

GOING TO COLLEGE WITH KIDS:

Understanding the campus climate for student parents

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

College students who are also parents, that is, student parents, are a rapidly growing, yet oftentimes invisible, population on traditional university campuses. Student parents comprise those attending two- and four-year institutions, and they may be pursuing an undergraduate degree or graduate education. Given their dual roles, as both college students and parents of children, student parents may have specific and unique needs and perceptions regarding their higher education experience. Importantly, to date, very little research has explored the experience of student parents. In this project, two focus groups involving 11 student parents at a traditional, urban public university were conducted. Findings illustrated that the student parents generally felt that the campus climate was largely unwelcoming to them, and that numerous actions are needed to improve their experience and make them feel welcome.



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To address these findings, recommendations for policy makers, administrators, and researchers to improve the campus climate for student parents are made.

for policy makers:

- Consider the holistic and unique needs of student parents including child care, housing, and transportation, especially when developing policy related to access to higher education.

for college and university administrators:

- Take concrete actions to improve campus spaces including buildings, sidewalks, and bus systems to make them more family-friendly.
- Reduce the stigma associated with being a student parent through an increased representation of student parents on university websites and in university marketing materials.
- Find ways for student parents to connect with one another through student organizations, family-friendly environments and activities, and other targeted gatherings.
- Provide information on the needs of student parents into all training that university instructors take to improve their teaching practices.

for researchers:

- Examine how campus attributes (e.g., urbanicity, public/private) shape the identity and success of student parents.
- Examine the efficacy of novel ways of supporting student parents, such as on-campus child care facilities, to help build literature on best practices for universities.

In summary, colleges and universities more broadly need to recognize that university students who are also parents have multiple roles that they have to navigate. Rather than expecting student parents to adjust to the institution, it is important to ask how the institution can support them. By studying the experiences of student parents, we can begin to have these meaningful conversations to create change and improve the college experience for this group.



Background

Student parents are a rapidly growing population at universities across the U.S. In fact, the number of student parents in the U.S. increased by 30% over less than a decade, from 3.7 million in 2004 to 4.8 million in 2012, and student parents now make up over one-quarter of the undergraduate students in the U.S. (Noll, Rechlin, & Gault, 2017). Balancing parenthood, schoolwork, and economic livelihood is challenging for student parents and can potentially limit their success in college. As this population continues to rise, universities must identify ways to make the college experience more open to, and aligned with, the needs of student parents.

Despite the growth of student parents among higher education participants, campuses are often ill-equipped to meet the unique needs of student parents, thus impacting student parents' overall experience of the campus climate. Campus climate refers to the attitudes, behaviors, standards and practices that concern the access for, the inclusion of, and level of respect for individual and group needs, abilities, and potential (Rankin & Reason, 2008). As the number of student parents continues to rise in higher education, it is clear that colleges and universities will need to do more to ensure that their campuses are family-friendly and can support their student parents, in part through careful attention to campus climate as perceived and experienced by student parents. Having a foundational and theoretically sound understanding of the campus climate for student parents will provide faculty and administrators direction on how to improve their resources and help to ensure that this group will be retained to graduation.



Aims & Methods

The aim of this qualitative research study is to document student parents' perceptions of campus climate, explore how it impacts them as student parents, and to learn about their visions for improving the campus climate for student parents.

To address this aim, 11 student parents were recruited to participate in focus groups in the fall of 2019. The student parents included approximately equal numbers of undergraduate and graduate students from eight academic departments, and they ranged in age from 19 to 35 years. The majority of parents were mothers. Additionally, 45% of parents reported being white, 27% reported being multiracial, 18% reported being Black, and 9% reported being Hispanic. Participants were recruited from a program designed to provide special supports to student parents, including access to child care. Two sessions of the focus group were conducted and each lasted approximately 60 minutes. Focus groups were audiotaped and led by a lead moderator, and an assistant moderator observed and took notes during the session. Refreshments were served, and participants received a \$20 gift card as an incentive to participate.

Immediately after each focus group, the lead and assistant moderator reviewed the session notes and identified common themes and group dynamics. In addition, the audio recordings were thoroughly transcribed, with all identifying information removed to protect confidentiality. Subsequently, three researchers coded the transcripts and organized data according to the campus climate framework (Rankin & Reason, 2008). This framework focuses on three main aspects of campus climate: 1) personal experiences with the climate, 2) perceptions of the climate from others,¹ and 3) institutional efforts to address the climate. Coded transcripts were reviewed, and the discussion was held between all researchers to achieve consistency of interpretation.

¹ Due to the nature of the focus groups, we could not collect information from non-student parents about the campus climate for student parents, thus this theme is not part of our findings.

Findings

STUDENT PARENTS' PERSONAL EXPERIENCES WITH THE CLIMATE

Student parents were asked to describe their personal experiences within the campus climate. As participants shared their experiences as student parents in the university, they raised awareness of how institutional and cultural norms were often designed to support traditional college students, and it was contradictory to their needs as student parents. This culture often placed student parents in a situation that they felt marginalized them, especially when interacting with their traditional college-aged peers (i.e., students without children). One challenge they faced involved difficulties with group work. A participant who was studying in a STEM-related field expressed:

"A lot of the time I'm in group projects and we're like working on coding and stuff together, and like it's hard when like the group wants to meet up at 7:00 when everybody's classes are done, but it's like, I'm a mom; I can't come to campus with my son and do group work."

Another participant also shared concerns about participating in group work, even though her peers expressed acceptance of having her child present during the group work:


"Sometimes I do hesitate because, especially with group work, they'll be like we can meet at this time.... They've asked me to bring mine, but I'm like... you're not gonna get any work done if I bring my [child]."

The challenges that the student parents faced on campus also impacted their campus employment, as one participant shared her experience:

"I just got suspended, I think, today from my work-study job because the last work-study meeting that I went to, they like put this message up that literally didn't apply to anyone but me. It was a message on a slide that said child care. I asked my friend because I had to keep stepping out...they made a comment about it and said, 'Well we're going to address child care and how it's not, you're not supposed to like bring your child to work with you, like for work-study. But we don't have to address that anymore because the young lady that brought her kid isn't even in the room.' So, they were going to like single me out in front of the whole entire crowd."

Participants also shared their experience with events and activities that were offered on campus that mostly did not consider accommodating their needs as student parents. A participant described her experience at a student involvement fair designed to provide information about student organizations during the 'welcome week' on campus:

"I had the stroller and I'm like trying to walk through, and like literally people would not move out of the way for the stroller. I just kept hearing like people say like, 'She has a kid.' 'Is there a baby in there?' Just like weird things like that."



Another student parent who brought a child to campus also drew much attention:

“I brought her the other day to my class, and as I was walking, people just kept staring, and like, it was making me super uncomfortable. They were almost running her over because they weren’t paying any attention to where they were walking.”

Finally, participants explained the tension they felt between their identities as parents and as students. Most of the participants perceived that people reacted differently to them, compared to others, when they established themselves as student parents, as this student parent shared:

“I’ve noticed that like people will talk differently to you after they find out that you’re a parent. I feel like, the fact that they give me an excuse because I’m a mom, they think that it’s some sort of disability to have children... Just to see how other people view it as such a negative thing, it frustrates me.”

Participants also expressed how they felt that others on campus negatively judged them based on their parenthood, especially young parenthood:

“And they just give you the dirtiest look like, you’re that young carrying a baby? What’s wrong with you?”

“Mostly because I’m so young, and I don’t think it’s normal for, well it’s becoming more normal, but it’s not like the standard age that you have a kid. Also, with my race...for me to be one of the only black people and a mom, is like yeah.”

“But I don’t know, I tell people, like close friends and stuff, that know me, obviously know I have a son. But other people, I’m sometimes reluctant because I feel like they stigmatize a little bit, and they might think that I’m younger than I am. I feel like people do treat you differently if you’re a young mom, or if they think that you’re a young mom.”

Generally, as the student parents’ perceptions clarify, not only are campus activities largely inattentive to the special, unique needs of student parents, in terms of use of group work in classes and lack of family-friendly student-employment policies, but student parents are made to feel “weird” and “uncomfortable” for being on campus with children.



INSTITUTIONAL LACK OF EFFORTS AND PARTICIPANTS' SUGGESTIONS TO ADDRESS CLIMATE

When participants were asked to share their perceptions about efforts the university has or has not made to make a family-friendly campus, the student parents largely shared examples of how their campus was not currently family-friendly. Examples of inaccessibility on campus focused on public spaces on campus (i.e., transportation), as these student parents shared:

“A lot of the buildings are not accessible. [They are] not wheelchair accessible so that also means a stroller, carrying it upstairs.”

“Even for campus buses, I don’t know if you guys ever been on campus buses, there is no room for a stroller at all.”


“Or even on the sidewalk when you’re pushing, nobody moves over, or there isn’t enough room on the sidewalk to push the stroller.”

Although the university has engaged in some efforts to meet the needs of parents on campus, for instance, by providing lactation rooms, student parents note that the system to access the rooms could be improved, as one participant shared:

“You have to sign up ahead of time, which that doesn’t make sense. If I have to pump... I have to. I’m not going to schedule. Oh, tomorrow at 2 PM, I’ll be there. And then you get there and they’re like, ‘Oh, we can’t find the key.’ So last year there was one, and I went there, and then the office that had the key was being renovated and they were nowhere to be found. So, I just sat in the hallway and people looked at me...”

A theme noted among the focus group participants was that the university campus did not seem to offer any special ways for student parents to connect with one another. As one pointed out:

“When first coming to campus, it was really hard because I don’t know anybody. I have no family, no friends. So, it’s really hard to try to connect with people, especially my age, not most people... Like ‘Oh, I have a daughter.’ ‘Do you want to go out Saturday night?’ ‘Oh, well I can’t because I got to stay inside.’ Things like that.”



Students also provided examples of how their professors responded to their needs as student parents and did not always provide the needed flexibility:

“Most of my professors have been really understanding, but some that don’t have kids, they think that I’m just skipping to skip, and I’m like, ‘No.’ And then when I tell them that I have a kid, then it’s that thing where they kind of have a different idea of me then because they know that I’m younger, and they’re like, ‘Oh, why do you have a two-year-old?’”

“Last week I missed a whole week because my daughter was sick and I was sick, and I had ended up getting a concussion. Yeah, I had got in a car accident. So, when I told (the professors), they were like, ‘Well, you still have to come. I’m going to deduct your grade because there’s no excuse for you being absent.’”

Participants also had suggestions on how to make campus more family-friendly, most of which revolved around making campus spaces more available to children:

“It would help me so much if there was a place on campus where parents could come study and their kids could play like in front of them.”

“Not necessarily somebody watching your kids, but where they can easily be a kid and you can do your own thing.”

“There would probably be a park.”

Finally, participants also highlighted the importance of university investments in special accommodations for student parents in terms of housing and child care supports:

“I would say that I would love another option for student parents to live close to campus.”

“I would say a child care service, on campus, where you can drop off, maybe not every day, like a Monday through Friday type thing.”



Discussion

An increasing number of college students are parents, yet the needs and perceptions of this unique student group have seldom been explored. The present work aimed to learn from student parents about their experiences on a college campus, with a focus specifically on college climate. Our focus group analysis suggests that traditional college campuses are not well-equipped to support the needs of student parents in both subtle and more obvious ways, such as a reliance on group work in classes (which can be challenging to schedule for student parents) and derogatory statements from both peers and faculty regarding having children. Generally, the focus group participants felt that academic culture was designed for the “ideal learners,” who were traditional young college students with no children (Read et al., 2003). With the academic culture at universities not yet providing adequate supports for student parents (Springer et al., 2009), the student parent population tends to be invisible on campus.

Specific efforts, such as changing the public spaces on campuses to be amenable to children and strollers, and working to reduce the stigma of being a student parent on campus, are needed to improve the experiences, and ultimately, the success of student parents in their educational pursuits. Indeed, colleges and universities more broadly need to recognize that university students who are also parents have multiple roles that they have to navigate. Rather than solely expecting them to adjust to the institution, it is important to ask how the institution can support them.



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