

College Student Mother Needs at Regional Campuses: An Exploratory Study

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This exploratory study ascertains the needs and retention barriers of college student mothers at regional campuses of a rural Midwestern university. Regional and rural campus faculty offered hunches and opinion-estimates to suggest that over 50% of the university regional campuses enrollments are student mothers with children under the age of 18 years. The purpose of this study was to assess what student mothers say they need as campus services. The researchers emailed an on-line survey instrument and gathered relevant data directly via a paper survey from 237 volunteer participants at three regional campuses. The data is compared to the themes about student mothers found in the literature.

Regional campuses, because of their smaller size and more personalized environments, can play an important role in making it possible for lower income mothers to access, matriculate, and graduate with a higher education degree and have an opportunity for upward economic mobility. The Community College Survey of Student Engagement (2005) authors and Cunningham (2002) explored nontraditional undergraduates and their college choices and noted most students aged 24 and over and especially students with lower income categories attended lower priced two-year colleges. This is especially the case of college students in the Appalachian region as its citizens and students tend to be “the new traditional student” and the “student mother.” Across the United States and the world (Scott, Burns, & Cooney, 1998) the fastest growing and largest population of college students is over 24 years of age and female (Husser & Bailey, 2011). Adair (2001) asserted that college student mothers can only benefit from the accessibility of supportive factors in order to raise aspirations for the next generation. Adair called for financial, material, familial, cultural, and pedagogical assistance for college student mothers to promote success.

Discussion

Student mothers seem to be an ignored special needs population because some traditional campus administrators are concentrating on the former model of educating 18-24 year-old single students who are recent high school graduates. The traditional college student has typically received an array of services designed to support integration into college. These services are not especially helpful to the nontraditional student who may leave campus in between or directly after classes to fulfill family and economic responsibilities. Family, maternal, and financial aid needs for college student mothers have been ignored by many main campus offices and educational institutions, creating a situation where student mothers are at risk for academic failure or dropping out of college (Tinto, 1975, 1982, 1986, 1987, in Tinto, 1988). Tinto (1988) theorized that student persistence could be compared to three stages: separation, transition, and incorporation, similar to the Van Gennep anthropological philosophy of "rites of passage." According to Tinto, the first stage, separation, may not be applicable to the persistence of students who stay home in order to attend college as they are not disengaged from their families or communities. Students who stay at home to attend community colleges may also not find the community college experience as rewarding socially and intellectually and may have other factors that prevent persistence when compared to students who attend a distant college (Tinto, 1988). In the transition stage, Tinto hypothesized that students who are not traditional are more prone for problems as there exists additional stressors in influence their persistence due to failure to perceive the many changes and lack of integration or involvement in campus life. New students are not necessarily integrated into the society of college, according to Tinto, and thus a membership into collegial relationships may be inhibited (Tinto, 1988).

According to Gilligan (1982) gender-sensitive researchers have informed readers that women are more likely to place higher values on relationships, connectedness, and networking and therefore may become more satisfied with feeling part of the "university family." These values present "conflicting demands" of family, work, and college (Baber & Monaghan, 1988). Many daily-life necessities create a distraction from academics for these students and time management becomes a priority. This is especially an issue for student mothers who have significant childcare and family demands that lessen the amount of available time for engagement.

The aim of this study was to gather data about college student mothers perceived needs and barriers to a college degree. Due to the limited scope of this study, not all of the barriers and needs of college student mothers were explored. The first hypothesis was that a large number of college student mothers would report child care as a predominant need. Another hypothesis was that college student mothers would report struggles in juggling work, college, and family responsibilities.

Themes of Barriers to College Student Persistence

A literature review of college student mothers revealed five main themes about college student mothers. The first theme is that non-traditional students appear to be marginalized from mainstream campus environments (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006). Since the early 1980's, non-traditional students spend very little time on campus and rush to campus for classes and immediately leave campus after classes to fulfill family, marital, and economic responsibilities. Student engagement in campus activities is positively related to persistence (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2002). Authors have concluded that non-traditional students are marginalized by both other younger students and the institutional social or academic environment of college campuses (Kuh et al.). It has been hypothesized that some college campuses are not family friendly places and have policies that actually work against student parents in being active participants in campus life, such as timing of academic activities and scheduling sequential required classes during peak family times, therefore delaying a timely matriculation to a degree (Astin, 1999; Hungerford & Kramer, 2005; Siebert, 2006; Tinto, 1993).

The second theme is the lack of child care for student parents. There are many references in the literature of surveys noting child care issues are a significant barrier for student parents (Kuh et al., 2006). Many colleges do not address the availability of child care in conjunction with class scheduling (Kuh et al.). It is reported that the vast majority of colleges do not offer student parents available, accessible or affordable campus daycare, after school programs on campus or baby-sitting services. This is especially significant for the scheduling of evening classes and necessitates student mothers having to make and organize their own arrangements for evening child care and supervision. In support of the notion that child care is important to the retention and successful outcomes via graduation rates, several researchers suggested that there could be significant increases in

graduation rates, lower drop-out rates, speedier matriculation to a degree, and increased campus participation (Bates Parker, 1998) if child care services are offered to student parents/mothers (Burns & Gabrich, 2003; Gonchar, 1995; Hungerford, 2006; Scott & Burns, 1998; Siebert, 2006; Williams, 2002). Barber and Monaghan (1998) reported that most of the 250 unmarried women in a convenience sample reported delaying child rearing as a possible strategy when considering career expectations and future choices.

The third theme is that college student mothers have more personal stress and role overload. Personal stresses are recurring themes in the literature. One author indicated that there is a significant amount of role diffusion for student parents/mothers such as work (Di, 1996). This is especially the case for lower income student mothers. Their inability to juggle spouses, boyfriends, children, finances, and academic success creates a “super mom syndrome” which can create guilt and low self-esteem and be a distraction to focusing on academics. Many student mothers are reported to realize the importance of an education for economic betterment yet cannot fulfill and be an exemplar student, mother, or marital role all at the same time. This role overload creates high levels of personal stress and researchers report that it is a significant factor for student mothers to drop-out of college (Burns & Gabrich, 2003; Gilligan, 1982; Heller, 2005; Hungerford, 2006; Tinto, 1998).

Another theme in the literature about college student mothers is the perception of faculty and institutional insensitivity toward non-traditional students and student parents. Faculty has been cited as surprisingly entrenched in old style learning techniques directed at teenagers and younger adults rather than older adult learners. This is especially significant when it comes to family and maternal issues affecting college professor’s expectations for non-traditional students and parents (Hungerford, 2005/2006; Hungerford & Kramer, 2005; Tinto, 1988, 1993; Williams, 2002). Academic courses that require graded group projects or experiential graded outside classroom activities create difficulty for many older students with family or work responsibilities. A recent study at a large university reviewed 137 course syllabi and found 73% of the instructors had a grading bias based on classroom attendance with no provisions for child care emergencies, child health care, pregnancy, or work overtime addressed in the instructor’s policy on grade reductions due to non-attendance for any reason (Hungerford, 2005/2006; Hungerford & Kramer). The same study

found that 82% of the professors surveyed do not wish to know or care about a student's family situation that may affect academic performance (Hungerford). In one case, an institutional policy was reported that no cell phones, even on vibrate, were allowed in classrooms during classes, which was a serious attendance factor for single mothers who may necessitate being in contact with baby-sitters if an emergency arises for their child (Hungerford).

The last theme for college student mothers was the issues of finances and the additional struggles for non-traditional students. Authors have reported that non-traditional students, student parents and especially single student mothers often work against poverty and with struggles such as affordable child care and housing, aid to dependent children regulations, financial aid and expenses, in order to attain a degree (Adair, 2001; Boldt, 2000; DACSFA, 2002; Cunningham, 2002; Gittel, Schehl, & Fareri, 1990; Heller, 2005; Jennings, 2004; Kahn & Polakow, 2000; Tiamiyu & Mitchell, 2001; Tinto, 1993).

Methodology

This study utilized paper and email surveys to college student mothers. First, the researchers met with various university stakeholders to obtain a distribution list of email addresses of female students, especially those student mothers who declared having a dependent and had applied for financial aid. The researchers developed an online survey instrument using SNAP Survey. Snap Survey software, due to its excellent statistical analysis package for collected data, was chosen due to the potential large number of respondents. From a prepared email distribution list of potential respondents of female enrollees with dependent children using a Microsoft Outlook email system, the potential recipients were sent a letter of introduction and a solicitation to participate by assent that assures total anonymity to participate in filling out the attached survey.

Once approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the university, the survey instrument was field tested at one regional campus with a known population of 50 student mothers in the principal investigator's social work classes in fall 2008. The field test was voluntary. The students were given the instructions and told that nonparticipation would have no effect on a student's grade for the course. The field test provided necessary feedback that led to fine-tuning for clarity, ease of use,

meaningful and properly stated and formatted questioning, and timeliness to enable students to complete the survey in less than 10 minutes.

Data Collection and Analysis

The window for participation in the online survey was conducted throughout fall term 2009. Confidentiality of the projects target population email distribution list, names of participants and their unique responses, and security of all collected data from all participants was a project priority. Because of the built in confidentiality factor, a recent scare from online hacking, and an initial server glitch in the distribution of surveys, there was an initial low response rate from the email surveys. Because of this rate, the student assistant traveled to three regional campus sites in order to solicit paper surveys. When the assistant disseminated the in-person survey to participants, she read a script similar to the online script recruiting the voluntary responses. She received verbal confirmation that the participants who filled out paper surveys had not completed the online surveys.

The exact percentage of the university enrollment that meets that specific classification of college student mothers at this university is unknown. The university 2007 head-count was 7,819 enrolled students and 5,740 full time equivalents (FTE) at the regional campuses (Debra Benton, Registrar, personal communication July 2009). Many participants in confidential emails to the researchers noted they had received an email but initially chose to ignore the request due to time constraints and fears about the online survey. The online survey responses constituted approximately one-third of the survey response. The exact rate of response could not be calculated due to the mixed methods of survey delivery and the information the researchers received back from students who noted they were incorrectly emailed (nonparents and males were the typical response).

Results

The researchers collected data on 237 college student mother respondents via online and in-person responses. Participants were either single parents living with children, living with significant other and children, married with children, grandparents raising children/grandchildren under the age of 18, or foster parents raising children under 18. Respondents noted being mostly single parents. Participants who responded having at least one child ($n = 237$) were allowed to proceed with the rest of the online

and in-person surveys. Some participants reported having as many as 4 children (n = 17), 5 children (n = 4) and 6 or more children (n = 3).

The area cited by the respondents as the most common need was child care (n = 136) followed by “more classes need to be made available during times students can attend” (n = 64). Difficulties juggling work and college were noted by 46 respondents. Forty respondents noted a need for professors who were more understanding of the needs of college student parents. Financial aid issues were noted by 31 students and issues with illness and parking were noted by 20 each. Other issues included health issues (n = 8), online offerings (n = 7), and language barriers (n = 1).

Students were also given an option in the survey to list online or write needs on paper in response to the questions “Please list what you think are the three greatest needs of student parents on your campus? Please be specific and explain the nature of the need.” The most common themes additionally noted by the students were: time management (n = 18), not liking college (n = 17), transportation (n = 17), lack of pregnancy parking (n = 14), degree completion challenges (n = 14), advising and lack of a counselor (n = 4), work conflicts (n = 3) and requesting on-site jobs (n = 3). Students also wrote comments requesting phone service availability, options for quick degree completion, parenting classes, and better food options.

Conclusions

The aim of this study was to ascertain the college student mother needs. The participants from five different regional campuses responded in part to addressing their regional university campus needs. Due to limiting the number of questions in order to keep the survey instrument brief, not all of the themes or barriers to college student parents were explored. The first hypothesis was that a large number of college student mothers would report child care as a predominant need. The survey results appear to verify this as an issue for the respondents as child care received the most responses in the checklist of needs. Another hypothesis was that college student mothers would report struggles in juggling work, college, and family responsibilities. Student noted a variety of issues relating to this hypothesis such as class availability, difficulties in juggling responsibilities, and time constraints being understood by professors as the predominant secondary responses.

Recommendations

Further investigation is recommended for faculty and administrators of regional campuses. These investigations would involve collaboration with the various university system offices of Registration and Enrollment, Financial Aid, Deans of Regional Campuses, Planning and Institutional Improvement, Student Services, Child Care Center and Women's Studies and any other stakeholders who are appropriate. Answers to these questions are warranted:

1. How many student mothers are enrolled within the system?
2. What do student mothers perceive as their main needs and services to stay enrolled?
3. Who watches the children of student mothers while she attends classes?
4. What barriers has a student mother experienced at this location?

Retention of high risk students, such as lower income student mothers, may translate into increased funding. This outreach may counter a student mother's decision to drop out of the higher education system, therefore affecting the finances of regional campuses and her giving up on education as the pathway to economic upward mobility. Finances of higher education and the new traditional student have generated a lot of interest in the past decade. Retention, enrollment management, market-specific planning and recruitment, shorter matriculation, drop-out rates seem to have become the new "buzz-words" in academics. Regional campus faculty and administrators interested in directing limited marketing resources spent on retention and recruitment could focus on specific and larger groups of non-traditional students, such as student mothers, rather than chasing a shrinking population pool of local high school graduates. Implementation of additional family-friendly policies and low cost family-child friendly programs could be highly effective recruitment tools in attracting both female and male non-traditional students. If educators reach out to lower income mothers to recruit, engage, and offer them a simple array of low-cost services, these actions may influence the nontraditional students outside-and-inside the university. Supported students may have positive outcomes in return.

In summary, the literature on the topic of non-traditional student parents and especially single student mothers in higher education portrays a

very poor picture full of barriers, stressors, challenges, and failures for this under served and at risk population of “hidden students” which is quickly becoming the norm on smaller, community and regional campuses. Attaining a degree as a non-traditional student requires unusual organization, sacrifice and tenacity on the part of individuals. The literature shows a nationally accepted archaic educational system of traditionalism that is not nurturing of student parents, offering supportive student services, adaptable or who are financially non-supportive and in fact, has built-in institutional barriers and policies that work against non-traditional students attempting to successfully complete a degree in a timely fashion, if at all.

Personal Biography

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