their children's college choice decision process, they were not necessarily decision initiators or decision makers with respect to their child's decision to attend the community college.

There is virtually nothing in the literature that focuses on parents' roles in their students' decisions to persist at an institution.

Methodology

Approaches and Participants--Survey

The survey was developed by researchers based on an earlier instrument used at a community college (Bers & Smith, 1989). College professionals established face validity through critiques. The final instrument included questions concerning the process for choosing college in general, questions concerning the college decision process in regards to the specific college, and demographic questions about the respondents and their family.

Data from the college's student information system were combined with parent responses for each student. Institutional data included each student's placement test results in reading, writing, and mathematics, as well as college-credits earned and grade point average for the first term of attendance (fall 2000).

The initial population surveyed comprised 674 sets of parents or guardians (one survey was sent to each household). Surveys and postage-paid return envelopes were mailed in late October 2000. A second mailing with a copy of the instrument and postage-paid return envelope was sent to nonrespondents three weeks later. A total of 225 surveys (33.5 %) were returned.

Mothers completed most surveys (73%), and most respondents (79%) identified their racial or ethnic identity to be Caucasian. Parents reported the gender of their students as 56% male and 44% female. Parent respondents were well educated. We constructed a variable based on the



combination of mother's and father's highest education level to use as a proxy for parent socioeconomic status. Forty-nine percent of respondents were from households where at least one parent held a bachelor's degree or higher and another 38% were from households where at least one parent had attended college at some point.

Data analyses involved frequencies, chi squares, and analyses of variance. Simple frequencies were used to provide descriptive information about parent and student characteristics, parent roles in the college choice process, and parent assessments about and expectations for their children's educations. Parent socioeconomic status and parents' assessments of their children's academic skills were used as independent variables to explore whether the college choice process varied by either attribute. The latter was operationalized through responses to a survey item that asked the respondents to rate their students' academic skill levels on a 5-point scale where 1=remedial or low and 5=honors or high and then collapsed responses into three categories to prevent small cell sizes.

Approaches and Participants--Focus Groups

In June, 2001, the college convened a parent focus group to further explore parents' roles in their sons' or daughters' college search process, parent perceptions of their sons' or daughters' experiences at the college, and parent responses to the college catalog.

The college developed a list of students who had graduated from an in-district, public high school in 2000 and attended the college in the fall of 2000, the same group whose parents had received the fall survey. The list also indicated whether the student had attended the spring 2001 semester as well. An external market research firm recruited focus group participants from the list, with instructions to recruit 15 participants (only one parent per household) from across the district high schools, and to make sure that more than one half had students who persisted to the spring 2001 semester. Participants received dinner and a \$75.00 honorarium. The discussion was held on a Wednesday evening at a commercial focus group facility in the college district. The institution's research director, an experienced focus group facilitator, moderated the group; several college employees observed the discussion from behind a one-way mirror.



Thirteen of the 15 recruited parents attended the discussion. All but one were mothers; in retrospect we learned that instructions to the recruiters should have specified a minimum number of fathers to be recruited.

Findings

Survey

In this section, findings from the survey and focus group components of the project are presented in brief. More detailed findings and discussions are available upon request from the authors.

From the survey we learned that parents want and expect their students to earn at least a bachelor's degree, with two out of three anticipating their students will earn an associate's degree first. Parents value student outcomes that relate in large part to academic achievements and increased focus and confidence, including earning credits and GPAs that will transfer, improving academic skills, gaining a sense of direction, and improving self-confidence. They see academic skill level and maturity as linked, with those who report maturity levels high also perceiving higher academic skill levels. While parents have a general awareness of their students' academic skills, many overestimate the level as measured by placement test results. For example, more than 20% of parents thought their students had high-level academic skills, yet their students placed into remedial work in at least one discipline. Students whose parents said their sons or daughters did not have high academic skills earned lower grade point averages than students whose parents rated their sons' or daughters' academic skills at a higher level.

A major purpose of this study was to gain understanding of the ways in which parents of community college students participated in the college choice process of their sons or daughters. We sought information about several aspects of the choice process: when the decision to attend college and the community college specifically were made; sources of information about colleges used by parents; college choice activities in which parents engaged; factors influencing the choice of the community college; the decision to attend the community college; and parent summary evaluations of the college choice process for them.

Chi-square analysis identified a statistically significant association between the timing of the decision to attend college and the decision to



attend the community college ($X^2 = 34.65; p < .001$). Two-thirds of parents reported that their students always planned on attending college, but fewer than 12% say they always planned on attending the community college. Thus students who plan early for college are less likely to attend the community college than students whose college attendance decisions are made later in or even after high school. Of particular interest were the findings that 16% of the parents said their students had always planned to attend college but decided to attend the community college only after high school graduation, and two thirds said their students applied only to the community college.

Information about colleges is communicated to parents of prospective students through many channels. Parents reported using a variety of information resources to learn about the college. On average, they reported using three different resources. More parents (21%) used 2 resources than any other number of resources, and 1 in 10 parents reported using 5 or more information resources. College publications (class schedule mailed to every household, college catalogs, and college brochures) and personal contacts comprise the two most important types of resources relied on by parents. High school counselors, faculty, and students themselves also serve as important sources of information. Mass media such as newspapers, television, and radio are not used by parents to learn about the community college. Analyses of variance revealed no significant differences by parent socioeconomic status or parent assessment of their sons' or daughters' academic skill levels and the number of resources used to learn about the institution.

Parents became involved in their sons' or daughters' college choice processes at different stages: 19% of respondents said they were never involved, 31% became involved during their students' freshman or sophomore years in high school, 46% became involved during their sons' or daughters' junior or senior years, and 4% became involved only after their student was out of high school. Interestingly, almost one-third (29%) of parents who rated their sons' or daughters' skill at the highest levels also said they were never involved in their students' college choice process.

On the survey we listed a variety of college choice activities in which a parent could engage, such as talking with a high school counselor or



faculty member, attending a college night at the local high school, reading college information, and visiting a college campus. On average, parents participated in 3.2 different types of college choice activities, though they may have engaged in each type of activity multiple times. More parents (19%) reported engaging in 2 types of activities than any other number. One in 10 reported they did not participate in any college choice activities, and at the opposite end of the spectrum, 15% reported engaging in 5 or more types of activities. Frequently mentioned activities involved personal contacts, conversing with high school counselors or teachers, attending college nights at high schools, and visiting college campuses or open houses. Slightly over one half (52%) said they read college brochures or catalogs, and one in four said they visited college websites. As with the number of information resources used, analysis of variance revealed no significant differences in the number of college choice activities in which parents engaged and their socioeconomic status or assessment of their students' academic skill levels.

Many factors may affect the decision about which college to attend. Parents were asked to identify which of a list of college choice factors were considered in their children's decisions to attend the community college. Factors related to money and to students' uncertainties about college were more influential than college reputation or the importance of friends or family members. Parent socioeconomic status was associated with financial reasons for selecting the community college. Ninety-seven percent of parents with the lowest socioeconomic status indicated finances were a factor, 89% of parents in the middle status group cited finances as a factor, and 75% of parents in the highest status group indicated finances were a factor. Put another way, for most parents of community college students, finances are a significant reason their sons or daughters attend the community college. Parents who rated their sons' or daughters' academic skills at lower levels were more likely to cite this factor and those who rated skills at the higher levels were least likely to cite this factor.

We asked parents to indicate who initiated the idea of their son or daughter attending the community college and then asked whether the decision to attend was primarily theirs, the student's, or a joint decision. We found that three out of five parents reported the initial idea to attend the community college was theirs, and that three out of five parents also reported it was their sons or daughters who initiated the idea of attending



the community college (respondents could check multiple items). There was an overlap such that 32% of the parents indicated that they and their students both initiated the idea of attending the community college, suggesting cooperation between parent and student.

According to parents, the actual *decision* to attend the community college was entirely or mostly the students' (in 46% of the cases) or a joint decision of student and parents (51%). Only 3% of respondents said the decision was mostly or entirely the parents'. Parents also indicated they were confident their sons' or daughters' decision to attend the community college was a good one. Using a 5-point scale, where 1=not at all confident and 5=extremely confident, 85% of respondents rated their confidence at levels 4 or 5 and only 4% rated their confidence at levels 1 or 2.

Focus Group

In this section, main themes that emerged from the parent focus group discussion are presented. It should be noted that although the original intent was to devote a part of the discussion to the topic of college choice, participants were not interested in talking about a process that had occurred nearly a year or more ago (recall the focus group was held in June, a year after high school graduation and 10 months after students began fall classes). We did glean some insights into their perceptions of the process and their roles in it, however; these are presented below. Since a major strength of focus group research is the opportunity to move to related topics when a subject raised does not elicit pertinent comments, the facilitator guided the group to talk more about their perceptions, as parents, of the college and their sons' or daughters' experiences there. Several major themes emerged; they are used to organize the presentation of findings provided below.

College search and choice. Most parents said their sons or daughters had either always planned or thought about attending college or came to this decision during high school. A few participants said they had told their students they had to attend college or to make a choice between work and college. The participants had not engaged in extensive college search activities such as visiting multiple campuses. It appeared from comments parents made about their sons and daughters that most of them (students) did not have strong academic skills or a focused interest on a



particular major. (A subsequent analysis of students' records revealed that 10 of the 13 placed into remedial mathematics and 7 of the 13 placed into remedial English.) A number of parents noted their sons' or daughters' lack of maturity. These attributes, combined with financial limitations expressed by some (see below), resulted in students coming to the community college as much by default as by a clear proactive decision.

Perceptions of the college. On the whole, parents were positive about the community college. One parent said his family had not thought highly of the institution until his children attended, and then there was realization that the school was of high quality. Several parents, even when they bemoaned their sons' or daughters' lack of academic achievement or progress, noted their students had not behaved or taken their work seriously. Some said their students referred to the community college as too much like high school; others made comments that when their students took classes they changed their minds about the institution being like high school and came to regard it more positively.

Finances. Most parents offered observations about finances, paying for college, or about financial aid. A number of comments suggested that parents were concerned about paying for college and believed they lacked complete or accurate information about financial aid or the college's policy about payment for repeated courses. For example, one person said as a parent she had received no information about scholarship availability, but as a student herself she had received such information. Another noted that her daughter had received financial aid but had not been told the financial aid would be valid only for courses actually passed. Based on the focus group discussion it seems evident that parents are concerned about finances, lack clear information about financial aid, and find the topic complex and frustrating.

Parent involvement in advising and registration. Respondents were very vocal about their expectations that they, as parents, should be involved more in their sons' or daughters' advising and registration processes. Several noted their sons or daughters had not registered for the right courses. One parent was particularly annoyed because her daughter had placed into remedial composition despite being in honors English in high school. Most parents said their sons or daughters needed more guidance than was provided and commented on what they perceived to be a shortage of counselors. Several had sons or daughters who had participated in



testing and advising sessions while still in high school; they thought their sons or daughters had not been given the individual attention or time they needed. A minority of participants, on the other hand, said they thought that students should be treated more as adults when they reached college and ought to behave with more independence with respect to advising and registering for classes. They did not imply students should make choices without guidance but seemed less critical about what others perceived as inadequate assistance. A few suggested that parents should be involved at the beginning of their children's attendance but then end their direct involvement after a period of time.

Nearly all participants said they, as parents, should be given more information directly from the college about their sons' or daughters' performance during the semester. They wanted to be informed when their sons or daughters were not attending classes or were doing poorly. Most said they were paying their sons' or daughters' college expenses, or at least a good share of them, and therefore had a right to be informed. As with advising and registration, only a handful expressed a different view and said that once in college, a student should act more independently and learn by failures.

Course transferability. A number of participants expressed confusion or concern about the transferability of courses from the community college to another institution. Their comments suggested they did not understand that receiving colleges and universities make decisions about transferability, or they or their sons or daughters had received inaccurate information or had misinterpreted what they had been told. Some suggested that the institution tell students or provide written information detailing what courses transfer, to where, and in what majors. Others, but not many, noted that such information was available, and one or two even commented that their sons or daughters had told them about the advising guides available for specific majors at specific transfer institutions (these guides are prepared by the student affairs department but cover only selected majors at some colleges and universities). Comments about course transferability were frequently linked with comments about advising and course selection.

Parents made a large number of statements about course transfer, yet there were virtually no statements implying that parents expected the college to prepare their sons or daughters for employment in an occupation



covered by a vocational program.

Communicating with parents. Parents agreed there should be more communication from the college to them. They did not agree, however, on the most effective means for accomplishing this. Some wanted telephone calls, saying they already receive too much e-mail and junk mail. Others preferred mail because they could read the information at their leisure. One person suggested that communications should be sent in one large packet rather than in a series of mailings, but it was unclear whether others agreed with her.

These parents thought a parent orientation would be a good program, and many would like to be included in the advising meetings their sons or daughters have with counselors or advisors. They believe they should have access to people at the community college to contact about or on behalf of their sons or daughters, including counselors.

Catalog. Parents were given copies of the college catalog and asked to spend a few minutes looking through it and making observations. Many said they had not seen it before and would have liked to have it to use with their sons or daughters. Parents offered comments that indicated they did not know what terms like “A.A.” or “A.S.” meant. They did not know that the “chairperson” was responsible for a program, and though they saw the telephone number by the chairperson’s name for each department or program did not think this person could answer questions about that department or program (they suggested a phrase like “head of program” would be more informative). They found sections on general education requirements very confusing. They did not know from the cover what the book was because the word “catalog” was not on the front cover. It was not clear that everyone understood what “catalog” meant. They felt that the catalog could be informative and helpful and wished they had had it earlier.

Discussion

The survey and focus group reflects an effort to gain information about the perceptions, participation, and objectives of parents of community college students. The survey goals were to a) gain a better understanding of the factors influencing college choice of community college students from the lens of parent perceptions and participation and b) explore the impact of parent socioeconomic status and assessment of



their sons' or daughters' academic skills on the choice process and decision to attend the college. The focus group explored parents' involvement in the search process but concentrated more on their ideas about their appropriate roles as parents of community college students. Parent comments clearly indicated they expected to be directly involved in many actions that the college either cannot permit because of Family Education Rights and Privacy Act restrictions (directly sending grades to parents regardless of student wishes, for example) or the institution's stance that community college students are adults who both can and should make their own decisions about college.

The study also provides the institution with insights into the information parents report using and the activities in which they engaged as their sons or daughters explored colleges and decided to attend the community college. Parents have high expectations for their sons or daughters and want the community college to prepare and enable students to achieve these goals. Parent expectations may be unrealistic, however, given the realities of college attendance and the academic skill levels demonstrated by students whose parents responded to the survey or who came to the focus group.

Both the survey responses and focus group conversation demonstrated that factors influencing the decision to attend the community college were primarily those related to finances or to students' academic skills and maturity. Parents appear comfortable with their sons or daughters enrollment at the community college; focus group parents were not happy, however, with their involvement in their sons' or daughters' education after enrollment. Most parents felt they should be more connected with what was happening and wanted the college to keep them informed. Because they were paying their sons' or daughters' college expenses in whole or in part, they felt entitled to be kept directly informed.

Implications

Results of this study have several practical implications. One is the value of providing information about the college to parents throughout their sons' or daughters' high school years and even after, since a number of students made the decision to attend the community college only after high school graduation. Parents rely on college publications and personal conversations more than on the mass media, suggesting that efforts to



reach parents of traditional-aged students should concentrate on production and dissemination of publications and the fostering of strong ties to high school personnel who can then transmit information to parents.

Parents are likely to respond in particular to messages about the financial wisdom and modest cost of using the community college for the first two years of a baccalaureate degree and for providing opportunities for their sons or daughters to improve academic skills and gain maturity and a sense of direction. Appeals to attend the community college based on high quality programs or delivered through the mass media are less likely to be persuasive.

Community college parents who participated in the focus group lack realistic expectations about how most students move through these institutions, including the fact that the majority needs remedial coursework and do not earn the associate's degree. Anecdotal evidence from the college's counselors and advisors who meet with parents at informational sessions and high school college fairs suggests these unrealistic expectations are not unusual. The risk in reinforcing unrealistic expectations is that parents may place blame on the college if their sons and daughters do not follow the more traditional paths that parents seem to have in mind for them.

Parents' incomplete or inaccurate information was particularly evident in focus group conversations about financial aid and the college catalog. Community college professionals are likely to assume there is widespread understanding of language such as "A.A. degree" or "chairperson," but the focus group revealed a level of unfamiliarity with these terms that was surprising. This suggests clearly that in communicating with parents and the community, colleges need to engage in careful research and craft language and explanations that may seem simplistic to those who work in colleges but that are essential to inform potential students, parents, and the public.

The Value of Multiple Approaches

This study employed both quantitative and qualitative research to examine parent involvement in the college choice process of traditional-aged community college students, factors influencing the choice to attend the community college, parent views about their sons' or daughters' experiences at the college, and parent ideas about what their own role should



be as the parent of a community college student. The survey permitted us to combine data to examine parent perceptions in light of their sons' or daughters' actual academic performance and progress. The focus group elicited rich insights into parent expectations for their sons and daughters and their ideas about what the college should provide to them, as parents. The combination of approaches yielded deeper insights and more useful information than the results of either the survey or the focus group did alone.

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