# **Abstract:** In the spring of 2020, the COVID19 pandemic caused colleges and universities in the United States to transition from facetoface 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 decisionmaking. 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



## Introduction

On 12 March 2020, the World Health Organization declared COVID19 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 (Viner et al., [2020](#_bookmark99)). In the United States, most institutions of higher education that offered facetoface 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](#_bookmark49); Blankenberger & Williams, [2020](#_bookmark51); Viner et al., [2020](#_bookmark99)).

The impact of school closures on families of children enrolled in K12 education has been widely reported in the popular press (Perelman, [2020](#_bookmark84)) and is also starting to receive scholarly attention (Bhamani et al., [2020](#_bookmark50)), 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 COVID19 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](#_bookmark54); Macleod et al., [2013](#_bookmark78); Pitman, [2000](#_bookmark85)). In short, parents are a key stakeholder group for institutions of higher education in the United States (Lee et al., [2018](#_bookmark76)).

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](#_bookmark65)). 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 middleto upperincome European Americans, there is some indication that ethnicity and income alone are not always closely tied to helicopter parenting (Doepke & Zilibotti, [2019](#_bookmark62); Kouros et al., [2016](#_bookmark71)). 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](#_bookmark73); Lee & Kang, [2018](#_bookmark74)). Researchers have begun crosscultural 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](#_bookmark64)). In short, while parental involvement with college students may be different in different cultures, the US context during the COVID19 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 COVID19 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 COVID19 pandemic in the United States, implications are also explored for other contexts.

## 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.

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 parents 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 COVID19, they continued to rely primarily on digital communication. Video calls went from being the fourthmost used modality to secondmost used. Much of the remote education students were receiving was delivered via Zoom, a video conferencing tool (Stassler, [2020](#_bookmark93)). And many parents/guardians probably also found themselves transitioning to remote work that utilized video conferencing tools (Thompson, [2020](#_bookmark97)). Thus, moving family communication to FaceTime or Zoom became part of the new normal.

These parents/guardians gave their students 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 inperson 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 flipflopping 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 reputationbuilding that is used as students are acculturated during their first year of higher education (Lee, [2019](#_bookmark75)).

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 atrisk 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 students institution. The overall mean is above the midpoint 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 communicationrelated 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.

## 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 secondmost 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 bimodal 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](#_bookmark81)). 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 midpoint on a fivepoint 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 careerpreparation 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 communicationrelated 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](#_bookmark57); Sata en & Waeraas, [2016](#_bookmark89)) and contraction of family communication offices (McMillan et al., [2020](#_bookmark81)) 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 (Brotspies & Weinstein, [2019](#_bookmark55); Hassan & Craft, [2005](#_bookmark67); Sommerfeldt, [2012](#_bookmark92)). 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 5point 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.

## 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 oncampus experience to remote learning at the time of data collection. This allowed for realtime 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 highlevel 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 COVID19 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).

#### 