

Parental Divorce and Undergraduate Students' Success

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This project was funded by the Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program (UROP) at UMNTC

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Overview

- Literature review
- Methods
- Quantitative and Qualitative Results
- Recommendations

Divorced Families

- Between 40% to 50% of first marriages end in divorce (Amato, 2010)
- Divorce impacts over one million children per year (Cohen, 2002)
- Between 25% to 35% of college students are from divorced families (Johnson & Nelson, 1998)

Impacts on College Students

- Students from divorced families are
 - More likely to experience psychological problems
 - Stress
 - Depression
 - Anxiety
 - Have more difficulty with relationships
 - Experience greater financial difficulties

Amato and Keith (2011)

Gap in Scholarship

- Prior research has identified several factors that can compromise success in higher education for students of divorced families
- Yet, there is no existing research related to whether students from divorced families might have lower persistence rates, graduation rates, or lower academic achievement

Research Questions

- Is there an association between parental marital status and
 - students' academic achievement (first-year GPA)
 - retention to second year
 - graduation (or ongoing success) in four years
 - graduation (or ongoing success) in five years
- What challenges do students from divorced families face during their first year of college?

Methods

- Quantitative analyses
 - CIRP survey (administered in 2007) analyses merged with institutional data
 - Linear regressions predicting GPA
 - Logistic regressions predicting retention and graduation
- Qualitative analyses
 - Interviews conducted with 18 college sophomores

Quantitative Instrument

- CIRP survey administered to new incoming first-year students in the summer preceding fall 2007
- Of 5,280, 4,693 were retained for analyses because not all had ACT/SAT scores and many did not correctly write their correct IDs on the survey

Measures

- Dependent:
 - Students' first-year GPA
 - Retention from first year to second year
 - Graduation in four and five years
- Independent:
 - Parents' marital status (derived from CIRP)
 - Both alive and living with each other
 - Both alive, divorced, or living apart
 - One or both deceased

Measures

- Independent:
 - Gender
 - Race/ethnicity
 - Pell grant recipient
 - First-generation status
 - In-state resident
 - ACT/SAT scores
 - Lived in college
 - College of enrollment
 - Students' self-rated abilities compared to an "average person their age"
 - Academic ability
 - Drive to achieve

Sample

Variable	n	%
Divorced family	959	20.4
Female	2632	56.1
First-generation	775	16.5
African American	201	4.3
American Indian or Native American	53	1.1
Asian American	520	11.1
Hispanic or Latino	112	2.4
International	80	1.7
Pell grant recipient	879	18.7
In-state resident	3117	66.4
Lived in residence halls	3954	84.3

Quantitative Results

- Is there an association between parental marital status and...
 - students' academic achievement (first-year GPA)
 - retention to second year
 - graduation (or ongoing success) in four years
 - graduation (or ongoing success) in five years

First-Year GPA

- Controlling for demographics, college experiences, and ACT scores, students from divorced families had a significantly lower first-year GPA compared to their peers
- Model explained 19.2% of the variance in first-year GPA
- Parental divorce was not the most important predictor in the model ($\beta = -.049$)

First-Year Retention

- Controlling for demographics, college experiences, and ACT scores, students from divorced families had a significantly lower first-year retention compared to their peers
- The odds of retention decreased by 1.40 for students from divorced families
- Pseudo $R^2 = .093$ (Nagelkerke, 1991)

Fourth-Year Graduation or Success

- Controlling for demographics, college experiences, and ACT scores, students from divorced families had a significantly lower four-year graduation rate and four-year success rate compared to their peers
- The odds of graduation decreased by 1.24 (four-year grad) and 1.23 (four-year success) for students from divorced families
- Pseudo $R^2 = .245, .267$ (Nagelkerke, 1991)

Fifth-Year Graduation or Success

- Controlling for demographics, college experiences, and ACT scores, students from divorced families had a significantly lower five-year graduation rate and five-year success rate compared to their peers
- The odds of graduation decreased by 1.31 (in both models) for students from divorced families
- Pseudo $R^2 = .298, .284$ (Nagelkerke, 1991)

Qualitative Results

- Research question:
 - What challenges do students from divorced families face during their first year of college?

Qualitative Sampling

- Emailed a random sample ($n = 197$, 20%) of second-year students who, the previous year, had taken the CIRP survey and indicated that their parents were divorced
- Interviewed 18 students (10 females, 8 males)

Qualitative Instrument

- Looking back to your freshman year, what was it like being a new college student from a divorced family?
- What were some challenges that you faced when you first came to college?
- Has your parents' marriage status—and everything resulting from it—ever impacted your decision to attend college, which college to attend, or whether to stay enrolled in college

Qualitative Results

- Several key themes emerged:
 - Move-in day challenges
 - Financial challenges
 - Familial responsibilities
 - Greater responsibility and financial independence
 - Relationship and trust issues

Move-in Day Challenges

- Nearly every student discussed move-in day as a point where they felt “othered” or awkward in comparison to their peers
- Move-in day was an initial source of tension for students, often in relation to whether there was an amicable relationship between parents

Financial Challenges

- Who will pay for college?
- Employment and student loans were almost always necessary for students
- Single-parent concerns
- Concerns with regards to not imposing on family (graduating sooner)
- Pressure to support family members after graduation

Familial Responsibilities

- Concern and responsibility for siblings
- Keeping in separate contact with both sets of parents can be overwhelming and tiring
- Visiting both parents over breaks can be stressful to accommodate their schedules

Greater Responsibility and Financial Independence

- Required to have a job for financial independence
- Missed out on social aspects and sometimes even academics because of work responsibilities
- Felt a sense of keep responsibility and independence
 - Going back and forth between parents and/or living with a single parent created independence

Relationship and Trust Issues

- Hesitant to get into intimate relationships
- Difficulty trusting others
- Differing relationships with parents and other family members

Factors of Influence to Consider

- Several factors appeared to mitigate the impact of divorce on students:
 - Age of students when parents divorced
 - Amicable nature of divorce
 - Whether parents went to college
 - Whether parents lived near each other
 - Whether parents remarried or remained single

Recommendations

- Consider marital status in prediction models of student success
- Seek alternative ways of measuring parental marital status (including age of divorce)
- Dig deeper into why students from divorced families struggle with GPA and success in higher education

Limitations and Future Directions

- Reduced sample for quantitative
- Limited generalizability
- Small sample for qualitative study (and only interviewed second-year students)
- Not a heterogeneous population—what aspects of the divorce situation influence student outcomes?
- Longitudinal studies may reveal long-term implications of divorce

Thank you!

- Any questions?

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