COVID-19 and strategic communication with parents and guardians of college students

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Abstract: In the spring of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic caused colleges and universities in the United States to transition from face-to-face to remote learning. Academic leaders need to understand how to better serve both their customers (parents) and their consumers (students) after this disruption in the academic business model. Strategic communication will be critical for rebuilding this industry sector. Taking a snapshot of communication patterns in the midst of change provides a baseline for future decision-making. This study builds on literature regarding emerging adulthood, family communication patterns, and crisis communication to examine two areas: (a) communication between parents/guardians and their students, and (b) communication between the institution and parents/guardians. In a study of 525 parents/family members, communication patterns reflect differences in stages of progression through the developmental stage of emerging adulthood. Digital communication tools dominated family communication and video calling increased. Parents/guardians of students who plan to return to their former institution were most satisfied with crisis communication, communication across the student life cycle, and measures of institutional quality. Parents/guardians of those who graduated were least satisfied on most measures. The potential

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

In the spring of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic caused colleges and universities in the United States to transition from face-to-face to remote learning. Academic leaders need to understand how to better serve both their customers (parents) and their consumers (students) after this disruption in the academic business model. In a study of 525 parents/family members, researchers found that families communicate frequently and mostly with digital tools. Parents/guardians of students who plan to return to their former institution were most satisfied with crisis communication, communication at different points in the student experience, and their assessment of colleges/universities. Parents/guardians of those who graduated were least satisfied on most measures. Many parents involved in the study were willing to consider giving money to colleges/universities in the future. Recommendations are provided for applying insights to other strategic communication contexts.
for future philanthropy was relatively high across the sample. Recommendations are provided for applying insights to other strategic communication contexts.

**Subjects:** Mass Communication; Organizational Communication; Public Relations; Family Communication; Higher Education Management; Study of Higher Education

**Keywords:** COVID-19; strategic communication; family communication; emerging adulthood

1. Introduction

On 12 March 2020, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 to be a pandemic, and by March 18, the UN Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization reported that countries around the world had closed educational institutions to try to limit the spread of the disease (Viné et al., 2020). In the United States, most institutions of higher education that offered face-to-face instruction closed their doors and urged students to return to their “permanent address” to learn remotely. Academic research is just beginning to explore the effects of these closures on higher education (Bao, 2020; Blankenberger & Williams, 2020; Viné et al., 2020).

The impact of school closures on families of children enrolled in K-12 education has been widely reported in the popular press (Perelman, 2020) and is also starting to receive scholarly attention (Bhamani et al., 2020), but, the impact on parents of college and university students is still underexplored. Despite the fact that “permanent address” is generally considered to be code for “family home,” no academic research was found that directly addressed the role of families of college and university students during the COVID-19 pandemic despite the fact that parents often pay the tuition, making them the “customer” while students are the “consumer” of higher education (Breidenstein et al., 2020; Macleod et al., 2013; Pitman, 2000). In short, parents are a key stakeholder group for institutions of higher education in the United States (Lee et al., 2018).

Heavy parental involvement with college students has been observed fairly extensively in the context of the US where the consumer/customer construct is also prevalent (Fingerman et al., 2012). There is some exploration of the role of both ethnicity and family income in this phenomenon within the US context, and while the phenomenon seems to be most prevalent among middle- to upper-income European Americans, there is some indication that ethnicity and income alone are not always closely tied to “helicopter parenting” (Doepke & Zilibotti, 2019; Kouros et al., 2016). The phenomenon of high parental involvement with college students has also been explored and found to be fairly prevalent in the Korean context (Kwon et al., 2015; Lee & Kang, 2018). Researchers have begun cross-cultural examination of the phenomenon and have found that Asian students generally received more support from parents but were less satisfied with that parental involvement than were students in the US and Germany (Fingerman et al., 2016). In short, while parental involvement with college students may be different in different cultures, the US context during the COVID-19 pandemic offers an important lens for understanding how parents communicate with their students and how they perceive institutional communication.

This study builds on three broad bodies of literature: emerging adulthood, changes to family communication patterns in the digital age, and crisis communication. The literature on each of those topics is briefly reviewed. Research questions are proposed based on observations from the literature and from the specific crisis situation. Given the fact that the crisis was unfolding in real time, the goal of the study was to describe how communication was unfolding in real time and to make initial inferences from the sample population to the larger population of parents and families.

More than 500 parents/guardians of college students in the United States were asked to provide information about how they communicated with their students both before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. They were also asked to rate the quality of communication with the institution
during the crisis and at multiple points in the student life cycle. To gain more depth of understanding, responses were analyzed based on the students’ plans for fall to see whether parents of students who intend to return to their former institution have different experiences than parents of students who are changing intuitions, those who graduated in the spring, and those who are leaving without graduating. While this study focuses primarily on strategic communication between institutions of higher education and parents in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States, implications are also explored for other contexts.

2. Literature review

This study examines two broad areas of communication. First is communication between parents/guardians and their students. The literature on emerging adulthood and family communication informs this portion of the study. Second is communication between institutions and the parents/guardians with a particular focus on crisis communication. The concept of differentiating between students based on their intention for the fall is also introduced.

2.1. Emerging adulthood and family communication

A new developmental stage defined as “emerging adulthood” started to be recognized at the dawn of the 21st century. Arnett (2000) identified emerging adulthood as a developmental period of identity exploration brought about by social and economic changes including delays in educational completion, marriage, and parenthood. The age range of traditional college students matches the developmental stage of emerging adulthood—18 to 24 years of age.

Scholars have further defined this developmental period by developing measurement scales (Reifman et al., 2007) and analyzing changes in prefrontal lobe development (Tanner, 2011). Some researchers have suggested that the emerging adulthood is a function of affluent western societies and not a universal developmental stage (Côté & Bynner, 2008; Doepke & Zilibotti, 2019; Kins et al., 2013; Kouros et al., 2016).

From a communication perspective, emerging adulthood is defined as a period in which families negotiate shifting balances between both volume and conflict in communication patterns (Alda Patricia et al., 2019; Parra et al., 2015). Researchers also found significant linkages between the kinds of messages families give their children who are transitioning to college and the educational experiences of students (Kranstuber et al., 2012; Palbusa & Gauvain, 2017). Generally, parents who have a college education are more often able to communicate with their students in ways that the students find supportive than are parents who did not complete college.

Changes in communication patterns between parents of emerging adults are also sometimes linked to the rise of the digital communication technologies (Hollahan et al., 2007; Knebel & Seele, 2019; Rudi et al., 2015; Zerfass & Huck, 2007; Zerfass et al., 2018). McMillan and Morrison (2006) found that family communication was one of the primary “domains” that emerged from autobiographical essays of college students who had “come of age” with the internet. Those students reported that digital communication tools not only provided new ways for families to communicate but also changed communication patterns of family members of different generations.

The availability of anytime, anywhere digital communication tools combined with the new emerging adult developmental stage is related to a phenomenon which has been called “helicopter parenting” (Bradley-Geist & Olson-Buchanan, 2014; Darlow et al., 2017; Doepke & Zilibotti, 2019; Fingerman et al., 2012; Kelly et al., 2017; Kouros et al., 2016; Kwon et al., 2015; Lee & Kang, 2018; Lemoyne & Buchanan, 2011; Schiffrin et al., 2014). Darlow et al. (2017) linked over-parenting to delayed transition to adulthood. Lemoyne and Buchanan (2011) developed a scale for measuring parent involvement and found that helicopter parenting is negatively associated with student psychological well-being and positively related to both use of anti-depressant and pain medications. Similarly, Schiffrin et al. (2014) found that students with over-controlling parents reported significantly higher levels of depression and less satisfaction with life. They found strong linkages
between these negative outcomes and delay in the developmental needs of emerging adults (e.g., need for autonomy).

The literature on emerging adulthood and family communication led the researcher to develop two specific research questions about the communication between parents and their college-going students who were impacted by the transition to remote instruction in the spring of 2020.

RQ1: Did frequency of communication between parents/guardians and their students change before and after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ2: Did modes of communication used by parents/guardians and their students change before and after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.2. Higher education and communication with families
Despite growing recognition that parents are the “customers” and students the “consumers” of higher education (Breidenstein et al., 2020; Macleod et al., 2013; Pitman, 2000), relatively few studies were found that focused specifically on communication between institutions of higher education and parents (Lee, 2019; Lee et al., 2018). In-depth interviews with parents (Lee et al., 2018) found that parents were generally comfortable with thinking about higher education as a “consumer good” during the college selection process. But throughout their students’ experience in higher education, parents were more focused on institutional culture and reputation. Generally, parents rated personal communication and engagement with institutional employees as more important than advertising in building a strong organizational identity (Lee, 2019).

The rise of the emerging adulthood developmental stage combined with access to anytime, anywhere digital communication tools is driving forces in the formation of parent and family programs at many US institutions of higher education. These offices are tasked with managing relationships between the institution and the parents who are often still highly involved in their students’ lives. AHEPPP is a professional association for those professionals who work with parents and families of college students (AHEPPP, 2020). However, a recent survey of AHEPPP members (McMillan et al., 2020) found that most institutions (56.3%) have one or fewer full-time staff members dedicated to family programs. AHEPPP members reported that their institution’s crisis communication during COVID-19 was less effective with parents and families than with any other stakeholder group.

2.3. Crisis communication
The field of crisis communication has a rich literature that spans many organizational contexts (Spence et al., 2016; Taylor, 2019; Varma, 2011). A full review of that literature is beyond the scope of this project, but this study builds on the general principle that crisis communication should be accurate, consistent, credible, and timely (Covello, 2008).

It is also informative to consider recent studies that examine crisis communication in the context of higher education. The widely used situational crisis communication theory served as the basis for an examination of a crisis situation in the context of a university’s management of a crisis related to hate speech (Thelen & Robinson, 2019). The researchers found that most of the institution’s messaging focused on helping key publics cope psychologically with the crisis. Taylor (2019) examined the ways that social media have sometimes undermined campus climate and suggested the need for institutions of higher education to increase media literacy training to reduce potential communication crises that could result from activities such as cyberbullying.

2.4. Plans for fall 2020
During the summer of 2020, institutions of higher education in the United States began to develop return-to-campus plans for the fall (Chronicle Staff, 2020). While there was a great deal of concern
about whether new students would come to campus amid the pandemic (Field, 2020), there was also concern about whether students who had transitioned to remote learning in the spring would return (Browsky, 2020). Retention of existing students is recognized as critical to both the economic sustainability and moral fiber of institutions of higher education (Braxton, 2013).

Earlier research (McMillan & Matsunaga, 2017) has shown that students who retain and progress to their senior year are much more likely to report having positive experiences in all aspects of campus (e.g., academics, student life, transactional services) and have fewer overall challenges than do students who leave and return, or even students who seriously contemplate leaving. In general, perceptions of organizational communication and overall satisfaction with the organization were strongest among stayers and weakest among those who contemplated leaving. The current study builds on that work to examine whether organizational communication and satisfaction variables are different based on reported plans for fall.

RQ 3: Are there differences in perception of crisis communication based on student’s plans for fall enrollment?

Despite the lack of investment in parent and family professionals noted above, many institutions of higher education have highly developed communication offices that regularly communicate with multiple stakeholders, including parents (Chapleo & Sullivan, 2017; Sataøen & Wæraas, 2016). Researchers have begun to show the effectiveness of strategic communication with parents across the student life cycle (Lee, 2019; Lee et al., 2018). To gain further understanding of how the COVID-19 pandemic might influence perceptions of those communication efforts, this study examined the following research question:

RQ 4: Are there differences in perception of institutional communication at multiple points in the student life cycle based on the student’s plans for fall enrollment?

Most universities have relatively few professionals dedicated to working with families but multiple professionals working on various forms of strategic communication. Does this system serve parents well? Do parents know how to navigate university structures to find someone who can help them if they need to contact the institution on behalf of their child?

RQ 5: Are there differences in knowledge of contact information based on student’s plans for fall enrollment?

The parental perception of the institution of higher education will be influenced by many factors—not the least of which is what their children have learned and how well positioned they are to be citizens, leaders, and workers upon graduation. Thus, any measure of perceived institutional quality will reflect far more than the institution’s success in communication. Nevertheless, strategic communication will play an important role in building brand perception that can be measured by assessment of statements of institutional quality.

RQ 6: Are there differences in assessments of institutional quality based on student’s plans for fall enrollment?

3. Method
A questionnaire was distributed in July 2020 to parents/guardians of college students. The questionnaire required about 10 minutes to complete. All research procedures were approved by the
researcher’s institutional review board and data were collected using QuestionPro. The questionnaire was deployed via Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk) which provides researchers with access to a diverse set of workers who can provide quick and cost-efficient responses to survey questionnaires. While the reliability of data collected from MTurk workers is still under examination, MTurk has proved to be a valuable tool, particularly for gathering data quickly from a carefully defined population (Rouse, 2015). MTurk screening tools, as well as screening questions in the survey instrument, were used to make sure that all participants were a parent or guardian of a student who had been enrolled as an undergraduate in a US college or university in the spring of 2020 and who had experienced the transition from face-to-face instruction to remote delivery.

Because the subject of this study was unfolding in real time, the goal was primarily to understand communication patterns during the pandemic and how/if they changed from pre-pandemic levels. The researcher did not have access to any earlier research that had studied these particular patterns prior to the pandemic, so respondents were asked to provide “before” data based on very recent memory. No previously developed measures were found for the phenomena under study. Therefore, the research is primarily descriptive in nature. Research questions rather than hypotheses were posed. Items such as crisis communication were considered based on responses for single items (e.g., accuracy, timeliness) rather than combined scales; thus, no measures of reliability (e.g., Chronbach’s alpha) or validity (e.g., factor analysis) were conducted. Additionally, all questions were straightforward assessments of simple phenomena (e.g., frequency of communication with students) that were very familiar to the respondents. Because respondents were not asked to interpret unfamiliar concepts, concerns about face validity of the questions were minimal.

As detailed below, there is evidence that the survey sample is relatively representative of the population of parents of college and university students in the US in terms of basic demographics as well as the type of institutions their students attend. Therefore, some inferential statistics were used to suggest ways in which the sample may represent parents of college students more broadly.

For all statistical tests described below, two analyses were conducted to assure that assumptions about data distribution were valid. First, distributions were charted and examined for normalcy. All histograms showed bell curve distributions. To further test the distribution assumptions, all analyses were conducted using non-parametric tests. Results were identical in substance to the analyses that assumed normal distribution (e.g., the two methods revealed the same results for tests of significance). For the sake of streamlined reporting, results below assume normal distribution.

Responses were downloaded to SPSS. For research question 1, chi-square analysis was used to examine differences in the frequency of communication before and after COVID-19. For research question 2, a t-test was used to examine differences in the number of communication modalities used before and after the pandemic.

For research questions 3–6, respondents were grouped into four categories based on their responses to the following question: Which of the following best describes your student’s plans for the fall of 2020? Those who responded: plans to return to the same institution they were enrolled in this spring were coded as “stayers.” Those who responded: plans to return to school, but at a different institution, were coded as “changers.” Those who responded: graduated, so will not be returning to school, were coded as “graduates.” And those who reported that their students were planning to leave school either permanently or for at least one term, as well as those who indicated their students were still unsure of their fall plans, were coded as “other.”

Multiple Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was used for research questions 3, 4, and 6. The goal of these questions was to explore whether there were differences in the sample (and by inference in the larger population) between stayers, changers, graduates, and others in terms of perceptions.
related to each of four different characteristics of crisis communication (RQ 3), perceptions of communication across multiple stages in the student life cycle (RQ 4), and agreement with five different statements about institutional quality (RQ 6). In addition, post hoc analysis was conducted for each of these research questions to locate the source(s) of significant variance.

For research question 5, chi-square analysis was used to examine whether parents of stayers, changers, graduates, and others varied in their self-reported knowledge of whom to contact for help at their student’s institution.

4. Findings
A total of 525 parents/guardians responded—34.0% were female, 65.0% were male, and 1.0% were transgendered or preferred not to respond. Most were parents (73.7%) or stepparents (5.3%) with 7.6% as legal guardians and the remainder as some other relative (e.g., grandparent). About half (50.2%) of the respondents were White, 28.7% were Black/African American, 7.8% were Hispanic/Latino, and 4.7% were Asian. The remainder were American Indian/Alaskan Native (3.0%), Multiracial (2.0%), and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (1.7%). The sample was broadly representative of the country with respondents from 45 states and the District of Columbia (only Delaware, Maine, New Hampshire, North Dakota, and Utah had no respondents). Four-year institutions were well represented with 37.9% from private four-year schools and 34.5% from public institutions. Some parents/guardians also reported that their students attended two-year private (14.2%) and public (10.7%) institutions.

A majority of participants (71.3%) reported that their family home was less than 100 miles from the college/university the students attended, however only 50.7% of students actually lived with family after the COVID-19 pandemic began. A fairly large number (17.0%) remained in on-campus housing, 14.0% lived in a friend's home, 11.9% stayed in the college town but lived in off-campus housing, a few (5.0%) stayed at study abroad locations, and a handful (1.3%) had no permanent address.

Almost a third (30.8%) graduated in the spring of 2020. Additionally, 33.2% planned to return to the same institution they attended in spring of 2020, 20.7% planned to return to school but at a different institution, 7.6% planned to sit out for a semester or more, 2.6% planned to permanently leave school, and 3.2% had not yet finalized their plans for the fall. For research questions 3–6, students are compared based on four broad categories: graduates (30.8%), stayers (33.2%), changers (20.7%) and others (13.4).

4.1. Family communication
Two research questions focus on communication between parents/guardians and students.

RQ1: Did frequency of communication between parents/guardians and their students change before and after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic?

Parents/guardians were first asked to indicate how frequently they communicated with their students before the COVID-19 pandemic. They were then asked to indicate whether that frequency changed after the pandemic and, if so, they were asked to report on the new frequency. Approximately three quarters (77.9%) of respondents reported that communication frequency changed. Table 1 reports on the frequency of communication both before and after the COVID-19 pandemic began. The columns show the percentage of parents/guardians reporting a given level of communication both before and after the pandemic began. Chi-square analysis revealed that the differences reported in Table 1 are statistically significant ($X^2 = 199.185, df = 16, p < .000$).

RQ2: Did modes of communication used by parents/guardians and their students change before and after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic?
Parents/guardians were asked to indicate modalities that they used for communicating with their students before the COVID-19 pandemic. They were provided with a list of modalities and were able to select all modalities that they use. They were then asked if the modalities changed after the pandemic and, if so, what modalities they used post-pandemic. Most (77.2%) reported changes in communication modalities. To understand differences in communication, first variables were computed for total number of modalities used before and after the pandemic. Overall, more modalities were used prior to the pandemic (2.16) than after (1.64). This decline in number of modalities used was significant (t = 9.094, df = 534, p < .001).

Table 2 reports on percentages of parents/guardians pre- and post-COVID-19 who used each modality. Despite the overall decline in the number of modalities used, general trends remained in terms of “most popular” modalities. Phone calls were the top modalities both before and after the pandemic and postal mail was used least frequently. The only change in order was that video calls became the second-most frequent modality after the pandemic even though it had been the fourth-most used prior to the pandemic.

4.2. Institution communication with parent/guardian
Four research questions focus on communication between the institutions of higher education and the parents/guardians who responded to the survey.

RQ 3: Are there differences in perception of crisis communication based on student’s plans for fall enrollment?

Parents/guardians were asked to rate their student’s institution of higher education on four separate characteristics of crisis communication: accuracy, consistency, credibility, and timeliness. All rankings were on a scale of 1–5, where 1 = very bad and 5 = very good. MANOVA revealed that differences among groups were significant for all of the crisis communication variables (F = 4.29, p < .001). Table 3 reports means and standard deviations for each characteristic of crisis communication.
communication. Post hoc analysis is also provided to show the primary sources for the variance in each relationship.

Differences among groups were significant for all four of the characteristics of crisis communication. Parents/guardians of stayers tended to rate their institution’s crisis communication most positively while parents/guardians of graduates had the lowest ratings in all cases except for consistency which was rated lowest by those who had other plans. Differences were significant across all four characteristics of crisis communication. Overall, timeliness was rated lowest and credibility and consistency tied for the highest rating.

RQ 4: Are there differences in perception of institutional communication at multiple points in the student life cycle based on the student’s plans for fall enrollment?

Parents/guardians were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with communication from the institution of higher education at multiple points in the student life cycle: during the admission process, during orientation, during the first year, after the first year and ongoing, and during times of crisis. All rankings were on a scale of 1–5, where 1 = very dissatisfied and 5 = very satisfied. MANOVA revealed that differences among groups were significant for all of the crisis communication variables (F = 2.29, p < .01). Table 4 reports means and standard deviations for each stage of the student life cycle. Post hoc analysis is also provided to show the primary sources for the variance in each relationship.

Differences among groups were significant for four of the five points in the student life cycle. Only communication during orientation was not significantly different among groups. Parents/guardians of stayers rated satisfaction with communication at all points in the student life cycle most highly. Parents/guardians of graduates gave the lowest ratings for communication during admissions, orientation, and the first year while parents/guardians of students with other plans gave the lowest ratings for communication after the first year and during crisis. Overall first-year

| Table 3. Crisis communication perceptions by student type |
|-----------------------------------------------|
| Stayer (N = 177) | Accurate | Consistent | Credible | Timely |
|------------------|----------|------------|----------|--------|
|                  | 3.96.858 | 4.09.890   | 4.11.815 | 3.91.906 |
| Changer (N = 111) | 3.86.933 | 3.96.808   | 4.02.933 | 3.69.980 |
| Graduate (N = 165) | 3.65.999 | 3.82.890   | 3.65.923 | 3.31.051 |
| Other (N = 72) | 3.85.899 | 3.65.952   | 3.95.963 | 3.53.007 |
| Total (N = 525) | 3.82     | 3.92       | 3.92     | 3.62    |

| Post Hoc Analysis of Difference in Crisis Communication Perceptions |
|-------------------------------------------------|
| Accurate | Consistent | Credible | Timely |
| Stayer | MD = .10 | MD = .13 | MD = .09 | MD = .22 |
| CHanger | MD = .31* | MD = .27* | MD = .46* | MD = .60* |
| Graduate | MD = .11 | MD = .44* | MD = .16 | MD = .38* |
| Other | MD = .21 | MD = .21 | MD = .37* | MD = .38* |
| Chang | MD = .01 | MD = .14 | MD = .07 | MD = .17 |
| Graduate | MD = .01 | MD = .31 | MD = .07 | MD = .17 |
| Other | MD = .20 | MD = .31 | MD = .07 | MD = .17 |
| Graduate | MD = .17 | MD = .31 | MD = .07 | MD = .17 |
| Other | MD = .20 | MD = .31 | MD = .07 | MD = .17 |
| Tukey HSD, HC 3 Method, MD = Mean Difference, * p <.05. |
### Table 4. Satisfaction with communication by student type

|                          | During Admissions Process | During Orientation | During the First Year | After the First Year and Ongoing | During Times of Crisis |
|--------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------|
| **Stayer (N = 178)**     | 4.19983                   | 4.21918            | 4.36847               | 4.37937                           | 4.33960                |
| **Changer (N = 110)**    | 3.99                      | 4.12               | 4.26955               | 4.17994                           | 4.21                   |
| **Graduate (N = 165)**   | 3.85                      | 4.07               | 3.96                  | 3.99                              | 4.09968                |
| **Other (N = 72)**       | 3.88                      | 4.11               | 4.29                  | 3.90                              | 3.94                   |
| **Total (N = 525)**      | 4.00                      | 4.13               | 4.20                  | 4.14                              | 4.18                   |

**Post Hoc Analysis of Difference**

|                          | During Admissions Process | During the First Year | After the First Year and Ongoing | During Times of Crisis |
|--------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------|
| **Stayer**               |                          |                       |                                   |                        |
| **Changer**              | MD = .19                 | MD = .10              | MD = .19                          | MD = .12               |
| **Graduate**             | MD = .34*                | MD = .40*             | MD = .37*                         | MD = .23               |
| **Other**                | MD = .31                 | MD = .07              | MD = .46*                         | MD = .38*              |
|                          |                          |                       |                                   |                        |
| **Changer**              |                          |                       |                                   |                        |
| **Graduate**             | MD = .14                 | MD = .31              | MD = .18                          | MD = .12               |
| **Other**                | MD = .12                 | MD = .03              | MD = .27                          | MD = .26               |
|                          |                          |                       |                                   |                        |
| **Graduate**             |                          |                       |                                   |                        |
| **Other**                | MD = -.03                | MD = -.33             | MD = .09                          | MD = .15               |

Tukey HSD, HC 3 Method, MD = Mean Difference, * p < .05.
communication was rated highest followed by crisis communication. Communication during the admission process received the lowest satisfaction rating overall.

RQ 5: Are there differences in knowledge of contact information based on student’s plans for fall enrollment?

Parents/guardians were asked to provide a yes/no response to the following question: I know whom to contact at my student’s institution for help if I have concerns. Chi-square analysis was used to compare responses by student category. Table 5 show percentages of yes/no responses for each category of students.

Differences between groups were not significant ($X^2 = 5.067, df = 3, p > .05$). Overall, parents/guardians expressed a high level of confidence in knowing whom to contact at their institution if they have concerns about their students.

| Table 5. Contact knowledge by student type |
|--------------------------------------------|
| Student Type     | Yes (%) | No (%) |
| Stayer (N = 177) | 91.5%   | 8.5%   |
| Changer (N = 110)| 90.0%   | 10.0%  |
| Graduate (N = 164)| 89.6% | 10.4%  |
| Other (N = 72)   | 81.9%   | 18.1%  |
| Total (N = 523)  | 89.3%   | 10.7%  |

| Table 6. Assessment of institutional quality by student type |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|
| Student Type     | Satisfaction with Decision | Value for Price (Mean) | Encourage Another Parent (Mean) | Would Select Again (Mean) | Consider Making Gift (Mean) |
|------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Stayer (N = 177) | 4.09.913                    | 4.22.811               | 4.11.856                       | 4.22.714                 | 4.00.923                    |
| Changer (N = 111)| 3.49 1.069                  | 3.73.981               | 3.86.872                       | 3.99.887                 | 3.89.952                    |
| Graduate (N = 165)| 3.31 1.124                   | 3.71.925               | 3.75.920                       | 3.89.927                 | 3.81 1.028                  |
| Other (N = 72)   | 3.64 1.179                   | 3.67 1.101             | 3.64 1.050                     | 3.81 9.73               | 3.79 1.125                  |
| Total (N = 525)  | 3.66 3.88                    | 3.88 3.88              | 3.88 4.01                      | 3.90 3.90               |                             |

Post Hoc Analysis of Assessment of Institutional Quality

| Student Type | Satisfaction with Decision | Value for Price | Encourage Another Parent | Would Select Again |
|--------------|---------------------------|-----------------|--------------------------|-------------------|
| Stayer       | .60*.78*.45*               | .49*.50*.55*    | .25*.36*.46*             | .22*.33*.42*      |
| Changer      | .18 -.15                  | .02.06          | .10.21                   | .10.19            |
| Graduate     | -.33                       | .05             | .11                      | .08               |
| Other        |                           |                 |                          |                   |

HC 3 Method, MD = Mean Difference, * p < .05.
RQ 6: Are there differences in assessments of institutional quality based on student’s plans for fall enrollment?

Parents/guardians were asked to rate their level of agreement with five statements that relate to institutional quality: “I am satisfied with my student’s decision to attend,” “The institution provides a good value for the education for the price,” “I would encourage another parent to send their child to this institution,” “If I had it all to do over again I would send my child to this institution,” and “I would consider making a gift to this institution in the future.” All rankings were on a scale of 1–5, where 1 = completely disagree and 5 = completely agree. MANOVA revealed that differences among groups were significant for all of the crisis communication variables (F = 4.46, p < .001). Table 6 reports means and standard deviations for each statement of institutional quality. Post hoc analysis is also provided to show the primary sources for the variance in each relationship.

Differences among groups were significant for four of the five assessments of institutional quality. Only the question about potential future gifts was not significantly different among the groups. Parents/guardians of stayers tended to most strongly agree with all of the statements of institutional quality. Parents/guardians of students in the “other” category (those who were still undecided and those who planned to leave school either temporarily or permanently) had the lowest level of agreement with the other four statements. Parents/guardians of graduates had the lowest level of agreement with the statement of overall satisfaction with their student’s decision to attend the institution. Overall, the statement about selecting the institution again scored highest followed by willingness to consider making a gift in the future. The statement of general satisfaction scored lowest.

5. Discussion

More than a quarter of respondents communicate with their students once or more per day and those numbers rose from 26.4% of respondents before COVID-19 to 28.7% after COVID-19. This relatively high percentage of parents/guardians who report communicating once or more per day is consistent with the literature on emerging adulthood and family communication in the digital age. It is not surprising that daily communication increased post-COVID-19. Students who were at the family home had more opportunities for frequent communication. This also helps to explain the decrease in percentage of respondents who reported communicating at least once a week but less than daily (from 35.2% before to 28.5% after COVID-19).

It is important to note that only 50.7% of respondents indicated that their child lived with them post-COVID-19. This helps to explain why both infrequent communication (less than once a month) and somewhat infrequent (at least once a month but less than weekly) rose post-COVID-19 (from 9.0% to 9.7% for infrequent and from 29.4% to 33.1% for somewhat infrequent). Post hoc analysis shows that after COVID-19, only 8.6% of those who reported infrequent communication were at the family home whereas 64.7% of those who reported communicating multiple times a day were at the family home ($X^2 = 45.58, df = 0, p < .01$).

This rise in infrequent and somewhat infrequent communication among students who are away from their family home may be a tactic for more efficiently managing time for both the parent/guardian and student. Students who were not at their parent’s home during the pandemic may also have progressed further in their development as adults. Future studies could gather data using scales of emerging adulthood to determine whether students who are communicating with parents/guardians more frequently have more characteristics of emerging adulthood than those who communicate less frequently.

Overall, it is not surprising to see that digital communication tools dominated family communication for these participants. The surprise might be that, in addition to smartphones (which also enable email, text, and video calls), about a quarter of these parents/guardians report that they
also still sent traditional mail. Even though parents/guardians were likely to use fewer communication tools after COVID-19, they continued to rely primarily on digital communication. Video calls went from being the fourth-most used modality to second-most used. Much of the remote education students were receiving was delivered via Zoom, a video conferencing tool (Stassler, 2020). And many parents/guardians probably also found themselves transitioning to remote work that utilized video conferencing tools (Thompson, 2020). Thus, moving family communication to FaceTime or Zoom became part of the new normal.

These parents/guardians gave their student’s institution ratings from 3.62 to 3.92 (on a scale of 1–5) on quality of crisis communication with parents/guardians. Timeliness received the lowest score. This particular crisis unfolded so rapidly that it was hard for institutions to meet parent expectations for timeliness.

Scores were not uniform. Parents/guardians of students who plan to return to their current institution gave institutions the highest grades (ranging from 4.11 for credibility and consistency to 3.91 for timeliness). By contrast, parents/guardians of students who graduated in the spring gave low ratings for crisis communication. They rated timeliness at 3.31. They may have been hoping to hear that some kind of conventional convocation would be available for their students, but institutions often waited as long as they could to deliver the news that no in-person celebration would be held. Parents/guardians of students in the “other” category (those who are undecided or who are dropping out either temporarily or permanently) gave the lowest grade for consistency (3.65). Perceptions that intuitions were “flip-flopping” on their messaging were frustrating for parents/guardians of students who are struggling with deciding on the next steps.

Interestingly, parents/guardians of students who were planning to change institutions gave scores that were only slightly lower than those of stayers. Post hoc analysis revealed that there were no significant differences between stayers and changers. Much of the difference among categories was accounted for by the difference between stayers and graduates (on all four variables) and stayers and others (on consistency and timeliness). The only other significant differences were between changers and graduates on credibility and timeliness. This analysis supports the notion that parents/guardians of graduates were particularly unhappy with how institutions communicated during a crisis.

Generally, parents/guardians reported the greatest satisfaction with communication from the institution in the first year and the lowest satisfaction during the admission process. This is consistent with earlier research which found that even though families are able to adjust to the consumer language used during recruitment, they are more comfortable with the language of institutional culture and reputation-building that is used as students are acculturated during their first year of higher education (Lee, 2019).

Parents/guardians generally felt that crisis communication was stronger than general communication after the first year. But even though differences among groups were significant in every category except for orientation, most of that difference was because of high scores from parents/guardians of stayers and low scores from parents/guardians of graduates. Post hoc analysis shows no significant differences between stayers and changers and no significant differences between changers, graduates, and others. However, graduates rated communication significantly lower than did stayers at almost every stage. The at-risk groups in the “other” category rated communication as significantly worse both during crisis and after the first year.

Parents/guardians of stayers and of changers are fairly satisfied with most communication from the university, so the decision for some students to stay and others to change seems to have little to do with how the university communicated with parents/guardians. But parents/guardians of graduates had relatively low satisfaction with communication at most stages. Parents/guardians
of leavers and contemplators negatively evaluated both crisis communication and communication after the first year is concerning.

There was no significant difference in knowledge about whom to contact if students are experiencing challenges and most parents/guardians have a high level of confidence. However, even though there was no significant difference (in part because of the relatively small size of the category), parents/guardians of “other” students scored almost 10% lower than stayers on this measure. Future studies could further explore parents/guardians of students who plan to leave and/or who are undecided using qualitative methods to gain more depth of insight into their relatively higher level of challenge in finding communication contacts at the institution.

Offices of advancement and development should be encouraged to know that all segments of the population are roughly the same in terms of their willingness to give a future gift to their student’s institution. The overall mean is above the mid-point with a score of 3.90. Significant differences were found for all of the other measures of institutional quality. But, as detailed in the post hoc analysis, this is because stayers gave significantly higher ratings than all other groups on all of the categories with only two exceptions: (a) encouraging another parent to attend, and (b) selecting the institution again.

The final measures of institutional quality encompass much more than the communication-related items that were reported earlier. While those communication measures did not show a great deal of difference in perception between changers and stayers, these measures of institutional quality indicate that differences do exist. Future research should seek to understand what those differences are and how they are communicated to parents/guardians.

6. Conclusion
Communication between parents/guardians and students during and after the pandemic followed patterns consistent with the literature. Students who went to the family home communicated more often and used fewer communication tools than those who did not. Digital tools remained dominant and video calling rose to be the second-most used modality for communication. But only about half of students were in the family home during the spring of 2020. This may help to explain the shift to a more bi-modal communication pattern with the students who were living at home communicating more frequently and those who were not at home communicating with parents/guardians less frequently. Differences in where students lived during the pandemic could be related to their progression through the developmental stage of emerging adult. Future research should further explore the dynamics of family communication during crises and examine the role of developmental stages in shifts in communication patterns.

From the strategic communication perspective, higher education institutions need to better plan for when and how to communicate with families. Institutions often failed to coordinate specific messages to families during the pandemic. Many institutions seemed to believe that students would share needed information with families (McMillan et al., 2020). But this may not be true for students who did not go home and also for those who reduced their frequency and modes of communication during the pandemic.

Research questions 3–6 address strategic communication between institutions of higher education and families. Overall assessments of crisis communication during the pandemic were above the mid-point on a five-point scale. General satisfaction with communication during crisis was a bit higher than scores for the specific characteristics of effective crisis communication. Perceptions of crisis communication were not uniform. Parents/guardians of students who planned to return to their previous institution rated crisis communication most positively. The most negative assessments were from the parents/guardians of graduates.
This crisis had particularly negative consequences for graduating students. They missed many of the academic, social, and career-preparation experiences traditionally associated with the senior experience. Thus, both students and their parents/guardians may have soured on the institution even though the crisis was centered in public health rather than in the institution itself. However, these parents/guardians are no less likely to consider future giving than are others.

Logic would suggest that parents/guardians of students who decide to change to a different institution would have lower levels of satisfaction than would those who plan to stay. But this was not true for any of the communication-related variables. Parents/guardians of changers were not significantly different than stayers in their assessment of crisis communication or of communication across the student life cycle. But there were significant differences in some of the measures of institutional quality. In particular, parents/guardians of changers noted lower satisfaction with the decision to attend an institution and its price/value proposition than did the parents/guardians of stayers. Future research should further explore what factors influenced satisfaction levels and how all of these factors intertwine in helping to shape brand perception.

Most parents/guardians report that they know how to contact the institution if they need to talk to someone about their students. This study did not seek more detail on this point, but future studies should find out more about whom parents/guardians actually contact. Given what previous studies have revealed about the expansion of marketing communication (Chapleo & Sullivan, 2017; Sataøen & Waøraas, 2016) and contraction of family communication offices (McMillan et al., 2020) in institutions of higher education, it would be interesting to see if parents have a uniform sense of whom to contact or if they have used a kind of trial and error method to find “the person” who will respond to their calls and emails. Does the role of the contact person impact their overall perception of the institution? For example, do parents/guardians who contact admission offices have different perceptions of the institution than do those who contact parent/family offices?

Finally, even though this study focused on a single stakeholder group (parents/guardians) of a single organizational type (institutions of higher education) during a unique crisis situation (a pandemic) in a single country (the United States), the findings are not limited to that unique context. Three key points are worth further exploration in broader contexts.

First, the intertwined relationship between parent/guardian “customers” and student “consumers” applies in other contexts when the purchaser of goods and services may be different from the actual user of those goods and services. Understanding patterns such as frequency and modality of communication between customers and consumers can be an important aspect of building a strategic communication plan. It is also important to understand underlying factors (such as an emerging developmental stage and changing communication technologies in the case of the current study) that influence those communication patterns.

Second, the segmentation of stakeholder groups is critical. This has long been a principle of strategic communication (Brotnes & Weinstein, 2019; Hassan & Craft, 2005; Sommerfeldt, 2012). But the method of segmentation is not always obvious. Traditional segmentation often relies on demographic characteristics, but behavioral intentions (e.g., plans for continuing with higher education) proved to be meaningful in the current study. That segmentation revealed a relatively high level of dissatisfaction among parents of students who have graduated. At one level, institutions might view stakeholders who have moved on from needing their services as no longer relevant. But the relatively high levels of propensity for future philanthropy among this (and other) groups show the importance of recognizing the lifetime value of stakeholders even when they are no longer actively involved in the core mission of the institution.

Finally, brand image is complex and is influenced by many different expectations and experiences. In the current study, the average scores for communication across every stage of the student life cycle were at or above 4.0 on a 5-point scale, but four of the five measures of
institutional quality were below the 4.0 mark. Clearly, some factors beyond communication are influencing the parental perception of factors such as the price/value proposition, satisfaction with institutional choice, and willingness to recommend the institution to others.

7. Limitations
As with any study, the research reported here has limitations. The sample was drawn from a panel that may not be fully representative of the population. A more purposive sampling technique could have enabled the collection of more data from leavers and contemplators so that those two categories did not have to be grouped together for analysis.

Data were collected during the midst of an ongoing crisis before final decisions about returning to higher education were operationalized. Most colleges and universities had announced a plan for fall at the time of data collection, but ongoing escalation of the pandemic was causing some institutions to change from plans for an on-campus experience to remote learning at the time of data collection. This allowed for real-time assessment of crisis communication, but it may not have accurately captured which students would actually return to their former institutions and which would change institutions or stop out.

The purpose of the study was to gain a high-level understanding of how families communicated with each other and how institutions communicated with families. That split purpose allowed for collection of data that informed the relationship between customers, consumers, and institutions, but it did not allow for depth of exploration in any area.

An additional limitation is that research questions focused on individual items rather than on scaled variables. This was revealing in many instances. For example, the data showed that timeliness was a primary challenge for these institutions—a fact that would not have emerged if all of the crisis communication characteristics had been combined into a single scale. However, future studies may wish to consider grouping related items into scales that can be tested for reliability. Factor analysis could also be used to confirm the validity of internal structures that measure communication both within families and between families and institutions of higher education.

In summary, institutions of higher education are to be commended for relatively high ratings on crisis communication and communication across the student life cycle. But much additional work is needed to understand the intricate relationship between parents, students, and institutions of higher education. Leaders of colleges and universities are facing many challenges as the COVID-19 pandemic has reshaped their institutions. As they learn to lead in this new environment, it is critical for them to gain a better understanding of how to better serve both their customers (parents) and their consumers (students).

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