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COMMUNICATING WITH PARENTS ABOUT COLLEGE:

DOES THE APPROACH MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

John Michael Winkworth

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of
the Graduate College in the University of Nebraska
in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Educational Psychology and Measurements

Under the Supervision of Professor

Robert D. Brown

Lincoln, Nebraska

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COMMUNICATING WITH PARENTS ABOUT COLLEGE:

DOES THE APPROACH MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

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JMW

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PREVIEW

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The parents of college students have long been ignored by administrators and researchers in American higher education. The subject of considerable attention during the elementary and secondary years, parents have been presumed to be of little consequence to the educational goals and activities of colleges and universities. In fact, colleges have traditionally served in the place of parents, carrying out many of the typical parental functions. It has not been unusual for colleges to provide students with food, shelter, health care, financial aid, and counsel, and to discipline them when appropriate. But higher education is changing, the doctrine of in loco parentis is in decline, and some educators are beginning to show new interest in the role played by parents during the college experience.

Considerable support for parental involvement is being generated by researchers in higher education who see parents as being important to student growth and development during the college years. With curiosities no doubt piqued by the talk of a "generation gap", research efforts on the parental role and its relationship to the collegiate experience of a son or daughter are being given more attention. Studies comparing parents and students on such dimensions as attitudes (Ellis & Bowlin, 1970; Hurst, Munsey, & Penn, 1971;

Smith & Kimmel, 1970), values (Johnson, 1969), expectations (Braskamp & Flessner, 1971), and perceptions (Brown, 1972; Evans, 1970; Seymour & Richardson, 1972) are adding to an understanding of the role of parents. While the evidence is insufficient to draw many clearly defined conclusions, the general consensus appears to be that parent involvement during the college years can have a profound influence on student performance.

A good share of the impetus for this growing interest in parents, has been the result of the financial difficulties currently besetting higher education. The average citizen, under the burden of a greater and greater tax responsibility is becoming increasingly vocal about the disbursement of his tax dollar. After functioning in a relatively unfettered fashion for a good many years, public higher education has come under the scrutiny of a much more vigilant public which has some serious questions about the educational enterprise. A growing concern over the increasing estrangement of the public is reflected by Warren Bennis (1972) who, as a university president, feels that public institutions can ill-afford to lose the support of the citizens. It is becoming evident to most administrators that they must give attention to their various publics. And of these groups it appears that parents as taxpayers and de facto supporters of colleges have a high probability of being sympathetic to the problems of higher education. Their active support could serve to be quite invaluable to harried administrators.

Parents do indeed possess an important potential for influencing positive student development during the college years. But it could

be that this impact has been thwarted in many cases by an inadequate understanding of the college experience--a situation that has resulted in part from an implicitly held expectation that their participation was of little value. It is time for colleges to make a concerted effort to bring parents up to date and into the educational process.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this investigation was to examine the relative effectiveness of several methods of communicating with parents of first year college students. The study focused on parents of new students who participated in a summer orientation program. Three different treatment approaches were developed, in an attempt to influence parental expectations of the freshman year. While all approaches utilized small discussion groups and information generated by the parents, they differed in terms of overall program focus.

The primary intent was to compare a Positive treatment approach that concentrated solely on the good side of college with a Problem treatment approach that was concerned with the negative aspects and a Balanced treatment approach that attempted to provide a more objective picture of campus life. Program effectiveness was to be judged on the degree to which parental expectations and attitudes, as well as their behavior in the small discussion groups, differed between treatments. Consistent with the social learning theory of Rotter (1954), it was predicted that the Positive treatment would be more effective than either of the other two.

Theoretical Framework

Theoretical support for the importance of parents to student development during the college years comes most directly from the writings of Nevitt Sanford and Eric Erikson. In discussing the difficult transition of the late adolescent from the relative security of the home to the challenge and uncertainty of college, Sanford (1962) notes the necessity of the student's receiving reassurance of his own value and worth from his family and friends. It is support in the form of encouragement, expressions of confidence, and treatment as a promising equal that assists the uncertain student through this period of adjustment. And while Sanford feels that parents can help to cushion the shock of leaving home, he thinks that it is perhaps just as important that they not make the situation too comfortable and that they provide the student with the freedom to have a wide variety of experiences.

An interpretation of Erikson (1968) yields essentially the same two basic points. He speaks to the important supportive function when he suggests that effective development involves a sense of continuity with one's past along with the maintenance of his or her familial roots while pushing on to new and different experiences. The critical role of providing freedom and understanding is substantiated by his view of the college years as the occasion for a psychological moratorium during which the individual is relatively free to play a number of roles without any lasting obligation and to confront established values and modes of behavior.

An examination of possible program approaches growing out of the

ideas discussed above, suggested one based on the premises of Julian Rotter. In Social Learning and Clinical Psychology (1954) he presents a cogent argument for the merits of a positive approach which directs attention to the desirable aspects of a situation. Two general points of his appear to be most pertinent to parent program approaches. The first is that the most direct or simple way of increasing behavior potentials is through direct reinforcement. Certainly the plethora of research on the effectiveness of positive reinforcement in altering behavior (e.g. Krasner & Ullmann, 1965; Thoresen & Krumboltz, 1967) lends credence to this claim. The second refers to the manner in which verbalization can quickly bring about change in expectations by directing an individual's attention to new and previously neglected consequences of behavior. Luchins (1942), in his studies of set, has clearly demonstrated that one can, by verbal techniques, direct attention to cues which, although previously present, were not attended to.

Program Description and Rationale

This study was conducted to examine the relative effectiveness of several methods of communicating with parents of college freshmen. Within the context of a summer orientation program for parents of freshmen, effort was expended to develop worthwhile experiences that would positively influence expectations about the college experience of their son or daughter. A summer orientation framework was selected primarily because it offered the opportunity to involve a significant number of parents whose general accessibility to the campus is quite

limited. In addition, the practical relevance of conducting research within an already existing structure was also a critical factor in this decision.

Relying most heavily on Rotter, a treatment approach focusing strictly on the positive aspects of college life was developed. Information presented stressed the favorable side of the campus. In a series of structured interactions, parents were to discuss their own positive expectations relative to their child's upcoming college career, as well as their thoughts as to their own role in the process. At no time was their attention directed at the negative side.

In order to test the effectiveness of this positive emphasis, two additional treatments were constructed which varied only on the critical "focus" dimension. In direct contrast to the positive approach was the negative or problem presentation in which parents were to concentrate on the unpleasant aspects of college life. By dwelling on the difficulties inherent in any college situation, it might be argued that parents could gain an increased awareness and understanding of the trials and tribulations confronting college students. This concentration on the problem does not appear to be completely without precedent for there are a good many therapeutic approaches to dealing with maladaptive behavior, such as Freudian psycho-analysis and Rogerian therapy, that deal quite extensively with problems and negative feelings and expectations. It is thought that through a clearer understanding of the problem, the client is able to pull himself out of the mire.

For a third and final treatment approach, a program was

constructed to balance the two previously mentioned emphases. An objective approach presented parents with a view of campus life that included equal portions of both the pleasant and the unpleasant.

An adequate comparison among these three treatments is predicated on a high degree of parental involvement. This requirement necessitated that a number of basic changes be made in the parental orientation program itself. While most reported program efforts have typically had the parent in a passive, listening role, it was integral to the study that parents become active participants.

First of all, the large group lecture was replaced by small group discussions. A recent evaluation effort of a parent orientation program conducted by Celio (1972) revealed that parents rated most highly a small group experience that enabled them to interact with students and with each other. Their favorable reaction concurs with research results based on small groups which demonstrates their utility in bringing about change in problem solving skills (Barnard, 1942; Dawson, 1956), attitudes (Casey & Weaver, 1956), and behavior (Lewin, 1952). The latter reference gains additional relevance because in that instance change took place in a brief time frame nearly identical to that used in this study.

A second and perhaps more radical alteration in the overall program structure was that a major source of program content would be the parents themselves. Rotter (1954) has called attention to the fact that parental education programs need to give the highest priority to information provided by parents. By eliciting ideas, concerns, and suggestions from parents, the chances are increased that the "facts"

will make sense to the parents, and hence, have an increased likelihood of being seriously considered. This idea is in drastic opposition to the de rigueur "question and answer session" mechanism employed in most similar programs to obtain parent input. If the interest in parents is genuine, then perhaps a shared dialogue is a more effective means of communication than the usual monologue delivered by an administrator.

A final change was in the manner in which the institution was to handle its share of the communication with parents. The idea of utilizing upperclass college students is certainly not new, and no doubt their delegated function as discussants and group leaders is merely a difference in degree. But the information function which has typically been the main thrust of these programs and the responsibility of the institution's administrative arm was dealt with in quite a different way. Based on the demonstrated effectiveness of mailed information approaches (Winkworth, Brown, & Braskamp, 1973), critical information was mailed to parents prior to their program attendance. This freed up the college's administrative representative to serve an unusual program role--that of a listener!

Treatment group comparisons were based on a variety of assessment measures. The primary index of program effectiveness was impact on parent expectancies. Rotter's (1966) I-E Locus of Control Scale was employed to quantify program effect on generalized expectancy for reinforcement. Two additional expectancy questionnaires were developed which focused on expectations in regard to parental behavior. Both of these instruments included positive and negative expectations scales,

which were intended to measure the general direction of parental expectations.

A second measure of program effect was change in parent attitudes. Although somewhat tangential to the program objectives, measures of attitude might possibly provide important data on the effect of program approaches on parent affect. Lastly, program assessment was concerned with the behavior of the parents in the small groups. It was felt that behavioral observations of the parents would add considerable information to an understanding of how they reacted within each of the three approaches. These recordings were to be the responsibility of the students who were small group leaders.

Consistent with Rotter's (1954) social learning theory, it was predicted that the positive program approach would be more effective than either the problem or the balanced approaches. Specifically, it was hypothesized that the positive group would give evidence of:

- 1) greater expectations of control over their own reinforcements;
- 2) more positive expectations of their student's first year behavior;
- 3) more positive expectations of their own behavior;
- 4) more positive attitudes toward the college and the program;
- 5) and greater involvement in the program.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This chapter contains an elaboration of the research and theory on which this investigation is based. Included are descriptions of the parental role as a facilitator of student development, past research on parents of college students, typical parent program efforts, and the nature of expectancy as it relates to this study.

The Facilitator Role of Parents

Parental functions appear to play a critically important part in student growth and development. Morrow & Wilson (1961) found that parents facilitated academic success by being approving, trusting and encouraging, as well as less restrictive and severe. In another study Murphey, Silber, Coelho, Hamburg, & Greenburg (1963) discovered two conditions that seemed to facilitate the development of autonomy and accountability in first year college students. They suggested that student growth seems to be optimal when parental confidence and clarity in their own point of view are accompanied by a flexibility that maintains confidence in the student during his period of searching. In reviewing the relevance of parents to student development, Mills (1968) echoed basically the same point when he said that one of the dominant contributing factors to a student's adequate self-esteem seems to be that he feels that his parents have a high regard

for him.

The significance of parents is quite evident in the perceptions of college students themselves. Although often physically separated by attendance at a distant college, students continue to provide evidence that their family ties are anything but ignored. Joseph Katz (1968) concluded that the students he studied moved within the life-space composed of their families. In their activities, values, and choice of occupation the majority seemed to conform to the behavior and expectations of their own family. In studying the nature of parent-student communication, Bloom & Kennedy (1970) reported that students maintained a fairly regular contact with their parents by means of letters and telephone calls.

College students also perceive their parents to be an important resource for finding solutions to a variety of problems. Collins (1960) found that students discussed serious problems with their parents. First year students in particular, see their parents to be a primary source for advice and assistance (Cole & Ivey, 1967; Regan & Thompson, 1965). In addition, parents rate as an important source of influence on occupational decision making (Lehmann & Dressel, 1962; Slocum & Empey, 1956; Thielens, 1966).

Research on Parents

Research interest in the parents of college students has mainly taken the form of studies that are descriptive in nature. Comparisons of parent and student attitudes have been quite popular. Tautfest & Young (1970) studied attitudes toward college regulations; Ellis &

Bowlin (1970) looked at off-campus housing, while Smith & Kimmel (1970) obtained reactions to off-campus cohabitation; and Biggs, Vaughan, & Donart (1972) obtained opinions related to campus dissent and university management of student life. In summary, attitudinal differences seem to conform to the expected pattern with parents holding more traditional or conservative views, while students tend to be more liberal. There is also one piece of evidence to suggest that these parent-student differences become increasingly discrepant with college attendance (Hurst, Munsey, & Penn, 1971).

These differences between parents and students are not solely confined to attitudinal issues. Evidence on values, expectations, and perceptions shows the same general tendency. Johnson (1969) compared the values of freshmen and like-sex parents on the Poe Inventory of Values and found students to hold more intense values on six of the eight areas. In a study comparing parent and entering student expectations, Braskamp & Flessner (1971) reported that while there was agreement on the more concrete and objective expectations related to degree objective and predicted grade point average, congruency was not found in the personal and emotional area, as for example, the goals for attending college.

Parents and students seem to have very different perceptions of the college environment. In studies using the College and University Environment Scales (CUES), Evans (1970), on a commuter campus, and Brown (1972), on a large campus with a high proportion of residents, both found discrepancies between student and parent perceptions. Seymour & Richardson (1972), employing the College Characteristics

Index (CCI), reported a similar lack of perceptual similarity.

In summary, it is the very presence of these divergent views that places a serious strain on parent-student relationships and that can stifle any facilitating parental effect. Parents seem potentially to be able to influence in a markedly positive way the growth and development of their offspring. By being confident and supportive, by demonstrating trust and understanding, parents can facilitate the total education of their son or daughter. Unfortunately, this potential is placed in serious jeopardy by some fairly significant differences that exist between parents and their college offspring.

While certain differences can no doubt be attributed to traditional age related perceptions, a rather significant proportion has resulted from a lack of parental awareness and comprehension of what college is all about. Parental perceptions of the environment have been found to be unrealistic and overly idealistic (Brown, 1972). Their confusion over the role of the college is evident in continued parental support for a policy of in loco parentis which is in apparent contradiction to the general belief of educators who see this doctrine heading toward a speedy demise (Dua, 1966; Johnson, 1969). A further documentation of this parental bewilderment is present in the work of Bordin, Shaevitz, & Lacher (1970) who found that parents expected colleges to exert more control over their sons and daughters than they themselves did at home!

These findings should not be so surprising, particularly in view of the way parents have been excluded from the process. Out of contact and ignored, they have been forced to base their view of college on

vague recollections of their own college experiences (Bloom & Kennedy, 1970), and on the often sensationalized accounts of college activity portrayed by the media. Equipped with outdated and overly exaggerated information, it is no wonder that parents have trouble understanding college life and the actions of their own students.

Typical Parent Program Efforts

Very little is known about how colleges can best go about involving parents in the college experience. Numerous suggestions have called for student personnel professionals to work with parents (Bloom & Kennedy, 1970), for parents to be given a more realistic picture of campus life (Tautfest & Young, 1970), and even for administrators to involve parents in the policy making of the institution (Biggs, Vaughan, & Donart, 1972). But too few of these ideas have led to systematic consideration and implementation of parent programs by which a parent could become a more active participant. The most popular program form that has been employed is the on-campus parent orientation.

Although a relatively recent phenomenon, parent orientation programs appear to be gaining modest support on college campuses (Forrest & Knapp, 1966). Especially for administrators and student personnel workers confronted with the problems of trying to involve a group that is inaccessible in most cases, orientation sessions of a brief duration provide an excellent opportunity for communicating with parents about the college experience. There are minor variations from institution to institution, but the orientation format remains

basically the same. Parents are invited to the campus to learn about college. Information is then transmitted by some combination of large group assemblies, panel discussions, question and answer sessions, and campus tours.

There have been variations on this basic format that seem worthy to mention. Herman & Zeigler (1961) used the orientation day to interpret a large number of test scores to parents in a large group situation. In a second example Kronovet & Barash (1964), in working with parents of commuter college students, used small discussion groups that met four times over the course of one month. By means of unstructured group interactions, their goal was to increase parental understanding.

While the presence of such program efforts is quite encouraging, the almost total absence of any meaningful assessment of program effectiveness is rather disheartening. It seems unfortunate that Kronovet & Barash (1964) did not attempt any type of systematic evaluation of their work! In one of the earliest reported efforts, Newton (1955) was content to report that his program was "well received". Most efforts have been content with a similar indication of parental satisfaction. As Cole & Ivey (1967) seem to suggest, perhaps this is the best that can be hoped for.

While not intending to denigrate the importance of favorable parent attitudes, there is research evidence to suggest that a measure of parent satisfaction provides an inadequate assessment of program content. In their study of the influence of mailed information about the campus on parent-student communication and interactions, Winkworth,