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Student Parent Success: A Piece of the Reform Puzzle

By Sharalle Arnold, GVSU Staff and Lisa N. Hickman, GVSU Faculty



When Grand Valley State University student Danielle decided to attend college, she did not do so without consideration for her then 2.5 year old daughter. Unlike the “traditional” college student Danielle would be launching into a new world of higher education, however this would not be a solo effort. She would have to give each question at least twice the consideration, because of her role as both student and mom. For example, where would she live and would it be a suitable environment for her daughter? When purchasing school supplies for herself, would she have extra to support her daughter’s preschool needs? In short, it would be twice the tuition, twice the cost of backpacks and twice the pressure to be excused from class if her daughter were to become sick and required to leave preschool.

This story is not an unfamiliar one. Parenting students account for a rising number of nontraditional students entering the academic setting. Almost 4 million students identify as a student parent in the United States, and half identify as a single parent (IWPR, 2010), much like our Grand Valley State University student mentioned above. College campuses are changing, and nontraditional students are a part of this story.

Today, nontraditional undergraduate students can include those who may be “responsible for a dependent child, a spouse/partner, 23 years of age or older, a veteran, financially independent or are returning after a three or more year absence” according to Lisa Miller, Director GVSU

Meijer Campus in Holland and Co-chair of the Nontraditional Student Network (personal communication, March 5, 2012). ¹We define student parents, one category of this nontraditional population, as those responsible for the care and well-being of a dependent child who are concurrently in pursuit of their Bachelor’s Degree. As mentioned, this population is on the rise at colleges and universities in the United States, and an important component of reform in higher education must include attention to student parents. For example, graduation from institutes of higher learning is a national priority for reform (Cooper, 2010) but college completion may be a challenge for student parents, given the responsibilities of parenting, finding affordable care and balancing the student role. Nontra-

Considerations for Student Parent Support

Listed below are suggestions for colleges and universities to increase support systems for student parents.

- Increase awareness regarding student parents & postsecondary completion.
- Deliver a consistent definition of nontraditional support.
- Research and implement best practices to develop a family friendly college campus.
- Ensure a formalized system of support for nontraditional students.
- Safeguard access to affordable quality campus child care.
- Develop funding streams that generate parent focused scholarships.
- Ensure the availability of affordable, quality on campus housing.
- Encourage faculty to identify and acknowledge both strengths and differences presented by nontraditional students.
- Ensure feeding areas for nursing mothers.
- Designate family friendly study / gathering areas.

Implementing support services like these can improve the experiences of student parents thus increasing engagement, commitment and, most important, completion.

ditional students, including student parents, have been a missing piece of the reform puzzle.

National statistics on student parents paint a telling picture regarding use of care and need for care on college and university campuses. Of all parents enrolled in higher education, over a million are found at four-year institutions, comprising 13.1% of their total population (Miller, 2010). A higher percent of student parents, no matter their family structure, are women (Miller, Gault & Thorman, 2011). Of all low income students attending college, one-third are student parents (Miller, Gault & Thorman, 2011). These student parents are also more likely to be working (Miller, 2010). Child care, then, becomes a decisive factor for student parents when making the decision to attend college (Miller, 2010).

There are benefits to campus child care for student parents. Independent studies at colleges and universities such as the State University of New York (Kapner, 2002) find that student parents that are able to access campus child care are more likely to stay in school and graduate with higher grades. A campus child care may then become a tool for recruitment and retention, because it offers accessibility, can increase productivity, decreases drive time and is convenient (Boswell, 2003).

Student parents with access to campus care have a 26% higher achievement rate than the general student population. But it is estimated that, of the campuses that do provide child care, they only fill approximately 5% of the student needs for care (Miller, 2010). The lack of availability may be the result of limited spots being divided among campus faculty, staff and students. This speaks to size and capacity of programs. There are an estimated 1,074,000 child care slots needed by student parents at postsecondary institutions- but there are only 56,300 slots available. Additionally, not all colleges and universities offer child care (Miller, 2010).

There is a great need- not just on campuses without child care, but even on campuses with already existing care. For example, a higher number of campus facilities are licensed for preschool age children, thus locating care for infants and toddlers can be more difficult. Campus child cares also report capacity as an area of need. Many maintain wait lists of parents who desire care on campus but there is no space available to serve them (Miller, Gault & Thorman, 2011). With enrollment beginning at 2.5 years and three classrooms, the GVSU Children's Enrichment Center faces similar issues.

The most recent myGVSU Climate Study yielded results indicating that almost 500 students who responded to the survey identify as a student parent. ²Fifty two percent of these student parents identify that they experience financial hardship. Additionally, 33.5% of these parents identify they had difficulty in affording child care (GVSU, 2011a). There are multiple barriers for student parents, undeniably including finances and access to care; the ability to connect to the campus community may be another.

Campus climate and sense of belonging is integral for success for all students, but perhaps even more so for nontraditional students, including student parents. The myGVSU Climate Study indicated that most student parents agree that classroom environments on campus are welcoming, but approximately 17% disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement. Further statistical analysis reveals that student parents are more likely to disagree and say the classroom environment is not welcoming than non-parents (GVSU, 2011b). This reflects a larger pattern for nontraditional students (including student parents) at colleges and universities, where they do not feel a sense of belonging and feel “disengaged or alienated” (Zepeke & Leach, 2010: 172). Education professionals agree that student engagement is pivotal “for high quality learning” (Zepeke & Leach, 2010: 168), and likely a critical component for student parent persistence. Student parent success hinges upon the ability of colleges and universities to both remove barriers and provide an infrastructure of support.

The student parent population in higher education is growing in size and stature. As institutions put the puzzle of reform together, they cannot do so without the important “piece” of student parents, and all nontraditional students. Programs, policies, actions- reform of any shape—must be willing to grow and evolve as the face of colleges and universities change. Constant attention and willingness to be open to the ever changing needs of all students is required as reform, both large and small, takes time to implement (Kuh, 2005).

Many colleges and universities, including GVSU, have demonstrated a commitment to strategies that support retention and student engagement. The research sends a consistent message- deliberate focus on nontraditional students, including student parents, is needed in the effort to promote academic success. If we find the support students need to succeed, they are more likely to commit and continue at universities, thus increasing graduation rates- which is not only a national priority but a GVSU imperative.

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¹For more information on the Grand Valley State University Nontraditional Student Network, visit their webpage at: <http://www.gvsu.edu/nontraditional/>

²While the results are not representative of all student parents at Grand Valley State University (only of student parents that responded to this survey) they are still informative.