“You’ve got to know that you’ve prepared them and hope that some of what you taught them sticks. You know, but it’s a fine line. It’s a fine line. You can’t be that helicopter, but you can’t, but you still have to maintain that contact and you still have to make sure they’re OK. You just have to know your child. Know what they need.”

(Jane, Parent)
Introduction

This session presents the preliminary findings of a study undertaken by senior student affairs administrators at the University of Pittsburgh to investigate the impact of parents on college student persistence to graduation.
Introduction

The research team consists of director-level student affairs personnel from across functional areas, as well as a faculty member and doctoral student from the School of Education.

Functional areas include:

- Disability Services
- Cross-Cultural Leadership
- International Student Services
- Student Affairs Marketing
- Student Affairs Communications
- Outside the Classroom Curriculum
- Residence Life
Current persistence and retention literature predominantly focuses on the role of institutions and institutional support systems in student success and completion.

(Astin, 1996; Berger, 2000; Berger & Milem, 1999; Braxton & Mundy, 2001; Brock, 2010; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1983; Tinto, 1986, 1993)
Research has been conducted on how family characteristics affect student persistence in post-secondary education, but not on how, and if, parents contribute to student persistence.

(Guillroy & Wolverton, 2008; Lippmann, et.al, 2008; Mattanah, Hancock, & Brand, 2004)
Background

The study focused, specifically, on the role that parents play in student persistence.

By speaking with students who are about to graduate, as well as their parent(s), this study adds a unique perspective on parent-student interaction and how the interactions affect student completion in post-secondary education.
Using Weidman’s (1989) socialization model as a frame, this study aims to contribute to the persistence literature through an examination of the specific role of parents on student persistence and degree completion.

Weidman (1989) takes into account the role of parental socialization in influencing students’ experiences in college – and that relationship to student outcomes, such as completion.
Method

The study used semi-structured interviews of both senior students and their parents.

The research team interviewed twenty-five sets of students and parents, encompassing a variety of demographic and student-level characteristics.

Researchers considered gender, ethnicity, and student-involvement when generating the sample of students and parents.
Limitations

- Sampling Method
  - Using snowball sampling to obtain sample

- Research Team
  - Size, scope, and responsibilities

- Interview Protocol
  - No cross-referencing of interview data
Analysis

Preliminary analysis
- Each interviewer reads own transcripts, and the transcripts of two other interviewers
- Categorize responses according to data reduction chart
- Emergence of themes across categories
Emergent Themes

- Parental Expectations of Success in College
- Emotional Support
- The Role of Other Family Members
- Disconnect between Parents and Students
Parental Expectations of Success in College

“The only thing that I can really say is that for me personally I’ve groomed both my daughters from when they were small that they were going to go, that they were going to college. So we planted that seed very early so that in their minds there was no other alternative. You know, it was just the natural progression. You graduate high school and then you go to college. And that’s just what you are going to do. And then you’ve got to finish that.”

(Jane, Parent of Second-Generation Student)

I think they [parents] put a really, like a big emphasis on college and basically told me, you know, “You’re going to make it through college. We’re going to help you like 100%.” So they were really driven about making sure I got a degree.”

(Julie, Second-Generation Student)
Parental Expectations of Success in College

“I think in general they sort of raised me to like expect good grades for myself and like not graduating from college or like not getting a 3.0 or above, like, that wasn’t really an option. Like it was kind of like when I first, when I first came to Pitt, it was like I’m going to graduate college or else like I’m not going to be a real human being. Like there’s not really any other thing you can do. That was very much my mindset for a lot of college. So I think just having graduation being the default was like, it helped.”

(Mary, Multi-Generation Student)
Parental Expectations of Success in College

“I think that academically, um, so I went to private school for my entire life. And my dad has always – he never went to school himself but he’s always been really sort of proud whenever I’m on the Dean’s List or on the Honor Roll or any of that. So on the fridge he has every single, like they mail home a certificate when you are on the Dean’s List, and he has all of them, one behind each other, like on a magnet on the fridge. And if I don’t get one that month, he’ll just say, “Oh, I don’t have anything new to put on the fridge? You’ll have to send me something else to put on the fridge.” And I’ll send him like some other certificate of whatever award I got. And so that, he’s always sort of looking for something to put on the – which is really, and he just does it in like this cute little teasing way, and it’s like, you know, “if you didn’t get one of these, give me something else to put on the fridge,” which I think is really nice.”

(Sarah, First-Generation Student)
Emotional Support

“I would say my parents impacted me first and foremost, so like first and foremost emotionally. They made sure that I was OK. Made sure that I was taking care of myself in a healthy way. And they supported me and encouraged me to go out and be social and to do things that even if I was uncomfortable with, to just do it, and all that.”

(Julie, Second-Generation Student)

“Every once in a while he’ll call me and just say, you know, “It’s really hard,” or he’s got a big test he’s really worried about. And I’ll just talk to him and tell him that, you know, he just has to do the best that he can and, you know, I’m usually sure that he’s going to do well because he always does, but even if he didn’t, that I love him anyway, and that I’d be here for him no matter what if he needed to talk or if he had any problems.”

(Pam, Parent of First-Generation Student)
Emotional Support

“I don’t think [my mom] has the gist of exactly what I do here, but she has a general idea that I’m really working hard and, um, I think the best part about it is, it doesn’t really matter to her what I’m doing specifically. It matters that I’m trying, and when she can see that I’m trying, she’s still proud of me, and I can tell that by just talking to her.”

(Patrick, First-Generation Student)

“I just want my kids to excel in whatever they put their minds to. You know, and just know that I’m there for them. That I love them and I’ll support them as much as I can.”

(Cathy, Parent of First-Generation Student)
“It keeps me appreciative of everything that she’s done for me throughout my entire life. So [my mom] has definitely been a driving force, a rock, a cheerleader all the way for me in everything that I do, so…She, she’s absolutely been there to keep me stable emotionally because sometimes it gets hard. I, I wouldn’t be here without her. I wouldn’t like physically be here. Mentally, like I just would not have come to this place, to this – Just without the faith that she has in me.”

(Christine, First-Generation Student)
Emotional Support

“I feel like I don’t talk to my parents nearly as much as [other students] talk to theirs. But I still feel like mine are really involved. And I’m not sure if that’s just like a different you know, like, quirk of our relationship that, you know, we’re both really shy people and so we sort of, you know, I could feel supported without someone telling me that they’re there all the time or something like that. I’m, I’m not really sure. But I do think that sort of without Dad, I wouldn’t be here right now.”

(Sarah, First-Generation Student)
“I’d say my oldest brother went to Pitt and he joined a fraternity, so it’s – I think that really helped like having his connections and stuff to be able to get involved in Greek life and just kind of like I knew there was like a place to meet, that I would want to meet people right off the bat. My other brother, I would say like I call him a lot if I have like problems and stuff about classes and stuff ‘cause he was also business major and that kind of stuff.”

(Jeff, Multi-Generation Student)
The Role of Other Family Members

“He’s close with all of his siblings, so I think they’re a big emotional boosts for him, too. You know, he has two little brothers that think the world of him when he comes home and don’t let him go anywhere or do anything because they miss him and want to spend so much time with him. And you know, he’s really close with his sister at Pitt, and he’s really close with his, his older sister, and I think they’re a big part of who he is, too.”

(Pam, Parent of First Generation Student)
“But the push comes from the siblings, because they would say – and they would say this especially to the younger one – and if they’re saying it to the younger one, they had to say it to the other one – “OK, we’ve met the bar at this level. Not so much in a competitive way, but they make it be a competitive kind of way because, “OK, I’ve got this degree. It’s time for you to do something. OK, he finished that. Now it’s time for you to do something,” so that they keep the bar going in terms of what the next sibling is going to do and how they’re going to do it.”

(Helen, Parent of Second-Generation Student)
The Role of Other Family Members

“I believe all of them have ‘cause all of them have inspired me to like push towards my goal because like my brothers and my sister are very successful in their different careers that they have. So, seeing them, like, like be successful and seeing, like whenever I go home they’re starting families and stuff like that, it’s just, it inspires me to keep working as hard as I can. And then there’s like more specific family members that I, I like talk to all the time, so… but, I feel like all of them indirectly having, have helped me like push through college.”

(Harold, Second-Generation Student)
Parent – Student Disconnect

Inconsistent identification of pivotal developmental moments

Parents identified moments of development that they saw as pivotal, that were not mentioned by students, and vice versa.
Implications

- What is the role of parents?
  - In this study, parents provided emotional and financial support
  - They acted as safety nets
  - Little active role in supporting students to persist
  - Parents saw their roles as important, but cited the individual motivations of their students and the role of the institution in providing positive experiences as most foundational in helping their students to persist
Implications

- Disconnect between parents and students on development
  - There were differences in the identification of pivotal developmental moments, challenges, and successes between the parent and student respondents

- Implications for Student Affairs Professionals?
  - This was most shocking for the research team of student affairs professionals
  - What does this mean for student affairs practice?
    - (1) There are things that students are not talking about
    - (2) There are things that parents are not aware of
Implications

- How do Student Affairs Professionals effectively engage parents?
  - Many parents cited the importance of “knowing their child” in helping to support them
  - Additionally, parents wanted to be aware of what was happening – whether from the institution or from their student
  - Students and parents cited regular communication with parents – with conversations spanning politics, world events, family situations, courses, friends, challenges, and successes

The bottom line...these parents wanted to be engaged, and they communicated often with their students
**Next Steps**

- Expansion of the sample
  - Random sampling technique

- Expansion of interview protocol
  - Using information gained through this study to inform future interviews

- Expansion of sites
  - Looking for differences based on institution type, size, and programming
Questions?

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