ON MARCH 11TH, 2020, the World Health Organization declared the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak a global pandemic. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, universities had to make dramatic changes in order to prevent the spread of the virus. To protect students, faculty, and staff, many higher education institutions shifted to completely online instruction and closed their campuses during the spring 2020 semester. Previous research during the MSRA and Swine Flu outbreaks has shown that closing schools was an effective method to prevent further transmission of the viruses (Cowling et al., 2020; Garbe, Ogurlu, Logan, & Cook, 2020; Nafisah, Alamery, Al Nafesa, Aleid, & Brazanji, 2018; Rashid et al., 2015).

As a result of these sudden changes, university students turned to their families for guidance and support. Campus closures meant that students residing in residence halls had to return home, a significant challenge for many students, especially those from out of state. As the pandemic progressed, universities spent most of the summer months planning for the fall 2020 and spring 2021 semesters, and many universities decided to shift to online only, hybrid, or socially distanced in-person education. Again, college students were forced to take online courses and make difficult decisions. Do they return to their university or transfer to a different institution? Do they live at home or move closer to campus?

College students did not answer these questions in isolation, and likely turned to their parents and families for advice and guidance; parents continue to play a crucial role in the lives of their children throughout college (Arnett, 2000; Connell & Dworkin, 2012). However, during college, most parents are parenting from a distance, students are working to become independent, and families need to adjust to these changes. As a result, parents are engaged in their students’ higher education experience in many different ways, including participating in college enrollment decisions, discussions related to college experience decisions, learning about college resources, financial support, and addressing mental health concerns (Carney-Hall, 2008; Kiyama, Museus, & Vega, 2015; Nuñez & Kim, 2012). Parents and students being able to maintain open lines of communication, is important for college student success (Dworkin & Savage, 2010). Students look to family as an important source of support for psychological well-being; parent encouragement has been shown to improve student engagement during college (Roksa & Kinsley, 2019). Students are more likely to have a smoother transition to college when parental engagement is higher (Wolf, Sax, & Harper, 2009).
Since the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted so many aspects of the college experience, it is likely that students will continue to turn to their parents and family members for advice and guidance. To support student success, colleges and universities need to view parents as key stakeholders and foster positive relationships with parents when providing student support (Ward-Roof, Heaton, & Coburn, 2008). However, job loss, reduced family income, and family illness (or vulnerability to illness) due to the pandemic may compromise families’ abilities to provide needed support to college students.

To support student success, colleges and universities need to view parents as key stakeholders and foster positive relationships with parents when providing student support.

It is likely that these changes may be disproportionately impacting incoming first year college students who are new to the college environment and first-generation college students who are at greater risk of dropping out than their continuing generation counterparts. The US Department of Education found that as of the 2016 academic year, parents of first-generation college students had a median income of $41,000 as compared to $90,000 for continuing generation students (RTI International, 2019). In addition, college students were not included in the first stimulus bill provided by the United States government. This likely exacerbated financial challenges as children over 16 and college students under 24 did not qualify for this first payment. With job loss and transitions home, access to computers and a stable internet connection are areas of concern for college students and could have serious consequences for the success of students.

This study was designed to understand the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the family’s role in their students’ college experiences. Specifically, we examined parents’ attitudes towards institutions’ COVID-19 decision-making, parents’ perceptions of communication quality between families and institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the short-term impact of the pandemic on students’ education and personal well-being in addition to family well-being.

Method

The Department of Family Social Science and Minnesota Extension at the University of Minnesota partnered with the professional organization AHEPPP: Family Engagement in Higher Education (AHEPPP; https://www.aheppp.org/) to recruit and survey parents from across the country to understand the impact that the pandemic has made on the family’s role in their students’ college experience.

AHEPPP is the premier national association for professionals who work with the parents and families of college students. AHEPPP provides valuable resources, networking opportunities, and education to support professionals in higher education who promote student success through informed parent and family engagement. AHEPPP has more than 200 partner colleges and universities in the United States and Canada. For this study, AHEPPP shared a recruitment message that schools could customize; individual parent programs then shared a custom message with parents of their students, using scheduled email newsletters and social media announcements. Both parents of returning students and parents of incoming first-year students, planning to attend college beginning fall 2020, responded to the survey. AHEPPP also shared the recruitment message with non-AHEPPP institutions who promoted the survey opportunity to their families.

Parents who chose to participate could click on a link to complete a 15-min online survey (via Qualtrics); parents responded to scale questions and open ended
questions (more information about all the survey questions is available online: https://innovation.umn.edu/college-parent/). All participants had the opportunity to be entered into a drawing for a chance to win one of 20 $25 electronic gift cards. These results captured one moment in time—parents responded to the survey between mid-June and early August 2020. The results provide a glimpse into the short-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on college families.

Of the 5,867 parents who clicked on the survey link, 3,715 parents (63% response rate) from more than 75 institutions across the country consented to participate and completed the survey. Parents represented all 50 states and Puerto Rico; 17 were living overseas. 68.9% of students were at public institutions. Participants were parents of incoming first-year college students (28.3%), first-year students (27.9%), sophomores (22.3%), juniors (15.4%), and seniors (4.7%). In addition, 21.7% of parents had less than a 4-year degree (parents of first-generation college students), 42.9% had earned a Bachelor’s degree, and 34.4% had a higher degree. In 60.3% of families, at least one household member had been laid off from full- or part-time employment since February 1, 2020, and 77.4% of families had at least one household member who had been required to work from home as a result of COVID-19.

Results
Parents’ Attitudes Towards Institutions’ Decision-Making

In general, parents were positive about the institutions’ decisions related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Parents understood the complexity of the situation, describing the decisions as, “given the information they had at the time, I think it was best for students, employees and the state” and “I believe my student’s college is doing the best it can given the ever changing circumstances.” About 90% of families reported receiving information from their school about campus response to the COVID-19 pandemic, separate from notifications that students received. Nearly three-quarters (73.7%) reported that they were confident they received the information they needed; 83.5% believed their student’s institutions had taken the right steps to handle the situation. One parent reported that, clothes/books were packed and flights could be changed.

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Other parents echoed similar sentiments: “we feel well informed as parents and appreciate the tone in which these communications have been sent” and “we were very impressed with the communication from [a large public institution] and their timely decision making. As soon as the governor made a decision, [the large public institution] announced their plans for the summer and fall semesters.” Compared to parents of students in public institutions (87.1%), parents of students in private institutions (91.1%) were more likely to receive COVID-19 related information from the schools ($X^2 (1) = 7.85, p = .005$), but no difference was found with the degree of confidence about the information received ($X^2 (1) = .10, p = .750$).

Parent-Institution Communication

Generally speaking, parents reported good communications with institutions. Most parents felt that they knew who to contact if they had concerns related to schools’ decisions about the COVID-19 pandemic: 28.8%
would contact college/university main office; 20.3% would contact parent/family office, and 17.3% would use the schools’ COVID-19 email or hotline. However, 24.3% of parents said they did not know who to contact. Parents of incoming students were more likely to identify a contact (78%) compared to other parents (72.4%; \(X^2(1) = 11.19, p = .001\)), indicating parents of incoming students might be more motivated to communicate with institutions or it may be that families of incoming students were receiving more communications from the institution as they made the transition. Parents however reported varying experiences with communication; one parent said “I had a very specific question that I asked through a [Facebook Direct Message], and it was never answered by the pages’ administer,” another parent said “Facebook incoming freshman parents page—they provide a forum for questions and rapid answers.”

Most parents felt that they knew who to contact if they had concerns related to schools’ decisions about the COVID-19 pandemic.

For concerns other than COVID-19, most parents said they were likely or very likely to search the college/university website (89.2%) and contact a specific office (81.6%). Other popular resources included searching the parent/family website (69.4%), asking their students (64.7%), and contacting the parent/family office (57%). Less than half said they would ask other parents (40.8%) or post a question on the parent/family social media page (40%). Although parents were least likely to post questions on the social media page, many parents said they would use online programming and social media to gain more information from their students’ college/university. The most popular social media platforms included Facebook (67.8%) and online video/webinars (55.1%), followed by online meetings (43.9%), Instagram (41.2%), blogs (30.5%), chats (25.5%), and Twitter (26.9%).

Decision-Making About Education: Comparisons of Incoming First-Year/Non-Incoming and First Generation/Continuing Generation Students

Most parents reported their student would continue their education as planned despite the COVID-19 pandemic. For parents of incoming first-year students, 84.4% reported the COVID-19 pandemic didn’t change their students’ college choice, while 5.1% said their students had selected a college closer to home, and 1.2% selected less expensive institutions. No difference was found between first-generation and continuing generation incoming college students (\(X^2(1) = 1.06, p = .304\)). While most parents reported that college choice did not change, many parents reported that the decision process had changed considerably with many describing the process as being “less special.”

Most parents reported their students would continue their education as planned despite the COVID-19 pandemic.

For parents of non-incoming students, 84.4% reported that their students would return to the same school, while some decided to transfer to a different school (1.4%), leave school (0.4%), or not attend school in fall 2020 (0.4%). No difference was found between first-generation and continuing generation college students (\(X^2(1) = .27, p = .60\)). When asked to think about how the COVID-19 pandemic would affect their student’s time to graduation, 83.5% said their students were still on track to graduate as planned, while 13.3% reported it could take longer than expected to graduate due to the pandemic. Parents of first-generation students (\(X^2(1) = 12.70, p = .005\)) and parents of students at public institutions (\(X^2(3) = 24.07, p < .001\)) were more likely to report that their students’ graduation would be delayed because of the pandemic.

Meanwhile, many students faced challenges with alternative learning in the spring semester. Only 16.4% of parents believed the alternative learning worked fine and there were no challenges for their students. Obstacles to online learning included less structured classes (26.7%), no access to labs/studio time (15.3%), distractions at home (13.4%), and spotty internet (9.6%); 4.2% reported their students had trouble meeting deadlines. Parents described students’ challenges with online learning. One parent said, “My student felt it was difficult to learn online. There [was] a lack of resources compared to on-campus learning. She had a lot less motivation to participate in review sessions and office hours.” Another parent described the challenges of spotty internet access, “my daughter’s grades [were] impacted due to the Wi-Fi the Internet being slow where we live.” Other
parents described the difficulty certain majors faced online such as dance and performing arts, “performing arts classes don’t work as well via zoom as in person” and “she is a dance major - feedback was difficult as was finding studio space.” Interestingly, parents of first-generation college students reported their student had fewer challenges with online learning ($\chi^2(1) = 8.44, p = .004$) and less preference for in-person learning methods ($\chi^2(1) = 15.31, p < .001$), compared to continuing-generation students.

Only 16.4% of parents believed the alternative learning worked fine and there were no challenges for their students.

Finally, most students’ housing conditions were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Parents reported their students moved home from campus housing (57.7%) or off-campus housing (19.8%); some remained in off-campus housing (8.8%) or campus housing (1.5%). However, parents still anticipated their students would be living in campus housing (46.6%) or housing near campus (34.7%) during the 2020–2021 academic year; only 9.2% reported their student would be staying at home with family. Parents described the range of impacts to student housing for particular populations, including students studying abroad and those who were from out of state, or living off campus. For example, one parent said, “my student was studying abroad and came home when the program was shut down.” A parent of an out-of-state student noted, “my son had to move to another dorm to house all the students that were having to stay on campus. Then we flew him home. Much later we went to get all his belongings. Because each city, county, and state had different rules it was hard to know when to pick up his belongings.”

Family Well-Being

The COVID-19 pandemic posed challenges for families; 40% of parents reported that at least one family member was laid off from work and about 80% reported at least one family member had to work from home. One parent described the challenges of working from home with students suddenly home as well: “everyone in our household was online for work or school so poor connections.” The sudden closure of college campuses, and for some job loss due to COVID-19, resulted in financial challenges for students and parents; 44% reported at least moderate negative impacts on family financial status and 54.8% on the way the family managed money. One parent reported: “my daughter had to stay in her apartment because they wouldn’t let her out her lease. She lost her job because of the virus shutdown and the management at the apartment wouldn’t work with those children. Some were evicted because of lack of funds. We sent my daughter money to cover her bills.” Another parent reflected on the stress and expenses of moving a student home from out of state: “everyone had to hire movers, at great expense, and coordinate remote moves.”

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Based on these data, it’s not surprising that approximately three-quarters (74.5%) of parents thought COVID-19 had negatively affected their student’s academic experiences at least moderately; 34.5% reported at least moderately negative influence on communication with college students, and 29.6% reported COVID-19 had a moderately negative influence on their relationship with their student. Parents expressed concerns about their students, including, “my student is depressed and angry,” “my son really missed the college experience of being with friends and independent of family,” and “circumstances required my student had to get a full-time job when he came home, which made attending online classes difficult.” In addition, there were specific financial challenges and concerns that were impacting future school enrollment. One parent reported, “debating [enrollment] due to income being affected and denial of loans,” while another parent said, “my student MUST return to school or lose her student loan deferment period.”

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academic experiences at least moderately; 34.5% reported at least moderately negative influence on communication with college students, and 29.6% reported COVID-19 had a moderately negative influence on their relationship with their student.

In spite of adversities, most parents reported their students’ overall physical health in the past week as good (20.7%), very good (33.4%), or excellent (40.6%); overall sense of well-being as good (29%), very good (31.8%), or excellent (24.9%); and, personal relationships with their close friends as good (27.8%), very good (29.5%), or excellent (24.9%).

The results in Table 1 (see below) show that compared to incoming first-year students, parents reported current college students had worse physical health, sense of well-being, and personal relationships with their close friends; however, COVID-19 more negatively impacted incoming first-year students’ academic experiences and parent-student communication.

Discussion
The COVID-19 pandemic posed unusual challenges for college students and their families, without any guidance or previous experience on how to respond for institutions or families. To our knowledge, this is the first study to explore the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on college families. It is important to recognize that these data, although they represent families across the country at a range of institutions, they also represent families who were still engaged with the institution, despite COVID-19, and were receiving regular communication from the institution. In addition, most parents had completed college themselves. While these parents provide a glimpse into higher education during COVID-19, there are many families’ experiences that were not captured in this study. For example, we focused on understanding the family experience and collected data from parents, students’ perspectives are not reflected in this dataset. We had limited demographic information on students, so we were unable to explore demographic differences in students’ experiences. These are important areas for future research.

These data represent one moment in time, and reflect how one subset of families experienced the immediate crisis of COVID-19. We are continuing to learn how families’ experiences are changing over time.

Families and Institutions During the COVID-19 Pandemic
In summer 2020, most parents believed that shutting down institutions during spring semester was appropriate to stop the spread of the virus and protect people. They agreed that institutions were doing their best for the students as well as employees. At such a time full of uncertainties, institutions and parents also had high-quality communication. For both private and public institutions, the majority of parents believed they were receiving information from institutions and they were confident that they received what they needed. They knew who to contact when having concerns specifically related to the pandemic and other concerns. Multiple methods were used to facilitate the communication between parents and institutions, including contacting the main office and specific offices, searching online, accessing a COVID-19 hotline or social media. In general, families were confident in institutions’ COVID-19 related decisions and had good communications with institutions.

Family Well-Being During the COVID-19 Pandemic
Families suffered from the negative impact of the pandemic while also displaying remarkable resilience. Most parents reported that COVID-19 negatively influenced their students’ academic experiences, causing some students to make significant changes, including postponing college, delaying graduation, or
changing majors and/or career plans. The pandemic also caused many people to lose their jobs, leading to reduced income and problems related to money management. Nevertheless, most families were coping and reported good physical health, a sense of well-being, and strong personal relationships for both parents and students.

Families suffered from the negative impact of the pandemic while also displaying remarkable resilience.

What is also evident here is that COVID-19 has not had an equal impact across families. For families of first-generation college students, COVID-19 has been complicated. Parents of first-generation college students reported that their students had a better sense of well-being and better personal relationships with their close friends compared to other students. However, families with first-generation college students also reported a greater impact on parental physical health, family financial status, and the way they manage money than other families. The resources families are starting with will have a big impact on their crisis response. First-generation students for example, likely entered college with strong and deep social support networks, knowing they were going to need that support as they embarked on their higher education journey. And they were able to sustain these strong supports. However, these families were also likely to be entering college without a financial safety net with family employed in jobs more vulnerable to COVID impacts. First-generation students also tend to be different from their continuing generation counterparts, perhaps requiring more flexibility for work, family responsibilities, and already having plans to live off campus, thus, they may have been less impacted by online courses and perhaps welcomed some of the flexibility and not having to worry about commuting back and forth to campus.

Parents of first-generation college students reported that their students had a better sense of well-being

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Table 1. Means and Significant Differences Between Incoming First-Year Students and non-Incoming Students, and Between First-Generation and Continuing Generation Students.

|                                      | Incoming First Year | Non-Incoming | First-Generation Students | Continuing Generation Students |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------|--------------|----------------------------|--------------------------------|
|                                      | n  M (SD)          | n  M (SD)    | n  M (SD)                  | n  M (SD)                      |
| How would you rate your student’s overall… within the past 7 days? | 1 to 5 | | | | |
| Parent physical health               | 1032 4.08 (0.88)  | 2466 4.05 (0.91) | 755 3.92 (0.91)           | 2729 4.1* (0.89)              |
| Parent sense of well-being          | 1032 3.7 (1.01)   | 2466 3.67 (1.03) | 755 3.71 (0.98)           | 2729 3.67 (1.03)              |
| Parent personal relationship with close friends | 1032 3.63 (1.02) | 2466 3.59 (1.06) | 755 3.6 (1.06)            | 2729 3.6 (1.04)               |
| Student physical health             | 1032 4.19* (0.87) | 2466 4.04 (0.94) | 754 4.04 (0.91)           | 2730 4.1 (0.93)               |
| Student sense of well-being         | 1032 3.75* (1.00) | 2466 3.61 (1.07) | 754 3.74* (1.02)          | 2730 3.63 (1.06)              |
| Student personal relationship with their close friends | 1032 3.71* (1.08) | 2464 3.52 (1.13) | 753 3.65 (1.14)           | 2729 3.56 (1.12)              |

To what extent do you think that COVID-19 has negatively affected…

|                                      | 1 = not at all to 5 = a great deal |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Students’ academic experience        | 1033 3.44* (1.21)                 | 2468 3.31 (1.18)               |
|                                      | 755 3.28 (1.23)                  | 2731 3.37 (1.18)               |
| Family financial status              | 1031 2.39 (1.24)                 | 2465 2.47 (1.25)               |
|                                      | 753 2.74* (1.35)                 | 2728 2.36 (1.21)               |
| The way to manage money              | 1032 2.75 (1.19)                 | 2466 2.73 (1.25)               |
|                                      | 755 2.98* (1.28)                 | 2728 2.67 (1.21)               |
| Communication with student           | 1031 2.2* (1.32)                 | 2465 2.06 (1.27)               |
|                                      | 754 2.14 (1.35)                  | 2727 2.09 (1.27)               |
| Overall relationship with student    | 1031 2.02 (1.24)                 | 2466 1.96 (1.25)               |
|                                      | 755 1.95 (1.27)                  | 2727 1.99 (1.24)               |

Note: * represents the mean is significantly higher than their counterparts (p < .05).
and better personal relationships with their close friends compared to other students. However, families with first-generation college students also reported a greater impact on parental physical health, family financial status, and the way they manage money than other families.

Incoming first year students were also more vulnerable to having their college experience negatively impacted by COVID-19. It is possible that no prior college experiences made it harder for students to adapt to college life, especially for their academic development. On the other hand, not able to compare to prior in-person academic experiences might make them more satisfied with the situation. They were perhaps able to keep a closer relationship with their high school friends while non-incoming students might have felt challenged by not being able to be in person with their college peers.

**Implications**

Spring 2020 was extremely challenging for students, families, and institutions, and the challenges have continued into the 2020–21 academic year. In response, institutions increased their communication with parents, and parents were generally satisfied with the information they were receiving. Although the current survey was distributed through institutions that have a system in place for communicating with parents, many other institutions did not, but were forced to pivot and start communicating with families about COVID-19. Families generally expected colleges/universities to return to a state of pre-COVID normal in fall 2020, but that did not happen.

COVID-19 has shown that at times of crisis, supporting students requires coordination between the institution and the families of its students. Sharing information on major decisions that affect students, and giving parents the information they need has lasting benefits in all stages of enrollment management, from admissions and retention to graduation and donor relations. However, the types of student information that U.S. colleges and universities can share with parents are limited by the federal Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA: https://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/fpco/ferpa/index.html); similar limitations are enforced in most other countries. When institutions can support parents and students in working together, some of these barriers to information sharing are eliminated.

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This year, Parent/Family Programs were innovative in providing programs and services; and families were engaged. What does that mean for future programming? Do in-person programs like admissions events or parent/family weekend need an online option? Are multiple formats worth the time and effort? Facebook continues to be popular with parents who are looking for information; but families need more than simply being on the receiving end of Facebook posts. COVID-19 forced colleges and universities to reconsider their relationship with the families of their students. They relied on families to move their students home and provide the technology and support students needed to continue their education. As a result, institutions are seeing an increase in the value of and need for communicating with families, and parents have come to expect it. Long term it will be critical for institutions to assess parents’ new expectations for communication both within the context of a crisis and during normal operations.

Institutions are seeing an increase in the value of and need for communicating with families, and parents have come to expect it.

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