

What Evidence from Research Tells Us: Family Engagement in College Pathway Decisions

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Overview

Each year, only 60% of high school graduates in Washington transition to postsecondary education within one year.¹ Family engagement is a critical part of the college search and transition process. Families are often involved in campus visits, financial planning, and the shifting of norms and responsibilities when a student begins their higher education journey. Evidence from research suggests that focused family engagement initiatives can help students make the transition to postsecondary education. This *Research Spotlight* highlights evidence from research about family engagement and families' influence on students' college pathway decisions, focusing on their college search, financial aid, and equity.²



Engaging Families During the College Search

Applying a Family Systems Theory (FST) approach to the college search process could improve college readiness by engaging families throughout the transition. [FST](#) asserts that the search and transition to college is experienced by the family as well as the student. Under this framework, school counselors and other college access staff should design college readiness programs that intentionally include understanding, input, and buy-in from families. Counselors and staff can help inform expectations and changes through the college search process so families can anticipate the disruptions and transitions that may otherwise cause tension to existing family dynamics.³

“Any big financial decision, I go to [my parents]. They are very involved in the process.”

– First-generation college student
(quote edited for clarity)

Communicating regularly with families through blogs and other readily accessible forms of engagement can be a positive mode of interaction between institutions and families. In addition to social media pages and website pages, one institution's Family Relations office uses its daily blog to keep parents informed on upcoming events, weather, and advice on supporting their students and encouraging independence. A [survey](#) was conducted to gauge perceptions of these communications with parents. Results indicated that 96 percent of parent respondents rated the blog positively, and 98 percent rated the institution's overall parent communications as positive.⁴



Engaging Families on Financial aid

Communicating directly with families about financial aid can improve completion rates of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) so that they can access financial aid to pay for college. For example, Nebraska dramatically improved FAFSA submissions by implementing a [strategy](#) based on family engagement. The strategy consisted of a series of communications campaigns geared towards families, including dozens of newspapers stories, broadcasts on local news stations, and over 300 financial aid presentations at high schools. The communications campaigns took place in the fall and helped prepare students and families to complete the FAFSA, resulting in an increase in the state’s FAFSA completion rate of more than 200 percent.⁵

Providing opportunities for families to learn about financial aid options gradually can [improve](#) their understanding of complicated information.⁶ [Interviews](#) with college students indicated that parents tend to be the most utilized source for financial aid information. However, their advice can be outdated, confusing, or unhelpful.⁷ This was the case for both first-generation and non-first-generation students because so much had changed since their parents attended college. Institutions should engage with students and families at different stages in the application process to understand what information and resources students already have and provide additional or corrected information to help inform their financial aid choices.



Equity in Family Engagement

Intentional engagement with families of first-generation college-going students can help create a welcoming and inclusive culture. Institutions may struggle to engage parents of first-generation students, particularly those from traditionally underserved and underrepresented backgrounds. However, there are [many ways](#) institutions can improve engagement. For instance, they can create communication content in different languages depending on community needs, hold family breakout sessions for orientation/pre-orientation, and invite current parent panelists who can share their experiences with incoming families.⁸

“Where my daughter attends, she says that there is racism... before, when she was applying, that is what I would have liked to know. What schools have higher percentages of racism, more or less. And why?”

– Latina parent (quote edited for clarity)

Addressing racial inequities and creating an inclusive campus environment are important for engaging students and families of diverse backgrounds. Various qualitative studies that have engaged with specific racial groups suggest that racial inequities deeply impact students and families. A [study](#) of parents of first-generation Latina/o students found that they were concerned about safety issues posed by racist and anti-immigrant sentiments that were rampant on campus.⁹ Similarly, a [study](#) of Native American students found that they grapple with cultural and spatial isolation from their families. The absence of significant Native American cultural and spiritual

RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT

practices, the prevalence of micro-aggressions, and racial slurs influenced their sense of belonging on campus.¹⁰ Another [study](#) found that Black students considered racial climate and population of other black students on campus when selecting a college.¹¹ Addressing these crucial campus climate issues can help create positive perceptions of equity and inclusion that will likely improve engagement between diverse students, families, and institutions .

Recognizing family involvement as an asset regardless of a family’s experience level with higher education can help engagement efforts. A [study](#) of the parents of first-generation college students demonstrated that parents had overwhelmingly positive attitudes and beliefs about the value of higher education. While these families may have lacked more traditional “college knowledge,” their emotional and financial support for their students were valuable contributions. Most parents in the study kept contact with their student, visited campus, offered advice, and encouraged self-efficacy for their student to problem solve new issues independently.¹² Encouraging family engagement can be a positive source of support for students to succeed in higher education.

Conclusion

Encouraging family engagement during the transition from high school to college can be an important part of improving the college-going culture in Washington and ultimately increasing educational attainment in our state. Families play an integral role in college pathway decisions, so it is imperative to develop strategies to engage students and their families in meaningful ways. The most current research and literature suggest that family engagement is important for student success in the college transition process, particularly regarding college search and financial aid. Research also indicates the necessity of adopting equitable engagement strategies geared towards families from underrepresented communities and acknowledging all families’ contributions to supporting their students’ success in college.

Notes

- ¹ "High School Graduate Outcomes | Washington State Education Research and Data Center." *High School Graduate Outcomes | Washington State Education Research and Data Center*. <https://erdc.wa.gov/data-dashboards/high-school-graduate-outcomes>.
- ² The articles referenced include studies that use a mix of research methods with varying degrees of rigorous evaluation, literature reviews, and news articles.
- ³ Das, Bagmi, and Beth H. Gilfillan. 2021. "Utilizing Family Systems Theory in College Readiness Counseling." *Mid-Western Educational Researcher* 33(1): 71–82.
- ⁴ Chapman, Betsy. 2017. "Using Blogging to Engage College Parents and Families--and How That Can Impact Your Institution's Bottom Line." *College & University* 92(1): 55–60.
- ⁵ Ciaramella, Allie. 2016. "How One State Leads the Country in Boosting FAFSA Completions National College Attainment Network."
- ⁶ Broderick, Lindsay. 2019. "Tips for Engaging Parents in FAFSA Completion - National College Attainment Network."
- ⁷ Harper, Casandra E., Lisa Scheese, Enyu Zhou, and Rajeev Darolia. 2021. "Who Do College Students Turn to for Financial Aid and Student Loan Advice, and Is It Advice Worth Following?" *Journal of Student Financial Aid* 50(3): 1–23.
- ⁸ New, Jake. 2014. "The Opposite of Helicopter Parents." *Inside Higher Ed*.
- ⁹ Cuevas, Stephany. 2020. "Ley de La Vida: Latina/o Immigrant Parents Experience of Their Children's Transition to Higher Education." *Journal of Higher Education* 91(4): 565–87.
- ¹⁰ Tachine, Amanda R., Nolan L. Cabrera, and Eliza Yellow Bird. 2017. "Home Away From Home: Native American Students' Sense of Belonging During Their First Year in College." *Journal of Higher Education* 88(5): 785–807.
- ¹¹ Comeaux, Eddie, Thandeka K. Chapman, and Frances Contreras. 2020. "The College Access and Choice Processes of High-Achieving African American Students: A Critical Race Theory Analysis." *American Educational Research Journal* 57(1): 411–39.
- ¹² Harper, Casandra Elena, Hao Zhu, and Judy Marquez Kiyama. 2020. "Parents and Families of First-Generation College Students Experience Their Own College Transition." *Journal of Higher Education* 91(4): 540–64.