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# College Students' Reflections on Their Parents' Support of Their Educational Attainment Goals

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## Introduction

- Parents' attainment expectations, or how far parents expect their children to go in school, is a stronger predictor of students' academic success than other forms of parent involvement (Fan & Chen, 2001).
- Students' educational decisions are related to their perceptions of their parents' expectations and students' utility values, or their beliefs about the usefulness of educationally-relevant tasks (e.g., Expectancy Value Theory; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000).
  - Parents' attainment expectations are positively associated with whether their children attend and graduate from college (Bui & Rush, 2016; Zhan & Sherraden, 2011).
  - Students' educational utility values are associated with their persistence in school (Foley et al., 2014).
- Less is known about students' beliefs about how their parents support them in their educational endeavors, which could have implications for their college persistence and degree attainment.
- Although educational attainment expectations and students' educational utility values are theoretically connected, the exact nature of the relation between these constructs warrants examination.

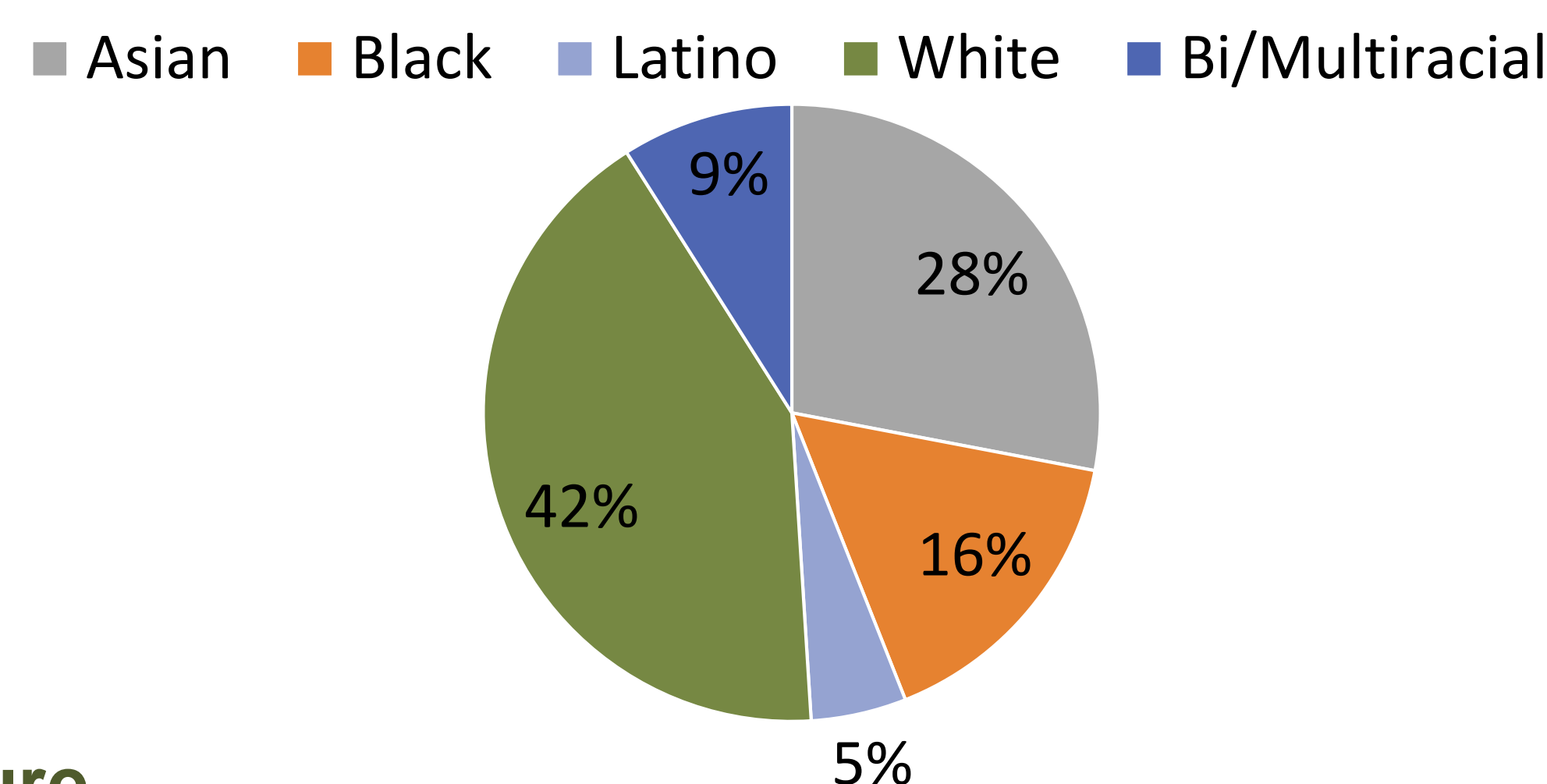
### Present Study

- The present mixed-method study examined:
  - College students' reflections on their parents' support of their educational attainment goals.
  - The relation between parents' attainment expectations (presumed by students) and students' educational utility values.

## Method

### Participants

- $N = 371$  college students attending a mid-sized public university in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States
  - Gender: 72% female
  - Race/Ethnicity: dichotomized for analyses (0 = White, 1 = all others)



### Procedure

- Students completed an online questionnaire, which consisted of open- and closed-ended questions, as part of a larger study.

### Measures

- GPA (self-reported)
  - $M = 3.24$ ,  $SD = 0.54$
  - GPA's ranged from 1.60 to 4.00

## Method

### Measures

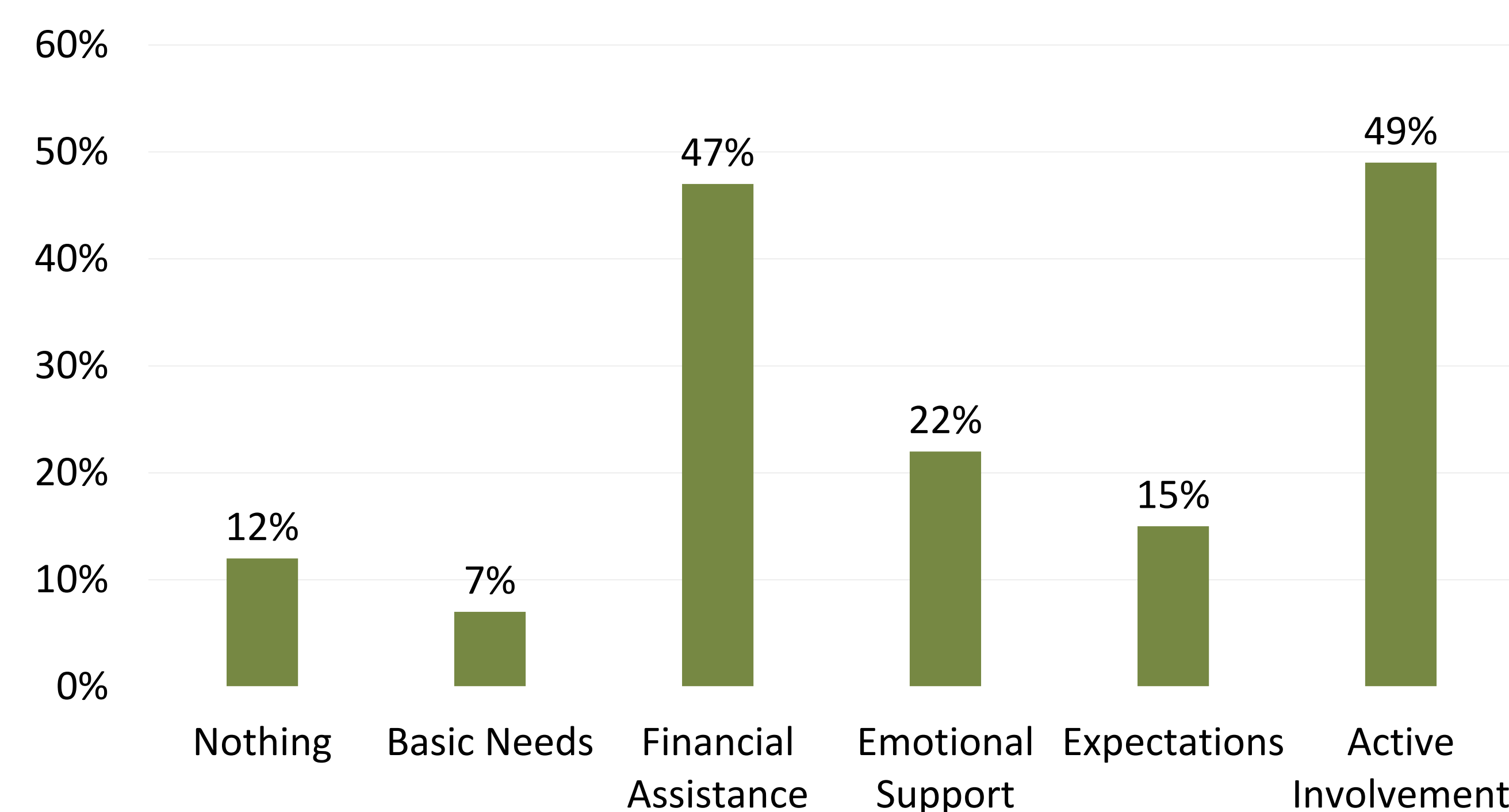
- "Did your parents do or provide anything to help you live up to their educational attainment expectations?"
- "Indicate the lowest level of education/training that your parents considered acceptable for you while you were growing up." (0 = Associate degree and lower, 1 = Bachelor's degree and higher)
- Educational Utility Values
  - Economic Value of Education Scale (Murdock, 1999;  $\alpha = .84$ )
  - 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree)
  - $M = 3.51$ ,  $SD = 0.58$
  - Sample items: "School is not that important for future success." and "My parents say I need an education to learn a good living."

### Coding

- Responses to open-ended questions were coded using emergent thematic analysis (Cohen's  $\kappa > 0.8$  for each theme).
- Participants' responses were coded if a theme was mentioned at least once in the content of their answer.

## Results

- Six themes emerged from students' responses for how parents supported their educational attainment expectations:



### Quotes:

- "No...they didn't have that much information or guidance to give me." (Theme: Nothing)
- "They kept me well-fed, housed, and essentially gave me an environment where it was possible to succeed." (Theme: Basic Needs)
- "They offered to help pay for college since they understand that the amount of money college requires can be a deterrence." (Theme: Financial Assistance)
- "My mom was always supportive and pushed me to do well." (Theme: Emotional Support)
- "They were very vocal about us needing to graduate high school and that dropping out was unacceptable..." (Theme: Expectations)
- "They helped with my applications and took me to campus tours." (Theme: Active Involvement)

## Results

- Linear regression testing the relation between students' perceptions of their parents' educational attainment expectations and students' educational utility values:

Table 1. Parents' Academic Educational Attainment Expectations Predicting Educational Utility

Predictor	B	SE	$\beta$	t
GPA	0.12	0.06	0.11	2.09*
Gender	0.22	0.07	0.17	3.32***
Race/ethnicity	0.13	0.06	0.11	2.00*
Educational Attainment Expectations	0.24	0.07	0.19	3.64***

\*Note. \* $p < .05$  \*\* $p < .001$

- Students whose parents expected them to obtain at least a bachelor's degree had, on average, significantly higher educational utility value scores than did students who thought their parents expected them to obtain less than a bachelor's degree.

## Discussion

- Parents' active involvement and provision of financial assistance were the most common forms of support that students mentioned receiving.
  - Higher education can be difficult to navigate without assistance and is often costly to pursue. As such, parents' active involvement and financial assistance may be more salient to students than other forms of support.
  - Alternatively, it is possible that these forms of support are most important to students as they pursue their college degrees.
- Students who thought their parents expected them to at least obtain a bachelor's degree tended to have higher educational utility values than did students whose parents expected them to obtain an associate degree or lower.
  - This finding suggests that parents may pair discussing certain levels of attainment with explanations of why reaching that minimum is important for their children's future success.
- The dialogue that children have with their parents about educational attainment could impact their perceptions of the utility of education, which has implications for college persistence.
- Future studies should attempt to obtain data about educational attainment expectations from students and their parents; such data would allow comparisons between parents' actual educational attainment expectations and students' perceptions of those expectations.