Parental Divorce and Undergraduate Students’ Success

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Overview

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

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

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

Amato and Keith (2011)
Gap in Scholarship

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

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

• What challenges do students from divorced families face during their first year of college?
Methods

• Quantitative analyses
  – CIRP survey (administered in 2007) analyses merged with institutional data
  – Linear regressions predicting GPA
  – Logistic regressions predicting retention and graduation

• Qualitative analyses
  – Interviews conducted with 18 college sophomores
Quantitative Instrument

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

- **Dependent:**
  - Students’ first-year GPA
  - Retention from first year to second year
  - Graduation in four and five years

- **Independent:**
  - Parents’ marital status (derived from CIRP)
    - Both alive and living with each other
    - Both alive, divorced, or living apart
    - One or both deceased
Measures

• Independent:
  – Gender
  – Race/ethnicity
  – Pell grant recipient
  – First-generation status
  – In-state resident
  – ACT/SAT scores

  – Lived in college
  – College of enrollment
  – Students’ self-rated abilities compared to an “average person their age”
    • Academic ability
    • Drive to achieve
## Sample

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
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<tr>
<td>Divorced family</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
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<td>First-generation</td>
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<td>African American</td>
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<td>Asian American</td>
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<td>Hispanic or Latino</td>
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<tr>
<td>International</td>
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<td>Pell grant recipient</td>
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<td>In-state resident</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lived in residence halls</td>
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<td>84.3</td>
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Quantitative Results

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

• Controlling for demographics, college experiences, and ACT scores, students from divorced families had a significantly lower first-year GPA compared to their peers.

• Model explained 19.2% of the variance in first-year GPA.

• Parental divorce was not the most important predictor in the model ($\beta = -.049$).
First-Year Retention

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

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

• Controlling for demographics, college experiences, and ACT scores, students from divorced families had a significantly lower five-year graduation rate and five-year success rate compared to their peers.

• The odds of graduation decreased by 1.31 (in both models) for students from divorced families.

• Pseudo $R^2 = .298, .284$ (Nagelkerke, 1991)
Qualitative Results

• Research question:
  – What challenges do students from divorced families face during their first year of college?
Qualitative Sampling

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

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

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

• Nearly every student discussed move-in day as a point where they felt “othered” or awkward in comparison to their peers

• Move-in day was an initial source of tension for students, often in relation to whether there was an amicable relationship between parents
Financial Challenges

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

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

• Required to have a job for financial independence

• Missed out on social aspects and sometimes even academics because of work responsibilities

• Felt a sense of keep responsibility and independence
  – Going back and forth between parents and/or living with a single parent created independence
Relationship and Trust Issues

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

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

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

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

• Any questions?
References


