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What to Expect When You're Expected: Uncovering the Role of Cultural Capital in College Success

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What To Expect When You’re Expected: Uncovering The Role of Cultural Capital in College Success

Margaret Tippett, BA (anticipated May 2020), Ithaca College, NY
2020 Richard Macksey National Undergraduate Research Symposium
Study Premise

- Research has confirmed that the transition from high school to college is challenging and has identified parents as both supporters and stressors in the lives of college students, the latter particularly with respect to grades.
- Research has shown that cultural capital facilitates success in college.
- First-generation college students are almost three times as likely to withdraw from school within three years as students with parents who have a bachelor’s degree.
Research Questions

- What are the expectations that parents impose on a racially diverse group of first-year college women?
- How do these women navigate the expectations of their parents regarding attendance and location of college and social/extra-curricular activities during and after their transition to college?
The transition from high school to college is a challenging time during which many students have difficulty adapting (Towbes & Cohen, 1996).

College students who have higher levels of family support are less likely to experience loneliness (Chang et al., 2017).

However, Ross et al. (1999) found that 21/100 college students identified parents as one of their main stressors in college.
Cultural Capital

- Defined as a toolkit for navigating the social world (Chen, 2015)
- Students of college-educated parents can leverage their parents’ knowledge or toolkit regarding college to accelerate their own academic and social experiences
- First-generation college students do not have access to this knowledge accumulated through experience (Salas, 2016)
- “Families adopt a constellation of values, cultural values, as a result of their class location…(generating) a culture of scholastic expectations (Nash, 1990)
Expectancy-Value Theory

- Students choose to perform specific actions based on the expected outcome and value of that outcome (Feather, 1988)
- However, conflict can arise between adult students and parents who share a close bond; students strive to please their parents, but may simultaneously feel pressure and resentment
Methods: Subjects

- Five first-year college age women from a liberal arts college in the Northeast United States were interviewed.
- Participants were recruited through a Research Participant Flyer posted on a Facebook page dedicated to first-year college students.
- 13 students responded to the posting and interview times were confirmed with 5 students.
- Signed consent was obtained.
Methods: Procedures

- Each student was interviewed in a private location of their choice on their college’s campus
- On average, the interviews lasted about 58 minutes
- Participants were asked a series of questions about their relationships and social life on campus
  - Do you keep in contact with your parents? If so, how often?
  - How did you make your college decision?
Methods: Analysis

- Interview details were summarized in narrative descriptions
- Narratives were analyzed for themes
- Concept maps were developed to organize themes
## Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Quality of Parental Relationship</th>
<th>Degree of Cultural Capital</th>
<th>Attend College</th>
<th>Stay Close to Home</th>
<th>Maintain Contact</th>
<th>Avoid Alcohol</th>
<th>Join Extracurricular Activities</th>
<th>Network with Professors</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Haley</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Accept</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Katie</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Results: Attend College
Theme 1: Do As I Do

- Parents who attended college highly encourage their children to attend college (Anderson & Scott, 2014; Nicholas & Islas, 2015). Katie, a white college freshman, was pressured by her parents to attend college from an early age.

  “I’ve always been expected to attend college. Not going (to college), or going to work some job, was never an option in my family. Both of my parents went to school, so I was going too.”
Results: Stay Close to Home
Theme 2: Location, Location, Location

Heather is a first-generation college student. Her parents entered the work-force directly after high school graduation in Mexico. Neither of them were aware of the demands of college life, and both hoped that Heather could continue her duties at home while attending college in their town. Initially, Heather attended a college in her hometown, but subsequently transferred away.

“Leaving my parents was very difficult, and I was concerned that I wouldn’t be there for things. I helped raise my siblings, and so that was a big part of life….being there for my parents. But, at the same time, it was kind of a relief to be away at a different school because I had a little more time for myself.”
Results: Maintain Contact
Theme 3: Only A Phone Call Away

- There is an expectation of some level of parent-student contact (Small et al. 2011). Haley’s parents attended college and knew of the importance of contacting their parents when they needed assistance. Their insistence on regular exchanges represents cultural capital, in that Haley’s parents recognized the value of parental support during crucial experiences in college.

“I generally stay in pretty good contact with my parents through the phone. But, my relationship with my Dad is much stronger….I also keep in contact with my extended family and grandparents.”
If students are engaging in activities that their parents might not approve of, then students may lie about activities or omit information. Parents who attended college had “general cultural awareness” regarding the kinds of activities that occurred on campus (Dumais & Ward, 2009). Lila specifically stated that her parents would not approve of her attending parties on the weekend.

“Sometimes my parents will call me at night and I’ll tell them that I’m getting ready for bed, but I’m actually putting on my makeup to get ready to go out for the night.”
Results: Join Extracurricular Activities
Theme 5: Just Say Hi!

- Parents, many of whom were likely enrolled in college activities themselves, encourage their students to join on-campus organizations to motivate them to form new relationships (Lum, 2006; Rubin & Sloman 1984). Parents who attended college are aware of the importance of networking and creating friendships (Lee & Chen, 2016). Taylor’s parents encouraged her to attend her college’s student organization fair to make new friends.

“Because I had transferred and didn’t really know anyone, my mom told me I should try to join some group on campus, she was in a volunteer group for a few years, I think. I went to the event and signed up for the first table I saw: Women’s Rugby. I guess she was good motivation, because I am still on the team.”
Results: Network with Professors
Theme 6: They Are There To Help You

- Parents want their children to take advantage of all the available opportunities that they have access to in college themselves—establishing new relationships with peers and professors, joining clubs and sports teams—which creates a network that can foster opportunities in college and after graduation (Nicholas & Islas, 2015). Katie was not encountering any academic difficulty, but her parents still wanted her to attend office hours.

“My parents asked me if I had gone to office hours with my professors yet. When I told them “No,” they were kind of surprised and irritated. My mom suggested I look at tutors for class….she was a TA. They really wanted me to go, meet them, and create a friendship early on. I’ve gone to a few so far now.”
Conclusions

- Students generally accepted parental advice regardless of the presence or absence of parental cultural capital or the quality of the relationship with parents.
- Of the four rejections, one was associated with the presence of cultural capital and a positive parent-student relationship, two were associated with absence of cultural capital, and one was associated with a “rocky” parent-student relationship.
  - Desire for independence?
  - Lila rejected her parents’ advice to establish her independence.
  - Role of value-expectancy theory?
  - Heather rejected networking advice; perhaps she did not see the value of networking although her parents recommended that she pursue this.
  - Role of cultural capital?
  - Heather rejected networking advice because of the manner of presentation, authenticity.
Future Directions and Limitations

- Counseling directed towards first-year students about behaviors that can foster achievement and confidence in college
- Accessibility to skill toolkits that will equip first-generation college students to thrive in an environment with which their parents have had limited exposure
- Small sample
- Female only
- Single institution
- Manner of enrollment
Acknowledgments

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References


