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ABSTRACT

Three communication programs were designed to improve the communication styles and the nature of interactions between parents and their sons or daughters attending college. The programs focused generally on: (1) telling parents what college life is like and about some of the major concerns and worries of students, and (2) presenting parents with different models of interacting with students. Two major communication programs consisted primarily of a series of mailings to parents and third involved direct personal contact with parents during a summer orientation. The results showed that in general, parental reactions were quite positive. Also, the series of mailed treatments appeared to have little or no impact on parental communication styles. In conclusion, it appeared that for the type of parents who participated in this program, a mailed treatment involving written material was not powerful enough to have an impact upon parental attitudes or communication styles.
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INTERVENTION PROGRAMS DESIGNED TO IMPROVE
COMMUNICATION BETWEEN PARENTS AND STUDENTS

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The relationship between child and parent remains critical even as the child enters college (Bloom & Kennedy, 1970). This is often a difficult and stressful period for both. The student faces new challenges and adjustments to a new environment during a period when he is away from his parents. The college freshman is striving for independence and self-confidence and is often changing his views of himself and those around him. Parents are not available on a day-to-day basis to observe, accept, let alone cope with these changes. A lack of knowledge about each others' concerns and poor communication styles are major factors in parent-student conflicts (Berdie, 1970). How these conflicts are resolved can have an impact on the future development of the student as he becomes more independent and mature (Katz, 1968).

A communication gap between college students and their parents does exist. Significant discrepancies have been found between parent and student expectations about college life and the relative importance of goals for attending college (Braskamp, 1970). Parental and student perceptions about the campus environment have also been found to be incongruent, regardless of whether or not the students were freshmen or upperclassmen (Brown, 1972). Other investigators have found similar differences between student and par-

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ental attitudes toward campus regulations (Billings, 1970 Tautfest & Young, 1970), moral values (Johnson, 1969), and academic freedom, philosophy of education, and self-government (Crookston, Keist, Ivey, & Miller, 1967). Recent studies suggest that the parental-student communication and issue gap actually increases during the student's first year (Hubbell, Sjogren, & Boardman, 1970, and Hurst, Munsey, & Penn, 1971).

Until recently, program efforts to bridge the communication gap have been devoted almost entirely to helping students, but in isolation from their parents. Berdie (1970), however, suggests that the major responsibility for establishing better communication rests with the parents.

Purpose of Communication Programs

Three communication programs were designed to improve the communication styles and the nature of interactions between parents and their college sons or daughters. The programs focused generally on: 1) telling parents what college life is like and what are some of the major concerns and worries of students, and 2) presenting parents with different models of interacting with students. Two major communications programs consisted primarily of a series of mailings to parents and a third involved direct personal contact with parents during a summer orientation. The Programs were operational during the winter, late summer, and early fall.

Description of Program I

Program I consisted of a series of mailings to parents distributed during the latter part of the first semester, just prior to and immediately following Christmas vacation. These regular mailings consisted of written material which described the collegiate experience and focused on the major concerns

and worries of college students. Four major themes were chosen: 1) Vocational Planning, 2) Social Life, 3) Academic Life, and 4) Searching for Independence. Each topic was treated in three different formats. The first format was a one page montage of headlines from the student newspaper backed by a 250 word editorial commentary, which described problems students face. The Academic Life editorial discussed educational innovations and the Vocational Planning editorial elaborated on the changing work world. Under the Social Life heading, dating and new social patterns associated with group living were the major topics and student desires to "make up their own mind" was the central theme of the Searching for Independence editorial.

The second format for each topic was a one page mock Parent-Student Dialogue, which presented a conflict situation related to the particular theme of the series. Parents were asked to think about how the son or daughter in the dialogue felt and what response or course of action the parent should pursue. The possible effects of each parental response were briefly described.

Essays, which focused specifically on college life, comprised the third format. While the editorials dealt with the topics in the context of general adolescent problems, the one-page essays dealt with more immediate concerns of students.

Of major interest was whether or not a relatively modest and inexpensive treatment -- a series of mailings -- could have an impact upon parental communication styles. The following research hypotheses were made:

The mailed descriptions of student life and parent-student conflict situations will:

Ho. 1 Have a significant effect on the frequency of parent-student communication.

- No. 2 Have a significant effect on parental behavior in parent-student conflict situations.
- No. 3 Have a significant effect on parental attitudes toward youth.
- No. 4 Have a greater effect on parents whose sons and daughters also receive material than on parents whose sons and daughters did not also receive material.

Sample and Procedure

A total of 280 parent couples were randomly selected from all freshmen parents who did not live in the University town, had not attended the University, and had no other son or daughter at the University. One half were parents of male freshmen students and one half were parents of female freshmen students. Seventy parent couples were randomly placed into each of the groups: two treatment groups, one placebo control group, and one pure control group. Group I consisted of parents who alone were sent program material, whereas Group II was comprised of parents whose sons and daughters also received program material parallel to that sent parents in terms of themes, but from a parental point of view. Parents in Group III received placebo information while parents in Group IV did not receive any mailed information.

Groups I and II were sent program material related to a particular theme distributed over a ten-day period. The mailings began in November and terminated in late January. Parents in the placebo group were periodically sent standard promotional material about the University. The topics were generally unrelated to parent-student concerns and served as a control for the fact that they were recipients of a special University mailing. Returns were received from 86% of all parents who received the assessment.

Instrumentation and Analysis

Both fathers and mothers in all four groups completed a four page assessment inventory. Included were six scales comprising a Discussion Topic Survey, four scales in an Activity Reaction Inventory, an Attitude Toward Youth Scale and several individual items related to evaluation and use of the Communication Program material. The scales were piloted and revised from earlier institutional studies. Table 1 presents a description of the scales and their reliabilities.

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Insert Table 1 About Here

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On the Discussion Topic Survey items, parents answered the question "How frequently do you talk with your son or daughter about . . ." by marking "very often", "occasionally", "rarely", or "never". The Activity Reaction Inventory included brief descriptions of student activities and parents were asked to decide what they would do if their son or daughter engaged in such activities. Parents had five alternatives ranging from "Take Disciplinary Action" to "Do Nothing at All". They were also asked for their degree of agreement with statements about youth on the Attitude Toward Youth Scale.

Four separate planned comparisons were made: 1) Parents only treatment versus parents-students treatment; 2) Parents only treatment versus Placebo;



3) Parents only treatment versus control; and 4) Placebo versus Control. The comparisons represent four of a possible six two-group comparisons, but the contrasts were not orthogonal to each other. They did, however, provide the most direct test for the hypotheses.

A three way factorial ANOVA design was employed for each comparison for each to the 11 scales. The first factor was the treatment factor containing the two groups used in each specific comparison. The second and third factors were the sex of parent and sex of child. Since the eight groups formed by the 2x2x2 design were unequal in size, the data were analyzed using the method of unweighted means (Dayton, 1970).

Results

Table 2 lists the scales for which the differences between treatments, sex of parents and sex of students were statistically significant at the .05 level. Only twice did parents in the groups respond differently. Parents in the Placebo group discussed controversial behavior more frequently than those in the Parents only treatment group. In general, parents of male students responded to the items in much the same way as did parents of females.

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Insert Table 2 About Here

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The most frequent occurring differences were obtained in the mother vs. father responses. Mothers and fathers generally reacted differently on scale items which dealt with the frequency with which parents talked to their son or daughter. In all instances mothers talked to the child more about the topic than the fathers, and in general, mothers had a more positive attitude toward youth than fathers.

In response to the Evaluation items, ninety-one percent of the parents in the two treatment groups indicated they had read all or most of the material and seventy-nine percent indicated an interest in participating again. Over two-thirds rated the material as good or outstanding. The amount of sharing that took place is noteworthy. Seventy-seven percent of the responding parents said they had discussed the material with each other and sixty-eight percent had talked about it with their son or daughter. Only about one-fourth had talked about the material with a friend.

Conclusion

The treatments had little or no effect despite the fact that parents read and discussed the program material among themselves. Mothers generally reacted consistently different than fathers, regardless of whether the child was male or female. The program was apparently an effective public relations device, but either it was not powerful enough to have an impact on parent-student interactions or the outcome measures were not sensitive enough to note changes.

Description of Program II

Program II was a direct personal contact program with groups of parents who participated in a parent-student summer orientation at the University. The basic objective was to provide parents with information about students

and related campus issues. Within the informational context of the program, an attempt was made to assess the effect of differing types of program presentations on the ensuing information needs of participating parents.

Five distinctly different presentations were developed. Four of these efforts duplicated the themes employed in Program I; namely, Vocational Planning, Social Life, Academic Life, and Searching for Independence. A fifth presentation was a general approach encompassing all four areas of concern.

Each of the presentations followed the same general format, with slight deviations due to the individual styles of the three presenters who shared leadership responsibilities. For all but the general presentations, the parents were introduced to the topic for the 45 minute session by a brief one page hand out which attempted to stimulate their thinking relative to the day's theme. After the parents were given a chance to read and think about the material, the presenter addressed his remarks to a clarification of the issues. Questions and reactions were encouraged throughout. At the conclusion of the session the parents were provided with an opportunity to make a written request for additional information.

Sample and Procedure

In the summer of 1971 all students accepted to the fall freshmen class at the University, along with their parents, were invited to attend a one day summer orientation program on the campus. A total of 24 different sessions of the orientation were conducted. The sample for this present study consisted of the 1,497 parents who chose to attend this orientation.

Program II dealt solely with the daily 45 minute sessions that were held with the parent groups. These were large group sessions, with one

presenter. An attempt was made to distribute the five topics in a random fashion, over the 24 days of the orientation. However, the equality of presentations was not obtained and there was a considerable variation in group size with 37 in one group and as many as 120 in another.

At the conclusion of the program parents were provided with information request cards by which they could request additional information about University students and: Vocational Planning, Social Life, Academic Life, and Searching for Independence. In addition to the information provided by the requests, an administrative assistant made behavioral observations of the number of people present, as well as the number of questions asked.

Results

The average group of 62 parents asked roughly 5 questions during the 45 minute period. A total of 436 cards were returned by the participants, averaging 18 cards for each of the 24 presentations. The parents in the Searching for Independence presentation returned the highest percentage of cards per session (45%). The lowest return rate came from the parents in the Social Life presentation (19%). The return rate percentage is presented in detail in Table 3 which also indicates the type of material requested after the presentations.

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Insert Table 3 About Here

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The highest overall need was for additional Vocational Planning information (79%), while the smallest number (53%) requested Searching for Independence material. Table 3 also presents information that could be related to the effectiveness of specific presentations on the information requests in the presented areas. For example 80% of the parents in the Vocational Information presentation requested additional vocational material. Using the General Presentation as a group for comparison, Vocational information and Academic Life requests remained the same for both groups. However, with the Social Life and the Searching for Independence groups, the requests for more material relative to the presentation showed decreases of about 10 and 13 percent respectively.

Conclusion

The procedure of varying program presentations in a parent orientation proved to be workable in meeting and assessing parent information needs about college life. Information concerning vocations and the world of work was most frequently requested. As for the effectiveness of the five presentations, the discussion of campus social life was most effective in reducing the information needs of parents, while the focus on changing values and modes of behavior in the Independence presentation produced the greatest amount of desire for additional information.

Description of Communication Program III

The third program in the series was similar to Program I, but included a number of modifications. In terms of the material itself, the style and nature of the format were considerably more simple than the elaborate presentations utilized in the earlier program. For each of the four topics,

Vocational Planning, Social Life, Academic Life, and the Searching for Independence, a two page presentation was developed. The objective of each was to transmit to parents a clear and concise picture of student life on the campus. A number of brief statements related to student concerns, University rules and policy, and sources of assistance on the campus were included. For example, in the Social Life presentation parents were informed that most students spend less than five hours per week in extra-curricular activities, that campus religious organizations are quite active in the programming area, and that the Recreation and Intramural Office provides an excellent series of experiences to students. A second part included a short 250-300 word narrative to draw parental attention to a particularly troublesome aspect of student life. The Vocational material, for example, included some notions about the unpredictability of the job market and the manner in which this influences the student's vocational decision making process. A final part contained some specific behavioral guidelines for solving common problems. In the Academic area, a set of seven behaviors that would facilitate academic survival were included.

Additional modifications in the frequency and the timing of the materials were made. Only two mailings of material were sent to the parents. The first mailing consisted of a brief cover letter and the Vocational and Social Life presentations. One week later this was followed by the Educational and Independence information. The materials were sent during the first two weeks of August, preceding the beginning of the fall semester. The intent of this mailing time was to capitalize on the heightened excitement and anticipation of both parents and students which usually are present at entry into college.

A major question of this study was whether or not parents with differing degrees of interest in the college future of their son or daughter would be

effected differently by the treatment. In this study high degree of interest was defined as having participated in a summer orientation program and requesting more information.

Two major hypotheses were tested in this study: 1) parents with differing interests in college as defined by their participation in the various phases of summer orientation should have different expectations of their son or daughter and frequency of parent-student discussions; 2) parents receiving the treatments should differ in their expectations and frequency of parent-student discussions from parents in the control group.

Sample and Procedure

The parents of 735 prospective freshmen students were selected for inclusion in the program. Half of these parent couples received the mailed treatment material, while the parent couples in the control condition did not receive the materials until after the assessment phase. Within each of the treatment and control conditions, there were three major parent groups. Groups I and IV consisted of the 435 parents who had attended the summer orientation program (as described in Program II) and who had returned cards requesting additional information. These parents were randomly assigned to either the treatment or the control condition. The second major parent group consisted of parents who had attended the orientation program but who did not ask for any additional information (Groups II & V) while the third consisted of students who did not attend the orientation (Groups III & VI). The seventy-five parents in Groups II, III, V, & VI represented a random selection from all parents in the two groups and were randomly placed in the treatment or control groups.

In the first week in August the parents in the three treatment groups received the Vocational and the Social Life materials, along with a cover letter explaining the nature of the program. One week later they received the Academic and Independence materials. The parents were informed that an evaluation form would be sent to them in the first part of September.

Instrumentation and Analysis

The assessment consisted of five separate scales in a Parental Expectations Survey, and five scales in a Frequency of Discussion Checklist. The parents of the three treatment groups also responded to a number of evaluation items pertaining to the mailed material. Finally, all parents were asked to provide some demographic information. The scales were developed so that the items reflected very closely the material sent to the parents. Table 4 presents a description of the scales and their reliabilities.

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Insert Table 4 About Here

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On the Parental Expectation Survey parents responded to the question "What do you feel are the chances that your freshman son or daughter will do each of the following. . ." by checking "no chance", "maybe", "good possibility", and "sure thing". For the Frequency of Discussion Checklist, parents were asked, "In the last two weeks before your son or daughter left

for college, did you talk about. . .". They were to answer yes or no, and, if yes, they were to give the number of times. The frequency choices were 1, 2, and 3 or more.

A three way factorial ANOVA design was employed to analyze each of the ten scales. One factor contained the three levels of parental participation in the summer orientation program, i.e., attendance plus request, attendance only, no attendance. The second and third factors were the treatment vs. control condition and sex of the student, son or daughter. Since the twelve groups formed by the 3x2x2 design were unequal in size, the data were analyzed using the method of unweighted means (Dayton, 1970).

Results

Table 5 lists the scales for which the main effects (treatment, parental participation in orientation, sex of student) were statistically significant at the .05 level. (Significant interaction effects were also obtained for some scales but did not lead to any meaningful interpretations.) Three of the four significant main effects were due to the sex of the student which indicated that parents of male students did not respond in the same way as did the parents of female students. Parents of females had greater social expectations and expected to discuss the topics more often with their daughter while attending college than did the parents of male students. Similarly parents of females had discussed the topics more often during August with their daughter than did the parents of males.

All parents in the three treatment groups were asked to complete a short evaluation form which was attached to the assessment. Mothers most frequently completed the assessment with nearly one fourth of both parents jointly completing the survey. Nearly everyone (96%) felt the material was

good or excellent. Four of every five parents talked to their spouse about the material and to the son or daughter, and three fourths gave the material to their child to read. However 60% of all parents did not talk with their friends about the material. In summary, parents had a very positive attitude toward and were quite involved in the program.

Conclusion

The purpose of this program of communication intervention was to examine the effects of a less sophisticated method of communication on parental expectations and student-parental discussions. Neither expectations and frequency of discussion was related to receiving the material nor was parental interest as measured by degree of involvement in the orientation program related to parental behavior. The sex of the student was significant with parents of female students being more involved with their daughter's life than were parents of male students.

General Conclusions and Discussion

Parental Reactions to the Program Material. In general, parental reactions were quite positive. They read the material, discussed it with each other and a majority would have gladly participated in similar programs again. It seems safe to assume that parents appreciate contacts with the University and that they will read material the University sends them.

Effectiveness of the Intervention Programs in Changing Communication Styles. The series of mailed treatments appeared to have little or no impact on parental communication styles. There are several possible explanations of which the first must be that the treatments themselves were

not powerful enough to bring about change. Information alone, especially in written form, has never proven to be a strong impetus for change. Some sort of involvement in terms of a debate, dialogue, or discussion usually serves to augment the potential impact of information. Although the parents in these studies did discuss the material with each other and many with their son or daughter, this was not built in systematically into the treatments. Other possible explanations include the educational level of the parents - generally little or no college - and the possible lack of sensitivity in the assessment devices.

Parental - Student Interactions. Among the parents in this particular study, the mothers were more likely to have discussed issues and concerns with their student, regardless of the student's sex. If the matriarchial pattern holds true for parent-student decision-making and conflict situations as well as for discussions, the mother may very well be the key to bringing about change in parental-student interaction styles. This might be less true, however, for populations with different educational and socio-economic backgrounds.

The nature of parent-student interactions suggests a very heavy avoidance of potential conflict producing topics, such as sex, controversial behavior, and problems as opposed to sharing feelings and ideas about experiences, world affairs, or future aspirations. While this emphasis is to be expected in day-to-day interactions, it indicates that parental-student interaction styles could be enriched, if not changed, if balance among the topics discussed was increased.

In conclusion, it would appear that for the type of parents who participated in this program, a mailed treatment involving written material,

about college life, student concerns and communication styles, is not powerful enough to have an impact upon parental attitudes or communication styles. The general responsiveness, however, of parents to participation in such a program warrants continued efforts to involve parents in other ways. Written material supplemented by phone calls from a university staff member might provoke the involvement necessary to stimulate thought and change. Encouraging students to discuss the same topics when they are home, might also be a supplementary catalyst. The most potentially powerful intervention, however, would be to deal with the same topics and concerns in a face-to-face situation with parents and students..

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TABLE 1

Names, Descriptions and Reliabilities of the 11 Scales
Included in the Assessment

<u>Scale Name</u>	<u>Discussion Topic Survey Description</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>R</u>
1. World Affairs	Social problems, current events, books read, television shows	3	.53
2. Abstract Sharing	Feelings about life, where headed in life, occupation aspirations, religious or ethical questions	4	.73
3. Experience Sharing	College experiences, friends, past history of family, school work and academic progress	4	.64
4. Problem Sharing	Very personal problems, sex, worry, serious financial and academic problems, embarrassing events	5	.75
5. Sex & Marriage	Attitudes toward sex, plans for marriage, dating patterns, living with others	5	.85
6. Controversial Behavior	Taking drugs, marching in a demonstration, quitting school, traveling	4	.75
<u>Activity Reaction Inventory</u>			
1. School	Change major, fail a course, want to drop out, study little, transfer to another college	6	.64
2. Personal	Have little social life, unsure about goals, seem very upset, making foolish decisions	4	.65
3. Independence	Talk about getting married, disagree on politics, stay out very late, live in an apartment	6	.64
4. Behavior	Not attend church, be in college demonstration, be suspected of drinking, arrested by police	4	.59
<u>Attitude Toward Youth</u>			
Attitudes Toward Youth	Mature, have it too easy, not realistic, drugs, morality, against everything, are concerned	15	.76

TABLE 2

SIGNIFICANT EFFECTS OBTAINED IN THE ANALYSIS OF PARENT RESPONSES

<u>Treatment Comparisons</u>	<u>Scale</u>	<u>Effect</u>	<u>P</u>
1. Parents only versus Parent-Student	World Affairs	Parent	.01
	Abstract Sharing	Parent	.01
	Problem Sharing	Parent	.05
	Sex & Marriage	Student	.05
	School Activities	Parent	.01
	Independence	Parent	.05
	Attitudes Toward Youth	Parent	.01
2. Parents only versus Placebo	World Affairs	Parent	.01
	Abstract Sharing	Parent	.01
	Experience Sharing	Parent	.01
	Problem Sharing	Parent	.05
	Sex & Marriage	Parent	.01
	Controversial Behavior	Treatment	.05
	School Activities	Parent	.05
	Independence	Parent	.01
	Behavior	Student	.05
3. Parent-Student versus Control	World Affairs	Parent	.01
	Abstract Sharing	Parent	.01
	Experience Sharing	Parent	.05
	Experience Sharing	Student	.05
	Problem Sharing	Parent	.01
	Attitudes Toward Youth	Parent	.01
	4. Placebo versus Control	World Affairs	Parent
Abstract Sharing		Parent	.01
Experience Sharing		Parent	.01
Experience Sharing		Student	.01
Problem Sharing		Parent	.01
Sex & Marriage		Student	.01
Controversial Behavior		Treatment	.01
Behavior		Student	.05

Table 3

Specific Information Requests
of Parents Desiring
Additional Materials
(Percent)

Presentation	(Percent in each returning cards)	Type of Material Requested			
		Vocational	Social	Academic	Independence
Vocational	(31)	80*	70	65	61
Social	(19)	92	68*	70	61
Academic	(36)	72	81	67*	51
Independence	(45)	82	74	69	46*
General	(25)	78	75	66	53
Total	(29)	79	72	66	53

* Percent requesting additional information about subject area of their group presentation.

Table 4

Name, Description, and Reliabilities of the 10 Scales

<u>Scale Name</u>	<u>Description</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>r*</u>
1. Academic Expectations	make honor roll, get help with studies, take pass-fail course, worry about bad grades, talk to teacher out of class.	5	.42
2. Vocational Expectations	change major, talk about careers, get job, worry about voc. choice, read about different occupations.	5	.54
3. Social Expectations	date once a week, join campus groups, have few friends, spend week-ends on campus, have periods of loneliness.	5	.46
4. Independence Expectations	become more religious, try drugs, become more independent, increase interest in politics, have trouble adjusting.	5	.34
5. Communication Expectations	ask your advice, come home monthly, write or phone weekly, listen to your opinion, discuss controversial subjects with you.	5	.67
6. Academic Discussions	good grades, study habits, flunking out, competition for grades, getting help with study problems.	5	.73
7. Vocational Discussions	current job market, importance of a good job, part-time job, vocational future, deciding on a college major.	5	.52
8. Social Discussions	dating, fraternities & sororities, making new friends, joining campus organizations, college social life.	5	.74
9. Independence Discussions	going to church, drugs, demonstrations, cost of college, paying their own way.	5	.56
10. Communication Discussions	keeping in touch with home, calling frequently, asking for advice, coming home on week-ends, areas of disagreement.	5	.50

* n = 299

Table 5

Significant Effects Obtained in the Analysis
of Parental Responses

<u>Scale</u>	<u>Effect</u>	<u>P</u>
Social Expectations	Sex of Student (Females higher)	.05
Communication Expectations	Sex of Student (Females higher)	.01
Communication Discussions	Sex of Student (Parents talked more to females)	.05
Social Discussions	Sex of Student (Parents talked more to females)	.01