Multi-Generational Perspectives: How They Interact and Impact Service to Students and Their Families in an Age of Highly-Involved Parents

A doctoral thesis presented

by

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to

The School of Education

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education

in the field of

Higher Education Administration

College of Professional Studies
Northeastern University
Boston, Massachusetts
October, 2012
Abstract

Although there have always been differences in how generations navigate decision-making in higher education, highly involved parents have led to conflicting inter-generational educational expectations. This research study investigated the phenomenon of parental involvement and how meanings on educational expectations vary depending on generation. The researcher used generational theory as the theoretical framework and employed Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis. Two faculty, two staff, two students and two sets of parents from Appalachian State University participated in this study. An increased level and depth of parent involvement as compared to in the past emerged as a primary theme. Differing expectations of customer service and the purpose of higher education also emerged as themes. Throughout this study, there is a disconnect between the views of faculty, staff, parents, and students of different generations about what is in the best interest of the student. Understanding these differences and their impact on the perceptions of customer service may be useful for administrators as they provide services to students and their families in higher education.

*Keywords*: generational theory, Millennial Generation, helicopter parents, customer service, higher education
This doctoral research study is dedicated to my departed mother, Carol Ann Wawrzusin.

She was more than my mother. She was also my mentor and friend. She taught me what it is to be an intelligent, strong and loving woman.
Acknowledgements

This doctoral research study would not have been possible without the love, support and encouragement of family and friends, especially my father, Raymond Wawrzusin and my future husband, Dr. Eric L. Thomas. I cannot thank Eric enough for his endless patience and understanding, and for the many hours he spent proofreading and reviewing all my papers and drafts. I also appreciated him supporting me writing when I felt like writing and not writing when I needed a break. I am very lucky to have him as my life partner.

Dr. Joseph W. McNabb has been an outstanding advisor and I cannot thank him enough for his wisdom and guidance. His suggestions and questions throughout the writing and research stages of this study were always thoughtful and right on the mark to help me move in the right direction. I also would like to thank Dr. Kimberly A. Truong, my second reader, for her insightful and knowledgeable feedback and recommendations.
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Statement of the Problem and Significance

The range of generations currently converging on college and university campuses is creating a conflict of perceptions and expectations in higher education. There may have always been differences in how generations view the world and navigate decision-making, but anecdotal observations from those working in higher education indicate that the interactions among the generations have never been as volatile and filled with contradicting points of view as they are today. Over-involved parents are a main contributor to the current tensions. Brown (2005) outlined that the ways that the generations view the world and approach learning are fundamentally not the same, and argued that judging the varied points of view and approaches of the different generations gets in the way of understanding those differences. It is important for faculty and staff to understand the differences between generations and how those differences impact how administrators do their jobs and provide services in higher education.

The different perspectives of the various generations represented on college and university campuses impact higher education in many ways. This is a result of the intersection of the views and needs of faculty, staff, students and the families of students, and the impact has increased as the level of parental involvement with college students has increased (Carney-Hall, 2008). Traditionally the faculty and staff at colleges and universities have felt that a primary role of higher education has been to teach students to think and learn for themselves as they progress to being informed, autonomous adults. This goal runs counter to the expectation of continued, and often excessive, involvement of the families of today’s students. Many parents attempt to manage the college lives of their sons and daughters with little to no participation from the students. This problem has manifested itself in such a way as to result in the regular use of the
phrase “helicopter parent” to describe these overly-involved mothers and fathers. Cline and Fay (1990) originally coined this phrase as a caution regarding the hovering approach to parenting.

There is often a significant disconnect between student service offices in higher education and students and their families about what is in the best interest of the student and what constitutes quality customer service and assistance. As Daniel, Evans, and Scott (2001) asserted, students and their families no longer view college as a place of opportunity to learn from experts, but instead approach the college experience with a strong sense of customer-based entitlement. This is primarily a result of the shift away from attending college in order to learn, and towards attending college in order to obtain a degree as a prerequisite for employment (Astin, Sax, & Korn, 2003; Delucchi & Korgen, 2002).

Coomes and DeBard (2004) discussed research regarding the role of Baby Boomers and the Millennial generation, including the advent of the “helicopter parent.” They pointed to the value of studying the research of Howe and Strauss regarding the Millennial generation in order to recognize better what students need and to “reconcile the potential intergenerational conflicts that can emerge when values are not aligned” (Coomes & DeBard, 2004, p. 7). They reflected on the significance of understanding the relationships between the generations currently on college and university campuses, particularly using a theoretical framework of generational analysis, as it applies to the Boomer and Generation X faculty and staff and Millennial students (Coomes & DeBard, 2004).

The issue was significant enough to have warranted the TIAA-CREF Institute to focus on the topic at its 2007 Higher Education Leadership Conference where it brought together presidents, chancellors, and other high-level leadership to discuss the challenges presented to colleges and universities today by the convergence of three of the generations in particular:
Baby Boomers, Generation X, and the Millennials. It published *Generational Shockwaves and the Implications for Higher Education*, focusing on the topics of that conference. As Herbert Allison, Jr. emphasized in the Foreword, the current environment of college campuses includes the challenge of recruiting and retaining talented professors, researchers and students, and meeting the needs and objectives included in each of their generations while still staying true to their institutions missions and values (Heller & d’Ambrosio, 2008).

There has been research regarding generational theory and some research has begun investigating the level of involvement of today’s parents. There is an absence of research on the impact of that involvement in higher education and the impact of multiple generations on the perceptions of service and expectations of privacy and ownership of the academic record at colleges and universities. As such, more research is needed in order to understand the implications of this issue and how to best provide administrative services to students in higher education.

**Practical and Intellectual Goals**

The disparate views and expectations of the many groups and generations currently connected with college campuses, particularly those of the Baby Boomers and Millennials, often lead to a significant disconnect between student service offices in higher education and students and their families. Areas of tension include the views and expectations of customer service in higher education, the objective of higher education, and the role of parents and family in a student's college experience. The intellectual goal of researching this issue is to better understand the expectations of the various cohorts involved in higher education, particularly as associated with their generation, as a way to improve the customer service experiences while also fostering independence and learning by the student. The practical goal is to improve the
service to students while also meeting the mission and educational purpose of higher education. With a better understanding of these relationships and expectations, institutions of higher education can train their faculty and staff to be cognizant of the changing expectations of students. This understanding can then inform changes and improvements to institutional practices and communications with students and families.

Appalachian State University has a strong history of student-focused decision-making and fostering positive relationships across all cohorts on campus. As the involvement of parents has increased, this has created increased opportunities for dissatisfaction and poor relations with students’ families. Faculty and staff in the academic departments express frustration at the parents’ demands for private student information while parents express frustration at paying for their students’ education and not being able to get answers to their questions. Parents are increasingly leaving the students out of the conversations. The university has attempted to address the issue of access to information through the creation of a parent portal that allows students to give access to certain private information to their parents. Unfortunately, the changes put into place have not addressed the overarching issue of the parent’s expectations and their feeling of ownership of their son or daughter’s education. Before effective training could be implemented at Appalachian State University for faculty and staff, and before communications and training for parents and their students could be created, a clear understanding of the issues contributing to this generational and cohort disconnect is needed.

**Research Questions**

The primary research questions for this study were:

- How do students, parents, faculty, and staff in different generations perceive and describe customer service in higher education?
• What are the views of students, parents, faculty, and staff in different generations on the concept of students as consumers?

• What are the views of students, parents, faculty, and staff in different generations on the role of parents and family in a student's college experience?

Secondary to the above primary questions were the following:

• How is quality customer service defined at college?

• How do faculty, staff, students, and their families differ in their view of students as consumers?

• How do faculty, staff, students, and their families perceive the purpose of higher education?

Theoretical Framework

There is a wide range of age groups comprising the society in which we live and work. Although these age groups are made up of individuals, they often share certain general characteristics and values as a result of the overall attitudes of their cultures and parents (Coomes & DeBard, 2004). These age groups also share the financial and technological environments in which they grew up (Coomes & DeBard, 2004). Massey (1979) asserted that the value systems set in childhood do not change throughout our lifetime, and that they differ significantly between generations. This concept of generations has been in existence for a very long time. Nash (1978) argued that the concept of generations was used even in ancient Greece to describe groups of ages and to categorize them according to stages of life, distinctive characteristics, and common social and historical events.

History of generation based theories. Bengston, Furlong, and Laufer (1974) reviewed generational analysis in the context of sociology and psychology. They posited that although the
concept of generations was used in ancient times to consider the cycles of political and social change, it was not until the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that generational analysis began to move away from a biological, age-based explanation for those cycles of change (Bengston, Furlong, & Laufer, 1974). Between 1830 and 1840, Auguste Comte was the first to investigate generations scientifically, researching the impact of generations on historical change (Jeager, 1985). Comte believed that the ending of each generation was a key component in moving societal processes forward, and that the pace of generational change impacted the pace of historical change (Jeager, 1985).

The first comprehensive and published writings on the topic of generations and history to receive recognition began after 1850 (Jeager, 1985). According to Jeager (1985), Justin Dromel and Guiseppe Ferrari wrote about the topic during that time using their own observations. Jeager (1985) reports that they wrote extensively about the significance of membership in age groups and how social class and increased standards of living were impacting family and age dynamics; both authors attributed standard year-based intervals of 15 or 30 years to the division of generations. In contrast, Gustav Rumelin used a statistical study to inform his investigation into generations and refuted the notion that significant, generation-defining events occurred within predictable intervals of time, contributing to different generational characteristics (Jeager, 1985).

According to Jeager (1985), Ortega y Gasset was one of the prominent authors during the early 1900s to write about generations. The Spanish philosopher believed that generations had a historical, presupposed rhythm. Bengston, Furlong, and Laufer (1974), referenced Ortega y Gasset’s 1923 summary of the classical view of age-group generation as representative of the view of generations at the time. Ortega y Gasset (1923) referred to generations as “a dynamic
compromise between mass and individual” (p. 15) and pointed to generations as “the pivot responsible for the movements of historical evolution” (p. 15).

Karl Mannheim also wrote about generations during the early 1900s but did not subscribe to Ortega y Gasset’s rhythmic view of generational periods (Jeager, 1985). Karl Mannheim was, however, the sociologist credited with the seminal theory regarding generations (Bengston, Furlong, & Laufer, 1974; Eyerman & Turner, 1998; Jaeger, 1985; Pilcher, 1994). According to Jeager (1985), Mannheim was the first to use the social scientific methods current for his time to create a generational theory and to analyze generations as a form of social stratification. Mannheim (1952) posited that generations were a result of a complex combination of factors including “stratification of experience” (p. 296), and he presented generational location and context as key to developing generational groups. He specifically pointed to common historical events and social processes as significant factors in the formation of generational groups (Mannheim, 1952).

Mannheim (1952) also discussed the importance of generational groups as change agents. Pilcher (1994) emphasized Mannheim’s apparent interest in setting his theory on generations apart from the other theories about generations. Mannheim’s belief that despite the potential to do so, “not every generation develops an original and distinctive consciousness,” was a primary difference between Mannheim’s examination of generations and previous theories (Pilcher, 1994).

Theories based on generation have continued to be discussed to some degree since the seminal work of Mannheim. The impact of recent generations on social change in the United States of America has led to renewed attention to the concept of generations in the last decade.
According to Beinhoff (2011), it is the work of William Strauss and Neil Howe that has influenced current ideas of generations and how those generations are divided.

**Howe and Strauss generational theory.** Generational theory is a multidisciplinary social science framework developed by Neil Howe and William Strauss that offers a way to view and understand the recurring cycles of generational types and characteristics. They have outlined 24 generations in Anglo-American history and mapped them all to four cyclic archetypes in their books *Generations* and *The Fourth Turning*. They originally referred to the four archetypes as Idealist, Reactive, Civic, and Adaptive (Howe & Strauss, 1991), but changed the terms in their later book to Prophet, Nomad, Hero, and Artist (Howe & Strauss, 1997). Below is an overview of the generations included in each archetype.

- The Idealist and Prophet generations grow up as “increasingly indulged post-crisis children” and transition to adults as narcissistic champions of the next shift in cultural awakening (Howe & Strauss, 1997, p. 84). This archetype was described by Howe and Strauss (1997) as “moralistic midlifers” (p. 84) and wise elders.

- According to Howe and Strauss (1997), the Reactive and Nomad generations are unprotected children as a generation and grow up to evolve into alienated teenagers and pragmatic adults. They often are leaders through cyclical secular crisis and as a result are tough and resilient elders (Howe & Strauss, 1997).

- The Civic and Hero generations are “increasingly protected children” (Howe & Strauss, 1997, p. 84) who unite as young adults to work together through a secular crisis. This is a generation of proud and achieving leaders who transition into powerful elders who are then attacked in the next cultural awakening (Howe & Strauss, 1997).
• The Adaptive and Artist generations grow up as overprotected children during a secular crisis and become sensitive, risk averse young adults in a post-crisis society (Howe & Strauss, 1997). This generation becomes indecisive as leaders and empathetic as elders (Howe & Strauss, 1997).

According to Howe and Strauss (1997) each of these four archetypes cycle in the same pattern, although with slight shifts in timing, within an 80 to 90 year period which the authors refer to as a saeculum with each generation cycle being around 20 years. Howe and Strauss (1991, 1997) extensively outlined how these types follow the same rhythm throughout the 18 generations and five cycles in the United States. They also argued that the same pattern and rhythm applied through the previous four centuries and can be used to predict future generational patterns (Howe & Strauss, 1991, 1997).

According to Howe, Strauss, and Nadler (2008), there are six generations currently alive in the United States that have peer generational groups shaped by whatever historical events were happening while that group was in a similar age and phase of life. Five of these generations are currently impacting higher education. These five generations are: the ‘Hero’ GI Generation, born 1901 to 1924; the ‘Artist’ Silent Generation, born 1925 to 1942; the ‘Prophet’ Boom (or Baby Boomer) Generation, 1943 to 1960; the ‘Nomad’ 13th Generation (or Generation X), born 1961 to 1981; and the Millennial Generation (tentatively designated as ‘Hero’), born since 1982. It is important to note that there is no standard of specific birth year ranges agreed upon by all researchers of generational theory. The ranges mentioned here are those usually used by Howe and Strauss.

In addition to the specific attributes of each age group, generational differences and their interactions have been studied extensively (Coomes & DeBard, 2004). Members within a
generation share “common ground” in that they are “united by memories, language, habits, beliefs and life lessons” (Howe, Strauss, & Nadler, 2008, p. 7). Each generation has its own personality, and the variation in these generational personalities can have a significant impact on how each group interacts with another. It is important for society as a whole, and for university faculty and staff in particular, to have a basic understanding of these generations in order to recognize how the interactions impact higher education. The broad descriptions of the generations below are based on several authors and sources including Coomes and DeBard (2004); Hammill (2005); Howe and Strauss (2000); Howe, Strauss, and Nadler (2008); and Twenge (2006).

The Silent Generation tends to respect authority, conform to the norms of society, and value discipline. Members of this generation think of family in terms of traditional definitions and see education as a lofty goal not attainable by everyone. They are financially conservative, preferring to pay cash and maintain savings. This generation is most familiar with rotary phones and personal forms of communication. They had a strong presence and influence as leaders in higher education during the 1990s and continue to contribute in leadership roles as trustees and senior faculty at many colleges and universities.

The Baby Boomers are generally optimistic about the future and value involvement in society, but think of the traditional definition of family as disintegrating. They view education as a birthright. In regards to finances, Baby Boomers generally depend upon using credit and paying later. In their use of communications, they are open and accessible. This generation has a strong presence in higher education both as parents and as staff and faculty. While this generation’s members were the ones that demanded freedom and autonomy during their college experiences, they are expecting high levels of inclusion in their children’s college education.
Generation X is the generation that is often skeptical of authority and prefers fun and a laidback attitude over formality. This was the first group to regularly have both parents working and is the generation of the “latch-key-kids.” Members of this generation tend to view education as a means to an end rather than inherently valuable. Cautious financially, they prefer to keep personal and work communication separate. This generation is responsible for much of the most recent technical advances in the United States. Regarding higher education, this generation is different from older generations in no longer holding peers that attend college in particularly high esteem. This is partially due to recognizing college as one of several paths to success. This generation represents the young faculty and staff on college and university campuses and is just beginning to play a parental role in higher education.

The Millennial Generation is used to being special and focusing more on the individual. They tend to be confident, happy, and social and view families as fluid. This generation has a flexible definition of family that accommodates diverse and merged families. The Millennial Generation views education as expensive, but also recognizes that it is required to be successful in life. In addition, they have a very liberal view financially, spending money freely. Communication is a constant in their lives. Millennials are the majority of college students today.

The parent and student generations in higher education. As Coomes and DeBard (2004) pointed out, “The relationships between the Boomer generation or Generation X faculty and staff and the Millennial students now beginning to attend higher education can be better understood within the framework of generational analysis” (p. 8). It is important for leaders in higher education to understand the characteristics of the generations when reacting to overly-involved families and determining how best to serve students. Although all four generations are
important to current campus communities, the generation of traditional students, the Millennial
generation, touches all the other cohorts on campus. In addition, the most significant
relationship among the generations right now is that between the Baby Boomers and the
Millennials. Most faculty members are Baby Boomers and most parents of the Millennials are
Baby Boomers (Coomes & DeBard, 2004). As a result, the characteristics of these two
generations warrant further understanding.

Dunn-Cane, Gonzalez, and Stewart (1999) pointed out that the high number of
individuals making up the Baby Boomer generation had a significant cultural, social, and
economic impact in the United States. “The flood of babies made America of the 1950s a child-
centered nation, where parents, teachers, and marketers labored to satisfy their every need and
desire,” states Gillon (2004). During the years that the Baby Boomer generation was in
childhood, it comprised more than 40% of the population in the country (Dunn-Cane, Gonzalez,
& Stewart, 1999). This was the first American generation in which having children was more of
an option and pleasure, rather than inevitable or a necessity (Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 2000).
In addition, Baby Boomer children were valued and precious to their parents. Their parents
raised them to have a better life and achieve the American dream (Zemke et al., 2000). The
Baby Boomer generation grew up in optimistic and positive times. As a result, Baby Boomers
tend to have an increased focus on self and believe in and support growth and expansion of
themselves and the world around them (Zemke et al., 2000).

The children of Baby Boomers grew up taking for granted what their parents struggled to
create. According to Twenge (2006), the Baby Boomer generation was the first to view the
world from a self-focused perspective and place a strong value on individualism. She also
asserts that this is why so much of what the Boomers did was done in groups. Twenge (2006)
refers to the Millennial Generation and Generation X together as “Generation Me.” She is a self-described member of this Generation Me group. She asserts that those in these younger generations do not feel the need to assert their individualism because they were born into a world where their parents already celebrated the value of the individual. She explains that “we don’t need to look inward; we already know what we will find. Since we were small children, we were taught to put ourselves first….We simply take it for granted that we should feel good about ourselves, we are all special, and we all deserve to follow our dreams” (Twenge, 2006, p. 49).

As previously mentioned, the Millennial Generation was born into families where focus on self was already an assumption. But unlike the latch-key kid Generation Xers, the Millennials were watched and protected and their life organized every waking moment (Howe & Strauss, 2000). As a generation, it has been highly valued and made to feel inherently special. As children, this generation was given trophies just for participating in activities or any effort put forth, rather than for particular accomplishments (DeBard, 2004). Millennials respect authority and are happy with doing what they are told, as long as they are involved in the decision-making process and understand the reasons why they are doing a particular activity (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Along with feeling special, Millennials also feel confident in their abilities, and pressured to live up to high expectations (DeBard, 2004). They are achievers and are unfamiliar with failing. This is partially due to the protection and help of their Boomer parents and partially to the zero tolerance attitudes of their parents regarding not living up to expected standards (Howe & Strauss, 2000).

Another key characteristic of Millennials is comfort with technology, and the strong social connections that result from their use of technology. According to Oblinger (2003), among the teenage members of the Millennial Generation, forms of electronic communication
such as text messages are seen as “natural communication and socialization mechanisms” (p. 39). He indicated that 70% used instant messaging and 41% used email and instant messaging to contact teachers and schoolmates about class work (Oblinger, 2003). In addition, 81% of teenage members of the Millennial Generation used e-mail outside of the school setting to communicate with friends and family (Oblinger, 2003). The ease of staying in close contact has contributed to the increased involvement of the families in their students’ college lives.

**Generational theory as a theoretical lens.** The concept of generations has received renewed attention in the last decade, and the work of Howe and Strauss is the basis of how generations are currently understood (Beinhoff, 2011). The descriptions and predictions of Howe and Strauss Generational Theory have not been widely tested, however. The research proposed here seeks to learn if and how the beliefs of the students and their families, as well as the faculty and staff, are impacted or defined by the generations of those individuals. Specifically, the research will attempt to identify how one’s generation influences the beliefs about customer service and students as consumers in higher education today.

**Summary of Contents and Organization**

This study is presented in five chapters, including this introduction. This introductory chapter provided context for this research and an overview of the history, strengths, applications, and limitations of generational theory, the theoretical framework through which the research was considered. The second chapter includes a literature review. The literature incorporated, as well as the absence of relevant literature on the topic, contributes to the understanding of the problem of the practice being examined in this study. The foundation of any research is the methodology selected for the study and the methodology for this study is outlined in the third chapter. Along with the methodology, chapter three details the site and participant selection method, as well as
the approach to data collection and analysis. Chapter four presents the findings of the research and chapter five provides an overview of implications and benefits of this work for educational institutions.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

The literature available focusing on the impact of generations in higher education is extremely limited. However, research in related areas of higher education is important to consider because it contributes to a foundational understanding of the overall issue of overly involved parents and the perceptions of current college students and their families. Research in the discipline of student development is one such example, as is research into the history of the law related to the parental role in education.

Research Related Student Development

Arnett (2007) has researched the growth and development of adolescents that comprise the Millennial Generation. Arnett argued that there are myths surrounding the selfishness and delayed adulthood of young people today that are based on a small portion of truth, but have been “exaggerated into gross falsehoods” (Arnett, 2007, p. 28). Arnett (2000) has written extensively on the theory of a new life-stage developing for young people called “emerging adulthood” (p. 268), a life-stage that exists between adolescence and young adulthood. He explained that adolescence tends to range from approximately ages ten through seventeen and young adulthood ranges from around age 30 through to the early 40s, with emerging adulthood representing the middle range of years (Arnett, 2000). He first wrote about this life-stage as it applied to Generation X and is now beginning to apply the theory of emerging adulthood to the Millennial Generation. He has argued that emerging adults have complex and mixed feelings about adulthood, feelings that are based on recognizing the costs and benefits of transitioning to adulthood, and not based on a desire to remaining in childhood (Arnett, 2007).

There have been studies into the role and impact of parental involvement in student development but the results are mixed. Some research regarding the impact of parental
involvement has found a negative correlation between parent involvement and student development (Hoffman & Weiss, 1987; Lopez, Melendez, & Rice, 2000). In contrast, other research has found that parental involvement has a positive impact on student development and transition to college (Mattanah, Hancock, & Brand, 2004; Schultheiss & Blustein, 1994). The difference between the parental role in elementary and secondary school as compared to that of the parents at the college level complicates the question of whether parental involvement helps or hinders the growth and development of their children. While parental involvement is encouraged and found to be instrumental to student success in elementary school by teachers and administrators (Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994), it is encouraged but not seen as necessary for high school success (Eccles & Harold, 1996). Parental involvement has not been encouraged or expected at colleges and universities (Daniel et al., 2001; Melear, 2003).

**Research Related to Legal Role of Parents**

Melear (2003) discussed the role *in loco parentis* plays in the absence of parental involvement in the college level. This doctrine was confirmed in the legal case of *Gott v. Berea College* (1913) when the courts found that “college authorities stand *in loco parentis* concerning the physical and moral welfare and mental training of the pupils, and they may make any rule or regulation for the government or betterment of their pupils that a parent could for the same purpose.” Through the 1960’s, the doctrine of *in loco parentis* was the framework used by courts in determining collegiate legal cases (Melear, 2003). It was not until the volatile protests of the 1960s that the courts began to view legal questions with colleges and universities through a contractual lens, paving the way for consumer-based expectations of entitlement (Melear, 2003). The case that acted as the turning point was *Dixon v. Alabama State Board of Education* in 1961. Alabama State College had expelled students with no notice or hearing for participating
in a civil rights protest. The lower courts ruled in favor of the college based on *in loco parentis*, but upon appeal the higher courts overturned the ruling and found that students at public institutions had a right to expect due process (Melear, 2003).

The Baby Boomer Generation included the college students of the 1960s and 1970s and these students were instrumental in the shift away from *in loco parentis* and toward entitlement as students. Another part of this shift was the enactment of Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), also referred to as the Buckley amendment, in 1974. The primary intention of this law was and is to protect student privacy, but it also has specific implications for the autonomy of college students. FERPA applies to elementary, secondary, and post-secondary institutions, with the rights afforded students by FERPA being shared with parents up until enrollment in a post-secondary institution (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Forbes (2001) noted a change in the opinions of judges in her consideration of the shift from *in loco parentis* to consumer based entitlement for college students. In the summaries of court decisions, the judges voiced their belief that since students had fought for their rights as adults and were considered adults with respect to voting rights and enlistment in the military, “they should be considered solely responsible for their own behavior and thus freed from institutional oversight and protection” (Forbes, 2001, p. 13). As Shapiro (2002) noted in a New York Times article, it is ironic that the same parents who fought for their independence as college students now seek to be so involved in the college decisions of their children.

**Research Regarding Millennials and the Workplace**

Research on the specific impact of generations has been done in the disciplines of business and management. The research available focuses on the impact that the different generations have in the workplace. Hershatter and Epstein (2010) pointed out that Millennial
generation college graduates began entering the work-force around 2004 and will continue to join the work force for the next 20 years. After what they described as extensive review of surveys of this generation, Hershatter and Epstein (2010) found that this group “behaves in ways that are readily identifiable, often predictable, and frequently unique to the generation” (p. 212). They noted the important role that technology has played in how this generation approaches life and work, but that the impact of the Baby Boomer leadership and parenting played an even more significant role in the characteristics of the Millennial Generation. The over-protective nature of parents and society as a whole toward the Millennials as young people has resulted in a strong preference on their part for very clear expectations and regular reassurance (Hershatter & Epstein, 2010). Although the desire to work in a highly structured organization might prove to be a strength for this generation in the work place, their interest in choosing which specific tasks they should be responsible for and having a say in how and when they complete those tasks may not translate well as employees (Hershatter & Epstein, 2010). In addition, Hershatter and Epstein (2010) pointed to how the need of Millennials for structure, clarity, and reassurance was often felt by managers to be draining and time-consuming. This generation has been raised with a modus operandi of regularly seeking approval and affirmation while also “receiving gold stars and shiny medals for just showing up” (Hershatter & Epstein, 2010, p. 217). As a result, “managers therefore often find themselves in the unenviable position of having to spend a disproportionate amount of time managing people who were presumably hired to help them” (Hershatter & Epstein, 2010, p. 217). Tensions between the generations are heightened in the workplace when those in management do not understand the needs of the Millennial Generation, and the most effective integration of this generation occurs when those around them
accommodate their needs into the training provided to the young employees (Hershatter & Epstein, 2010).

Twenge and Campbell (2008) reported similar findings regarding the Millennial Generation in the workplace and did so based on data from research on generational difference in psychological traits and attitudes. They used what they referred to as cross-temporal meta-analysis studies. They found that in addition to the high expectation of clear expectations and control from outside themselves, the Millennial Generation has higher self-esteem and narcissism (Twenge & Campbell, 2008). This generation demands work that is meaningful to them and expects to be able to make contributions and be promoted quickly (Twenge & Campbell, 2008). Also, although the Millennial Generation seeks constant approval and feedback on a personal level, as a whole this group is not concerned about societal approval (Twenge & Campbell, 2008). This lack of concern was discussed by Twenge and Campbell (2008) in relation to this generation’s beliefs about professional dress codes and manners. All of these characteristics contribute to the lack of loyalty to employers demonstrated by the Millennial Generation and high frequency of job change (Twenge & Campbell, 2008).

Research Regarding Generational Differences in Higher Education

Although research related to the impact of generations in higher education is minimal, it has increased a bit recently as a result of the interest in the helicopter parents and their Millennial children. As a result, there are some studies on generational characteristics and generational differences, particularly as related to the Millennial Generation and their impact in higher education. The research regarding the broad topics related to the Millennial Generation and its characteristics has been published in journals focusing on higher education, student affairs in higher education, and business psychology.
Stewart (2009) conducted a case study using responses to a standardized national survey, interviews, and personal email correspondence with students, a study meant to investigate how Millennial students were different from students from previous generations. He decided to pursue this study as a result of his experiences teaching psychology undergraduate students in 2005 and 2006 after spending 15 years teaching graduate students and holding an academic administrative position (Stewart, 2009). He found that Millennials depicted themselves as less able to put themselves in others' frames of reference and less concerned about others (Stewart, 2009). In addition, Stewart (2009) found that this generation expressed more concern about unfair treatment and doubts about the world being just or fair and indicated they were less able to plan or consider the future. They also reported they were less independent in their beliefs, participated less in intellectual activities, and generally disliked academic work (Stewart, 2009). The struggle for Stewart as a faculty member was how to maintain the academic standards he perceived as critical for a college level course, while providing the level and amount of support and patience that the Millennial Generation students in his class required (Stewart, 2009). His recommendation was not to fall into an either/or mentality and to aim to find a balance that maintains the integrity of the learning experience while also reaching out to understand the needs of this generation of students (Stewart, 2009).

Stewart and Bernhardt (2010) sought to understand the differences in psychological characteristics of the Millennial Generation as compared with previous generations; they conducted a quantitative study using samples of students who had completed the California Psychological Inventories (CPI) at three public universities. They conducted this research to provide clarification on whether there are clear differences between generation cohorts (Stewart & Bernhardt, 2010). Stewart and Bernhardt (2010) found that Millennial students consistently
displayed an increased level of narcissism, self-centeredness, and extroversion as compared to students before 1987. This generation was also found to be more impulsive with less self-control of their behaviors (Stewart & Bernhardt, 2010). The authors hypothesized as to the cause of these findings and referenced the meta-analysis of Twenge and Campbell (2009) as well as the theory by Arnett (2010) that young people are experiencing a delayed entry into adulthood and a new life-stage of “emerging adulthood” (p. 89). Stewart and Bernhardt (2010) cautioned and posited that there may be differences between the Millennial students of highly selective colleges and university as compared to those in less selective colleges and universities.

Gregoryk and Eighmy (2009) used a mixed methods approach to study whether age or generation had an impact on classroom interactions and learning styles. They used the Personal Value Assessment tool to select participants for the focus groups of their qualitative first phase (Gregoryk & Eighmy, 2009, p. 14) but did not explain what that meant or what criteria they used to do so. Gregoryk and Eighmy (2009) then used the information gathered from those focus groups to develop their “Quantitative Survey of Intergenerational Interaction in the Undergraduate Classroom” (p. 14), a 58 item, four-point Likert response-scale survey designed to capture information about eight value constructs which they defined as: (a) Activities in Classroom, (b) Interaction and Differences, (c) Lifestyle and Preferences, (d) Respect toward Authority and Others, (e) Rewards and Motivation, (f) Roles within Groups, (g) Teamwork, and (h) Work Ethic (Gregoryk & Eighmy, 2009, p. 14). The researchers sent email invitations to complete the survey to all students enrolled in three upper-Midwest universities in the United States, and received 1219 responses. The results of this study are of particular interest because they included students from several different generations, and even ended splitting Generation X into two sub-groups based on age. Gregoryk and Eighmy (2009) found that those in the age
range of 26-35 were significantly different in their responses when compared to the Generation X students in ages 36-45 (p. 20). Their use of focus groups to inform their quantitative survey was a smart approach. It ensured they gathered data as targeted and comprehensive as possible.

Another study seeking to understand changes in college level students over time was conducted by Konrath, O'Brien, and Hsing (2010). They sought to examine changes in the scores on the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) between 1979 and 2009, and paid particular attention to those who completed at least one of the four subscales related to Empathic Concern, Perspective Taking, Fantasy, and Personal Distress (Konrath, O'Brien, & Hsing, 2010, p. 180). This study was of interest both as related to its approach and its findings. Konrath, O'Brien, and Hsing (2010) found that empathy has sharply declined in students over time, as has the ability to consider alternate perspectives and that this decline is most noticeable after the year 2000 (p. 187). The approach of a meta-analysis of data collected on a national scale was an interesting and clearly generalizable method.

An additional example of research in the area of Millennials of particular interest to the research being proposed here was an interview-based qualitative study conducted by Somers and Settle (2010) to better understand the typology of helicopter parents. *College and University* is the peer-reviewed journal published by AACRAO (American Associate of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers), and the researchers who co-authored this report included an Associate Professor from the University of Texas at Austin and the Vice-President for Student Affairs at Shawnee State University. They interviewed 190 academic and student affairs professionals at public, four-year universities around the country, starting with pilot interviews to test their questions and then transitioning to a handful of individual interviews before shifting to a mix of
focus-group formatted interviews as well as some individual interviews (Somers & Settle, 2010, p. 22). The main research questions posed by Somers and Settle (2010) were:

- What is a helicopter parent? How do helicopter parents act?
- How prevalent are helicopter parents? What are their demographics? Are there distinct “types” of helicopter parents?
- What factors encourage “helicoptering”? (p. 22)

They pointed to using a qualitative method based on the literature as a good fit for studying “complex phenomenon for which there is little clarity” (as cited in Somers & Settle, 2010, p. 22).

The logic used in their choice of research method resonated very closely with the logic needed to examine the questions related to how this population and their Millennial students perceive themselves in higher education. The findings of this research study are also extremely relevant in that 40 - 60% percent of the experts interviewed reported having helicopter parents on their campuses (Somers & Settle, 2010, p. 23). This confirms what has only been anecdotally evident. In addition, Somers and Settle (2010) found that helicoptering is more prevalent during the initial and final years of a student’s college career (p. 23).

Melear (2003) did not study the Millennials or their parents, but instead focused his research on the shift towards students in higher education being viewed as consumers from a legal standpoint and through the lens of contract law. His research was qualitative in that he reviewed 130 past court cases to determine how the courts have viewed contractual law as applied to institutions and students in higher education. Melear (2003) found that students are being viewed as customers in higher education (p. 138). This finding is relevant to the question of students and their parents’ perceptions as customers in higher education. If the legal system views them as such, then it adds legitimacy to their perceptions.
Research Needed

The different perspectives and points of view of the various generations have created several problems in higher education. A review of the literature related to generational theory and higher education demonstrates that although there is some research into the characteristics of the Millennial Generation and their Baby Boomer parents, there is very little on the impact of those characteristics and their dynamics with each other and the institutions of higher education. Issues for further study include all aspects of those relationships and their dynamics. Specifically of interest from a student service office perspective are the perceptions and expectations of the students and their families, as well as those of the faculty and staff in higher education. There is an absence of research relating to the impact of multiple generations on the perceptions of service and expectations of privacy and ownership of the academic record at colleges and universities. As such, more research continues to be needed in order to understand the implications of these issues and how to best provide administrative services to students in higher education.
Chapter 3: Research Design

Research Questions

The primary research questions for this study were:

- How do students, parents, faculty and staff in different generations perceive and describe customer service in higher education?
- What are the views of students, parents, faculty and staff in different generations on the concept of students as consumers?
- What are the views of students, parents, faculty and staff in different generations on the role of parents and family in a student's college experience?

The purpose of these questions is to examine and compare the perceptions and beliefs about customer service in higher education among the differing generations of students, parents, faculty and staff. The questions encourage examination of how the members of each cohort (students, parents, faculty and staff) view students as, on the one hand, consumers who are purchasing an education and, on the other hand, as seekers of knowledge; a related topic here is the issue of how the various respondents view the roles of parents and family.

Secondary to the above primary questions are the following:

- How is quality customer service defined at college?
- How do faculty, staff, students and their families differ in their view of students as consumers?
- How do faculty, staff, students and their families perceive the purpose of higher education?

These secondary questions are critical to the understanding of the primary research questions in that they are basic definitions that should not be presumed to be the same by each
group or generation. Although they are not the primary research questions, poor assumptions about the answers to such questions could result in minimally useful or inaccurate research conclusions.

**Methodology**

As was the case in the research of Somers and Settle (2010), this study seeks to understand complex phenomena. In this case, the phenomena being researched are (1) the historically novel perception of student as consumer, and (2) the highly involved role of parents in higher education today. In addition to understanding the overall phenomena, this research seeks to understand the phenomena via the perceptions and experiences of individual students, parents, faculty, and staff. As a result, the method most suitable for this research is interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). As Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) stated in their text outlining this method, “IPA research is always concerned with the detailed examination of lived experience” (p. 47). It is the lived experiences of students and their families, as well as those of the college faculty and administrators, that this research will seek to understand.

**History of interpretive phenomenological analysis.** Interpretative phenomenological analysis was conceptualized in the mid-1990s and published in Jonathan Smith’s 1996 paper in *Psychology and Health*, which argued for an approach to research that could integrate experiential and qualitative methods in a way that would be relevant to mainstream psychology (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). According to Smith in his keynote address at the BPS Health Psychology Annual Conference in 2010, between the years of 1996 and 2008 there were almost 300 empirical papers published utilizing IPA (as cited in Hefferon & Gil-Rodriguez, 2011). Although IPA was originally developed with strong ties to psychology, the method has been increasingly used in range of research disciplines (Hefferon & Gil-Rodriguez, 2011).
Smith (2004) describes interpretative phenomenological analysis as containing three main components. He indicates that IPA combines an epistemological theoretical position with practical guidelines for how to conduct the research and an empirical body of research studies (Smith, 2004). The goal of IPA research is to “explore in detail how participants are making sense of their personal and social world” (Smith & Osborn, 2008, p. 53). According to Smith (2004), IPA is part of the closely connected phenomenological approaches in psychology that seek to understand “personal lived experience” (p. 41), but is unique in its approach to how that experience should be studied.

IPA is a method that is dynamic in its process of seeking to make sense of the lived experiences of the participants (Smith & Osborn, 2008). According to Smith and Osborn (2008), IPA has a “theoretical commitment” (p. 54) to approaching the participants as “cognitive, linguistic, affective, and physical” (p. 54) beings possessing strong connections between their talk about their experiences and how they think and feel about those experiences. In addition, IPA recognizes the complexity of those connections and designates the IPA researcher as an interpreter in the process of analyzing those connections and complexities (Smith & Osborn, 2008, p. 54).

Smith (2004) outlined three characteristic features of IPA in his reflection of the development of this research method. He indicated that IPA is idiographic, inductive, and interrogative (Smith, 2004). IPA is idiographic in its emphasis on focusing closely on the examination of one case and completing the thorough analysis of that case before moving on to the thorough analysis of each subsequent case that are part of an individual research study (Smith, 2004). It is only after each case has been analyzed individually that the whole of the cases is then examined for themes and similarities and differences (Smith, 2004). IPA is
inductive in that the techniques used are intended to be flexible enough to allow for “unanticipated topics and themes to emerge during analysis” (Smith, 2004, p. 43). Research utilizing IPA does not attempt to verify or disprove specific hypotheses; in contrast, it seeks to collect information about broad research questions (Smith, 2004). IPA also aims to contribute to the overall research in various disciplines and does so by “interrogating or illuminating existing research” (Smith, 2004, p. 43).

**Examples of interpretative phenomenological analysis research.** Despite the specific guidelines that exist regarding how to conduct IPA research, there is still flexibility embedded in those guidelines that allows for a variety of approaches in choosing samples and collecting data (Smith, 2004; Smith & Osborne, 2008). This variety is demonstrated in the handful of IPA research studies below that involved either higher education or parental perceptions.

Tomas Jungert (2008) used IPA in his research regarding the phrase “student influence” and how it was understood by a group of ten master’s level engineering students at a university in Sweden. He sought to understand how the students perceived student influence, how they decided to exert their influence as students in their classes, and how their perceptions of student influence impacted their beliefs about their own potential, capabilities, and choices regarding study habits. Jungert (2008) selected five male and five female students between the ages of 19 and 24 at varying stages of the program. These students participated in annual, semi-structured, hour-long interviews from the year 2000 to the year 2006. Over the course of the research study, 42 interviews were conducted and transcribed into 410 pages of research material. Jungert (2008) reported that three overarching themes were discovered and these themes contained multiple sub-themes and patterns. He shared the results, but did not go into much detail regarding his approach to analyzing the data.
Barros, Kitson, and Midgley (2008) used IPA to investigate the perceptions of parents who had been attending specific psychoanalytically based parent-toddler groups in England. Thirteen parents were invited to participate in the study and seven parents agreed. There were six mothers and one father who participated in the research. They were given pseudonyms to protect their identity. All the parents participated in a single semi-structured interview designed using the IPA-recommended format of open-ended questions; the interview took place at the participant’s home or the agency office. The interviews were all converted to transcripts. In addition to the interviews, all participants were sent a feedback letter as a follow-up to the interview that was designed to collect information about the participants’ reactions and views of the topics discussed during the interview process. The information from the interview and feedback letters was reviewed for each participant several times by each of the team members before they moved on to review the next case. Once each of the individual reviews was complete, the team then proceeded to consider all of the cases together and found three overall themes and a number of subordinate themes.

Southcott and Joseph (2010) used interpretative phenomenological analysis to investigate student teachers in their final year of college at two Australian universities and how they experienced music from cultures other than their own and how that impacted their understanding of cultural diversity of music in school settings. They began their study with an anonymous online survey in 2005 and used the results from that survey to inform the in-depth semi-structured interviews. Students were invited by email to volunteer to participate in the interviews. The researchers then had a teaching assistant conduct a total of thirty-seven interviews between the years of 2005 and 2008. Southcott and Joseph (2010) acknowledged that the use of a teaching assistant as the interviewer did not meet the standards typically used in IPA
and explained that this was a requirement of their ethical boards in order to “maintain distance between participants and researchers where there is a potential imbalance of power, such as the lecturer-student relationship” (p. 12). The researchers did not explain the sample size relative to IPA standards, or how the inclusion of participants speaking as many as ten different languages as their native language may or may not have impacted the interview and analysis process. Although the researchers mentioned the cyclic review process of IPA, it was not clear from the presentation of their conclusions whether they found specific themes emerge in their analysis of the interviews.

It is clear from the examples above that there is a range of approaches even within the framework of IPA research. Hefferon and Gil-Rodriguez (2011) argued that IPA is still a “misunderstood and misapplied methodology” (p. 759) and referenced a consistent lack of understanding of IPA as “primarily an interpretive approach” (p. 756). They surmised that the pressure they have observed from research boards and supervisors to include larger samples and more distant and descriptive analysis that could be generalized is a result of the “quantitative monopoly within academic research” (Hefferon & Gil-Rodriguez, 2011, p. 756). Hefferon and Gil-Rodriguez (2011) repeatedly recommend that “less is more” (p. 756) and that the strength of IPA research is found in the in-depth analysis of its participants and the deeper understanding of phenomena. Those findings may likely then be transferrable to other groups and have the potential to compliment the findings of quantitative studies (Hefferon & Gil-Rodriguez, 2011).

**Site and Participants**

Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) recommended finding a “purposive homogeneous sampling” (p. 49) in order for the research to make sense of the phenomenon as applied to one particular perspective. Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) also recommended choosing a sample
from referrals by those who would have access to likely participants, using opportunities from one’s own contacts or from referrals from other participants; these samples are selected “on the basis that they can grant us access to particular perspective on the phenomena under study” (pp. 48-49). According to Smith (2004), the detailed and nuanced analysis that is a staple of IPA research is only possible with a small sample. For this study, contacts in the division of Student Development and Parent & Family Services at Appalachian State University were used to select the sample, with a sample-size of two participants from each cohort (students, parents, faculty and staff). The contacts were asked to refer people who they thought would have experiences to share about parent involvement in higher education. It was anticipated that the students would be from the Millennial Generation and the parents, faculty, and staff would be from the Baby Boomer Generation and Generation X. Although there was the opportunity for referral from within Enrollment Management and the Office of Admissions, due to the professional role of the researcher as the Registrar at Appalachian State University it was decided to avoid potential conflict of interest to seek participation from other areas of the university. The university title and role of the researcher was shared with participants as part of the informed consent process. The individuals comprising the sample were asked to participate in one interview of approximately eight open questions with the researcher. The title of this research study was included as part of the informed consent form and because of its inclusion could have possibly influenced the participants’ to be more likely to be thinking of parent involvement. The participants were also asked to review and verify the accuracy of the transcript of their interview and given the option of providing additional responses.
Data collection

The primary approach for collecting data was in-depth in-person interviews. According to Seidman (2006), abstract social constructs are best examined through the experiences of those on which those constructs are built and if the goal of research is to understand those experiences and the meaning the people assign those experiences, then in-depth interviewing is a necessary method for that research. There are various approaches available for conducting in-depth interviews for qualitative research (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Seidman (2006) highlighted that no matter the style used for in-depth interviews, interest in understanding the experiences of others is the foundation for them all. Intrinsic in that interest is a belief that those experiences have value; this belief in the value of the participants’ experiences is essential to the techniques used during in-depth interviewing (Seidman, 2006).

Seidman (2006) provided an outline for an approach he referred to as “in-depth phenomenologically based interviewing” (p. 15) that combined life-history interviewing with focused, in-depth interviewing. Open-ended questions, designed to aid the participant in reconstructing his or her experiences, were the primary type of question used in this style of interviewing (Seidman, 2006). A unique component of in-depth phenomenologically based interviewing is that there is a series of three interviews with each participant (Seidman, 2006). The first of these interviews focuses on the life history of the participant; the second focuses on the details of the experience; the third focuses on the meaning of the experience to the participant (Seidman, 2006). Although Seidman (2006) strongly recommended adherence to this three interview structure, he acknowledged that alternative formats would work as long as the structure used would “allow participants to reconstruct and reflect upon their experience within the context of their lives” (p. 21).
Rubin and Rubin (2012) outlined a qualitative style of in-depth interviewing referred to as “responsive interviewing” (p. 36) that emphasized the formation of a relationship between the interviewer and participant. The important components of responsive interviewing include the relationship between the interviewer and the participants, the friendly and supportive tone of the interactions and the flexible questions and design of the interview structure. According to Rubin and Rubin (2012), responsive interviewing is “gentler than other interview styles” (p. 37) and confrontation is kept to a minimum. In addition, unlike some other interview styles, responsive interviewing is not about getting to a particular answer or verifying the facts provided by the participants (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Instead, the participant is inherently the expert of their own experiences and trust is an essential element of the responsive interview environment (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The questions used in this style of in-depth interviewing are flexible and designed to both illicit the sharing of each participant’s knowledge and experiences, and to evolve based on the answers provided by the participants (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

The interviews for this research were based on the responsive interview approach, but also integrated the core element of in-depth phenomenologically based interviewing by structuring the interview to derive meaning from the participants within the context of their life experiences. Due to the importance of the relationship between the interviewer and participants, responsive interviewing typically takes place face-to-face (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). As such, the interviews for this research took place in person. In-depth interviews over the phone or possibly over the internet where an alternative, but were not needed in this case. Email exchanges after the interviews were also used as a means for collecting data. Rubin and Rubin (2012) recognized that while alternative modes for interviewing are not ideal for responsive interviewing, they are sometimes necessary and can be an effective way to conduct interviews.
Rubin and Rubin (2012) recommended recording the interviews, as well as taking notes to ensure accuracy. They also recommended sharing the transcripts of the interviews with the participants to ensure accurate and authentic information was included regarding the experiences and their meaning (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Both of these approaches were followed in this research.

Each interview took approximately one hour. This matched what was anticipated and was based on the estimate by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) for interviews that incorporate six to eight questions. Participants were informed of the anticipated time required and that the interviews would be recorded when they were asked to be part of the study and at the beginning of the interviews. The identity of the individuals being interviewed will be protected using assigned names for the recording and tracking of the interview information. The interviews were all conducted on campus, with the specific location determined based on what was convenient for the participants.

As recommended by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009), the questions used in the semi-structured interviews for this research were open-ended and designed to encourage the participants to talk openly and at length with minimal prompting and input from the interviewer. In addition, the interview questions were designed to not specifically ask the research questions, but instead were designed to draw out information that could be used to answer the research questions during the analysis process (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2009). In addition to the questions listed in the appendix, all participants were also asked for the year they were born in order to establish their generation.
Data Analysis

Data in qualitative research is coded in order to categorize the findings (Saldana, 2009). The codes used are “often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute” (p. 3) to the data. The codes are then organized into categories and then themes (Saldana, 2009). Saldana (2009) emphasized that themes are the outcome of “coding, categorization, and analytic reflection, not something that is, in itself, coded” (p. 13). Saldana (2009) recommended two distinct coding cycles in the evaluation of data in qualitative research.

The first cycle included subcategories of methods as part of the initial review and coding (Saldana, 2009). Saldana (2009) considered this first cycle as “simple and direct” (p.45) and included aspects such as grammatical methods to assign attribute codes to provide overall organization to the data and elemental methods to assign structural and descriptive coding to overall topics. The first cycle also includes affective methods that incorporate emotion coding and value coding, exploratory methods that allow for holistic and provisional coding and procedural methods that may utilize prescriptive and pre-established coding systems (Saldana, 2009). Although Saldana (2009) highlighted that the application of themes to the data is an outcome of coding, he also recognized that “themeing the data” (p. 139) via the use of extended phrases that capture a general theme in the data rather than using a short code was a method used in the first cycle of coding data for some methodologies.

The second cycle of data coding as described by Saldana (2009), is more complex and requires higher-level analytical skills in order to classify, prioritize, and synthesize the data in integrated and sometimes abstract ways based upon the initial review of the data. According to Saldana (2009), the codes from the first cycle are reconfigured and restructured to create a more
restrictive and smaller list of broad themes or concepts to categorize the data. Methods included in Saldana’s (2009) second cycle of data coding potentially could include pattern coding, focused coding and theoretical coding.

According to Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) there are several specific phases to data analysis in IPA. These phases incorporate the concept of coding cycles as outlined by Saldana (2009). In the first phase, data will initially be analyzed by reading and re-reading the transcripts of the interviews. Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) recommended this as a first step to immerse the researcher in the original data, reduce the impact of being overwhelmed by outside information, and to enter the participants’ worlds and points of view (p. 82). During this initial portion of transcript review, overall comments and themes were noted, but the focus was on absorbing the information and patterns only at a high level. This approach was consistent with a couple of the methods described in Saldena’s (2009) first cycle of coding, particularly holistic coding.

After the initial couple of instances of reading of the data, the data was then reviewed for any comments or details of interest as part of the second phase of data analysis. This was the phase in which detailed examination of the data occurred, consistent with descriptive coding as outlined by Saldena (2009) as part of his first cycle of coding. Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) noted that this phase is very similar to free text analysis in that there are no rules about how to organize the review or what should or should not be commented on in the review of the transcripts. Any and all items of interest were noted and coded during this step of the analysis. Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) recommended noting linguistic patterns and language choices that may be meaningful during this detailed phase of data analysis. Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) also included conceptual comments in this phase, and described this conceptual coding
method as “more interpretive” (p. 88), requiring a more abstract approach by the researcher to the analysis of the transcript.

Once the detailed review of the entire transcript was complete, it was reviewed again as part of the third phase of data analysis. Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) referred to this phase as developing emergent themes. During this third phase, the initial notes and coding were re-read along with another review of the transcripts to determine any patterns or themes that emerged from the data in a way similar to that outlined by Saldena as part of the second cycle of data coding. Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) pointed out that by this part of the data analysis, the researcher should have developed a strong familiarity with the transcripts and that the data set would be quite substantial with coding and researcher comments included.

The fourth phase of data analysis included an additional review of the information to look for connections between the patterns and themes identified in the previous phases. Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) recommended the development of charts and/or maps to organize the analysis of data, but recognized that the method used could vary on what worked best for the researcher once they see the data from the first three phases. They indicated that the most important thing to keep in mind in this phase is that the method allows for the researcher to find a way to bring together the emergent themes and develop a structure that highlights the most interesting and salient points of the participants’ experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) included a fifth and sixth phase that incorporated the transition and comparison between cases in a given study. The fifth phase focused on moving from the case of the first participant and then repeating phase one through phase four for the interview of the next participant. The sixth phase is similar to the fourth phase, but involved
looking for connections and patterns across all the participants. For this research study, this analysis was also conducted to look for patterns and connections between and/or across cohorts.

**Validity and Credibility**

A primary limitation and threat to this study was the need to balance (1) the hermeneutic role of the researcher with (2) ensuring that the personal views and interests of the researcher do not bias the investigation or results. One of the recommendations from Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) to ensure validity and credibility in IPA research is to apply Lucy Yardley’s four principles of quality in qualitative research. The first of these was demonstrating sensitivity to context. As noted by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009), the choice of IPA as the research method is often connected to the researcher’s sensitivity to context. Such is the case in this study where IPA was chosen in order to achieve an understanding of the individuals impacted and involved in the phenomena being studied. The second principle of quality that was demonstrated in this study is commitment and rigor. In order to obtain the quality and quantity of data needed for this study, a great deal of commitment and rigor will be needed (Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Saldana, 2009; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). As Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) emphasized, an in-depth interview would only be successful if the researcher applied a high-level of attention both to ensuring the participants are comfortable and to the thorough collection of data. The third principle of quality is transparency and coherence. These were accomplished via the description of the stages of the research, the reporting and analysis of the data and the quality of the final report. In addition, member checking was utilized and the participants were asked to review, validate and comment on their interview transcripts. This was particularly recommended by Saldana (2009) in research studies with only one ethnographer. The final principle of quality
is impact and importance. This quality was fully demonstrated in the introduction of this paper through the statement of the problem being researched.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

As with all research studies, “researchers need to protect their research participants; develop trust with them; promote the integrity of the research; guard against misconduct and impropriety that might reflect on their organizations or institutions; and cope with new, challenging problems” (as cited by Creswell, 2009, p. 87). There were several ethical considerations in this research study, but also minimal risk to the participants. There was the ethical challenge related to the relationship of the researcher to the institution being studied. In this case, as the University Registrar, there was access to all data about students and most faculty as a result of the responsibilities of that position and it was important that the access was not utilized in connection to this research study. In addition, the Registrar’s Office is within the division of Enrollment Management and so it was important to select the sample carefully and in a way that did not interfere, or convey mixed messages from the institution, concerning the admissions process. Particular sensitivity to confidentiality and privacy was essential in regards to the interviews where students may have expressed opinions or beliefs that they did not want shared with their parents or professors, and where staff may have expressed opinions they may not want shared with their superiors in the institution.

**Limitations**

The research method of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis served as an effective methodology for gaining a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of the participants in regards to parent involvement in higher education and how they each make sense of the phenomena of the high level of involvement of many parents today in the college and university
setting. The results of this research indicate a wide range of understanding of these phenomena that appear to be according to the participants’ generation. The results are limited as a result of the absence of selective criteria in the participant selection since there was no requirement for the participants to be related or connected with each other beyond their connection to Appalachian State University. It would have been helpful in the selection of the participants to narrow the criteria and choose participants that were connected and sharing even more of the same experiences. This would have allowed for greater connection between the experiences of the participants, for example if the parents of the students participating, as well as faculty who taught those students and staff that had interactions with them were included as the other participants.

This study was limited to the experiences of individuals associated with Appalachian State University, one of sixteen universities in the University of North Carolina state university system. Appalachian State University is a selective public university, enrolls approximately 17,000 students and has a primarily white middle to upper class student profile. A similar study conducted at an institution with a different ethnic or socioeconomic profile may yield different results. An area of potential future research would be to conduct similar studies at institutions that are private or have a different student profile to see how the phenomenon of highly involved parents is experienced and understood in the context of those complex factors.
Chapter 4: Research Findings

This chapter will present a discussion of the key findings and themes from this study. A table identifying the participants is provided. The following three primary themes emerged, parent involvement, consumer expectations, and the purpose of higher education. Parent involvement was threaded throughout the interviews with varying opinions on the amount, level, and quality of that involvement. The consumer expectations of students and parents ranged from a feeling of entitlement to a feeling that success needed to be earned. The responses related to the purpose of higher education ranged from viewing it as an opportunity to learn to acting as an avenue to get a job. A table identifying the participants will be presented first. This will be followed by the analysis section. In the analysis section, a short statement outlining each theme will be offered. That will be followed by a clear and full narrative account of how the participants have made sense of the phenomenon under study---parental involvement in higher education. A concluding statement will be offered.

Ten participants were interviewed for this research study during May and June of 2012. The participants included two staff members, two faculty, two students, and two sets of parents including the mother and father in the same interview. The table below represents the participants, their cohort (faculty, staff, parent or student) and their generation. If a participant was near the cusp of the generation years, that is also indicated. Participants on the early cusp of being a Baby Boomer had a birth year that was near the birth years of the Silent Generation.
### Table 1

*Participant’s Cohort and Generation*

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<th>Participant’s Pseudonym</th>
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<td>Joe</td>
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<td>Sally</td>
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<td>Mary &amp; Charlie</td>
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<td>Sara</td>
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<td>Jenny</td>
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### Parent Involvement

Parent involvement was threaded throughout the responses in all the interviews with varying opinions on the amount, level, and quality of that involvement. Generally participants solidly in the Baby Boomer generation expressed support of the level of parent involvement they have observed and experienced as appropriate and just the right amount for what the students need. Participants, who were early Baby Boomers or in other generations, described parents as very involved and sometimes overly involved. There were slight differences in view and level of autonomy for the Millennial students and for the generation of their parents.

Although not specifically asked about the role of parents, all the participants in the study spoke of parental involvement and indicated a perceived increase in parent involvement today as compared to in the past. Within this theme there were several subcategories, including those
related to frequency of contact, quality, and level of involvement and parents’ interest in having more involvement with their student and the university.

Parent involvement was a key subject thread throughout the findings of this research and was represented throughout the responses of all the participants. Varying opinions on the amount, level, and quality of parent involvement were shared in the interviews. All the participants expressed an observation of increased parent involvement. A majority of faculty and staff participants indicated the parents are often overly involved, but the one staff member believed parents are involved just the right amount. The parents themselves indicated a clear interest in increased involvement and the students both perceived themselves to be quite independent while observing the tendency of their peers was to rely more on their parents.

**Frequency of parent contact with the university.** Three of the four faculty and staff participants who were either in Generation X or an early Baby Boomer indicated that they felt parents were frequently involved in contacting the university, and on their student’s behalf. Joe, one of the faculty participants, compared the change in parent involvement since he started his career in higher education in 1978. He now encounters parents all the time in his work as faculty and as a department chair.

What I see now is that – I mean, I used to talk to my father and my mother about what I was doing, but I don’t remember any form of intervention or active control of any kind. I think they were interested in my intellectual development, and we talked about things, some of which pertained to study, a lot of them didn’t. But never was there any active management of my studies.

Sally, the other faculty participant shared her experiences from when she was in college and indicated that parents were not involved then. Sally also shared discussion that has occurred
during faculty meetings in her department where other faculty made similar statements about the notion that their parents would never have thought about calling or coming in to talk to the college, complain to the Dean or in any way interfere on their behalf as students. According to Sally, “they’re just appalled that parents have chosen to get involved and with the strategies they’ve used to get involved that they feel are just – it’s really not their place.”

Barb, one of the staff participants, mentioned she has seen an increase of questions during her time working as an administrator in higher education. She spoke about how the level of questions and interactions by parents begins with parent orientation during the summer and continues through to graduation. Barb indicated she talks to quite a few parents each semester, but suspects that parents are much more involved than is evident by that number based on what she has observed regarding the frequency of direct contact between students and their parents on a daily basis. She also shared an example of a coworker with a student in college. This coworker keeps track of all of her daughter’s appointments and tests and regularly calls to remind her daughter of what she needs to do each day. Barb shared that her mother would never have done that for her when she was in college and that she has also not taken that approach with her own college age daughters.

It is clear from the statements above that the perception by these participants is that there has been an increase in the involvement of parents as compared to the past and that in some cases the involvement is too frequent. When asked follow up questions regarding the specifics of how often they are being contacted by parents, all three participants answered that it was actually a small number of parents that contacted them in any given academic term. In direct response to when Joe indicated that he encounters parents “all the time,” he was then asked how many parents that equaled in a semester. Joe responded that it was actually only a few times a
semester, specifically “maybe two or three times a semester.” Similarly, Sally indicated that in a typical semester she is contacted by three or four parents. Barb indicated that it was definitely not a majority of parents that contact her, and was only “12 to 20 in a semester.”

Cindy, the Baby Boomer staff member, had a very different perception of the frequency of parent contact. She expressed belief that most parents are concerned about what is going on with their student and rarely get involved beyond what they should. She focused on the fact that in contrast to over 17,000 undergraduates enrolled at Appalachian State University, and the several hundred assigned to her as an advisor, she only hears from a handful of parents each semester. It is interesting to note here that although the overall number of parent interactions is the same as the number shared by Joe, Sally, and Barb, the perception of that number is quite different.

Only one student of the parent and student participants commented on the frequency of parent interactions, and she did so through her view as a student orientation leader. Jenny stated:

Through orientation I’ve seen many different parents and many different interactions with parents and I definitely think that it’s a minority that are too involved, and I think it’s a very slim minority because the ones who are overbearing are always going to be the ones that pop up the most because they're going to be the ones that are asking questions constantly.

**Quality and level of parent involvement.** All four of the faculty and staff participants shared their perceptions regarding the level of parent involvement. The same three of these four as had indicated a perception of parents being too involved also shared concerns about the level parents’ involvement. They expressed concerns about how the parents they heard from chose to
get involved. Joe, a member of the faculty, expressed his opinion that parents today sometimes attempt to play an inappropriate role. He explained that parents should instead be advising their sons and daughters on how and where to get the information they need to know and how to navigate solving their problems, rather than the parents doing it for them. Joe also discussed what he has observed regarding his children as parents and noted that they tend to cater much more to his grandchildren’s preferences and interests than he did as a parent. He saw it as a generational difference. Joe indicated that this was how he navigated such things with his children and that he did so to help them learn how to be independent. He shared an example where a mother came to him as chair of the department to complain about a grade her son had received in one of his classes that she thought was incorrect. According to Joe, once the grade was reported, he was immediately overwhelmed with calls and emails from the student and from the student’s mother. Upon investigating the situation Joe learned that the student had failed the final exam as a result of not preparing for it, but that there was also a calculation error that the faculty had made for all the students in the class based on how the instructor had weighed the final exam in the final grade. As a side note to that situation, Joe shared that a second student “unprovoked and unsolicited” came to him to share a scene from one of her classes she had found troubling. She approached Joe to report the incident because she felt the instructor had been mistreated by a student in her class. It turned out to be the same student who was complaining to Joe about the final grade. When Joe spoke with the student and his mother about the grade being changed based on that miscalculation he said the response he received from the mother was, “He is the son of a doctor. He deserves nothing less than A.” This complaint began a year ago and has since proceeded to an official grade appeal that will be heard by the college’s grade appeal board this coming fall semester. Joe expressed frustration at this case and pointed
to it as a demonstration of where a parent was over-reaching and being overly and inappropriately involved on her student’s behalf.

Sally indicated that when parents are not happy with something they will typically start at the top and initiate their complaint with someone they perceive to have a high level of authority to correct what they are calling to complain about. Sally shared that when this happens it shows that they are already gearing up for a fight. Sally shared that she thought parents most often expected her to say that she was the one who made a mistake, not the student. She also shared her thoughts on the parents’ approach to complaining:

It's just something about that squeaky wheel that sometimes gets their way and these were parents that were, you know what, I don't know if they were not kind people but they certainly weren’t very kind in the words that they were using. They were very much looking for someone to blame.

In addition to parent complaints, Sally spoke about parents who contacted her directly. In contrast to those parents Sally felt were calling to complain, the parents who were genuinely concerned about something going on with their student were more likely to contact her directly and ask for help. Sally felt that these parents were not looking for someone to blame at the institution, but instead were trying to understand what the problem was and how it could be solved. She shared that often these parents are very concerned and expressed having attempted to hold off reaching out to Sally for as long as they could, but that finally they felt that they were not getting enough or accurate information from their son or daughter and that they needed to become involved at that point. Sally also indicated that parents are more likely to email than call, but will call on occasion. She said that it is rare for the parents to just show up but that on occasion they will do that too, but then usually they will have the student with them. The most
memorable parent concern that Sally shared was one that she said made her “so incredibly upset” and involved a day that she was home from work because her child was sick. A father was angry because his son was several credits short of graduating and so the father showed up at Sally’s office looking for her after the Dean’s office had refused to change the son’s degree requirements. Sally’s department called to let her know that the father had said he was going to drive to her house to confront her about causing his son to not graduate on time. Sally spoke about having a police escort that day even though the father did not end up showing up at her office or home and how stressed she had been by the entire situation.

Barb shared her thoughts on the increasing interest of parents in the daily details of their students. Barb stated that many of the parents she hears from think that the college should be able to talk to them about all the student’s grades, even assignment-specific grades, and whether their son or daughter is attending class every day. Barb suspected this is based on an expectation of parents that college administrators should play a role similar to the administrators the parents have been interacting with at the high school level. She noted that this demonstrates that parents have not shifted their expectations of their students or the administrators according to the maturity that should be expected of students at the college level. In regards to these parents, Barb was clear in her thoughts on their level of involvement in declaring they are “way too over involved.” Barb explains more about her thoughts on parent involvement:

They shouldn't, you know, they have got to let go of these kids. The ones who call me and say, "My son didn’t get his diploma and we just don’t understand why he didn’t get his diploma yet." And the kid's standing there while the mom is talking to me, so when I ask her, "did he…" and she'll say, "Well did you…? Hello, put him on the phone! Why are you calling as an intermediary, when he's standing right there!
When asked for clarification on when Barb thought a parent was appropriately involved versus over involved she responded, “I just think, my own personal bias is that if you're a student in college and your momma's calling for you, it is too involved.” She went on to explain that parents who have been in the habit of taking care of their son or daughter’s business have created a couple of issues for their family. First, because it is a habit the parents continue on with the behavior even after the children should have learned how to do things themselves and second, the students have never had to take responsibility for doing it themselves and so have no experience or expectation of doing so in college. Barb also shared that her coworkers in the other colleges at the university have similar experiences with parents regularly calling to take care of the business that their son or daughter should be resolving.

Cindy’s perceptions of the level of parent involvement again contrast those of the other faculty and staff participants. Early in the interview Cindy offered the following:

I haven't really come across very many parents I would call overly involved. I am not saying that doesn't happen but, I really think it tends to be overblown. I think most parents are involved the right amount for that student. There are a few cases that are different and, of course, parents could be overly involved in their students' lives that we don't see.

This is particularly interesting since the only question asked at that point in the interview was for her to describe her experiences at Appalachian State University and then a follow up question about study abroad students she had mentioned. Cindy goes on to offer similar comments regarding the perceptions of over involved parents nine more times throughout the interview to reinforce her opinion and experience that parents who reach out and become
involved are generally doing so at an appropriate level. Another example of Cindy asserting this despite no question being asked about parent involvement was her comment below:

Again, I don’t know exactly what over involved means because I think with the vast majority of student it just varies so much. You know a parent who calls for information is not necessarily an over involved parent. And in fact usually they have very good reasons, very solid reasons. I don’t think I would want to go back to the way it was when I was a college student in the 70’s and 80’s that parents were really given the cold shoulder and say well you don’t have a stake in this.

So although Cindy does share examples of where and how parents are much more involved with their students now than in the past, her perception of that involvement is quite positive. Cindy spoke about her experiences as a parent of a daughter entering her freshman year of college and explained the difficulty she was having in that transition as a parent, particularly in the context of her view that she would be parenting long distance. Cindy strongly supports a high level of parent involvement and insisted that, “overall parents are exactly involved as they need to be, and probable err on the side of not enough involvement rather than too much.” In regards to parent complaints, Cindy does agree with Sally that they start at the top. Cindy claimed that the parents who initiate their complaints by calling the Chancellor are the parents that give a “bum rap” to the rest of parents for being too involved.

The interviews with the parents and students also revealed different perceptions about the level of parent involvement and levels of student independence. Ironically, all the student and parent participants identified their experiences as unique and different in this regard as compared to what they believed were the experiences and approaches of their peers. Sara, a student whose parents are in Generation X, indicated that she has a job working in the advising center on
campus while in school and this has helped her learn how to take care of her own problems. She shared that she believes she has a very different approach to making decisions and solving problems as compared to most of her friends. She considers herself to be very independent and the most independent of all of her friends. She attributed this to the fact that many of her friends have never had to work and are able to call their parents whenever they need extra money. Sara also shared that at her job she often sees times where parents are calling to fix their son’s or daughter’s problems or get answers for them and she does not understand this approach. She found this perplexing since she said she could not imagine her mother calling to speak to her advisor. When asked what percentage she would guess other students had the same or different approach to her, Sara responded that most students are not as independent and that this is sometimes by their choice and sometimes because of the choices their parents make to get involved. She also shared that she has observed a shift in independence based on the level of the students. Sara observed the following about freshman versus seniors:

I see a ton of freshman where the parents are very hands-on because they’re not ready to let them go. Obviously, they have an independence level very low, whereas I know a lot of my senior friends are more independent because their parents are weaning them off of it. But even then, I mean, I have plenty of senior friends whose parents have paid for every cent of their college and they’ve never taken out a loan, never worried about debt, and they’ll never worry about a bill or anything like that, because their parents paid for everything. I definitely know a lot of those.

Jenny, a student with Baby Boomer parents, also touched on the differences of involvement and independence from freshman to senior year. She shared that in her freshman year she was nervous and needed help from her mother more then. She stated:
Freshman year you're very, you're nervous and you don’t really know what’s going to happen, but I think when freshman year started I was still in the high school mindset, it was kind of like I still needed to rely on my mother for things and I had to call her and tell her if I was sick and things like that. And now I don’t feel like I need to do that, and if I do, it’s just more for the comfort of her, to just kind of let her know what’s happening in my life.

Jenny also spoke about herself as very independent both in academics and solving problems. Regarding when she had difficulty in an accounting class, she explained that she took the initiative to find the tutoring lab and schedule an appointment for herself. This compared to the approach her classmates would likely take of asking their parents to help figure out what to do. Jenny also shared an example of her independence from a time when she had questions about financial aid. She described how she took the initiative of finding out what she needed to do and only asked her mother for the financial information related to her mother when filling out the FAFSA. Jenny stated about herself, “I do like to do things myself. I’m very self-oriented and independent.” When asked if she felt her perspective was similar or different to her friends’ perspectives regarding independence she replied that she takes a “drastically” different approach to that of her friends. As proof of this Jenny described a time where she was taking care of some paperwork for her financial aid scholarship and her friends told her they thought that was odd and asked her why her parents were not taking care of that for her. She credits the difference in her approach to her friends to having grown up in a single parent home with her mother, but also mentioned that alone probably doesn’t account for the difference. She explained about a friend of hers whose parents also divorced but who is very different from Jenny in regards to independence, even expressing to Jenny that she things her level of independence is a little scary.
Helen and Matt were parent participants from the Baby Boomer generation and spoke about the importance of finding a way to be involved in healthy ways. Helen shared her thoughts:

I just think that the healthy involvement is doing something that’s constructive and productive and benefitting the school or doing something for the students but not hanging onto your child. So you’re involved, you feel connected but your student doesn’t feel like that you’re hovering over them.

Helen discussed the difficulty of dropping the student off the first year. She and Matt had seen parents struggling with even small examples of separation. She shared that during move-in day that she regularly witness parents that do not even want to leave their sons and daughters long enough to go park the car while they are moving their items into the dorms. Matt added to his wife’s comments that it is clear during that process that there is a quite a bit of separation anxiety and that the parents are just as clingy, if not more, than the students who are being left behind at school. Matt also shared how he anticipated Helen having difficulty when they dropped off their youngest son, but that in reality he ended up having just as difficult time letting go and saying goodbye as Helen had when it was time to leave.

Helen and Matt also talked about how their role was different depending on the needs of each of their sons, with their older son having required much more direction about where to go and how to get certain things done. Helen mentioned that with their older son they needed to give a bit more direction at first and needed to reach out to him more often to see if he was doing everything he should in school. She also mentioned that she needed to reach out to his academic advisor at one point and called the advisor with questions about what their son should be registering in for the following term. Helen mentioned that their son had to give permission first
for the advisor to talk with them, but that he did. Helen proudly offered, “He didn’t just give me parents access, he gave me his logon information.”

Helen also mentioned several other situations where she needed to contact the school to sort out different issues for their son currently at Appalachian State University. One example was when her son was blocked from registering because the university had not received his final high school transcript. Although several emails and messages had been sent to her son, it was not until he called her to complain that he could not register that Helen knew about the issue. She explained that she contacted her son’s previous institution and arranged for the transcript to be overnighted to Appalachian. Matt shared that their experiences with getting help and answers is part of what has impressed him about Appalachian State University. He said:

People do seem to care. It’s easy enough for everyone to say. I’m sure the faculty at even the biggest university on the planet talks about personalized and we care and everything. But putting that actually into practice and it appears to us anyway from our perspective that they put it in practice up here, that the faculty cares about the students being successful and they’re willing to help them achieve that success.

Mary and Charlie were early cusp Baby Boomers, meaning they were born just on the edge of the years bordering the Silent Generation. One of the first stories they shared that connected to their expectations of their involvement verses their son’s independence was about advice given their son when he began at Appalachian State University. Mary explained that one of the first advisors their son met at orientation had told him that he needed to view school as though it was a 40-hour a week job. Both Mary and Charlie expressed that they thought this was excellent advice and was a good introduction for their son to the expectations he would need regarding his schoolwork. Mary mentioned that they have emphasized to their son that they
made sure his tuition was covered and that his housing costs were paid for so that he could concentrate on his studies and be successful in college. Both Mary and Charlie commented on their son’s more mature and independent approach to college as compared to high school. Charlie stated, “From high school, he was a much – he was a – he wasn’t a man then. He has grown into pretty much of an adult human being since he’s come up here. He was still part boy, part man when he was in high school.” Mary elucidated:

As he became older and he moved to community college, up to community college, I did not – he just told me – he set his own schedule and we would talk a whole lot about what classes are you taking and what’s required of you and like if certain classes were papers and certain had a lot of quizzes and so forth. And we talked about it with him a lot and just like now, he talks to us a lot about it. But he totally – he totally does all the planning.

Mary also went on to explain that their son has even transitioned from asking them to read and proof his papers and such to being more independent and having friends and tutors read them instead. Mary and Charlie only had one instance they described where they intervened on their son’s behalf and it involved some misunderstanding about an infraction that was reported on a criminal background check when their son applied to matriculate into the College of Education. It was a situation where he had gone saltwater fishing off the coast where he and his parents live and had the wrong fishing license due to a new licensing requirement that had gone into effect that year. A staff member in the Dean’s office had implied to their son that it had been a criminal violation that could have resulted in jail time and might hinder him from getting into the college. Charlie described how he ended up needing to write a letter on his son’s behalf to explain that the incident had only involved an infraction and was not a criminal violation. He explained that after working for 32 years in law enforcement and having worked closely with
their local district attorney he felt he could provide a letter informed by his experience and not just as the father. In addition to writing the letter, Charlie called the District Attorney’s office to arrange to get a copy of the citation dismissal and sent that in to the Dean’s office as well.

Mary and Charlie also shared a situation where their son felt he had not received a fair grade in a course. They suggested that he follow up with the professor, but their son decided not to and they felt it was important for it to be his decision. Mary stated that although they thought their son should have pursued the issue further, they also felt it was not their decision to make and that they needed to support their son’s choice about the matter. When asked if they thought their views matched those of other parents Mary replied, “There’s certain people who don’t want to let go of their child and of course that’s understandable when you’ve got a mother coming up here with a freshman and it is okay to have a little trouble letting go.” She went on to say, “somewhere down the line, you can’t keep doing everything for them.”

**Parent interest in being more involved.** Although the responses regarding this subcategory were not as voluminous as those related to the current level of involvement or the extent of the involvement, several of the faculty, staff, and parent participants had comments about this. Sally, a faculty participant, spoke about the challenge of answering parents’ questions when the student had not provided access or permission. She said explained that when that happens she shifts to speaking in terms of generic policy rather than specifics about a certain student. She mentioned that this is often enough to answer their questions, but that the parents still want more and feel frustrated at not being allowed to know specifics about their son or daughter without permission. Sally pointed to the fact that many times the information the parents are asking about is protected by FERPA. Sally also mentioned that the parents
frequently ask her not to mention to their student that they were calling about them, indicating that their son or daughter would be upset for doing so.

Joe, the other faculty participant, stated that parents today are much more inclined to be involved, and very proactively so. He mentioned that this included being interested in the details of the students’ academic records. He followed up with an example of a father he had dealt with who was concerned because his son was not going to graduate on time. Although Joe had been in regular communication with the student about what courses he needed to finish, the father wanted the same detailed information shared with him. Joe’s credits this interest of being very involved as “a generational thing” and shares that he has observed a similar level of involvement by his children with his grandchildren.

Cindy’s thoughts on this echoed her sentiments on the other subcategories of parent involvement. She believed that parents always know best what level of involvement their students need and want. Cindy stated:

The vast majority of parents have been just really on target with the right amount of involvement for that student's needs. And that, to me, that is really critical. Because for some students you can say "there you are at college" and just let them go, but for others you really can't. They are not there in regards to maturity; it just is not the same for all of them by any means. And I think that parents often have very legitimate questions and they needed to be treated with courtesy and understanding and, helped out.

Cindy explained that she has had several conversations with parents who share with her that they have not been able to find out information from the college or from their student. Cindy shared that her response to them is that since they are the writing the checks, they should be able to leverage that to get the information they seek. Cindy shared that it is not uncommon
for students to change the parent permission often and sometimes quickly. She described one example where one day she had been speaking to a mother of a student and was able to go into detail to answer her questions because the student had given her permission in the student system and when the mother called back the next day, the permission had been removed and Cindy could no longer answer all the mother’s questions. Instead, Cindy explained that she had to then shift to only giving high level answers related to policy, which frustrated the mother. According to Cindy not only are scenarios like this frustration for parents, but that often parents are frustrated because they want access to interim progress reports and grades, which are not collected at most universities.

Barb also discussed the amount of detail that parents would like access to, including interim reports and grades which do not exist in the way parents are seeking. Barb expressed that the sharing of student information is a family issue. She tells the parents that they need to ask their son or daughter for the information. Barb mentioned another aspect of parents wanting more access is that the students do not always share all the information or totally truthful information with their parents, and that causes some challenging situations for everyone involved.

According to Helen and Matt, many parents do not feel the level of connection to the university and their child’s educational experience that they would like to feel. They explained that they and the parents they know sometimes feel disconnected and that it can be difficult to get information they are seeking in order to help their son or daughter. Helen and Matt explained that many times parents do not know even where to start to ask for answers to their questions. Helen mentioned hearing from other parents that they have sent email and left voice messages but received no response from the university, or received a generic response and then sent to
various offices before ending up back where they started in the first place. While explaining parent’s interest in having more access and involvement, Helen also mentioned her conflicting feelings on the subject as a mother of two boys and her own feelings of still wanting to hover and be involved in their lives. Helen then referenced the role being on the Appalachian State University Parents Board has had for her and explained that she views it as a positive outlet for her interest in being involved. She described that it allows her to feel connected without focusing everything on her son. Matt followed this sentiment by explaining that if they come to town for a meeting or an activity connected with the Parents Association they will end up seeing their son and taking him out to dinner, but that the point of the visit was not all about their son. Helen further expands on this thought:

I just think that the healthy involvement is doing something that’s constructive and productive and benefitting the school or doing something for the students but not hanging onto your child. So you’re involved, you feel connected but your student doesn’t feel like that you’re hovering over them.

Helen also emphasized her belief that the school does not do enough to encourage students to share their information and that there should be more information and instructions from the university to parents about encouraging their students to give them permission and access to their information.

**Consumer Expectations**

The second theme that came through in all the interviews in varying degrees was that of the student or parent as a consumer. The perceptions of the expectations of students and parents ranged from a feeling of entitlement to a belief that that success needed to be earned. There was a consensus among all the participants that the increased cost of higher education has led to
increased expectations regarding the benefits of that financial investment by students and their parents. Specifically the expectations include customer based perspectives while the student is in college and the expectation that students will complete their degree and ultimately obtain a job as a result of that degree. There were differences in participants’ opinions regarding the level of appropriateness of the parents’ feelings of being the consumer in addition to or in lieu of the student being the consumer. The Baby Boomer participants expressed support of the notion of parents as the consumer. Those who were solidly Baby Boomers expressed strong opinions supporting this. Participants in Generation X felt that even when the parent is paying, it is the student’s educational experience and if anyone is to be viewed as a consumer in higher education it should be the student.

Woven throughout the responses related to consumer expectations were comments related to the cost of higher education. Several of the participants in this study referenced experiences with students and parents who believed their tuition payment should result in certain minimum grades or entitlement to a job after graduation.

Joe discussed the change he observed from his days as an undergraduate student in California at a state college with no tuition costs to that of his daughter, grandchildren, and other family members. He mentioned:

I have a daughter that's just graduated from a public institution in California and she’s had to take out student loans. I have a niece that graduated from a private school in California, Whittier College, and I think my brother and his wife owed well over $100,000 when she graduated. She’s yet to find full-time employment. And so the financial concerns weigh heavily on young people and they weigh heavily on their parents.
Joe stated that it is the financial aspect that has driven the different attitude on the part of parents and their children regarding the expectations of college and what they should get out of it. He also mentioned this feeling of expectation on the part of the mother’s involvement in the grade appeal, as well as the father who was intervening regarding the graduation requirements. Regarding the student’s expectations Joe declared, “These days, the idea of the student as customer I think reigns supreme.” He went on to explain that most of the students he encounters are very serious about their education and achieving their academic goals. He expressed the belief that the students want to get their money’s worth from college and so also associate that with doing their best and fully applying themselves to the college experience and the opportunities they are given while in college. Joe has also encountered some students who take that expectation too far. He shared one example where a student told him, “I paid my tuition, I deserve a C.” Joe took this to mean that the student believed since he had paid tuition to attend college he was entitled to pass the class no matter how he did on his assignments or how much effort he put into his studies. Joe then went on to share that his response to that student was to state, “Grades are earned. They aren’t bought. And it depends upon your performance in the class.” In contrast, Sally, the other faculty participant, indicated that issue of expectations based on paying the tuition only comes up occasionally in her interactions with students and parents. Sally believed this is attributed to the fact that the parents who believe this have already arranged for access to their son or daughters records.

Cindy’s expressed a clear belief that parents who are paying tuition are entitled to view themselves as consumers. She was quick to point out that this is an appropriate point of view and one that she fully supports in her interactions with parents. She expressed that it is appropriate for parents to feel like consumers when considering their financial investment, and
particularly in regards to their focus on students completing the bachelor’s degree in four years and that it will result in a degree and good paying job. Cindy also explained that while parents have a right to expect information for paying tuition, those rights included expectations between the parents and their student. She offered that she frequently explains to parents that they should feel entitled to information from their son or daughter if they are paying or if the financial aid is based on their salary and that the parents should feel free to demand the information from their student. Cindy offered several situations where students had not been honest with their parents as reasons it is important to work with parents when they are looking for information that their son or daughter is not sharing with them. In one example, Cindy described where a father had contacted her about his daughter who had been suspended. The daughter had told her father that it was a mistake by the university that caused her suspension, but in reality she had not been doing well academically for several semesters. Cindy detailed the face-to-face meeting she had with the three of them where the daughter was finally truthful with her father, explaining that the father had come to the meeting totally believing that some monumental mistake had been made.

A good summary of Cindy’s view of parent and students as consumers is in the following quote:

While students are the customers, we also acknowledge who is paying or backing the payments, and that doesn’t mean that parents need to have, you know, total access to everything all the time but it means that they deserve to be treated as well as the students. Parents should never be treated as if, you know, they are some lowly person who doesn’t deserve the time of day. Or get this brusque or rude answer. They don’t deserve that and they should never get it. It should always be done with respect and understanding and caring. Always.
Barb also referenced the notion of consumer expectations. She mentioned, regarding her work with summer orientation, that she frequently fields questions from parents. She explained that each group of parents is different but that many of the questions the last few years have been focused on their belief that if they are paying for their son or daughter to go to college then they should be able to have complete access to any information they want. Barb agrees that if they are paying, they are entitled to the information but believes the entitlement should exist between the parents and the student, not the parents and the institution. Barb continued to emphasize the issue of sharing student information as a family issue in the following:

We also talk about how you can turn in your tax return. I tell them we really don't want it, that you need to figure this out with your student before you get here. I'm very up front with them about that whole giving permission to parents, you know. I tell them they can have the conversation and your students can say, "Oh yes, I'm putting yes you can talk to my parents about academics." And then you can walk out the room and they can go right back in there and change the permissions to no. So I tell them, unless you have that relationship of communication set up with them, there is no guarantee that they are not going to change the permissions back. This puts the University in the middle, so you really need to figure out how to get this communication going without having the University in the middle.

Barb’s view on the subject of parents as consumers can be summarized in her belief that the students need to be viewed as adults and the parents need to adjust their expectations from those they had in high school to ones that put responsibility on their sons and daughters.

Helen and Matt believe that as parents paying the tuition they are the customer. Helen stated very bluntly that she feels that if the institution can see that she is the one paying the bills,
then she should have access to whatever information she wants. Matt concurred that there is a sense of entitlement that comes from paying, especially when in the context of the parents paying for all the expenses. Helen stated:

If you can tell I’m the one sending them money then I should have access to whatever I want. I realize though that in reality that’s not the way it works so I would never call up and play that card, “Well I’m paying for it, you need to tell me.” I’m sure a lot of other parents feel that same way. But I get that it’s not going to happen that way. I realize they’re 18 and I do think there’s a difference between a student who is basically on their own at 18 and putting themself through school by whatever way they can, student loans, working whatever, their parent calling and wanting to know information when they’re not involved at all. And a parent that is basically footing the entire bill. That’s just a personal feeling.

Matt followed up to his wife’s statement and stated that he believes the privacy laws are “overreaching” but also acknowledges that they “are what they are.” He then went on to also recognize that in the end it still is an issue that can be addressed in the family where the parents set the expectations for their children to give them the access to their information.

Mary and Charlie also spoke about their expectations. Mary expressed her understanding of the connection between the cost of tuition and the challenges some people have in affording college with their expectations of what they think they should get from a degree. She indicated she especially understood this when the students end up leaving school with a large amount of debt due to student loans. She also shared her view that public higher education is a bit different in that she recognized the portion that tax payers are contributing to her son’s education. Charlie expressed that they both expected to have to pay for their son’s education and that they believe
they are getting more than their money’s worth from Appalachian State University. One concern expressed specifically by Mary and Charlie and not mentioned by others was in regards to how money was spent by the university and a discrepancy they have observed in the colleges and in the maintenance and expansion of certain buildings across campus. Mary pointed out, “I really feel strongly about the humanities not being left behind when things are being fixed up.”

Sara shared several thoughts on expectations based on paying for college, but from a perspective of disagreeing with her peers. According to Sara:

I know some that think that they’re entitled to the moon and beyond because they pay for college, and especially when tuition is rising and people are like, “Well, I’m paying for this, I deserve this,” or “I deserve that.” I’m like, “Not really.” I guess that’s just my opinion. I feel like what we pay for is very little in comparison to what we get. I think the experience of college is worth more than any money in the world, and so the idea that like, “Well, I deserve my teacher to be nice to me, that’s because I’m paying for it,” I think that’s silly, because I’ve definitely heard people say that, like, “Well, I don’t deserve to get this ‘C’ because I came to class and I paid to go to class,” and that kind of stuff and that’s not reasonable at all.

Sara also described hearing the following from fellow students that they felt entitled to their professors being nice to them since they are paying their salaries and that they deserve to get at least a ‘C’ since they went to class each day and paid their tuition on time. She explained that she disagrees and thinks that logic is not at all reasonable. She expressed that tuition entitles them to a good education and to opportunities to learn, but that it was up to the student to take advantage of what college offers.
Jenny also identified with different expectations than those she perceived from her peers but did not discuss them at length in the way Sara had. When asked about what she expects from her experience at Appalachian State University, Jenny responded, “I think definitely just making it the best experience possible. I know that sounds cheesy, but I think that’s really all a college can do for their students, and I think App does a great job with it.”

**Purpose of Higher Education**

The third main theme that was evident in the interviews was that of the purpose of higher education. The responses related to its purpose ranged from viewing higher education as an opportunity to learn to viewing higher education as an avenue to get a job. The responses regarding the purpose of higher education again differed based on the participants’ generation. The Baby Boomer participants all expressed the opinion that a college degree is essential to success, with some variation as to the reason of importance based on whether they were early cusp Baby Boomers or not. The early cusp Baby Boomers felt the value came from what the students learned from being exposed to new ideas and ways of thinking, while the other Baby Boomers expressed the employment and financial outcome as the primary value to higher education. The Generation X participants expressed a fairly pragmatic view of the purpose of higher education with statements that recognized how the perceived purpose has shifted during times of recession as well as the struggles of the current generation to accept what they perceive as failure if and when their plans for further education change. The Millennial participants expressed a clear belief that the purpose of education is to learn and make the best of the new opportunities and experiences they are exposed to during college.

Ideas of college being an opportunity to learn and a path to a job were both discussed, as were expectations about college as a necessity to be successful versus an optional path to success.
in life. The responses from the participants related to the purpose of higher education ranged from viewing it as an opportunity to learn and grow, to the belief that college is specifically an avenue to get a job. Participants also shared their views on whether a college degree is required to be successful. Only one participant spoke about the role of graduate school. This third finding is connected to the first two, in that it provides a foundation for how students and parents define their overall expectations related to the college experience.

Joe discussed teaching his first college course in 1973 and mentioned that the students he taught at that time were less concerned with how much money they would make or whether they would find a job. He expressed that the students were not asking themselves those sorts of questions back then. Joe pointed to concern about cost as being a primary concern and that students today want to be sure they are paying attention to their degree progress and graduating on time. Joe mentioned that this is because of the financial impact delaying graduation by even one semester or a year can have on a student and their family. Joe also mentioned that he has observed that students from certain backgrounds have higher expectations and feelings of entitlement. He observed that student coming from a more affluent background where college is an expectation are more likely to have feelings of entitlement when they start at the university than those who come from less affluent backgrounds.

Sally spoke about her interactions with students and shared that some of her students who are just barely getting by academically have shifted their expectations to that of attaining employment after graduation rather than going on for an advanced degree. She explained that some students are just more successful going out and getting a job rather than pursuing a master’s degree, but that in her area it can be difficult for students to adjust their expectations according to their strengths and limitations. Sally also described that some of her students just
love to learn and expressed a genuine appreciation for working with this group. She also mentioned though that many in this latter group are not very good at paying attention to their progress toward graduation and are more likely to take courses they do not need just because they think they look interesting. This can result in them being a course or a certain number of credits short when it comes time for them to graduate. Sally said that she even has some students she needs to encourage to graduate because they are taking so many courses beyond what they need that they could be using that time and money to work on a second degree. When asked if she thought there was a correlation with academic performance and interest in employment versus graduate school, she said no. She outlined that in her department they are all thinking they want to be a psychologist and so anticipate that they will need to go on to graduate school to achieve that. Sally detailed that many believe and plan on going to graduate school after they graduate, but that by senior year some are considering other options. She explained:

They maybe want to go to grad school but have a shift in their thinking or they get burnout. Then they start thinking about and do I want to go to employment. “What kind of employment should I seek, if grad school is in my future but on down the road? Should I look at volunteer services, such as Americorp or Peace Corps?”

Sally expounded that she is glad when she observes her student go through that process because ultimately they need to figure out and decide if their original goal is really the best one for them.

She summarized that some of her students are burned out from school and others realize they may not be able to afford to go on to graduate school if their parents are no longer paying. Sally also mentioned that on occasion she has had students who planned to go on to graduate school, but end up getting a job offer that they feel they cannot refuse. Sally also discussed the
impact on students who decide to not pursue graduate school. She said, “I think at first it feels like a huge shock to them. Even kind of a loss and grief process that they're experiencing because they really attached themselves to an identity of a particular profession before they’ve gotten there.” She went on and explained, “I think some of them feel like they’ve failed themselves even though they haven't. It's just a change in their minds.” Sally also explained that it seems that for some this is the first time they are dealing with that feeling of failure, even though it is misplaced.

Cindy mentioned the role that choice of major plays in the expectations of the role of higher education and the expectations of parents. She said that parents are essentially pushing majors in health care and business and that this is short-sighted on their part. Cindy recognized that the focus of these parents is on employment after college and that they see those degrees as a guarantee their son or daughter will get a good job. Cindy pointed to this as a frequent pitfall to the students’ success and cautioned that this can sometimes set students up for failure. She declared her belief that this creates a challenge for students where the major is not a good match for their strengths and emphasized the difficulty in pursuing a major in which they are not interested and may not have the aptitude to be successful. She shared an example of where she had to navigate this sort of dynamic between a student and their mother:

This was a mom who was a lawyer and whose son just had zero desire to be in college, zero desire to be doing anything. After a few conversations with her, he really wanted to do something more hands on. So something perhaps like one of the construction management degrees or something in technology. Which I think is a great idea but mom was really convinced that he should have business or law. And just was not entertaining any idea of anything else.
To further complicate his situation, Cindy explained that the student had also been dishonest with his mother and had been telling her that he had been doing great academically even though he had not. Cindy also shared an example of situation where a student was struggling with staying in school and was not doing well academically, but the parents were insisting that he stay. She described that the father felt confident that the son just needed to apply himself and that the mother did not want to say anything to contradict the son. Cindy explained that although both parents felt they were trying to give their son every change to succeed their inability or unwillingness to see and address the reality of their son’s struggles was getting in the way of helping him. Another observation shared by Cindy was that for many of the students she interacted with who were struggling academically; this was the first times in their lives they were faced with failure and not protected from it.

Barb felt strongly that most students today are enrolled in college to get a job after they finish their degree. She also outlined that she believes students view college as an inevitability and just “another stepping stone” for them to check off their list on their progress to being an adult. Barb also explained that many students are raised with the expectation that they will go to college and so they end up seeing as an extension of elementary, middle, and high school. Barb expressed concern at what this means for the students and that this creates an environment where students do not realize the true purpose of college. Barb explained that students today do not know that they are there to learn higher level skills and new ways of thinking, or that they should be asking questions and seeking to learn things beyond what is assigned to them in the classroom. Barb detailed that instead students are looking at college more through a lens focused on the minimum required to get out and so often miss the opportunities that exist for them. Barb
attributed this view to the expectation of college as an extension of high school and to the tough economy.

Sara shared her perspective on the purpose of higher education through several of her comments throughout the interview. She mentioned, “I think the biggest thing that college gives you is the opportunity to become independent and develop those critical thinking skills, because I think honestly, the critical thinking skills are more important than the classes I sit in.” She went on to expand further, “I may never need astronomy in my life, but I will need to learn how to take care of myself, and that’s what college has taught me. I think that’s what I get by paying for college.” With regard to how that impacted her future employment Sara stated:

As a business major, I can tell you that they’re not going to hire me just because I know how to add some numbers together because I learned it in an accounting class. They’re only going to hire me if I’m a reasonable, well-rounded employee who knows how to take care of myself and solve problems. And that’s what college teaches you.

Sara shared her philosophy of what is important for students to succeed in college and explained that caring about your education is the key. She explained that even students who go to every class and complete all their assignments, if they do not care about learning they will not get everything out of that class that they can. Sara demonstrated high expectations for herself when she shared her views on academic success and failing. She stated, “I’m the kind of person who considers an A- failing, and I had a really bad two-hour crying spree a few weeks ago because I got my first B in a class, and it was the worst experience of my life.” In regards to her expectations of her faculty helping her reach her potential she shared that she wants her professors to teach her what they know and to do their best in trying to teach her. She expanded on what she believed she should do to maximize the opportunity to learn from her faculty, “I
think a lot of people expect their professors to reach out to them and to teach them, whereas I expect them to tell me their experiences and their knowledge. I have to use whatever means possible to understand it.”

Jenny also believed that the purpose of college is to learn, but also expressed her belief that many of her peers had a different viewpoint. She described that for many other students she knows, their focus is to finish college and get a job to make money. Jenny explained that this was far from her reasons for being in college and that she loves to learn. She believed that her peers’ point of view is a result of growing up in a family were going to college was always expected.

Helen and Matt shared their thoughts on the importance college plays in learning to prepare students for employment. Helen articulated when speaking about reasons to go to college, “It’s to learn, it’s to enhance your knowledge so that you are better equipped to get a job and have the skillset necessary to at least perform the entry level requirements of that job.” She went on and said:

I think for me part of college is just in addition to all that which I think is extremely important, it’s that time where they’re in between the nest and being on their own that they’re learning to function in the real world, in the adult world of responsibilities and what not. So I think it also…I think college exposes you to ideas, thoughts and things that may peak their interest that you would have otherwise not have known about.

Matt supported that notion and made the comparison that someone could be the best mechanic in the state but if they did not know how to run a business it would limit what they could do with their talent. Helen and Matt reflected on the experiences of their son and how his view of the purpose and benefit, or lack thereof, to college has shifted during his time at
Appalachian. Matt explained that their son did not want to go to college. He described how they had to convince him to go to college even though he did not see the value of a degree. Helen expounded:

He had a hard time grasping that while he might be equipped, because he is intelligent to go out and do many things, not just blue collar work if you will. He’s very smart, that he needed this in order to even be considered. Granted he could probably go do it but we had to really get him to understand that this was necessary.

Helen and Matt convinced their son to go to college by making a deal with him. Matt explained that they asked him to get a bachelor’s degree for them and then if he still wanted to go to technical school at that point they would support his decision to do that. Helen shared that their son’s view has changed since coming to college, “He thought he knew it all and now he’s not as sure he knew so much.”

Mary and Charlie had strong beliefs regarding the purpose and benefits of higher education. Early during the interview, Charlie stated about his son’s experience at college, “It’s like opening a whole new world for him as far as ideas that he probably never even thought about.” Charlie went on and explained that their son likes to share the new ideas he is learning with them and will often bring home books from class that he wants them to read. Both Mary and Charlie expressed how much they enjoy when their son shares his excitement about learning with them and how rewarding it has been to see him grow as a person. In regards to their expectations of what higher education provides, Charlie stated:

When you leave here, you should be able to sit down and talk to just about anybody.

That’s always been my feeling about education. A lot of folks are getting educated and
they want come out and talk down to people. But I think it should help individuals go out to be able to communicate with anybody.

Helen and Charles expressed that they suspected their views did not match those of other parents. Helen stated she didn’t think most parents shared their beliefs about the purpose of education and instead were focused on their son or daughter getting a degree in a specific profession or career. When asked to clarify what percentage she thought had the same views or different to her and her husband she answered, “I think that the great majority of parents probably look at it strictly in terms of a career. Maybe a little bit of the other, but I would say about 75% in terms of career.” Helen and Charles also indicated that they believed a degree increased the chances of their son finding a job with a comfortable salary but emphasized that for them making money was not a primary goal for their son. Helen explained:

When you look at the – compare the percentages of people’s income that have been to college as opposed to those that just been to high school, I mean it’s really obvious it’s going – it’s going to help you as far as your career. But like Jim said, we’re not – we’re not – we want him to make a living but we’re not concerned about him trying to be a rich man or anything like that.

**Concluding Statement**

Parent involvement, consumer expectations, and the purpose of higher education were three primary themes that emerged from the findings of this research. All the participants shared their experiences regarding parent involvement and how they made sense of the phenomenon in higher education. Consumer expectations of students and parents ranged from a belief that success in college is earned to a feeling of entitlement. Views regarding the purpose of higher education fluctuated between the opinion that it was to achieve a degree for the purpose of
attaining a job to the opinion that college created opportunities to learn and grow. A summary of these findings as well as a narrative account of how the participants of this study experienced the phenomenon of parent involvement in higher education were presented. The following chapter will include a discussion of the implications of these findings. The findings of this research and the current literature regarding generations and parent involvement will also be examined.
Chapter 5: Discussion of Findings

This was a qualitative study that sought to better understand the perceptions, expectations and the lived experiences of those closest to the phenomena of parental involvement in higher education. Based on the literature and observations there is a disconnection between the views and expectations of the different generations of students, parents, faculty and staff. Research had been conducted to better understand the interaction of parental involvement and student development, as well as the legal role of parents in education. In addition, research had begun to investigate how students in the Millennial Generation impact learning and teaching styles in college classrooms. There has been very little research into the role of the Millennial Generation and their parents on the perceptions and delivery of customer service in higher education.

The research presented here aimed to better understand the meanings of those most closely associated with the phenomenon of parental involvement and how those meanings vary depending on generation. The researcher employed generational theory as the theoretical framework and used interpretative phenomenological analysis as the research method.

Research Questions

The primary research questions for this study were:

- How do students, parents, faculty and staff in different generations perceive and describe customer service in higher education?
- What are the views of students, parents, faculty and staff in different generations on the concept of students as consumers?
- What are the views of students, parents, faculty and staff in different generations on the role of parents and family in a student's college experience?
Secondary to the above primary questions were the following:

- How is quality customer service defined at college?
- How do faculty, staff, students and their families differ in their view of students as consumers?
- How do faculty, staff, students and their families perceive the purpose of higher education?

The intellectual goal of this research was to better understand the expectations of the various cohorts in order to improve the customer service experiences while also fostering independence and learning by the student. The practical goal of this research was to learn information that would help improve the service to students while also incorporating the mission and educational purpose of higher education. This understanding will inform changes and improvements to institutional practices and communications with students and families. More specifically, with this information Appalachian State University can train their faculty and staff to be cognizant of the expectations of students and their parents based on the improved understanding of these relationships and expectations. An example of training that will improve these understandings is in-service professional development for staff in the Registrar’s Office and Enrollment Management at Appalachian State University. The findings do, generally, conform to the outline of generations as described in Generational Theory (Howe & Strauss, 1997), although some variation was found in the participants at the cusp of a generation.

**Interpretation of Findings**

The three primary themes that emerged in the findings of this research were parental involvement, consumer expectations, and the purpose of higher education. Parent involvement was the theme most strongly represented in the findings and threaded throughout the experiences
shared in the interviews by the participants. This theme included strong opinions from the participants regarding the level and quality of parent involvement with views that ranged from a belief that parents were appropriately involved to the belief that parents were overly involved. Consumer expectations was another theme that included a range of experiences and beliefs expressed by the participants. Some shared the view that success in college is earned while others voiced a feeling of entitlement. The views regarding the purpose of higher education represented a theme that vacillated between the attitude that it created opportunities to learn and grow and the attitude that it was to finish a degree in order to attain a job. These findings represent new information that is not available in current literature due to the absence of research on the impact of that involvement in higher education and the impact of multiple generations on the perceptions of service and expectations in higher education.

**Parent involvement.** As anticipated from the description of Baby Boomers in Generational Theory and the expectations of this generation as parents in the current available literature, the perception of the majority of participants in this research was that there is an overall increased level of parental involvement, as compared to previous generations. Additionally, there is an expectation from parents regarding a high level of inclusion in their children’s college education. This point of view is consistent with the writing of Gillon (2004) on the impact of the Baby Boomer generation in America and the increase focus of society on the needs and desires of the children.

Stewart and Bernhardt (2010) hypothesized that Millennials are experiencing a delayed adulthood and referenced the new life stage of ‘emerging adulthood’ proposed by Arnett (2010), as well as the results of the meta-analysis of Twenge and Cambell (2009) in his assertion. That hypothesis is supported by the findings of the research here. Several Baby Boomer participants
expressed the challenge parents of college student have in parenting from afar and staying involved to the level they would like and think is appropriate as a parent. These perspectives support Arnett’s (2010) notion of an extended development of young people today into adulthood.

Howe and Strauss (2000) pointed to the protection and help of the Baby Boomer parents as contributing to high expectations of Millennial students. DeBard (2004) reported that along with feeling special and confident as a result of this high level of support from their parents, they also have high expectations for themselves and are unfamiliar with failing. The student participants in this research shared experiences that were consistent with those these characteristics. The findings of the research here included the student perspective of an A- as a failing grade and the struggles of students transitioning to college as the first place they were not ensured success.

In the research by Somers and Settle (2010) a majority of the almost two hundred higher education administrators interviewed across the country reported that helicopter parents were present on their campuses. Somers and Settle (2010) also found that “helicoptering” was more frequent during the first and final years of a student’s college career (p.23). The definition of “helicoptering” in that research was unclear. In a similar way, the definition of highly involved parents versus overly involved parents is unclear from the findings of this research. It is clear though, that parents are much more involved than in the past and at least a small percentage become involved to the point that it was perceived by three of the four faculty and staff participants as overly involved. Even one of the student participants shared experiences she had working at summer orientation with parents who were constantly pressuring her to know more
and wanting to be fully informed and that there was only a slim minority of parents she felt were overly involved.

The students were both in the Millennial generation and viewed themselves as extremely independent, particularly as compared to their peers. The difference of actual independence as demonstrated through the experiences they shared during their interviews was interesting and could be attributable to the generation of the student’s parents. Although both students had a self-perception of being independent, the student who had Baby Boomer parents shared several examples of where her mother was still fairly involved and actively helping her, particularly during her freshman year. In comparison, the student with Generation X parents shared several examples of where she navigated college on her own. Even the student with Baby Boomer parents did seem, based on the experiences she shared in her interview, to be more independent than her peers. She credits this difference to coming from a divorced family, but also identifies other peers from divorced families where they are still quite dependent on their parents. It is difficult to know all the factors that could contribute to a young person’s level of independence, but certainly environmental and cultural factors related to her mother being deaf, the economics of the family and relationship of her parents after the divorce were all part of this student’s life experience and would have an influence on her personal characteristics. These perceptions and interactions between the student and their parent’s generation highlight the role generations are playing in how these participants experience parental involvement.

The two sets of parents were both in the Baby Boomer generation, but one set had birth years right in the middle of the Baby Boomer generation, while the other had birth years toward the early part of the Baby Boomer generation. Although they were both in the same generation, their views on parent involvement were vastly different. This is likely a result of when during
the generation they were born and demonstrates why there are no standard definitions of the various generations across the researchers who have investigated generational theory. The parents solidly Baby Boomers shared their experiences as actively involved parents, including several examples of where the mother took care of some of her son’s business for him. The early cusp Baby Boomer parents also shared their experiences as actively involved parents, but did so exclusively at the university level and only had one example of where they needed to intervene on their students’ behalf. That example was unique and an escalated situation in which a criminal record was being misinterpreted.

There is a clear difference in how the increased involvement in parents is perceived by the participants in this study, with the primary difference being attributable to the generation and where in the generation the participant fell in regards to his/her birth year. Early cusp Baby Boomers exhibited views more in line with the Silent Generation than Baby Boomers and valued student independence. The Baby Boomers were supportive of parents being highly involved in higher education. Generation X participants indicated concern regarding overly involved parents and believed student independence was an important part of the learning process at college. The Millennials believed themselves independent even when their parents were highly involved and there appeared to be a correlation between their actual level of independence and the generation of their parents. The perceptions expressed in the findings from the faculty and staff participants are consistent with the characteristics outlined by Howe and Strauss (1997) in Generational Theory.

**Consumer expectations.** Despite the prevalence of consumer expectations in the findings of this research, there has been little research to date regarding the consumer expectations in higher education. Melear (2003) outlined the shift from *in loco parentis* in
higher education to one of a legal contractual lens and toward consumer based entitlement. The results of the research of this research study demonstrate complex interactions between perceptions of customer focused entitlement by parents and students and the privacy laws outlined in FERPA. These involve both an interest from parents to be more involved and expectations and customers.

All the parent participants expressed an interest in being more involved, including full access to their student’s academic and financial information. They also felt that it was important for the institution to encourage students to give permission to the university to share academic and financial information with their parents, especially if the parents are paying college. One parent even spoke about the benefits of having students share their confidential student username and passwords with their parents. Although the parents recognized the limits FERPA has regarding their access to information, they also were clear in their belief that if they were paying the tuition then they should have access to whatever information they want regarding the student. This point of view by the parents regarding permissions and access to student information was shared by the Baby Boomer staff member, but not any of the other faculty or staff participants.

Melear (2003) found that from a legal standpoint, the courts have shifted to viewing students as consumers in higher education. This is critical to understand since it adds some legal legitimacy to students’ consumer-based expectations. Hershatter and Epstein (2010) conducted a study regarding the impact of the Millennial Generation on the workplace. They reported that Millennials want very clear expectations, seek regular reassurance, and work best in a highly structured environment (Hershatter & Epstein, 2010). These characteristics are evident in the experiences shared by the Millennial students in this study. They both indicated a desire for
regular and consistent communication from their professors regarding their ongoing progress in their courses and indicated they were entitled to that level of feedback and communication.

The fact that there were examples of consumer expectations shared across the participants in this study indicates that a certain percentage of college students and their parents have expectations as consumer. It is clear based on these findings that more research is needed to understand how common consumer based expectations are in higher education and the factors that contribute to those expectations.

**Purpose of higher education.** The beliefs and perceptions shared by the participants in the research here were consistent with the generational descriptions of Coomes and DeBard (2004); Hammill (2005); Howe and Strauss (2000); Howe, Strauss, and Nadler, (2008); and Twenge (2006). Baby Boomers have been found to be more likely to view education as a right, including higher education. Both sets of parent participants shared their experiences with their students and their expectation that college was necessary for them to be successful in life. One set of parents felt strongly enough regarding the importance of college that they had to make a deal with their son to agree to go to college. There was a difference though in why the two parents thought college was important that could be attributable to when they were born. The Baby Boomer parents felt that a college education was important in learning the skills necessary to get a good job, while the early cusp Baby Boomers believed that the value in a college education came from the student being exposed to new information and ways of thinking of things. Through the lens of generational theory this means the early cusp Baby Boomers were again showing characteristics more similar with the Silent Generation. This would account for their different perspectives of the purpose of higher education.
Also according to generational theory, members of Generation X tend to view education as a means to an end, rather than valuable on its own merits. This view is supported in the findings of this study. Both Generation X participants discussed the challenges that students today face as they navigate their decisions about what to do after they graduate. The Generation X faculty member shared that some of her students experience a sense of failure as they shift their focus from going on to graduate school to going out and getting a job instead, but from her perspective they had just changed their minds. The Generation X staff member spoke about the high percentage of students being in college to get a job and compares it to when she was in college. She spoke about the influence of the economy now and its similarity to when she was in college in the 1980s. She pointed out that people are worried about getting a job and securing their future.

Stewart (2009) conducted a case study investigating how Millennial students were different than previous generations and found that they were less able to plan for their future and disliked academic work. This difference was not evident in the findings of this research and contrasted with the experiences and opinions expressed by the student participants who both spoke about their high academic standards and belief that higher education provided them with opportunities to learn and grow academically and personally. Both students expressed that taking advantage of the opportunities to learn was what would map to their increased success both in getting a good job and in attaining their long term goals.

Although both the student participants clearly indicated in their interviews that the purpose of higher education to them is to provide them opportunities to learn, they also both expressed that many of their peers were more focused on finishing college to get a degree in order to get a job, especially as a result of their peers’ parents’ emphasis on this. Stewart and
Bernhardt (2010) conducted a study investigating the differences in psychological characteristics of the Millennial Generation as compared with previous generations. In both studies, Millennial students were found to have an increased level of narcissism and self-centeredness. Konrath, Obrian, and Hsing (2010) found in their study of change in college level students that students in the Millennial Generation had less empathy for others and were less likely to be able to consider alternate perspectives. The opinions and experiences shared by the students in this study do not appear to confirm the findings of either of those studies, particularly in regard to the views on the purpose of higher education. Both of the student participants expressed that their personal views were different than their peers but also expressed an understanding for why their peers believed what they did.

It is clear from these findings that a difference across generations is evident in their view of the purpose of higher education. The early cusp Baby Boomers viewed the purpose of higher education as providing experiences and exposure to learning new things to prepare them for a job, while the other Baby Boomers viewed the purpose of higher education as more a necessary path to achieve a good job with choice of major having a significant impact of job success. The participants in Generation X also recognized the role higher education has had in achieving a job, but viewed it as one possible path to success. The Millennial participants viewed the purpose of higher education to learn how to think and to be exposed to various learning opportunities.

**Significance to Problem of Practice**

As evident throughout the research here, there is often a disconnect between the views of faculty, staff, parents, and students of different generations in higher education about what is in the best interest of the student and what constitutes quality customer service and assistance. Brown (2005) emphasized that the way the generations view the world around them and navigate
learning are fundamentally different and these differences often get in the way of the different generations understanding each other. Carney-Hall (2008) referenced the increase in the intersection of these differences in higher education as the level of parental involvement has increased. It is important for faculty and staff to understand these differences between generations and how those differences impact how administrators do their jobs and provide services in higher education.

Daniel, Evans, and Scott (2001) asserted that students and their families no longer view college as a place of opportunity to learn from experts, but instead approach the college experience with a strong sense of customer-based entitlement. This is primarily a result of the shift away from attending college in order to learn, and towards attending college in order to obtain a degree as a prerequisite for employment (Astin, Sax, & Korn, 2002; Delucchi & Korgen, 2002). The research here confirms this to be true for most of the participants, but did not align with the responses from the students. The findings of this research point to the importance of considering the perspectives of the various generations within the cohorts, rather than applying one generalized perspective to each cohort. The power of perceptions is also evident in the interviews conducted for this research, in that a majority expressed a significant increase of overly involved parents but in contrast also indicated that only a handful of parents each semester qualify by their own definitions as being overly involved. Faculty and staff, particularly in student service offices such as Financial Aid, Registrar’s Office, and Academic Advising, need to be informed of the needs and expectations of both students and their parents in order to build processes and procedures that address those needs while also maintaining the integrity of the educational mission of the institution. In addition, it is clear from these findings
that institutions of higher education also need to take into account the behaviors that result from the perceptions and beliefs from those that view themselves as customers of the institution.

**Conclusion**

**Key findings and areas for future research.** The analysis of the interview transcripts from the ten participants in this study revealed three primary themes about the lived experiences of faculty, staff, parent and students at Appalachian State University and their perceptions and expectations of higher education. The three themes included parent involvement, consumer expectations, and the purpose of higher education.

Parent involvement was the key topic presented in the findings of this research. There were several categories of this topic thread throughout the responses of all the participants. Varying opinions on the amount, level, and quality of parent involvement were shared in the interviews. The topic of parental involvement is central to the concepts discussed in generational theory and in the scholarly inquiries to date related to the research questions presented here. Arnett (2000) has researched the Millennial generation and has proposed a new life-stage called “emerging adulthood” (p.268) to explain the time period between adolescence and young adulthood. That concept when combined with the mixed results of previous studies regarding parent involvement in elementary and secondary school, the lack of research on the benefits or harm of parent involvement at the college level and the results of this research study equate to a clear need for further scholarly investigation into the impact of highly involved parents on the development and growth to adulthood of college students.

The concept of consumer expectations was another key finding in this research. The perceptions of the expectations of students and parents ranged from a feeling of entitlement to a belief that success needed to be earned. In the same way that the legal view of higher education
shifted away from *in loco parentis* to one of consumer expectations, institutions need to find a way to make the same shift (Melear, 2003). This must be done while honoring the cultural shift of parent involvement outlined above. Several of the participants in this study referenced experiences with students and parents that believed their tuition payment should result in certain minimum grades or entitlement to a job after graduation. This is another area that warrants further investigation, ideally both quantitative to achieve an understanding of how pervasive that view might be as well as qualitative to understand why they feel those entitlements are reasonable.

The third key finding of this research was regarding the participants’ beliefs about the purpose of higher education. The responses related to the purpose of higher education ranged from viewing it as an opportunity to learn to the belief that it is specifically an avenue to get a job. Participants also shared their views on whether a college degree is required to be successful. Only one participant spoke about the role of graduate school. This third finding is connected to the first two, in that it provides a foundation for how students and parents define their overall expectations related to the college experience. It is interesting to note the fundamental and significant difference in the results of this finding for the students as compared to those of the parents. This would be another area for further research, particularly with a focus on how students of different generations and with parents of different generations may differ in their views and expectations.

**Implications for practice.** Even as all the participants expressed an observation of increased parent involvement, with a majority of faculty and staff participants indicating the parents are often overly involved, the parents themselves indicated a very clear interest in increased involvement. This is important information for administrators in higher education to
recognize and understand as they make decisions about policies and procedures. This interest on the parents’ part in being highly involved is the central theme from this research that has direct implications on the policies and practice in higher education. The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) is a federal law that restricts the sharing of college student information with parents, but there is a wide range of discretion at the institution level regarding the enforcement of FERPA. The tone of communication with parents about FERPA and the practices surrounding the enforcement of the provisions of the law are both areas that institutions can modify based on their recognition of how parents and students feel about parent involvement. Based on the results of the research here, it is clear that parents want more direct access to students’ information. The challenge in practice will continue to be how to balance that desire for access from parents with the role higher education plays in fostering independence in students. The responsibility for navigating these two opposing sides is spread throughout faculty and staff, but the leadership comes from the directors of student services offices such as Academic Advising, Registrar, Admissions and Student Accounts. Training on the factors involved and how to find that balance need to be incorporated into the professional development of all faculty and staff.

A second area of this research that has specific implications for policies and practice in higher education is the theme of consumer expectations. The findings related to consumer expectations point to the importance of institutions finding ways to educate students and their parents about reasonable expectations as consumers and as students, right from the beginning of their relationship with the institution. The Office of Admissions and the Orientation Program are two areas that need to incorporate communication with incoming students and their parents to create appropriate expectations of customer service into their practices.
The information gathered from this study is critical in determining strategies for improving understanding among the cohorts responsible for educating and serving students, as well as improving communications between, and understanding of, students and their families regarding the educational mission of the institution and how that may impact service delivery. Although this topic has national relevance, it is particularly important at Appalachian State University where the tensions of different definitions and expectations of customer service have created challenges in a community that has a history of valuing a high level of service to the students and their families. Specifically, the results of this research will be used to improve the training, policies and practices of the Registrar’s Office and Enrollment Management at Appalachian State University.
References


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APPENDIX

Parent interview questions.

- Please describe your experiences a parent of a student of Appalachian State University.
- Can you tell me about how your son/daughter came to be at Appalachian State University?
- What do you think your son/daughter would like from you while she or he is in college?
- How do you feel during the semester when your son/daughter is away at school?
- How do you feel when your son/daughter has trouble or questions while at school?
- Can you tell me about a time that your son/daughter needed your help while at school?
- What are the differences in how you interact with your son/daughter now that she or he is in college as compared to when she or he was in high school?

Student interview questions.

- Please describe your experiences as a student at Appalachian State University.
- Can you tell me about how you came to be a student at Appalachian State University?
- What do you think your parent(s) would like from you while you are in college?
- How do you feel about being a college student and living away from home?
- What do you want from your parent(s) while you are in college?
- What do you think your professors would like from you in class?
• What do you want from your professors?

• How do you feel when you have questions or are having trouble while here at Appalachian?

• What are the differences in how you interact with your parent(s) now that you are in college as compared to when you were in high school?

**Faculty interview questions.**

• Please describe your experiences a faculty member at Appalachian State University.

• Can you tell me about how you came to be faculty at Appalachian State University?

• What do you think students want from you as their professor?

• What do you think parents want from you as the professor of their children?

• How do you feel when students ask you questions about your courses?

• How do you feel when parents ask you questions about your courses?

• What are the differences in how you interact with your students now as compared to in the past?

• What are the differences in how you interact with the parents of your students now as compared to in the past?

**Staff interview questions.**

• Please describe your experiences a staff member at Appalachian State University.

• Can you tell me about how you came to be a staff member at Appalachian State University?

• What do you think students want from you as a staff person at Appalachian?
• What do you think parents want from you as staff person at Appalachian?
• How do you feel when students ask you questions related to what you do here?
• How do you feel when parents ask you questions related to what you do here?
• What are the differences in how you interact with students now as compared to in the past?
• What are the differences in how you interact with the parents of students now as compared to in the past?