# Building Community For Student-Parents And Their Families—A Social Justice Challenge For Higher Education

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> "[My children] belonging to the community mattered more to me than me belonging to one. It would have been nice if we all could have been involved in the same community."
> *Participant's comment in narrative section of student–parent survey conducted Spring 2012*

## Introduction

This research project developed as one outcome of an advocacy effort on behalf of student-parents enrolled at a major public university in the United States. Although the concept of a student parent isn't new it has not been clearly defined or explained in either the literature or research. For the purposes of our discussion, a *student–parent* could have any of the characteristics of the nontraditional student,[1] or could be 18 years old and is balancing the role of parent while attempting to finish a degree. The purpose of this project was to explore the perceptions and demographics of student-parents' at one U.S. university. The paper then expands on the characteristics of student-parents in higher education.

## Background and the waves of nontraditional students and student-parents

Despite the growing number of non-traditional students entering post-secondary education, limited information is available specific to the experience of student–parents within the university culture (Duquaine-Watson 2007; Quinnan 1997; Medved and Heisler 2010). Given that limitation we expanded our search of the literature to include relevant key words such as nontraditional learners, nontraditional students, or mature students (Freeman 2005; Wilson 1997). We found that the inclusion of nontraditional students and student–parents at universities, including the institution where this research occurred, is not a new phenomenon. Taking advantage of the GI Bill immediately following World War II and the Korean War, a surge of diverse older students enrolled at university campuses across the country (Bennett 1996; Quinnan 1997). Bound and Turner (2002) note that World War II vets accounted for 70% of all male enrollment shortly after the war (page 785). Many of these vets brought their families with them. Identified as married students they were initially housed in the World War II remnants of military barracks located on many campuses. Additionally temporary quarters such as trailer parks with shared bathhouse facilities were created (Mettler 2005). These young families changed the appearance of the university, challenged preconceived stereotypes about what type of student could be successful in college, and raised awareness of the need for increased family student housing

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[1] A *nontraditional student* is defined as having delayed entry into post-secondary education but may also be enrolled on a part-time basis, or work full-time. The nontraditional student is often viewed differently in financial aid screenings because of his or her independent status, may have a domestic partner, other dependents, or be a single parent (Freeman 2005).

(Mettler 2005; Bennett 1996). Universities responded and developed family housing programming in apartments as well as other family supports. Often the wives of the veteran students provided an important volunteer role to support services including recreation and cultural events, preschool, and afterschool care in the apartment communities.

The literature suggests that during the decades from 1970 to 1990 there were several waves when nontraditional students and student–parents in higher education gained attention (Hazzard 1993; Polakow et al. 2004; Smith, Deprez, and Butler 2002). One wave occurred during the late 1970s and early 1980s and may have been tied to an economic recession and the loss of traditional jobs. Experienced workers were looking to retrain for a rapidly changing workplace. Similar to the end of World War II and the Korean War, returning veterans from the Vietnam War were looking for education to improve employment options in the public sector. However, Schwartz (1985) suggests that Vietnam veterans did not fare as well as in the higher education environment as World War II and Korean War vets perhaps partly due to reduced military benefits and the unpopular nature of the war.

A survey conducted by the *Chronicle of Higher Education* found that in 1993 over half, 58.2%, of all students were over the age of 22 (Quinnan,1997, page 28). Increasingly, community colleges began to pay attention to the diverse needs of students, particularly women, returning to obtain a degree (White 2001; Duquaine-Watson 2007). The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching projected that higher education was facing mammoth changes. Nontraditional students were seeking to retrain for a new economy more highly reliant on a technology-focused work environment (Newman 1985; Hazzard 1993). The report outlined an ambitious set of recommendations that included providing new student financial-aid programs that could be balanced with work, restoring the full benefits in the GI Bill, increasing ethnic minority participation, and providing more opportunities for students' experiential learning through community service (Newman 1985).

Many of the Carnegie recommendations have been institutionalized into the U.S. university system however, in 1989 a survey of college and university presidents identified that the transformation of higher education was challenging the traditionally accepted concept of community (Boyer 1990). Lack of student involvement was identified as a serious problem (75%, page 48) and more than 60% of respondents indicated that expanding services for nontraditional students was important for improving the campus climate (page 51). The report proposed creating a caring community in which the well-being of each member is supported and community service is encouraged (Boyer 1990). It suggested expanding alternative living–learning communities and hours of operation to accommodate nontraditional students. There was a key emphasis on the importance of faculty and the classroom environment as a foundation for building relationships with students, creating a welcoming climate, and forming lasting bonds that connect students to the university. The report highlighted that, "Community must be built. Thus, a caring community not only enables students to gain knowledge, but helps them channel that knowledge to humane ends" (Boyer 1990, page 54).

Another wave of attention that highlighted student–parents but focused more directly on poverty occurred in the late 1990s with the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) in the U.S. (Polakow et al. 2004; Smith, Deprez, and Butler 2002; Duquaine-Watson 2007). Policy shifted to emphasis a work-first approach and adults receiving Temporary Aid to Needy Families

(TANF) were discouraged from pursuing educational options beyond the high school diploma or GED. Existing students, many of them single mothers, dropped their post-secondary education programs, despite their successful matriculation, to take minimum wage jobs that rarely had benefits.

Some states responded by initiating their own version of TANF to support student–parents, and there was an increased effort to work with researchers to document the beneficial outcomes of higher education as a means to transcend poverty (Polakow et al. 2004; Smith, Deprez, and Butler 2002). For example, the state of Maine created the Parents as Scholars (PAS) program and tried to mirror the former TANF programs that supported higher education. Parents meeting the entrance criteria were enrolled in a structured program that complemented their college pursuits, required full-time student status for the first two years, then allowed for more flexibility during the last two years if school attendance was paired with work. The final year involved preparation for the work transition and included activities such as resume preparation (Smith, Deprez, and Butler 2002). A review of the program pointed to a majority of PAS graduates obtaining higher than average grade point averages and finding jobs at a higher median wage than those who left welfare without a post-secondary education. Additionally, PAS graduates were more likely to have jobs associated with benefits such as health insurance and paid sick leave or vacation time. They expressed increased confidence of job security or the confidence to move to another job if times got tough (Smith, Deprez, and Butler 2002). Parent activism in the state of Kentucky represents another example of resistance to TANF changes and they helped craft House Bill 434. The bill provided greater clarity to all welfare recipients about ways to support their educational choices. The state continued to develop education-friendly policies for families facing poverty such as allowing 24 months of post-secondary education for full-time students without requiring additional work, and a bonus for those who earn their degrees (Miewald 2004).

1. The debate regarding work requirements for welfare recipients continues today suggesting that a multidisciplinary approach that includes economists in this discussion about higher education is critical. Recent analysis of household budget trends for the recent period, being referred to as the Great Recession (approx 2007-2009) (*Chart Book*:.., March 12, 2013), suggest that certain variables or constellation of variables within a family may have buffered the family or alternatively put them at significant financial risk (Emmons & Noeth., 2012). This multidimensional economic view notes that, for example, households with more than one revenue stream, such as two adults working in different economic sectors, or one adult with multiple sector income earning capacity, fared better than one working adult in the household (Emmons & Noeth, 2012; Ravallion, 2011). Although the economic benefits of obtaining a college degree has become an issue of debate given the rising cost of college tuition, currently available research notes that households where the income earner had a college degree fared better than households where there wasn't a college degree (Brusky, Red Bird, Rodriguez, and Wimer, 2013; Aber and Chaudry 2010).

**Promise of Education in a Democracy**

Polakow et al. (2004) and other researchers continue to point toward the positive impact of post-secondary education on families facing poverty and the potential for a degree to change their circumstances, including higher than minimum wage jobs that include benefits (Duquaine-Watson 2007; Quinnan 1997; Smith, Deprez, and Butler (2002). Similarly, other researchers (Bennett 1996; Mettler 2005; Schwartz 1985; Bound &Turner

2002) document that post-secondary education after WWII, when enrollments jumped to more than 50% of their prewar numbers (Bound & Turner, 2002; page 785) increased the economic potential for returning vets. *This period is also described as a democratization of America that helped reengage the academy in civic principles. It opened a pipeline to higher education for a greater number of diverse students and their families, contributing to the culture and climate of higher education. No longer viewed as an option for a privileged few, a student–parent's college degree became a promise for a better future for his or her children and American society.*

**Benefits of including families and children in the higher education community**

Other research in the health and education disciplines point to the importance of parent education and the family environment as critical components of improving children's health and well-being (Hobcraft 1993; Christian, Morrison, and Bryant 1998; Duquaine-Watson 2007). What is less well-known is the long-term impact on children when they are included in the post-secondary community in positive, family-friendly ways. Does their vision of their future broaden when they observe their parents attending school, studying, and successfully obtaining a degree? Do they benefit from living in stable, albeit modest, family housing that is representative of the diversity of the university community? While their parents are students, do the children benefit from having high-quality child care and appropriate access to the enriching cultural experiences—museums and other resources—that are part of the university community?

We can reasonably hypothesize that when children spend part of their formative years in enriching, developmentally appropriate areas within the university community that it would contribute to a pathway that would encourage children's future educational choices (Hobcraft, 1993; Dunst 2000; Dunst and Trivette 2009; Bronfenbrenner 2005). For families moving out of poverty the child's experience could potentially impact his/her choices that improve their family's opportunities for generations. However, there are gaps in the research on these specific questions as they pertain to student–parents and their families.

Comments from parents in programs such as Parents as Scholars (Smith, Deprez, and Butler 2002) suggest that children do benefit from witnessing their parents' school experience. One mother notes, "My two sons respect me for working so hard to go to college. They've gained renewed interest in their own school work as education has become a higher priority in our household. And I know that they are more likely to pursue their own college education now" (Smith, Deprez, and Butler 2002, page 15). Another parent reflects about her college experience. "I have grown as a person and can now be very proud of myself as well as my children. Two of my children were on the honor roll in school, and they have expressed that it is due to all of my influence and watching me study for many years" (Smith, Deprez, and Butler 2002, page 15).

Providing more evidence about the characteristics of the higher education pathway that can positively impact all members of the student–parent family would be a multidisciplinary contribution to research. This line of research may also help institutions of higher education as they revitalize their programs and services to prepare for students in the next decades. It may also provide innovative directions on programs that could positively impact families embedded in a cycle of poverty.(Brusky, et.al. 2013; Aber and Chaudry 2010).

**New Wave of Student–Parents and Today's Promise**

Student–parents are still found within the traditional married or committed partner student configuration but reflecting the changing demographics of our society, there are differences. The student–parent may be single, struggle with poverty, or be a member of an ethnic minority group (Polakow et al. 2004; Duquaine-Watson 2007). There continues to be the steady stream of military veterans making use of their educational benefits after tours abroad, further complicated by a protracted economic recession with people returning to learn new skills to increase employment prospects. The literature tells us that student–parents struggle with access to affordable child care and housing, sufficient finances to continue with their education, and flexibility within their academic programs to make progress in a timely manner. Additionally, they may find themselves in an academic environment in which some faculty and fellow students are supportive but others may be insensitive and even hostile toward the unique needs of student–parents, pushing these students to cope by remaining invisible (Duquaine-Watson 2007, page 234).

**Present Study**

The present study was conducted to provide data to identify the perspectives of student-parents at a major public university in the U.S. There are three primary questions:

**R1:** What is the demographic picture of student–parents at the targeted institution?
**R2:** What are the needs and desired services for student–parents at the target institution?
**R3:** Are there differences in the experiences of student–parents of different groups?

**Method**
**Participants**

Participants were recruited through a targeted email sent to student residence halls and student groups. Students in the undergraduate residence halls were omitted due to administrative constraints. In total, 414 student–parents responded to the survey, with 352 completing the survey in full. For all descriptive and comparative analyses, participants were included if they provided the information relevant to the question at hand. The resulting sample was 52.2% female, 47.3% male, and 0.5% transgendered (two participants). The mean age was 33.5 (SD = 7.16; median = 32; mode = 30; range = 19-41), and the racial composition was 69.3% Caucasian, 12.8% Asian American, 9.6% African American, 6.0% Latino/Latina, 1.5% Bi-Racial, and 0.8% American Indian/Alaska Native. For full demographic detail, please refer to Table 1.

**Measures**

The majority of the items on the 99 question survey were generated from the findings of an advocacy Summit and then rephrased to be a question then put on a 5-point Likert-type scale. Drafts of the questions were reviewed by the research team and disagreements vetted through discussion. A pilot version of the survey was distributed to a convenience sample and adjustments made to the final version.

Needs and desired services were presented by the categories delineated by the 2011 Summit: academics, child care, health care, healthy food, affordable housing, fitness and recreational activities, support for families, and financial management. Participants were asked to provide demographic information and also were asked to indicate what they

believed were the three most pressing issues for student–parents at their university and given the option to provide an open-ended response regarding their feelings and needs.

**Procedure**

Email invitations to participate in an online survey were disseminated, along with one reminder after two weeks. No remuneration was given for participation, and the survey was conducted online. Deans were provided with information about the study and a recruitment email to forward to their college's student listservs. An announcement to watch for the survey was provided once on a campus-wide public announcement listserv. The survey was completely anonymous but at the conclusion of the survey, participants were presented with a list of family-friendly resources within the community and were given the chance to submit their email for future contact about student–parent related opportunities or events.

**Results**

**Definition of Groups and Scales**

In order to help understand the data, groups and factors were created from the numerous variables present. Specifically, a scale was made for each of the eight major categories of needs and desires. The alpha values for these scales ranged between 0.73 and 0.85, with the exception of the fitness scale, which had an alpha of 0.65. In terms of demographic categories for analyses, the following were used: gender, partner status, income, housing, student status, and child status.
Refer to Table 2 for an overview of the categories, as well as group means and standard deviations. It is noted that the two transgendered participants were excluded from statistical analyses due to not having enough participants in the category to produce valid results. Additionally, N values for each group vary slightly due to missing data.

Additionally, the threshold for significance was lowered to compensate for the large number of analyses completed on the dataset. As such, when a comparison is referred to as significant, it indicates that the probably that a reported difference could be due to chance is less than approximately 1 in 120 ($p < 0.009$).

The final question provided an opportunity for participants to expand on issues important to them. These narrative results were combined into one document and read for context and specific content. Overarching themes were identified and narratives reviewed multiple times for clarity and to revise themes as needed. Nine principal themes were identified: academic accommodations, child-friendly spaces, financial support, differing experiences, health insurance, housing, information about available services, work-life-school balance, and understanding.

**Demographic Composition**

The study revealed an interesting and nuanced demographic picture of student–parents at UIUC (R1; Table 1). To highlight some of the most salient characteristics; 84.8% of the sample reported that they are married or cohabitating with a partner, 9.2% reported being single, and 6.0% reported being in a committed relationship. Graduate students comprised 86.8% of the sample. Although 82.7% of participants reported being full-time students, a total of 42.9% reported working either part or full-time. Most participants (54.3%) had only one child, and approximately 15.4 % indicated that they did not live with their children. For housing, 72.8% of participants reported living in off-campus housing, while 16.2% stated that they live out-of-area, and 6.3% reported living in the university

apartments.

**Needs and Desired Services**

***General Impressions and Explanation of Groups.*** Overall, participants endorsed three of the eight categories as being most important by a fair margin: child care (72.4%), academics (61.6%), and financial concerns (54.8%). In comparison, the areas viewed as least important were fitness and recreational space (23.6%), family services (17.6%), and healthy food (6.0%). (However, fitness space that includes child-friendly areas was frequently mentioned in the narrative sections, the details of which are expanded on later in this report.)

***Child Care.*** Child care was the area that participants most commonly rated as the most prominent issue facing student–parents at the targeted university although, as might be expected, higher income households had an easier time than lower income households. While participants indicated that they could access daytime child care, evening and drop-in daycare is not very accessible, and child care in general is very difficult to afford. Participants were very interested in university services providing additional flexible child-care options, as well as subsidized child care, child care close to campus. Women and single parents were more interested in adding evening and drop-in child care than men.

*Narrative Elaboration on Child Care*

In the narrative discussion, participants mentioned the need for child-friendly spaces on the campus that respected racial and ethnic minority groups and included access to fitness and recreation. However, one participant highlights that the lack of affordable child care required that her child live with a relative in another community:

> "Due to the difficulty of keeping my son with me my freshman year…he's been living two hours away with my mother…It's been too difficult to afford to bring him up here since child care is so scarce and expensive here."

Although some participants had spouses or partners as primary child-care providers they still voiced the importance of affordable short-term child care for a couple of hours a day consistent with the flexible student class schedule.

> "I'd really like to see better drop-in child-care options… . For example, this semester all I need is a babysitter for 1.5 hours, twice per week. Not full daycare, but enough care to watch my baby while I'm in class. I can't find this ANYWHERE!"

***Academics.*** Academics was rated as the second most prominent issue for student–parents. Participants reported that having children affects academics, including their ability to complete homework, study, read for classes, meet for group projects, and go to the library. However, participants did not feel that having children affected their ability to attend class, and also that some professors understand how being a parent affects coursework. Participants strongly endorsed that they would be interested in alternative times for evening final exams and were also interested in additional accommodations for nursing and pregnant mothers in buildings.

Women reported that their class and meeting attendance is affected more than men's, and men reported finding it easier to find child-friendly study spaces than women. Low-income households indicated that children impacted their homework, reading, and

study time more than high-income households. In terms of services, women indicated that they would be more interested in accommodations for nursing and pregnant mothers near their classrooms or study areas than men.

*Narrative Elaboration on Academics*

The narrative sections expanded on the theme of academic accommodations and policies, and participants mentioned concern about the lack of flexibility that doesn't consider the challenging balance of family life that student–parents face. One participant notes:

> "For me the most important challenge is about the classes. Single and young students with less responsibilities and parents have to obey the same rules most of the time. There is no flexibility about attendance to the classes or about homework due dates."

> Yet some participants did find their instructors were flexible as one participant highlights:

> "The professors have been good about understanding my need to miss class or have her [the student's daughter] sit in on class. But, that seems to be a personal 'niceness' on their part and not a university policy. Thank you for asking!"

Another participant notes the stress that is placed on families when a graduate program extends for many years, perhaps unexpectedly:

> " … the time required to finish a PhD in the school and the graduate college disregard whatsoever student–parents' needs. New regulations in [student's college] are adding to this burden."

***Financial Concerns.*** Financial concerns were the third highest-rated problem currently facing student–parents. Student–parents indicated that affording school and child care is extremely difficult, that they struggle with the added financial burden, when compared to their peers, having children negatively impacts their discretionary time to earn extra money. However, participants portrayed confidence with money management.

Perhaps not surprisingly, low-income and single student-parent households had a more difficult time with finances than married/cohabitating high-income households, and were more interested in money management materials and seminars.

*Narrative Elaboration on Financial Concerns*

Other comments from the narratives reflected concern from some about how they would manage the debt in the future. One respondent commented:

> "… the fact that financial support is not year-round … is frightening. I honestly have no idea how we will make ends meet [without incurring debt] this summer if I don't get support from my department."

Another student noted:

> "…I work part-time, but the bulk of our income comes from student loans, so while we are not currently in financial distress, we will need to continue to live

very prudently for a long time after we graduate, despite what I hope is a healthy income post-graduation …"

A participant who was a father had an important perspective:

"As a divorced man, who is paying 20% of his small income toward child support, I don't think anyone actually cares that I am struggling financially, and I have no time as well because I am either watching my daughter or working …"

**Housing**. The present sample indicated that housing was an issue of moderate importance. Participants indicated that they were satisfied with their current housing, but did express that it is somewhat difficult to find an adequate apartment that is affordable and close to campus. High-income households had an easier time with their housing than low-income households, graduate students had an easier time than undergraduates, and married or cohabitating participants had an easier time than single students.

*Narrative Elaboration on Housing*

The narrative reports provided a diverse view of student–parents' housing choices including support for current university supported family housing. A number of respondents mentioned owning their own home. However, the views also suggested some confusion about options available, particularly for diverse family configurations, and benefits of various choices. One student–parent responded:

"Campus family housing*(CFH) is a great community full of families, but the rest of campus seems completely shut down to children. Outside of CFH, I never found affordable preschool or afterschool care."

Another participant notes:

"I did not look at university housing since only two-bedroom units were available. I have teen boys and an elementary-aged daughter. They need their own space…. I decided to move to [neighborhood] where I could feel safe that we could make contacts with neighboring families. Since my hours would change every semester, I knew I might need to depend on nearby families."

A single student–parent highlights the struggle of trying to provide both housing and child care:

"Affordable housing is impossible to acquire, the university doesn't pay enough through assistantships to afford the housing prices and care for a child financially. Particularly if you are a single mom."

**Health Care**. For 28.4% of the participants, health care was a priority for student–parents at the University and reflects some of the nationwide issues surrounding health care access in the U.S. Most participants found it relatively easy to find medical care, mental health care, and health insurance for their children, their opinions differed about whether or not the cost of health care for their children was manageable. Lastly, participants worried that when their children were sick, it significantly interfered with their ability to complete

their academic duties. Some participants were in favor of adding medical and mental health coverage for children at the Student Health Center*. When examining the health-care factor, no significant differences emerged within any of the comparison groups.

*Narrative Elaboration on Health Care*

Health care and health insurance were mentioned in the narrative responses sufficiently to develop a unique theme. Comments highlighted confusion about resources available and costs involved with supporting children and spouses. While some student–parents appreciated the resources available through the state to support their children's health care needs, other students felt that they shouldn't have to rely on state-sponsored services but that health insurance options should be sufficiently affordable to allow for payment from the graduate student stipend. Several participants highlighted the expense:

> "Health insurance is very expensive for only one child. Also MANY wellness services are not covered, such as necessary immunizations for my child to attend school in the future."

And another participant notes:

> " … In fact, it is impossible to provide university health insurance based on financial aid available to married students with children …"

This concern is further described by a participant in the context of responsible choices:

> "I would rate health care and financial concerns together as #2, since in my mind, health care is by far the biggest financial concern… . there is no question that the overall cost of health care … is the #1 strain on the family finances. We feel compelled to pay for it because we can, if we sacrifice. …If everyone would improve their own health choices and make some sacrifices to pay for their health-care needs, the overall costs for all of us would go down."

Some participants felt that the student health center should be available for some children's services such as immunization and well-child checks. There was also considerable confusion about what care was covered under the health coverage through the university and also through the state available options for older children and spouses.

***Fitness.*** Fitness was indicated as a priority by 23.6% of the sample. Participants responded that although finding outdoor play areas near campus is not difficult, finding indoor play spaces near campus is more difficult. The sample was split regarding whether or not it was easy to provide fitness opportunities for their children, but none of the quantitative data from our comparison groups were able to explain the difference of opinion. Further, participants responded that it is difficult to find child care so that they themselves are able to exercise. Participants suggested creating more indoor and outdoor play areas, drop-off child care services at student recreation facilities, and structured activities for children's fitness.

*Narrative Elaboration on Fitness*

In the narrative responses, the fitness factor surfaced in the context of a larger theme identifying services and also in the theme of child-friendly spaces. Participants were appreciative of the recreation facilities available:

"The indoor aquatic center at the fitness center* is GREAT for my kids. That's really the only resource on campus I use for them, with the exceptions of a few events per year we go to."

Others noted fitness in the context of child care and access to unique programs offered through special grants:

"…fitness is extremely important to me. Although…, I feel like I'm lacking in keeping my kids fit. My daughter was in the fit for kids afterschool program…and I loved that I knew she was going to be physically active after school. More programs like fitkids that are accessible to children for more than just one year that would be wonderful."

**Family Services.** Student–parents completing the survey did not rank family services as a top-3 issue (17.3% endorsement) but indicated that they had difficulty finding time to socialize with other families and that traditional students do not understand the added challenges a student–parent faces. They indicated that, in general, they do not feel supported as student–parents at the University, and that their children would not be welcome in classes if an emergency were to occur. Participants also did not feel supported when selecting a preschool or school for their children.

Regarding adding services, there was a strong preference for events to meet other student–parents, adding more diaper-changing stations on campus, creating an online community for information and resources, creating a physical space for information and resources, assigning a family-support specialist for connecting services, arranging campus-wide events to increase campus awareness of student–parents to destigmatize being a parent in school. Students living on campus had an easier time with family services than students living off campus. Graduate students scored significantly higher on the family-services factor than undergraduate students.

*Narrative Elaboration on Family Services*

Respondents' narratives noted their appreciation for services provided through existing university-supported family housing. However, they raised concerns that their spouses or partners were isolated or sacrificing their own careers to support the student–parents' academic pursuits and wanted help for them. For example they suggested professional development opportunities, and transportation help appropriate for families suggesting that the university might consider car services similar to what is found in larger cities.

Several participants mentioned that just providing accurate information about existing services would be helpful, especially when student–parents were moving to the area to begin their programs:

"My wife and I figured out virtually every aspect of how to manage my graduate program with our young kids on our own. Particularly early on, …a means of communicating the available resources to student–parents and assistance in planning a strategy for making it through would be of

tremendous benefit. Once you've arrived and are under the demands of grad school, it's much harder to adjust or change plans to manage family life and school. Early and effective communication and assistance to student–parents is key to easing the transition."

Another student–parent who is also a veteran expands:
"Thank you for the survey! I hope these concerns are addressed. Even an online resource for parents to come together and network/share resources would be extremely helpful. As a student–parent and veteran it is very challenging to adapt to campus life."

**Healthy Food.** Healthy food was the least-endorsed as a prominent issue out of all the sections, being selected only 6% of the time. Participants indicated that they have access to and can afford healthy food for their children which was a concern of Summit participants that there may be issues of food insecurity with student-parents. They reported feeling having easy access to cultural foods for their children and didn't feel that dining hall meal plans were necessary for children. As might be expected, higher income households had an easier time with food sufficiency than lower income households.

*Narrative Elaboration on Healthy Food*
The narrative responses did not indicate that providing healthy food options was a significant need for student–parents and their families, or it was identified within the context of child care.

**Other Highlighted Themes from the Narrative Responses**
Several themes emerged in the narratives that raised new issues not expressly identified in the survey: work–life–school balance, differing experiences, and understanding.

**Work–Life–School Balance.** Many of the narrative comments alluded to the challenges of managing a full academic load and the expectations that go along with being a student at a research-one institution, with the responsibilities of family life on a reduced budget:
"The hardest adjustment is time management between school load, work load, and having a family."

However, as one participant indicates, student–parents persevere because they believe it is best for their families:
"…The personal and financial stress level is incredibly high, but we all believe that we're doing the best thing for our families in the long run…"

Several student–parents voiced concerns that this challenging balance was negatively impacting their family life:
"…the family dynamic with one student–parent and spouse left alone for long periods of time and not working at academic capacity…"

Another participant highlights how the stress of trying to balance everything has

been isolating from both peers and faculty:

> "I have found that trying to be a full-time parent and a full-time graduate student has put me behind my peers because of lack of time and resources, isolating me from my peers, but failed to create any solidarity with parenting faculty either …"

***Differing Experiences.*** It was clear from our research that student–parents' experiences varied across departmental contexts. Some found significant support from understanding faculty while others experienced surprisingly hostile incidents. For example one participant notes:

> "…I knew my circumstances when I started, and I rarely asked for extensions. When I did I was met with sympathetic responses, and was able to turn in those things late. I made sure to get them in within the new time frame and not to abuse my professors' kindness…"

Additionally:

> "All my professors were very understanding about my pregnancy and needing extra time to catch up after the birth. (All of them are parents themselves.) I was surprised! Unfortunately I still needed to drop my favorite class in order to keep up in my other classes and my test scores did suffer."

Then, unfortunately, some participants had very troubling experiences:

> "When my youngest was born…I had a professor not excuse me from an in-class assignment the day after his birth (and he was born at 10 pm the night before). The result was that I received a grade one letter grade lower than I would have otherwise."

Some participants suspected that the faculty member's gender played a factor in how they were treated. However, the overview of the narrative comments suggested faculty members' responses seemed more related to the individual's perception of the student–parent's abilities, specific circumstances, or adhering to the departmental rules and policies and were not gender specific. Participants provide the following examples:

> "I have found 3 or 4 male professors who were extremely insensitive to the demands of female students and their responsibilities as mothers. One professor told me, 'I don't think you have a future as a tenure line faculty member. It's nearly impossible to balance being a mom with being a scholar.' I was stunned as I had never allowed my children to interfere with meeting assignments, deadlines, etc. I wonder if he had the same message for fathers?"

Conversely, another participant highlights the following experiences with women:

> "I've had my share of teachers, specifically women who made my experiences as a student–parent horrible….However, in May I will still be able to stand before my family as the FIRST person to ever earn a bachelor's degree. The university needs to make being here more maintainable and friendly for students with children."

There appeared to be consensus that single parents had a significantly more difficult time than student–parents with a partner or family support, particularly if the partner was providing child care or financial support through his or her employment.

"Without the support of my wife (financial and otherwise) it would be impossible to be a student."

It also seemed clear from the narratives that there were differences in college and departmental policies that impacted student–parents' experiences:

"…but the [department] college has been a very difficult college to work with while also being a parent. Their schedule is extremely stringent, and the availability of sick days is very slim. I do not believe that I would have been supported by any of the faculty had I taken days off to care for my children when they were sick … There is, as far as I am aware, no resources for graduate students who are parents, and this was a difficult problem."

Another student–parent in a different college had a more positive experience:

"I really appreciate the diaper-change station in [building] and how understanding [college] staff have been when I need to go in and print off stuff with baby in tow."

***Understanding.*** Another key theme that emerged from the narratives was simply the student–parents' desire to be understood, having somewhere to share stresses and receive affirmation that their challenges were not insurmountable and that the university community cared about their circumstances. One participant highlights:

"…I don't think that people really understand the great stress that single parents are under. I am utterly exhausted so much of the time, but I keep pushing on. I wish I could join the meetings and gatherings, but I can't and I miss out on myriad networking opportunities. I would have welcomed with arms flung wide open the chance of connecting with a mentor or special advisor who could help me navigate the muddy waters single parents (and older students) face. Thank you for asking my opinion. I hope it helps!"

Another participant notes:

"I've figured out what academic load I can handle, and draw the line, and thanks to my advisor for early advice regarding this! But I do feel isolated, even lonely for the company of my peers, and feel guilty about complaining. I'm so very lucky to have this opportunity! But it's not easy to be doing what I'm doing and not have anyone in a similar situation to talk with. I'm in a different place socially than all of the other students around me."

Another student–parent highlights feelings of inadequacy compared to traditional students:

"We often feel inadequate because nonparent students are able to make so much more progress than we are and they often judge you with no consideration or understanding of what it is like to try to accomplish your goals while caring for and loving your children."

This participant's narrative confirms what we learned through the literature review

that some student–parents prefer to remain invisible out of concern that they may face discrimination:

> "I felt I had to hide being a parent my first year out of fear that my professors might assume I couldn't keep up."

Other participants suggested that the university to develop sensible policies that recognize their responsibilities but support student–parents, minimizing vulnerability to different faculty or departments that may misunderstand their situation.

**Discussion**

The present study accomplished the three primary objectives: 1) gain a better understanding of student–parent populations, specifically the demographics of student–parents at the targeted university; 2) learn the difficulties these parents face and which services were most important or desirable to address those difficulties; and, 3) explore whether group differences were significant in the difficulty of certain issues for student–parents. The results provide important insight for future student–parent advocacy and research.

The literature clarified that student–parent populations in post-secondary education have emerged from an initial wave of post-World War II and Korean War veterans. Predominately male, the veteran–students challenged the stereotypical concepts of college students. Universities responded by providing more flexible access to degree programs, instituting broader college-based support services, and beginning to view equity of access to education in new ways (Bennet 1996; Mettler 2005). Armed with their degrees, these new graduates entered an American economy and culture primed for growth, opening new doors of opportunity that changed the landscape of American society. Women and minority groups began to emerge within the student–parent population by the 1980s but with significant challenges to matriculation, particularly after welfare reform in 1996 required a work-first approach (Polakow et.al. 2004; Smith, Deprez, and Butler 2002). Reform has been successful in reducing welfare ranks but not reducing poverty levels (Stone 2007). Furthermore the restrictions on allowable post-secondary education for TANF recipients has undermined opportunities for access to degree programs that could convert to higher paying jobs with benefits as a pathway out of poverty (Stone 2007; Smith, Deprez, and Butler 2002). The result of these reform efforts and other financial pressures may be that college students today work more that students of previous generations. A recent Public Agenda report (Johnson et al. 2009) has expanded on these differences in college students noting that 45% of today's college students work more than 20 hours a week and 23% have dependent children, challenging misconceptions about the characteristics of college students (page 3).

At the target institution, the results of the survey indicated that student–parents are relatively split in terms of gender.  They are predominantly married or cohabitating, 85% live with their children, and nearly a fifth of the student–parent population are international students.  The vast majority of student–parents identified in the survey are graduate students, but it is important to note that the survey was not disseminated to undergraduates residing in residence halls. Every college at the target university was represented in the current sample with the exception of the Institute of Aviation.  In terms of work and income, 20% of student–parents reporting are unemployed and another 20%

work more than 40 hours per week.  Only 60% are employed by the university. Some have their incomes supplemented by a spouse or partner who is not a student. For their efforts, approximately 48% of student–parent households make less than $30,000 per year. Lastly, more than 85% of student–parents have one or two children.

The literature clarified that the student–parent experience has been rocky for many, very rewarding for some, but their experiences could be improved if certain services were supported through the university culture. High on the list of requested services is child care (Miewald 2004; Duquaine-Watson 2007). In a survey of students who left higher education before they obtained a degree, Johnson et al. (2009) indicated that 76% (page 20) of all students responded that providing day care for student–parents would help significantly in completing a degree. This result reflects considerable support for child care even from students who were not parents. Flexible, high-quality, and affordable child care was a prominent issue, and this sentiment was enriched through the narrative comments. The lack of child-friendly spaces prevented some student–parents from bringing their children to the university community, opting to leave them in the care of family members residing in distant areas. Although it is not unusual in cultures in the United States and abroad to have family members care for children for extended periods of time while parents seek economic opportunity elsewhere, it is rarely the first choice of parents. It is a choice of necessity that in some cases borders on desperation as families attempt to balance economics and their children's best interests. This practice may have a significant, unpredictable impact on children's development, parents' emotional well-being, and family dynamics.

Lack of flexible, child-friendly spaces also prevented student–parents from fully accessing healthy lifestyle and other resources normally available for all students, such as recreation facilities, or enjoying those services with their families. Lack of flexible child care precluded them from participating in evening academic activities. Accessible child care for sick children was highlighted as particularly important. Interrupted or undependable child care arrangements were identified as a potential source of tension between faculty members and student–parents when parenting responsibilities interfered with academic responsibilities. The implementation of more child-friendly spaces on campus was viewed as an important positive step to support student–parents and their children.

A second area of prominent concern was academic flexibility, identified as academic impact in the survey.  Student–parents felt that faculty members often did not understand their unique stresses if they had to miss a class or were delayed in an assignment because of a family emergency (Medved and Heisler 2010; Smith, Deprez, and Butler 2002). Offering classes at alternative evening or weekend times seemed helpful for some but challenging for others if it conflicted with their 8-to-5 child-care arrangements (Duquaine-Watson 2007; Smith, Deprez, and Butler 2002). Moving to provide more academic resources via the Internet, which might include online classes but also study resources, was widely viewed as being helpful (Johnson et al. 2009). However just as important in the academic impact theme was the desire for student–parents to see consistent policies or practices or perhaps a university office upon which they could rely as they attempted to balance academia with a healthy family life. While some faculty were understanding and supportive, it was clear that some student–parents felt vulnerable to faculty interpretation of policy and didn't know where to turn if they believed they were being treated unfairly.

Participant responses about adequate health care for family members of students not only reflected gaps where university communities could take responsibility but were perhaps systemic of issues impacting our larger society. Students have access to medical insurance,

and dependent students may still be covered under their parents' policies, but spouses and children of students are left with confusing choices. While some participants resisted the idea of government support aligned with welfare or low-income subsidies, others appreciated it when they could access social-support programs for their children. Additionally their comments echoed the persistent theme of isolation because resources for university students do not reflect the reality of student families today, since medical services available through resources such as the student health center represent the narrow view that students are young singles. Left exposed in the quagmire of options are children and unemployed spouses of university students. Thoughtful approaches to providing adequate health care and information about available resources need to be considered.

Financial strain was the third most prominent issue for student–parents in our survey, was a persistent source of concern reflected in the participants' narratives, and resonated throughout the literature (Polakow et.al. 2004; Quinnan 1997; Smith, Deprez, and Butler 2002; Soss, Hacker, and Mettler 2007). Johnson et al. (2009) identified "having to work…" as the foremost reason that students leave college without a degree, and the affordability of tuition and textbooks and other fees as major barriers for all students, including graduates (page 7). It was clear that a typical student–parent's long daily schedule requires juggling academics, work, and family life, and has little connection to the popular media portrayals of carefree college students.

The GI Bill was as an exceptionally effective mechanism for opening opportunities for World War II and Korean War veterans, and provided a framework for equitable access to education. Subsequent programs have whittled away at the available resources, reducing flexibility and lagging behind the rising cost of higher education (Mettler 2005; Bound and Turner 2002; Schwartz 1985). Unfortunately our current smorgasbord of grant, financial aid programs, and welfare reform stipends do not adequately address the expenses of student–parents supporting dependents (Polakow et.al. 2004; Stone 2007). Our survey results showed that income level presented a significant group difference. Partner status was also a strong predictor for group differences; married or cohabitating parents reported having less difficulty in multiple areas as compared to single parents or parents in a committed relationship but not living in the same home.

The narrative responses expanded on the appreciation that student–parents felt for their partners. They may be carrying the burden of child care, finances, and full-time work, and experiencing the social isolation of living within a university environment without being formally connected to the community. Similarly, there was recognition that single student–parents had a significantly tougher road.

**Recommendations**

> "As a student–parent and veteran, it is very challenging to adapt to campus life. It would be nice to see similar support resources for parents as there are for veterans." *Comment from student–parent participant, survey 2012*

The review of the literature on the growing number of student–parents, the importance of higher education as a pathway out of poverty, and the results of the survey suggest further consideration of the following recommendations. Several of the recommendations would require a commitment of resources. However, the other recommendations could be accomplished through increased collaboration of existing student

services and developing ways for the university to think differently about the nature of their student population and the important contribution of student-parents in higher education.

**1. Create a Web-based information and resource page for student–parents.** A Web resource, accessible from the university's home page, that notes housing options, child-care resources, health-care options, financial-aid questions specific to student–parents, and other university family-friendly opportunities. The link should be provided to all accepted students—freshmen through graduate students—sent directly from the admissions office, asking that all student–parents register to receive regular updates on resources or join relevant support groups. It would then be widely disseminated to raise awareness of support and services for students who may become parents after their initial enrollment.

2. **Increase access to affordable, flexible child care and improve the university environment through creation of more child-friendly spaces.** Participants indicated that affordable child care is in high demand. The spectrum of child-care options should be explored, including the reinstitution of cooperative child-care networks, originating from the 1960s, that reflect the needs of 21st century student–parents and their families. In tandem with providing flexible child care is expanding child-friendly spaces within and around the university community. We make this recommendation with full knowledge and awareness that recent child-abuse allegations at another large public university may be pushing institutions to move away from supporting children within the university atmosphere. We feel strongly that this would be a reactionary approach that is not in the best interests of children, or student–parents. Working collaboratively with all departments, university area community organizations and businesses would be helpful in creating new spaces and in developing understanding about the characteristics of a welcoming atmosphere for student–parent families and their children.

3. **Identify a university office and create a university position responsible for student–parents and their families.** The persistent theme that student–parents did not know where to turn when they faced difficulties suggests the importance of creating an available transparent resource consistent with the diversity mission of the institution. Taking a proactive stance, a student–parent office could be a friendly resource for the spectrum of concerns identified including health care, financial aid, and child care, but also could provide training for campus departments and faculty on student–parents, advising on how to intercede when challenging issues arise. The office also would be helpful in dissuading stereotypical perceptions of the student–parent populations, could begin to scaffold a framework of research specific to student–parent populations in higher education.

4. **Establish academic policies and practices that are responsive to the issues faced by student–parents.** The changing profile of student–parent families suggests the importance of ongoing dialogue about creating policies and practices that respond to student–parents today. Working with a newly established office and a student–parent advisory board as well as institutionalizing semiannual surveys of the student–parent population are important initial steps.

5. **Create an innovative, whole-family initiative to support undergraduate student–parents pursuing education as a pathway out of poverty.** The obstacles for

obtaining a post-secondary degree are increasing and the promise of obtaining a fulfilling job with benefits are slipping away from many, but particularly those with a family history of economic vulnerability. Developing a program that recruits and supports, through resources and services, student–parents and their families who would otherwise not have access to higher education is an exciting and reasonable extension of a public institution's core mission. It also responds to the research suggesting that higher education may provide a pathway out of poverty for those people with multi-dimensional risk indicators. Where student–parents' and their children's education are addressed in tandem, the potential for changing the course of future generations is compelling.

6. **Create a new residence area within walking distance from campus that has the flexibility to support different configurations of student–parent families.** University housing has been included in a number of exciting renovations to revitalize university living–learning areas. Student–parents and their families should be integral to that conversation and given full consideration in plan developments. Goals should include identifying additional, affordable housing closer to the central areas of the university that encourage healthy communities for the spectrum of student–parent families.

7. **Increase financial-aid literacy, financial support, and health-care insurance and delivery options for student–parents.** Recommendations one and three—a Web-based resource and a specific student-affairs position—will be important for increasing knowledge of available financial-aid resources at the beginning of the student—parent's experience at the university. However, the prevalence of financial concerns, including health-care options, both from survey respondents and in the literature suggests that a unique recommendation is warranted. One step to address financial literacy is to identify a financial-aid position with expertise on options for student–parents. A second step to help address health insurance and health delivery within the context of financial aid and affordability is to convene a diverse group to assess annually how student–parents' financial and health-care needs are being addressed. Identifying and understanding critical gaps and evaluating how the university can reasonably bridge those gaps to create a comprehensive financial and health-care support packet for student–parents is also requested, as we anticipate gaps may periodically vary. We also request that, in collaboration with the Foundation, a separate fund be established to specifically respond to student–parent financial support, a fund easily accessible for recommended purposes as needs arise.

**Limitations**

This is the first known attempt to identify the prevalence of student–parents and their unique perspectives within the targeted university system, and several department leaders involved with helping facilitate the research expressed some confusion about the scope of the research project. This was addressed through ongoing dialogue and discussion to increase understanding of the goals of the project, which were centered around information gathering and then appropriate awareness and advocacy. Although the research team had hoped to survey all students, the students in the undergraduate residence halls were omitted due to constraints on the maximum number of students that could be contacted. After considerable dialogue, it was determined that the percentage of student–parents living in these residence halls would most likely be low and a compromise for recruitment was reached. However, we fully acknowledge that we may not have results

from student–parents who are undergraduates and live at the university without their children. We hope that this restriction will be removed for future surveys of the same population. Another possible limitation is that the resource-restricted environment raised concerns that potential recommendations would not be achievable. While the research team respected this challenge, we made every effort to accurately portray the concerns of student–parents as reflected in the survey results.

Although it isn't a limitation but is rather the reflection of the magnitude of the concern and the goodwill of those involved, it is important to note that the research team's senior leadership volunteered their time for this project. A small grant was provided to two upper-level students to help facilitate the project so that it could be completed within one academic year. Future survey efforts should be institutionalized with a multidisciplinary guidance group to facilitate ongoing support for student-parent families.

## Summary

In summary, the present study represents a significant step toward understanding the demographic makeup, priorities, and needs of student–parents. The student–parent population has long been underserved, and as our knowledge about them grows, so will our ability to facilitate their education and help create a hospitable environment for both students and their families.

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