

Equal Access: Challenges Faced by Student Parents in Higher Education

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Abstract

This paper explores the challenges unique to student parents in higher education. These college students are simultaneously taking advantage of their rights to education and to founding a family, but to what degree should their challenges be considered a human rights issue? Since research on student parents is limited, this paper primarily examines inequalities in funding sources for higher education, analyzes why they exist, and looks at what impact they have. Ultimately, this analysis shows that the playing field is not level for student parents in the realm of higher education and that there are several practical solutions to helping this group achieve academic success.

Considering society's negative perception of young parents, it may be surprising that nearly a quarter of American undergraduate students are the parents of dependent children. What may be less surprising, but equally problematic, is that half of student parents are single parents. While the rate of student parents is highest at community colleges, where 29.2 percent are student parents on average, there is a significant portion of student parents at four-year institutions. In this setting, 13.1 percent of students are parents (Miller, 2010). One may struggle to imagine how it is possible to take on two of life's most stressful yet rewarding challenges: higher education and parenthood. A 2003 study by the U.S. Department of Education showed that the challenge is insurmountable for many. Nearly 50 percent of student parents at any institution type dropped out and did not complete an undergraduate degree

within six years of beginning their program; this incompleteness rate is only 31 percent for non-parents (Miller, 2010). In order to better understand the human rights implications of this issue, this paper will explore challenges that are unique to student parents. These college students are simultaneously taking advantage of their rights to education and to founding a family, but to what degree should their challenges be considered a human rights issue? The aim of this paper is to highlight existing research and engage with this important question.

Human Rights & Challenges to Consider

There are several rights outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) that are relevant to the issues surrounding student parents. First is the right to found a family, as outlined in Article 16. The right to have children is important because “the family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society,” and therefore is entitled to protection. The other article that is directly relevant in this case is Article 26, the right to education. While the Declaration states that only elementary education must be free and compulsory, it acknowledges that for individuals of good merit, higher education should be equally accessible. While Articles 16 and 26 are fundamentally the two most relevant rights for student parents, several other articles may be applicable in practice; Articles 2 and 7 have to do with the universal nature of human rights and freedom from discrimination. Students may be treated differently if they are also parents, and even different demographics may have an impact on how the individual is treated. For example, single mothers may have different financial aid situations than single fathers. Article 25 articulates the right to an adequate standard of living, which includes the right to “necessary social services.” Article 25.2 goes on to extend the right to “special care and assistance” to motherhood and childhood (United Nations General Assembly, 1948). With these fundamental rights in mind, this paper now explores several issues relevant for student parents pursuing higher education.

Financial Issues for Student Parents

Student parents face a range of financial challenges. First, children are expensive. In 2012, the annual cost of full-time childcare was anywhere between \$3,900 to \$15,000 USD based on location, type of care, and the child's age (Costello, 2014). These costs – on top of food, transportation, diapers, personal care items, school supplies, and all of the other miscellaneous expenses that come with having a child – make for a huge financial commitment, regardless of whether or not the parent(s) is a student. Second, higher education is becoming increasingly expensive. Ten years ago, the average U.S. public two-year in-state tuition and fees for one year amounted to \$2,897; \$6,120 for public four-year in-state institutions; and \$21,775 for private nonprofit four-year institutions. In the 2013-2014 school year, tuition and fees averaged \$3,711, \$8,596, and \$27,352, respectively. These figures represent a 28 percent increase for two-year schools, a 40 percent increase for public four-year schools, and a 26 percent increase for private nonprofit schools (College Board, 2014). The increasing cost of higher education can also be seen in trends of student loan balances; the average student loan debt for a household in the United States increased from \$23,349 to \$26,683 – an increase of 14 percent – from 2007 to 2010 (Costello, 2014).

Finding ways to cover the cost of parenthood and education independently is difficult enough for many, but paying for both simultaneously raises issues that are unique to student parents. In order to cover these costs, student parents often have to rely on working while attending school. Yet more than three-quarters of single student parents are low-income, which indicates that they are not meeting these financial needs through job-related income alone (Nelson et al., 2013). Student parents may have a more difficult time holding a job because of their need for a flexible schedule. While most students have to balance school, homework, and maybe a job or extracurricular activities, student parents have to balance all of these with raising children and being available any time an emergency comes up. In order to succeed, most student parents need a job with predictable yet flexible schedules so they are

not asked to come in last-minute, but they are also not expected to work during a time that conflicts with class or childcare availability (Reichlin & Gault, 2014). Despite the challenges that come with holding a job, student parents on average work five more hours per week (Reichlin & Gault, 2014) and have higher grade point averages than nonparents (Nelson et al., 2013). Even though student parents work more hours, they still need more financial aid for school than they are receiving. After all forms of financial aid are considered, including federal loans, 85 percent of full-time student parents and two-thirds of part-time student parents have unmet financial need (Huelsman & Engle, 2013). Single student parents on average are unable to cover \$5,507 in educational costs, compared to \$3,156 for nonparents (Costello, 2014).

Government Financial Support

For any undergraduate student, the basis of U.S. federal financial aid eligibility is the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). One of the most important numbers on the FAFSA is the Expected Family Contribution (EFC), which represents the amount of money a student's family is expected to put toward their education. Since student parents typically claim dependent children, they are more likely to have lower EFC values. Lower EFC scores increase eligibility for both subsidized and unsubsidized federal loans, as well as grants (Huelsman & Engle, 2013). Nearly two-thirds of single student parents have an EFC of zero while only 20 percent of nonparents receive such a low score (Nelson et al., 2013). A student parent with an especially low income and certain circumstances may qualify for a simplified EFC calculation, which allows them to exclude certain assets from the calculation. In effect, this lowers the EFC score and increases the individual's chances of receiving more financial aid (Huelsman & Engle, 2013). However, the simplified ECF does not result in aid above the maximum award for the neediest students, regardless of whether or not the student is a parent (Huelsman & Engle, 2013).

There are two main types of aid made available for students: loans and grants. In 2007-2008, 63 percent of student parents took out federal loans while only 46 percent of nonparents used loans. Grants are more desirable to students because they do not have to be repaid. Despite the fact that many students – especially student parents – rely on grants, the criteria for how they can be used is narrowing. Year-round grants were eliminated in 2011, which keeps students from being able to fund classes during the summer. Summer classes may be important to student parents, as they often need a flexible schedule. Previously, students could receive grants for up to nine years, but are now only eligible for six years. This is especially problematic for student parents because their circumstances make it more likely to need more time to complete a degree since so many are only able to enroll part-time. On the state funding level, student parents are equally as likely to receive grants as nonparents. However, the aid amount tends to be higher for nonparents than for student parents (Huelsman & Engle, 2013). This is surprising, considering that student parents tend to have both a higher amount of unmet financial need and higher GPAs than nonparents (Nelson et al., 2013). These inequalities in student funding support the idea that it is disproportionately difficult for a parent of a dependent child to access higher education.

One way the U.S. government specifically offers financial support to student parents is through the Department of Education's Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS) program. This grant-based program helps institutions set up on-campus childcare for student parents. In order to receive a CCAMPIS grant, the total of federal grant funds received by students for financial aid must be \$350,000 or greater (Huelsman & Engle, 2013). In other words, the program tends to be geared toward institutions with higher enrollment or a larger proportion of students with higher financial need. How the grant is used is up to the receiving institution. Funds could be used to compensate daycare employees, pay for facilities, or provide supplies. In 2001, the CCAMPIS program received \$25 million nationwide. In 2012, that budget shrank to \$16 million (Whissemore, 2013). Although the flexibility of

the CCAMPIS program may allow for campus-by-campus customization, it leaves a lot of room for the neglect of best practices. There is not enough research available that illustrates how the funding is typically used, or what methods could most cost-effectively help student parents. More work should be done to determine if the CCAMPIS program is designed in the best possible way to help student parents.

Lastly, the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) is a U.S. federal subsidy distributed to each state to provide childcare to low-income families. While states have a lot of flexibility in how they can set up programs, most tend to give vouchers to families who can use them at certain childcare providers (Huelsman & Engle, 2013). While this program is not specifically for student parents, it is a resource available to many. Since childcare is a huge expense, the CCDF program surely helps to alleviate some financial stress and level the playing field for student parent recipients.

Title IX

Of course, these financial resources are only helpful to student parents if they are able to get into and stay in school. Title IX of the Educational Amendments Act of 1975 is a law that outlines several forms of discrimination. This is specifically relevant to student parents' human rights, since freedom from discrimination is outlined in human rights frameworks such as the UDHR. Relative to student parents, Title IX specifies that student parents must have equal access to school programs, extracurricular activities, and fair treatment. It also requires schools to give adequate make-up time for absences excused by a doctor for the purposes of pregnancy and childbirth (Costello, 2014), but it does not make this distinction for parenthood-related absences after recovery from childbirth (Huelsman & Engle, 2013). Necessary reasons for absences that are not included in the policy may be illness of the child, lack of childcare, court appointments for custody, or typical parental supportive functions, like attending a parent-teacher conference, a sporting event, or a recital. Title IX prohibits discrimination against parents as an extension of not allowing discrimination based on sex, but does not specify exactly

what is considered discrimination. The vagueness of Title IX in terms of how student parents are treated leaves a lot of cracks for this group to fall through. The parent of a sick child may need to be absent from class more often than the mother of a healthy newborn, but is not afforded the same protection for excused absences under the law (Huelsman & Engle, 2013).

University-Based Assistance

Although student parents make up a significant portion of the student body, most schools are unaware of how many parents are enrolled. Few institutions are proactive in addressing the needs of student parents (Nelson et al., 2013). One area where this lack of understanding is particularly evident is in institutional-based financial aid. Nonparent students are twice as likely to receive institutional-based financial aid – either merit-based or need-based – than student parents. In 2007-2008, only 6.1 percent of student parents received merit-based financial aid from their school compared to 23.5 percent of nonparents with dependent status (Huelsman & Engle, 2013). These numbers seem to be disproportionate, considering that student parents tend to have both a higher amount of unmet financial need and higher GPAs than nonparents (Nelson et al., 2013), as previously mentioned. This could be a sign of several different issues. One may be that student parents are unaware of financial opportunities available to them and how to apply; this communication issue could be solved with more proactive measures on behalf of the school. Another possibility is that there is discrimination against student parents, whether it is intentional or not. Many merit-based scholarships require application materials that may indicate that an applicant has a dependent child, including essays, references, or interviews. The latter possibility would definitely be an indication of a Title IX issue and a human rights issue, but there is not currently enough evidence to support that; more research is sorely needed. The low rate of institutional merit-based proportional to GPA should at least be considered a red flag.

One of the biggest ways institutions can help student parents is by assisting with childcare. A survey of student parents at community colleges found that childcare was the first priority when choosing a college. Not only does provided childcare relieve a financial burden and make going to school more convenient, on-campus childcare helps student parents to network and get parenting support. On average, student parents with access to on-campus childcare performed 26 percent better than the average student (Miller, 2010). Despite these benefits, only 17 percent of colleges offer on-campus childcare to student parents (Costello, 2014). The capacity for childcare at community colleges is only enough to provide for 10 percent of student parents on average (Institute for Women's Policy Research); this rate is only 5 percent for all institution types combined. The average waiting list for an on-campus childcare is 85 percent of the total capacity of the facility. Although these figures make it evident that the need for on-campus childcare is not currently being met, these opportunities are actually decreasing. The number of institutions offering on-campus childcare dropped 3 percent from 2001 to 2008 (Miller, 2010). The number of community colleges with this type of care dropped 10 percent from 2002 to 2012 (Nelson et al., 2013). These trends are likely due to the cuts in CCAMPIS program and the problems with the U. S. economy in general.

Recommendations

As outlined above, there are several challenges that are unique to student parents. Although human rights frameworks such as the UDHR recognize rights to education and family, the question remains whether inequalities and challenges faced by student parents constitute human rights issues. When it comes to access to higher education for all, including student parents, freedom from discrimination is a key problem to consider here. This raises the question of who, if anyone, is responsible for leveling the playing field for student parents. The answer is simple: everyone can help.

Since there are so many issues student parents face, there are several gaps in assistance that need to be filled.

Research Student Parents

The first solution is to conduct more research on student parents. Most of the available studies trace back to one research organization, the Institute for Women's Policy Research. While they have lots of studies and reports available on the subject, they have only begun to scratch the surface. In order to approach more solutions to problems of student parents, there need to be more nationwide, regional, and school-specific studies conducted. On top of simply finding how many student parents exist and what their needs are, there should be more data on gender, race, economic status, location, and age of student parents in order to more fully understand their circumstances.

Invest in Student Parents

As highlighted previously, student parents are often disproportionately deterred from higher education for financial reasons. Governments, schools, and other institutions that offer financial support to students can step up to help provide for student parents. These groups can all help to provide student parents with more scholarships, grants, and loans to offset the cost of education. They can create or increase resources for programs that assist with childcare, whether it completely pays for the care or is simply used to create affordable daycares that are in closer proximity to college campuses. Along with on-campus daycare, another option would be to offer family-style student housing. Minimizing trips off-campus can help student parents simplify their schedules and reduce travel expenses.

At first, it may seem unrealistic to ask for more financial support. Programs like CCAMPIS are being cut because of economic concerns (Whissemore, 2013). Investing in student parents is a tough sell. However, increasing graduation rates is helpful for everyone involved, not just the graduates.

Universities value high rates of degree completion. College graduates contribute to the health of the economy, so it is in the government's best interest to invest in the economy's future by helping students. Since student parents are at a higher risk of not graduating – and they make up such a significant part of the student population – it would be a worthwhile investment.

Communicate with Student Parents

Because of the limited research in the area, it is unclear whether student parents have limited access to resources because they are not available or because they do not know they exist. An easy fix to this problem is to have communications that focus directly on this group, ranging from websites, pamphlets, seminars, or offices dedicated to student parent success. These can and should be made available by governments, schools, and other education and financial aid organizations. Because student parents tend to demonstrate more financial need, it is important that they understand their financial resources for both education and parenthood. These include FAFSA; CCDF; Women, Infants, and Children (WIC); institutional financial aid; and SNAP or food stamps. Schools should also ensure that student parents are fully aware of resources on campus, ranging from childcare opportunities, family housing options, counseling, career services, and on-campus clinics. While some of these resources are available to all students on campus, this group may be more likely to need them. Communication should not be a one-way effort. These institutions should also seek to understand the student body population. All of these efforts will be in vain if the programs developed are not benefiting student parents in practice. Do not make assumptions. Instead, keep in contact with student parents and, as suggested previously, conduct formal research.

Accommodate Student Parents, Without Compromising Academic Integrity

All financial and logistical challenges aside, student parents are disadvantaged because of their need for flexible scheduling and extra absences. Even if student parents were excused from all of their missed classes related to issues with their children, this would still be a disservice to them because they are not learning as much or getting the same academic challenge. Instead, schools can offer a variety of flexible scheduling options that will benefit everyone, but especially student parents. Instead of just offering traditional semester-long classes, offer classes that are accelerated or stretched out for two semesters. Create more online learning opportunities and integrate them into the traditional tuition payment programs. Also consider making online classes self-paced and vary in duration. Funding sources, especially government programs, should seek to accommodate these flexible class offerings. A good start would be to increase funding for summer classes. Of course, these options may not be enough. Sometimes absences are still necessary. Schools should encourage professors to be lenient with absences, makeup policies, and extra credit if a student parent shows that they are willing to take responsibility for their learning and schoolwork.

Conclusion

It is clear that student parents face challenges that are unique because of their two important roles as both students and parents. Student parents, on average, have higher unmet financial need in terms of educational costs than their nonparent counterparts. They may have higher access to federal student financial aid, but are underrepresented when it comes to state and institutional aid. Their legal protection from discrimination is vague. On top of all of these things, university-based programs for student parents – such as childcare – are not considered necessities, and are shrinking. The issue of student parenthood is not clear-cut like some other human rights issues, where there is a clear right to clean water or personal security. Although the UDHR proclaims a right to education, it does not

necessarily extend to higher education. The issue here is that the student parents do not have the equal access to higher education that nonparents have. To begin to level the playing field for student parents, there needs to be more research on the subject, more investment, more communication, and more accommodation for this group. These actions will only be a small step in the right direction. As there is very little information available on this problem that applies to nearly a quarter of college students in the United States, there is much work that needs to be done before student parents have equal access to higher education.

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