

Parent Involvement in College Planning

High school students want parents to be more involved in college planning

Publishers' note

“Helicopter parents” is today’s somewhat pejorative term for parents who are overly involved in their children’s lives and unwilling to let their children make independent decisions.

Recent articles in *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* as well as popular essays such as Nancy Gibbs’ “Parents Behaving Badly,” which appeared recently in *Time* magazine, have raised the alarm about this intrusive parental behavior.

But given that recent media coverage has been largely based on anecdote rather than solid evidence, we decided to make the helicopter parent phenomenon the focus of the first issue of *Student Poll* produced under a new collaboration between the College Board and Art & Science Group. Our findings are surprising and revealing, and for some, perhaps, comforting.

College-bound high school seniors are generally satisfied with the current level of their parents’ involvement in the college search process. But nearly 30 percent want more, not less, parental involvement, a figure that jumps to over 40 percent among students with lower SAT scores and household incomes.

To some degree, these findings appear to defy recent media reporting and other anecdotal evidence about “helicopter parents,” in particular the perception of a rising level of intrusive and alarming behavior. Our intent is not to distract attention from what is a set of legitimate concerns about the impact, on their children and others, of parents who just “won’t let go.” And without baseline data, we cannot confirm that the phenomenon is actually growing. But it is important to keep in perspective the difference between anecdote and behavior in the fuller context. We hope this survey is useful in letting one see the individual stories in context and in understanding the parallel problem of students who actually need more support.

Should we be alarmed or comforted by what we see in parental behavior? Highly regarded scholarship demonstrates conclusively that parental engagement has a positive impact on student success. For example, a study completed by the Harvard Family Research Project provides compelling evidence that parental expectations strongly influence student achievement in grades K-12. For less motivated students, it appears that more parental involvement might actually be welcome, and would likely be helpful.

At the same time, in *The Price of Privilege*, Madeline Levine describes much current parent behavior, especially among the affluent, as a cultural phenomenon, theorizing that work and time pressures have narrowed parents’ social networks, making their children a greater focus of their time and emotional attention.

College and secondary school officials might consider seeing increased parental involvement as an opportunity rather than a threat. Engaged and interested parents

can be much more easily mobilized to support the academic achievement of their children, meet volunteer needs, provide philanthropic support, and become advocates for the institutions their children attend.

The Millennial generation has been a particular source of curiosity among college and university presidents, trustees, enrollment officers, and student life staff. But aside from a few popular books on Millennials, whose assumptions are supported largely by anecdote or a few focus groups with students, there is scant empirical evidence to support the speculation about the values and behavior of the turn-of-the-century generation, particularly as they relate to college consideration and choice.

To help fill this empirical void, we decided to devote this issue of *Student Poll* to the evidence about Millennials and how they differ from previous generations of college students, drawing both on *Student Poll*'s own research and longitudinal data from the Cooperative Institute Research Program (CIRP) Freshman Survey.

Last fall, *Student Poll* administered an online survey to a national sample of college-bound rising high school seniors. This survey focused on how Millennials perceive themselves to be different from their parents on a variety of factors relating to college choice. Such a survey, of course, is about self-perceived differences, and measures values and attitudes at only one point in time. It is helpful, but not definitive.

To understand true generational change, consistent measures have to be taken over a long period of time, at least one generation or more, about 40 years. There is only one such source of longitudinal data on the attitudes of college students: surveys conducted by CIRP, part of the Higher Education Research Institute based at the University of California, Los Angeles. CIRP researchers have conducted an annual survey — the Freshman Survey — of incoming college freshmen every year since 1966. The survey is administered during orientation by more than 700 colleges and universities nationwide, with 272,000 students participating in the fall 2007 survey.

This issue of *Student Poll*, a collaboration of the College Board, Art & Science Group, and CIRP, synthesizes data from the recent *Student Poll* survey on Millennials as well as key findings from CIRP's 2007 report, and its 2006 report, *The American Freshman: Forty Year Trends*. The findings from these surveys puncture large holes in much of the conventional wisdom about Millennials, but also provide solid evidence for other conclusions about this generation. In many respects, the data show that Millennials are more like their parents than different.

More than anything, the findings confirm that generational change is gradual and transitional, with few abrupt shifts, and that gross generalizations about an entire generation do not capture important subtleties and differences. The findings also sound a warning first raised in 1949 by the psychologist Benjamin Forer. He posited the idea — now known as the Forer Effect — that people are highly disposed to accept vague, generalized, positive personality descriptions about themselves or about people like themselves, and to gravitate toward answers that simplify and order a complex world.

In an era when the socioeconomic and racial diversity and complexity of the college-bound population is greater than it has ever been, nothing could be more dangerous. So we offer this issue of *Student Poll* in the spirit of encouraging more thoughtful and nuanced consideration of the student populations entering our college campuses today.

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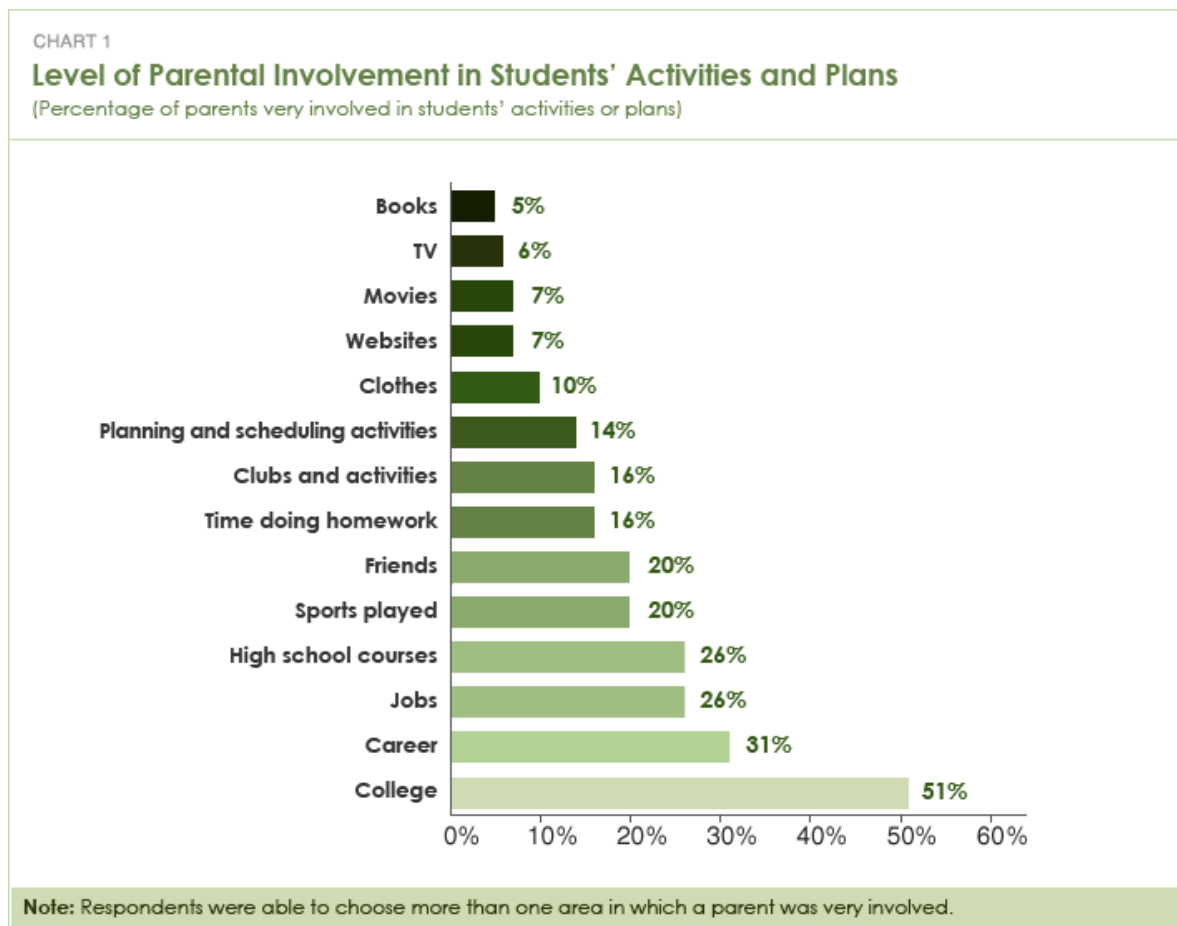
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1 Parents are much more involved in matters affecting their child’s future than in day-to-day activities. By far, parents’ greatest involvement concerns college planning.

We asked students to what extent their parents were involved in different choices and decisions in their lives — from everyday matters (e.g. books they read, TV shows they watch, clothes they wear) to important life plans, like college and careers.

College plans were at the top of the list for nearly all the respondent groups we interviewed. More than 50 percent of the students surveyed indicated that parents were *very involved* in their college plans. (Only five percent reported that their parents were *not at all involved* in the college selection process.)

Nearly one-third of students also indicated that parents were very involved in helping them think about future career choices. One-quarter of respondents also indicated that their parents were very involved in helping them get jobs during the summer and after school, and helping them decide what courses to take in high school.



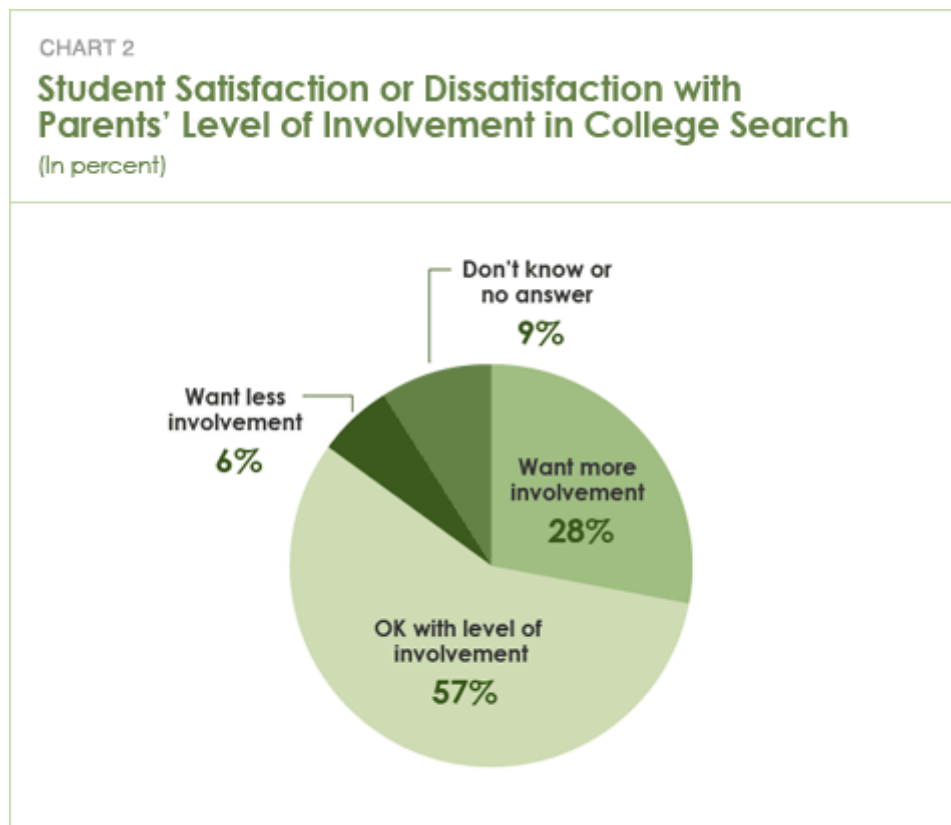
Source: studentPOLL survey.

By contrast, only small percentages of students reported extensive parental involvement in everyday decisions about books, television programming, clothes, and the like.

2 A sizeable segment of students want their parents more — not less — involved in the college search process.

While 3 out of 5 students are satisfied with the level of parental involvement, the vast majority of the remainder (28 percent of the total) actually want their parents to be more involved. Only 6 percent of the students surveyed who reported some

parental involvement in their college search reported that they want their parents *less involved*.



Source: studentPOLL survey.

3 Parents' greatest involvement in the college selection process focuses on college cost considerations.

Among the 95 percent of students who indicated their parents were very involved or involved to some degree in their college plans, a sizeable percentage indicated that their parents were very involved with or actually took care of the following cost-related tasks:

- Filling out financial aid forms (43 percent)
- Deciding what colleges they could afford (44 percent)
- Researching college costs (38 percent)

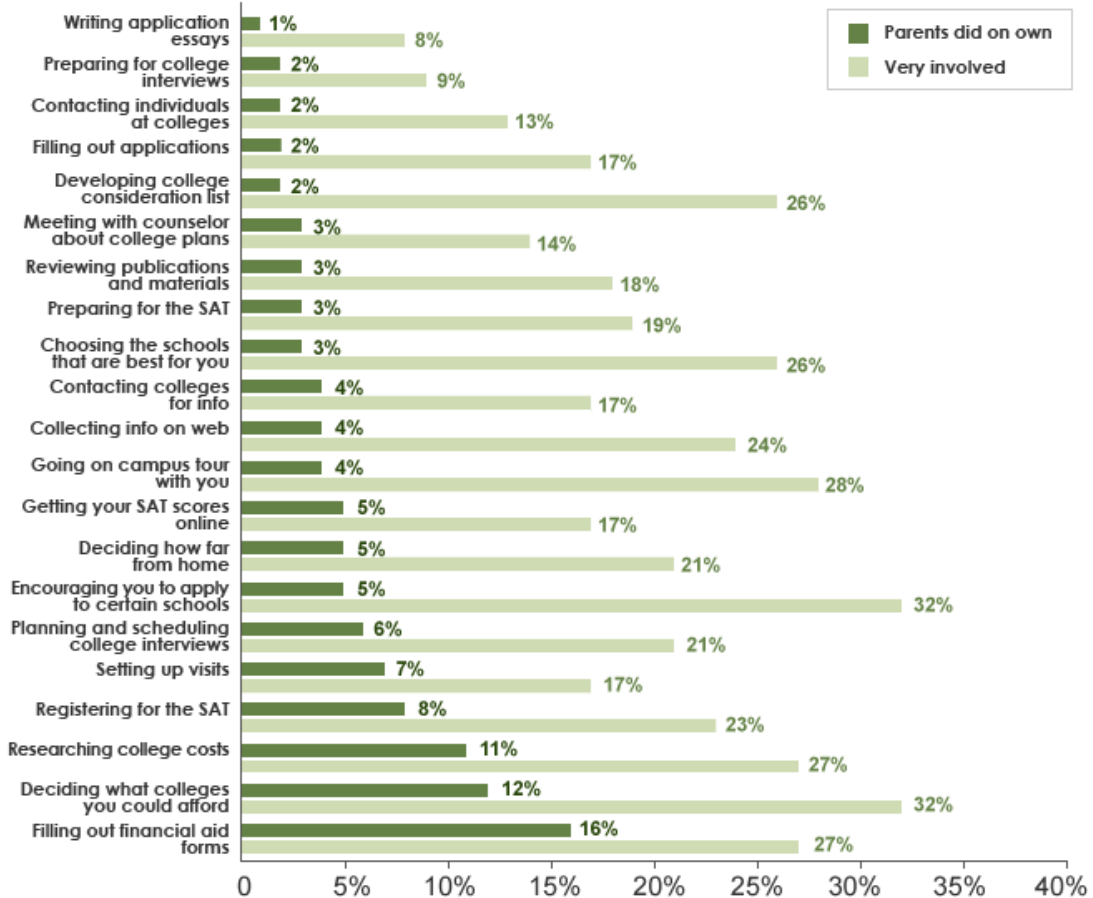
4 Students' responses reveal little evidence of extreme or intrusive parental involvement.

Clearly, parents are providing considerable help to their children in the college selection process. For example, more than 30 percent of students reported that their parents were very involved or by themselves planned and scheduled college interviews, accompanied the student on a campus tour, chose the schools best for the student, and developed the initial list of schools to be considered.

However, despite recent stories in the popular press about strongly controlling parents (e.g., asking to sit with their child during college admissions interviews) only a small number of students reported what could be considered extreme behavior on the part of their parents. Only 1 percent of students reported that their parents wrote their application essays, and fewer than 3 percent reported that parents filled out their applications. While even these small numbers will trouble to college officials, the actual incidence of this behavior seems to be lower than anecdotal opinion indicates.

CHART 3

Level of Parental Involvement in College-Related Plans and Tasks



Note: Respondents were able to choose more than one area in which a parent performed a task on their own or was very involved with the student.

Source: studentPOLL survey.

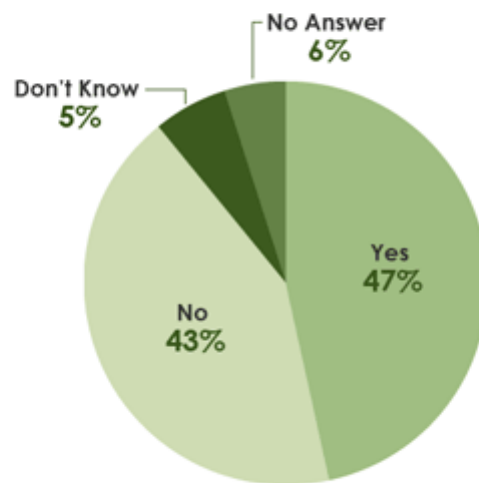
5 Much of the reported parental involvement is actually very positive and supportive.

For example, nearly half of the students whose parents were involved in their college plans indicated that their parents had encouraged or insisted that they apply to schools they hadn't considered.

CHART 4

Parents Encouraging or Insisting that Student Applies to a School Other than He or She Chose

(In percent)



Note: Percentages do not add up to 100 due to rounding.

Source: studentPOLL survey.

Regardless of income level and child's academic ability, parents who were deeply involved in the college selection and application process were more likely to persuade students to apply to schools they hadn't considered. The main reason parents encouraged students to apply to these schools was word of mouth — they simply had heard good things about the college or university from a friend and/or family member. Judgments about affordability and quality were secondary factors.

6 Both students with lower SAT scores and male students report higher levels of parent involvement.

- The findings revealed that levels of parental involvement increased as SAT scores declined. Parents of students with lower SAT scores tended to be more involved in the day-to-day decisions of their children.

For example, roughly one-third of students in the lowest scoring quintile of SAT test-takers reported their parents were very involved in their decisions about the friends they hang out with, the time they spend doing homework, the sports they play in high school, and the kinds of clubs or activities they are involved in at school.

Interestingly, despite an already considerable level of parental involvement, many of these same students reported a desire for even more parental support in the college search process. For example, 48 percent of the lowest quintile actually want their parents more involved as compared to only 19 percent of those in the highest scoring quintile.

CHART 5

Level of Parental Involvement by SAT Scores

(Percentage of parents very involved in students' activities or plans)

Type of Parental Involvement	SAT Score	Lower than 1252	1252-1419	1420-1579	1580-1769	Higher than 1770
Books		12%	6%	3%	2%	3%
TV		10%	5%	6%	6%	5%
Movies		12%	6%	5%	6%	5%
Websites		16%	6%	8%	3%	4%
Clothes		15%	6%	12%	8%	9%
Planning and scheduling activities		20%	14%	16%	13%	12%
Clubs and activities		31%	18%	19%	16%	7%
Time doing homework		32%	22%	22%	11%	7%
Sports played		28%	25%	26%	20%	11%
Friends		37%	27%	22%	16%	9%
High school courses		37%	31%	27%	27%	19%
Jobs		39%	27%	27%	27%	21%
Career		43%	34%	35%	29%	21%
College		59%	55%	56%	50%	46%

Source: studentPOLL survey.

- Male students report a higher level of parent involvement than females. For example, parents of male students were more likely to have been very involved or have done by themselves college-search-related activities such as collecting information on the web, contacting colleges for information, filling out applications, and encouraging the student to apply to certain schools.

We also examined in-depth the differences in parental involvement among various races or ethnicities. Overall, Asian, Black, and Hispanic students reported higher levels of parental involvement in time spent on homework and career advice.

Helicopter Parent Quiz

To help parents think about their role in the college planning and selection process, we have developed a quick “Helicopter Parent Quiz,” which is available on the College Board’s website. By responding to a short series of questions about areas of involvement in the college admission process, parents can receive feedback about how best to strike a healthy balance in encouraging the student’s thinking about college without interfering with their growing self-reliance. The quiz and related article can be accessed at www.collegeboard.com/helicopterquiz.

Study Methodology

The findings reported in this *Student Poll* are based on 1,778 responses from a random national sample of 75,000 high school seniors who took the SAT and who completed an optional web-survey between 12/1 and 12/15/06. The results of this survey are accurate at the 95% confidence level plus or minus 5%.

About Student Poll

A collaboration between the College Board and Art & Science Group LLC, *Student Poll* presents the results from a series of national surveys that measure the opinions, perceptions, and behavior of college-bound high school students and their parents. Published for the benefit of college and university senior leaders and enrollment officers as well as secondary school college counselors, *Student Poll* seeks to provide insights and understandings that will result in better communication and service to college-bound students across the nation.

First published in 1995 by Art & Science Group, a leading national source of market intelligence for higher education, *Student Poll* has become a trusted and widely-cited source of reliable data and insights on many critical questions concerning college choice. The College Board and Art & Science Group have now joined forces to expand the depth and range of the issues that will be explored in *Student Poll*. The collaboration between these two organizations will make possible expanded content and increased frequency of reports.

Student Poll findings and analysis are provided free on both the [College Board](http://collegeboard.org) (<http://tinyurl.com/6xxfzs>) and [Art & Science Group](http://www.artsci.com) (<http://www.artsci.com/student.htm>) web sites.

About the College Board and Art & Science Group

The College Board is a not-for-profit membership association whose mission is to connect students to college success and opportunity. Founded in 1900, the association is composed of more than 5,200 schools, colleges, universities, and other educational organizations. Each year, the College Board serves seven million students and their parents, 23,000 high schools, and 3,500 colleges through major programs and services in college admissions, guidance, assessment, financial aid, enrollment, and teaching and learning. Among its best-known programs are the SAT[®], the PSAT/NMSQT[®], and the Advanced Placement Program[®] (AP[®]). The College Board is committed to the principles of excellence and equity, and that commitment is embodied in all of its programs, services, activities, and concerns.

[Art & Science Group](http://www.artsci.com) (www.artsci.com) is one of the nation's most influential consulting firms specializing in market-related issues facing higher education and the nonprofit sector. The firm's work synthesizes imagination and empirical rigor — art and science. Its research is considered the most rigorous and innovative in higher education today. The firm assists clients in every major arena of marketing and communications: market-informed strategic planning; enrollment management and student recruitment; development and alumni relations; tuition pricing and financial aid. The firm has extensive experience working with a large variety of public and private institutions of higher learning, ranging from comprehensive private and public research universities to small liberal arts colleges.

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