



When the Nontraditional Becomes Traditional:
Addressing the Needs of Student-Parents in Higher Education

RESULTS OF THE I-PARENTS RESEARCH

“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

FOREWORD

I-Parents began in 2008 in response to the economic downturn and concerns about loss of family-support services including child care and summer programs. A group of concerned University of Illinois community members met to discuss possible collaboration to identify needs and address parenting and family-support related concerns for the students, staff, and faculty of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) and also for the greater Champaign-Urbana community. Realizing that resources would likely diminish, and with the goal of being sustainable into the immediate future, I-Parents developed a shared approach for providing resources and services and encouraged multidisciplinary innovation when planning new activities. The goal was to encourage people to think differently about how we, as a university community, reach out to the parents and children around us and recognize that small, progressive steps are often sufficient for impacting sustainable change that can improve the lives of families.

Since 2008 I-Parents has grown and, at minimal expenditure, has provided resources from which the community has benefited. One notable activity is the Summer Extravaganza offered in the spring of the academic year, is a collaboration between the College of Education, the Center for Education in Small Urban Communities, and the Urbana School District. This brings together approximately 40 local summer programs, on one evening and in one location, to facilitate parents making an informed decision about choosing a summer activity for their children. Attendance increases each year and evaluations show continued high regard for the event.

Another collaborative event that was cosponsored by University Housing and I-Parents was the Student-Parent Summit that convened in 2011 in the Student Development and Residential Programs (SDRP) building in the new Ikenberry Commons. The purpose of the summit was to expand the ongoing dialogue about the characteristics of, and needs associated with, Illinois students who are parenting, or student-parents, while simultaneously working to obtain a degree at the undergraduate or graduate levels. The summit built on a series of meetings and discussions that have gradually raised awareness of the growing number of exceptionally qualified student-parents at Illinois and the challenges they face on many levels while attempting to complete their educational programs.

In attendance were representatives from a cross-section of colleges, units, and programs including the Office of Inclusion and Intercultural Relations (OIIR), University Housing, College of Education, I-Parents, Center for Education in Small Urban Communities, Student Legal Services and College of Law, Campus Recreation, Office of Volunteer Programs, Graduate College, Office of Minority Student Affairs, RISK, a student-parent registered student organization, and more (see table 1). The summit provided the opportunity to bring together a representation of the diversity of units on the Illinois campus responsible for supporting student-parents. The cross-disciplinary dialogue provided a deeper understanding of the issues faced and created a working group and subcommittees to respond to ideas and move them forward.

The resulting white paper prioritized recommendations for next steps, some of which have already moved forward. Once again this working group has been cognizant that we are living within an exceptionally challenging fiscal environment. Every effort has been made to maximize cross-unit collaboration and work smarter through employing some simple changes that are a natural benefit of the increased communication.

One challenging issue raised during the summit is that there are no data on exactly how many student-parents currently attend the University of Illinois. For a number of important reasons, the university has no regular point of data entry whereby students would indicate that they are balancing parenting during their academic program. Although housing may catch student-parents through their housing requests, the discussions from the summit indicated that student-parents utilizing campus housing may be a small sample of the total population. This also presents challenges for developing a comprehensive survey and evaluation that could be disseminated to all student-parents at the University of Illinois. We found that this problem was not unusual when we contacted colleagues at other universities as they face similar barriers.

However during the academic year of 2011-2012, an I-Parents team proceeded to respond to the white paper's priority-one recommendation and developed a mixed-methods survey. This was focused on issues relevant to student-parents as identified within the summit, with the intent to disseminate to all student-parents at the UIUC campus. This paper provides more information about the background of nontraditional student-parents and the issues they face and highlights the results of the survey that was disseminated in spring 2012. We are thankful that we had the opportunity to conduct this research and appreciate the opportunity to present this summary. We look forward to working with you as we celebrate successes that were identified through the survey and work to address concerns to create a welcoming, supportive environment for all UIUC students and their families.

Sincerely,

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CONTEXT

|definitions|

Despite the growing number of adult students entering post-secondary education, limited research 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 information on nontraditional learners, or mature students (Freeman 2005; Wilson 1997). In the United States, a **nontraditional student** is defined as having delayed entry into post-secondary education but may also be enrolled on a part-time basis, work full-time, be viewed differently by financial aid because of his or her independent status, have a domestic partner or other dependents, or be a single parent (Freeman 2005). For the purposes of our discussion, a **student-parent** is 18 years or older and otherwise considered a traditional student except that he or she is balancing the role of parent while attempting to finish a degree. Additionally a student-parent could have any combination of characteristics found in the categories of nontraditional students. One goal of this project was to determine the characteristics of modern student-parents in the literature and at this university.



|waves of post-world war II nontraditional students, including student-parents|

The inclusion of nontraditional students and student-parents at universities, including the University of Illinois, 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 veterans accounted for 70% of all male enrollment shortly after the war (page 785). Many of these veterans brought their families with them and identified as married students. Initially they were housed in the World War II remnants of military barracks located on many campuses or temporary quarters such as trailer parks with shared bathhouse facilities (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 (Mettler 2005; Bennett 1996). Many universities, including Illinois, responded and our family housing programming evolved from these 1950s-1960s roots. Currently the family housing at the University of Illinois offers just over 1000 apartments at three locations: Orchard Downs, Goodwin Green, and Ashton Woods. University Housing also provides support to students and their families with services including recreation and cultural events, preschool, and afterschool care in these apartment communities.

The literature suggests that during the decades from 1970 to 1990 there were several waves when nontraditional students and student-parents entering 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, this was a period of history during which veterans were returning from Vietnam and 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 veterans perhaps partly due to reduced benefits and the unpopular nature of the Vietnam war.

Quinnan (1997) notes that 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 (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. An increased awareness was needed to respond to the needs of nontraditional students 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 GI Bill, increasing minority participation, and providing more opportunities for students' experiential learning through community service (Newman 1985).

Many of the Carnegie recommendations have been institutionalized into our current system but another report summarizing the results of a 1989 survey of college and university presidents identified that the transformation of higher education was challenging the traditionally accepted concept of community (Boyer 1990). When responding to questions about campus-life problems, 75% indicated that lack of student involvement was a serious problem (page 48) and more than 60% indicated that expanding services for nontraditional students was important for improving the campus climate (page 51). The report proposed guiding principles for decision making including creating a caring community in which the well-being of each member is supported and community service is encouraged (Boyer 1990). Exploring alternative living-learning communities and expanding services and hours of operation to accommodate nontraditional students were suggested. There was a key emphasis on

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the importance of the classroom under the guidance of faculty 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) (Polakow et al. 2004; Smith, Deprez, and Butler 2002; Duquaine-Watson 2007). Following a work-first approach, adults receiving Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF) were discouraged from pursuing educational options beyond the GED. There was widespread concern that existing students, many of them single mothers, would be forced to drop their post-secondary education programs despite their successful matriculation.

Some states responded by initiating their own version of TANF to support student-parents, and there was an increased effort 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 that tried to mirror previously available TANF support for parents eligible to pursue 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 GPAs and finding jobs at a higher median wage than those who left welfare without a post-secondary education. Additionally, graduates with jobs were more likely to have benefits such as health insurance and paid sick leave or vacation time. PAS graduates also expressed increased confidence of job security or the ability to move to another job if times got tough (Smith, Deprez, and Butler 2002). The state of Kentucky presents another example of parent activism that helped craft House Bill 434 in response to welfare reform. This 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).

|promise of education in a democracy|

Polakow et al. (2004) are clear that their research found that when student-parents completed their degrees, their ability to obtain higher than minimum wage jobs with benefits increased substantially. This and other research continues to point toward the positive impact of post-secondary education on families facing poverty and the potential for a degree to change their circumstances (Duquaine-Watson 2007; Quinnan 1997; Smith, Deprez, and Butler (2002). Similarly, other researchers (Bennett 1996; Mettler 2005; Schwartz 1985) document that post-secondary education for returning veterans increased their economic potential. Bound and Turner (2002) expand on this era, when college enrollments jumped to more than 50% of their prewar numbers (page 785) as the democratization of America 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.

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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?

Researcher Hobcraft (1993) suggests, and other developmental researchers would likely agree, that when developing support networks for children and families, it is perhaps particularly relevant to identify the pathways that contribute to children's healthy development. The critical societal components along those trajectories including, but not limited to, the impact of parents (Dunst 2000; Dunst and Trivette 2009; Bronfenbrenner 2005). Of course we know that children benefit from being surrounded by enriching environments that encourage education. We can reasonably

hypothesize that when children spend part of their formative years in university environments they would feel more comfortable seeking higher education out in the future, potentially improving their family's opportunities for future generations. However, there are gaps in the research on these specific questions as they pertain to student-parents and their families.

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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 noted, “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 pathway that can positively impact all members of the student-parent family when the parent has committed to a post-secondary degree would be a multidisciplinary contribution to research. This line of research may 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.

| new wave of student-parents and today's promise |

Student-parents are still found within the traditional married student configuration but, reflecting the changing demographics of our society, the typical student-parent also has changed. The student-parent may be single, struggle with poverty, or be a member of a minority group (Polakow et al. 2004; Duquaine-Watson 2007). The literature and concerns of student-parents participating in the summit were aligned. 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). The literature suggested that individual faculty and universities could improve the academic climate for these diverse students by recognizing their unique circumstances in course and college policies. For example, one faculty member indicates that she now attempts to include challenging areas impacting student-parents as part of her course policies that are read aloud the first day of class. She provides the following suggestion:

“For student-parents: If circumstances arise that necessitate your absence from class, such as the illness of a child, closing of day care for inclement weather, etc., please contact me as soon as possible so we may make arrangements to keep you up to date with course material and activities” (Duquaine-Watson 2007, page 237).

Similar to previous decades when returning veterans sought out opportunities in higher education, we are seeing an increase in veterans from recent tours abroad attempting to make conscientious educational choices that would improve their circumstances. Undoubtedly, a percentage of student veterans will come to our university community with their families. We also are experiencing a protracted economic recession that has disrupted the lives of many adults, pushing them to seek educational options as they attempt to retrain and enter the work force. The evidence suggests that we are on the swell of a new wave of nontraditional students attempting to enter higher education, including student-parents at the undergraduate and graduate levels. This research helps us further this conversation about the nature and needs of student-parents in post-secondary education and discuss ways institutions of higher education, specifically our university, may respond.

|present study|

The present study was conducted as a follow-up to the Student-Parent Summit in 2011. We were particularly interested in uncovering the viewpoints and concerns of a broader range of student-parents at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC). Specifically, the study examines three primary questions:

R1: What is the demographic picture of student-parents at UIUC? Currently, there is no clear picture of the student-parent population at UIUC, as data on parent status historically has not been collected. As such, the present study will seek to provide a rich demographic picture of this student group.

R2: What are the needs and desired services for student-parents at UIUC? The Student-Parent Summit in 2011 was an exploratory gathering and included only five student-parents. As such, while the thoughts and opinions shared have provided a valuable conceptual starting point, a larger sample of student-parents is required in order to generalize to the UIUC student-parent population as a whole.

R3: Are there differences in the experiences of student-parents across demographic groups? Not all student-parents are alike. They differ from each other in many facets. In the present study, the sample allowed for comparisons among student-parents of different partner status, gender, housing, living situations, and income. Student-parents in these various categories may have different experiences, and being mindful of these differences could provide insight into how to better accommodate diverse populations of student-parents.

METHOD

|participants|

Participants were recruited through a targeted mass email that was sent to every student at UIUC not currently living in undergraduate university-sponsored residence halls. Students in the undergraduate residence halls were omitted due to administrative 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 most likely would be low, and they were omitted from the recruitment.

In total, 417 student-parents responded to the survey, with 352 completing the survey in full. For all descriptive and comparative analysis, participants were included if they provided the information relevant to the question at hand (N=417). The resulting sample was 52.3% male, 47.2% female, and 0.5% transgendered (two participants). The mean age was 33.5 years (SD = 7.16; median = 32; mode = 30; range = 19 to 41), and the racial composition was 66.7% White, 12.1% Asian-American, 9.0% African-American, 5.8% Latino or Latina, 1.5% Biracial, and 0.7% American Indian or Alaska Native.

|measures|

The majority of the items on the survey were generated entirely from the findings of the 2011 Summit. Each need or desired service was 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 also were asked to indicate what they believed were the three most pressing issues for student-parents at UIUC and given the option to provide an open-ended response regarding their feelings and needs.

In addition to questions related to needs and desired services, participants also were asked to provide demographic information across a number of areas, including race, age, gender, sexual orientation, income, housing arrangements, partner status, work status, student status, age of children, number of children, and composition of household. The survey concluded with a narrative section that allowed participants to expand on questions or present other issues that were relevant for them.

|procedure|

Email invitations to participate in an online survey were disseminated via the targeted mass email system to every student at UIUC not currently registered as living in the undergraduate residence halls. No remuneration was given for participation, and the survey was conducted online. Students also were sent one reminder, encouraging their participation. 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 listserv. 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. However the survey was completely anonymous and the email was not connected to survey results.

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 categories to analyze participants, the following were used:

gender, partner status, income, housing, student status, and child status. Gender compares male and female. (The two transgendered participants were excluded from statistical analysis due to not having enough participants in the transgender category to be valid.) Partner status compares single, in a committed relationship, and married or cohabitating. Income compares greater or less than \$30,000 household income per year (high income versus low income). Housing compares campus housing and off-campus housing. Student status compares graduate and undergraduate students. Child status compares student-parents living with children to student-parents not living with children. Refer to table 2 for an overview of the categories and the means and standard deviations of how they relate to each major scale. 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 probability 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|

Results of the study revealed an interesting and nuanced demographic picture of student-parents at UIUC (R1). As previously mentioned, the mean age of participants was 33.5 years, and the racial breakdown of the sample was 66.7% White, 12.1% Asian-American, 9.0% African-American, 5.8% Latino or Latina, 1.5% Biracial, and 0.7% American Indian or Alaska Native. In terms of sexual orientation, 97.1% of the sample identified as heterosexual, with only 12 individuals endorsing a different sexual orientation. Regarding relationship status, 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. In terms of citizenship, 81.6% of the sample are U.S. citizens while 18.4% are international students.

Graduate students comprised 86.8% of the sample. Of the undergraduate students who completed the survey, 5.1% were seniors, 5.1% were juniors, 2.2% were sophomores, and one participant was a freshman. Although 82.7% of participants reported being full-time students, 22.41% of participants stated that they work 20 to 40 hours a week for employment, and 20.5% of participants stated they work more than 40 hours per week for employment. In terms of employment, 60.1% reported being employed by UIUC, 23% reported being employed elsewhere, and 16.8% reported not having any type of employment. In terms of household income, 25.2% of participants reported that their household income was less than \$20,000 per year, 33.3% reported their income to be between \$20,000 and \$40,000, and 33.5% reported their income was more than \$40,000 per year.

Most participants (54.3%) had only one child, although 32.7% had two, 9.4% had three, and 3.6% had four or more. In living arrangements, 84.6% of participants reported living with their children and 82.4% reported living with a partner related to 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 Orchard Downs 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.) As such, while every category received analysis on a scale level, child care, academics, and financial concerns were examined on an item-by-item level to identify which specific concerns and services were the most salient for participants (R2 and R3).

Child Care. Child care was the area that participants most commonly rated as the most prominent issue facing student-parents at UIUC. In general, while participants indicated that they could access daytime child care, they endorsed that 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 daytime, evening, and drop-in child-care options, as well as subsidized child care, child care close to campus, and health services for children.



When examining the child-care factor, one significant group difference was observed. High-income households had an easier time with child care than low-income households. When breaking down the factor into its individual components to examine for differences, low-income households indicated having a more difficult time accessing and affording daytime child care. In terms of adding services, low-income households were more interested in adding daytime child care, subsidized child care, child care close to campus, and health services. Women were more interested in adding evening and drop-in child care than men, and single parents were more interested in adding evening child care than married and cohabitating parents.

|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. One participant noted:

“They need more space for . . . growing families as well as more fitness and recreation space, especially for spouses of families with low incomes.”

One participant noted 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.”

Some participants mentioned that their spouses or partners were the primary child-care providers. However, they still voiced the importance of affordable short-term child care for a couple of hours a day, reflecting the flexible student class schedule or the ability to give the spouse providing child care a break:

“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 at the University of Illinois. In general, the majority of participants reported that having children heavily affects academics, including their ability to complete homework, study, read for classes, meet for group projects, and go to the library. Participants also indicated having significant difficulty in finding child-friendly study spaces. However, responses indicated that 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. In terms of services, participants strongly endorsed that they would be interested in alternative earlier times for evening final exams and were also interested in additional accommodations for nursing and pregnant mothers in buildings.

When examining the child-care factor and its impact on academics, no significant group differences were observed. When breaking down the factor into its individual components to examine for differences, 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 participants mentioned concern about the lack of flexibility that doesn’t consider the challenging balance of family life that student-parents face. One participant noted:

“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 noted 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. In general, student-parents indicated that affording both school and child care is extremely difficult, that they struggle with the added financial burden, and that having children negatively impacts their ability to earn money, as compared to their peers. However, participants indicated that they know how to manage the money that they have.

When examining the financial concerns factor, low-income households had a significantly more difficult time with finances than high-income households. Additionally, single student-parents had a more difficult time than married or cohabitating student-parents or student-parents in a committed relationship. When breaking down the factor into its individual components to examine for differences, student-parents in low-income households had a more difficult time affording school and child care, felt being a parent limited their earning potential, struggled more to pay bills, and had less skill in money management than high-income households. Additionally, married parents indicated that they had a significantly easier time than both single parents and parents in a committed relationship in terms of affording school and child care, felt that their earning potential was not limited, struggled less to pay their bills, and felt they knew more about managing their money. In terms of desired services, low-income households were more interested in money management materials and seminars.

| narrative elaboration on financial concerns |

Other comments emerged under a narrative theme of financial support and 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...”

However, some participants had different views regarding finances, suggesting diversity in student-parents' experience on this campus. For example:

“We have been comfortable on our 22K annual stipend due to the low cost of living in Champaign-Urbana.”

And:

“I am an engineering PhD student so financials are generally ok for me.”

Housing. The present sample indicated that housing was an issue of moderate importance. In general, participants indicated that they were satisfied with their current housing, with only 11.9% of the sample expressing dissatisfaction with their current living arrangement. However, participants did express that it is somewhat difficult to find an adequate apartment that is affordable and close to campus.

When examining the housing factor, high-income households had an easier time with their housing than low-income households. Additionally, graduate students had a significantly 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 and benefits of various choices. One student-parent responded:

“Orchard Downs is a great community full of families, but the rest of campus seems completely shut down to children. Outside of OD, I never found affordable preschool or afterschool care.”

Another participant noted:

“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.”

Another student-parent raised concern that even though family housing is available, it is designed to accommodate smaller families rather than the variety of family configurations found within the university community:

“The family housing seemed to be geared toward two parents plus one small child. For those of us who had more than one child, we were forced to find accommodations off campus. Housing and its expense meant that in addition to grad school along with child care meant that I worked 3/4 to full time all the way through my program. Thank you for doing this valuable research!”

Health Care. For 28.4% of the participants, health care was a priority for student-parents at the University of Illinois. However, quantitative results indicated that most participants found it relatively easy to find medical care, mental health care, and health insurance for their children. Participants had relatively split opinions about whether or not the cost of health care for their children was manageable, although none of the data from the groups defined in this study captured the differences that are related to these differences of opinion. Lastly, the majority of participants indicated that when their children were sick, it significantly interfered with their ability to complete their academic duties. In terms of adding services, participants indicated that they would be in favor of adding medical coverage for children at the McKinley Student Health Center, as well as university-sponsored mental health services.

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 suggested some significant confusion about resources available and costs involved primarily when supporting children and spouses. The views about how to address health care also reflected the diversity of the student body. 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 noted:

“... 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. It bothers me greatly to see other student-parents who are on government-aid programs for their health insurance. It also bothers me that so many health-care providers so frequently suggest to me and my wife that we sign up for these plans. 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.”

Several participants suggested frustration that McKinley could not be used for some services:

“... I . . . cannot take my daughter to McKinley, cannot afford having her on student insurance.”

And

“I think the MOST critical point is child health care: I will be willing to pay extra money to provide my child access to services such as McKinley.”

One participant highlights the challenge:

“I only checked health care because for me that is by far the issue I struggle with most. It is a hardship that my daughter must be covered under my plan (my spouse’s plan will not cover her) but that plan only covers sick care, not well care. When she needs shots, checkups, and other well-baby care, that comes out of my pocket.”

Some participants mentioned the relief that they felt because their child’s health care was covered by a government subsidized program:

“My children participate in AllKids. Therefore my children have access to health care. I would be interested in a student health insurance for children. Otherwise health care for my family would be too expensive.”

Another participant highlights the confusion about access to programs and that there is sufficient support at a local clinic rather than McKinley:

“The state of Illinois is very generous with health care for children and parents. All of the UIUC students will qualify for Illinois KidCare giving them access to free quality health care at [clinic]. My experience has been wonderful in getting to see a qualified pediatrician or family physician. I believe that the problem is that foreign students do not understand that their children qualify for AllKids regardless of nationality or visa status.”

Another participant highlighted that not all student-parents have young children and some have older dependent children or a family member with a chronic health-care condition that is not covered by current options:

“Some of your graduate students are not parents of minor children but of young adult children, the health of which is extremely important in their personal lives, but which also has a profound effect on their academic careers and performance.”

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.

In terms of adding services, participants were in favor of creating additional outdoor play areas and strongly in favor of creating indoor play areas, drop-off child-care services at the ARC, and programmed activities for children’s fitness.

In terms of the fitness factor, no significant differences were noted within comparison groups.

|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 CRCE 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:

“*Health food and fitness and rec space are really a part of child care because when considering child care . . . I am not only concerned about having someone to watch my children, but also making sure that my children are eating well and exercising.*”

Another parent shares the importance of fitness for her family:

“*. . . fitness is extremely important to me. Although I’m able to keep up with my own fitness, 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. In general, student-parents completing the survey did not view family services as a strong priority (17.3% endorsement as a top-3 issue). In general, participants indicated that they have a difficult time meeting other families with children to socialize with, and that other 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 of Illinois, and that their children would not be welcome in classes if an emergency were to occur. Participants also indicated that, in general and when applicable, they did not feel supported when selecting a preschool or school for their children.

Regarding adding services, participants indicated 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 building for information and resources, being assigned a family-support specialist to connect them with services, arranging campus-wide events to increase campus awareness of student-parents, and arranging campus-wide efforts to destigmatize being a parent in school. However, participants were less enthusiastic about adding tutoring services.

In terms of the family-services factor, students living on campus had an easier time with family services than students living off campus. Additionally, graduate students scored significantly higher on the family-services factor than undergraduate students.

|narrative elaboration on family services|

The narrative responses expanded on the quantitative survey data and noted appreciation for services provided through existing university-supported family housing. However, they also raised suggestions about ways to support spouses or partners of student-parents who may be sacrificing their own careers to support the student-parents' academic pursuits. For example:

“... to allow spouses to get professional development, as well, since many of them are very educated and need interaction...”

Additionally, families may feel isolated:

“... do not have transportation or are intimidated to use the bus system with large families...”

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, even while deciding on what graduate institution to enroll in (before coming to C-U), 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 at UIUC, it's much harder to adjust or change plans to manage family life and school (regarding virtually any issue on the list). 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. In general, participants indicated that they have access to and can afford healthy food for their children. They reported feeling knowledgeable regarding what food is healthy for their children, and generally reported having easy access to cultural foods for their children.

Regarding desired services, participants were generally against adding dining hall meal plans for children. They also were not particularly enthusiastic regarding adding materials or seminars outlining information about healthy food for children.

When examining the healthy-food factor, high-income households had a significantly easier time with healthy food than low-income households. No other comparisons were significant.

|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 expanded on the survey questions or raised new issues not previously discussed: 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 contexts. Some had support from a spouse to help with child care and finances and some spouses worked full time. Others were single parents with limited support. It was also clear that the climates within various departments were uniquely different for student-parents. Some found significant support from understanding faculty while others experienced surprisingly hostile incidents. For example one participant noted:

“*... 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.”

Although some faculty were supportive, student-parents worried that their family demands might prove to be more than the faculty member could accommodate:

“Also, time off from research is difficult to come by. Even with my advisor (as a mom) being generally understanding, taking the majority of the child-care emergencies and standard doctor’s visits, this has slowed me down considerably and created tension between my boss and me. I am also never available for evening meetings or weekends because child care is not an option and because it is one of the few times I have to spend with my daughter.”

Then, unfortunately, some participants had very troubling experiences:

“When my youngest was born, I was enrolled in classes. 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. Granted, all my grades were lower that semester, and I did have some professors who were very helpful and accommodating, but I have had others who could care less that I have children, and feel no inclination to help me academically when I have family emergencies.”

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 that gender differences did not play a substantive role in the interactions with student-parents. Faculty members’ responses were perhaps more related to the individual’s perception of the student-parent’s abilities, specific circumstances, or adhering to the departmental rules and policies. 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. More than likely it was because they didn’t have kids and were not married and therefore I felt like it was some jealousy as well as cruelty mixed in there. However, in May I will still be able to stand before my family as the FIRST person to ever earn a bachelor’s degree. U of I 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:

“*Student-parents who are male tend to have their spouses full time helping them. On the contrary, student-parents who are FEMALE tend to struggle more by themselves. This is also a gender issue. If UI supports female students in achieving higher education success, more attention should be drawn to this population.*”

Another participant noted:

“*Probably a good thing to have asked in this survey is whether the respondent has a stay-at-home spouse at home with the children. I think that affects the situation more than anything else . . .*”

Another participant confirms that premise:

“*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, and was often faced with frantically attempting to track down someone to care for my children when they were unwell, or to send them to school regardless of their poor health. 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. Having free matlab software also helped so I don't have to rely on going to campus for computer resources also has really helped.*”

Understanding. Another key theme that emerged from the narratives was simply the student-parents' desire to be understood. It was clear that it was important to have somewhere to share stresses and perhaps receive the affirmation that their challenges were unique but 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 noted:

“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.”

Another participant took a different approach and would like the university to develop sensible policies that support student-parents, minimizing vulnerability to different faculty or departments that may misunderstand their situation:

*“I have been a single mother throughout my entire academic career. Although I am currently a PhD student on fellowship, I began the process as a freshman when my son was 6 years old. I never used my status as a parent as an excuse for a weaker GPA, maintaining a 4.0 GPA throughout earning my BS. Perhaps because of this attitude, I found *all* my professors to be absolutely understanding of my occasional need to bring my son with me to class (I would sit in back on those days) or to an exam. Of course, my child is very well behaved and was never a distraction to anyone by making noise. One worry that I had, however, was what I would do if he got sick on a day when I had to take an exam. I had no family in the area, no friends I could trust enough to ask to watch him, and no money during my undergrad days. I always informed professors on the first day of class about this possibility, and unfortunately some of them would have been sticklers and would have required a doctor’s note if such a thing had come to pass. This is horribly impractical, as we don’t need to take our children to the doctor every time they get the flu. I would really like to see every professor made aware that parents may need to call in sick on behalf of their children and not have a doctor’s note.”*

Additionally, several participants clarified that they felt supported that we were conducting the survey as highlighted in this comment:

*“It is good to *finally* see somebody care about parents on campus.”*

DISCUSSION

In order to better serve and advocate for the student–parent population at the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign (UIUC), the present study is designed to accomplish three primary objectives: 1) gain a better understanding of student–parent populations, specifically the demographics of student–parents at UIUC; 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 significant insight and a foundation to use for future student–parent advocacy.

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 UIUC, 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 UIUC 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. Results from the UIUC survey indicated that 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 in the literature and the UIUC survey 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 flexibility 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 McKinley 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; in at least once facet, high-income households had an advantage over low-income households. 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 and the results of the survey suggest further consideration of the following recommendations. Once again, we have considered our ongoing resource challenges and feel the economic potential for future growth of student-parent families at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) exceeds the potential costs of the recommendations noted here.

1. Create a Web-based information and resource page for student-parents. Many of the participants mentioned the need for a Web resource, accessible from the Illinois.edu 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. Furthermore, this resource should be provided as a link 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 help ensure that all student-parents entering the university were provided with information about available resources. 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. Ideally child care would include the flexibility for evening times and drop-in times and child care in recreational spaces and other service areas that are part of the student academic and enrichment culture. The spectrum of child-care options should be explored, including the reinstatement 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 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 of 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 related to the balance of work and family within the university environment suggests the importance of creating an available transparent resource similar to other minority groups on campus. 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. Participants were also generally

in favor of campus efforts to promote student-parent awareness as well as destigmatization. The office also would be helpful in dissuading stereotypical perceptions of the student-parent populations, thereby engaging the university community in creating a welcoming atmosphere for all students. It also could be helpful for scaffolding 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, for example, understanding when parents feel more comfortable bringing their children to class in an emergency or when child-care options fall through. 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. 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 concern, 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.
6. Create an innovative, whole-family initiative to support undergraduate student-parents pursuing education as a pathway out of poverty. The literature was clear, and responses to the survey supported the sentiment, that 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 land grant institution's core mission. We realize that a recommendation of this type may be aligned with seeking external funding streams. However, where student-parents' and their children's education are addressed in tandem, the potential for changing the course of future generations is compelling. It also responds to the evidence that parents and children in poverty who have access to multidimensional methods of support have the greatest likelihood of success (Aber and Chaudry 2010).
7. 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 development. 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.

LIMITATIONS

This is the first known attempt to identify the prevalence of student-parents and their unique perspectives within our university system, and several department leaders involved with helping facilitate the research expressed some confusion about the definition and 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 I-Parents 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, but 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 I-Parents 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 none of the research team's senior leadership were paid for their involvement in this project. They volunteered their time, and 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 at UIUC. 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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TABLE 1 STUDENT-PARENT SUMMIT ATTENDEES, MARCH 11, 2011

	First Name	Last Name	Department	Title
1	Beckee	Bachman	Student Legal Service	Office Support Specialist
2	Charlotte	Bauer	Graduate College	Communications Specialist
3	Melissa	Brown	Human & Community Development	CCAMPIS Program Coordinator
4	Angela	Clark	African-American Cultural Center	Assistant Program Director
5	Andrea	Ferber		
6	Susan	Gershenfeld	Office of the Chancellor	Director, Orchard Downs Program
7	Vaneitta	Goines	Office of Volunteer Programs	Program Advisor OVP
8	Selma	Haveric	Daily Illini	
9	Imants	Jaunarajs	The Career Center	Senior Assistant Director
10	Janet	Kroencke	Campus Recreation	Assistant Director
11	Sharlyce	McKinnie		Student
12	Lila	Moore	Bureau of Educational Research; I-Parents	Coordinator, Center for Education in Small Urban Communities
13	Patricia	Morey	Office of Women's Programs	Director, Women's Resources Center
14	Sylvia	Puente	General Studies	Academic Advisor
15	Cecilia	Ramirez		
16	Angela	Reinhart	Cooperative Extension	Family Life Educator, Cooperative Extension
17	Anne	Robertson	College of Education	Director, Office of School University Research Relations
18	Claudia	Serbanuta	Romanian Student Club	Student
19	Wallace	Southerland	Office of Minority Student Affairs	Associate Dean, Director
20	Dana	Stodgel	University Housing	Interim Assistant Director, Business & Technology Services
21	Jeanette	Weider	University Housing	Director of Family & Graduate Housing
22	Carmen	Wilson		Student
23	Laura	Wright		Student
24	Julie	Griffin	College of Law Admissions	Speaker, Assistant Director

TABLE 2 N, MEAN, AND (Standard Deviation) OF COMPARISON GROUPS ON LEVEL OF EASE (Factors)

Gender	N	Financial Concerns					Family Services			Food
		Child Care	Academics	Housing	Health Care	Fitness	Family Services	Food		
Male	196	2.84 (.68)	2.08 (.91)	2.78 (.87)	3.11 (.65)	3.27 (.81)	2.73 (.78)	2.50 (.79)	3.74 (.67)	
Female	216	2.82 (.67)	2.33 (.99)	2.67 (.97)	3.21 (.68)	3.27 (.76)	2.57 (.80)	2.33 (.71)	3.66 (.92)	
Transgender	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
Partner Status										
Single	38	2.62 (.65)	1.76 (1.09)	2.07 (.66)	2.77 (.82)	2.99 (.72)	2.37 (.81)	2.12 (.64)	3.47 (1.26)	
Committed relationship	25	2.66 (.59)	1.76 (.69)	2.10 (.82)	2.91 (.68)	3.22 (.85)	2.48 (.88)	2.08 (.77)	3.69 (.71)	
Married or cohabitating	350	2.85 (.68)	2.32 (1.12)	2.85 (1.02)	3.22 (.63)	3.31 (.88)	2.67 (.77)	2.47 (.81)	3.72 (.82)	
Income										
<\$30k household per year	165	2.71 (.68)	2.23 (1.13)	2.38 (.89)	3.04 (.73)	3.15 (.85)	2.51 (.75)	2.27 (.81)	3.39 (.89)	
>\$30k household per year	178	2.91 (.65)	2.16 (1.07)	3.02 (1.03)	3.28 (.56)	3.38 (.87)	2.72 (.83)	2.54 (.76)	4.01 (.73)	
Housing										
Campus housing	31	3.02 (.53)	2.51 (1.29)	2.48 (.62)	3.19 (.62)	3.67 (.60)	3.16 (.55)	2.83 (.93)	3.57 (.67)	
Off-campus housing	333	2.78 (.68)	2.17 (1.08)	2.70 (1.04)	3.16 (.67)	3.28 (.87)	2.56 (.79)	2.35 (.77)	3.69 (.89)	
Student Status										
Undergraduate	53	2.58 (.76)	2.28 (1.12)	2.44 (.79)	2.86 (.73)	3.37 (.84)	2.39 (.80)	1.88 (.74)	3.37 (.85)	
Graduate	353	2.85 (.64)	2.18 (1.10)	2.73 (1.04)	3.21 (.64)	3.23 (.87)	2.66 (.78)	2.50 (.77)	3.75 (.87)	
Child Status										
Living with child(ren)	345	2.81 (.65)	2.11 (1.07)	2.66 (1.01)	3.17 (.66)	3.29 (.83)	2.64 (.81)	2.37 (.78)	3.71 (.87)	
Not living with child(ren)	69	2.75 (.84)	3.02 (1.14)	2.92 (1.02)	3.07 (.72)	2.97 (1.12)	2.38 (.59)	2.57 (.94)	3.42 (.89)	
Total	417	2.95 (.67)	3.81 (.99)	2.87 (.93)	3.17 (.66)	3.37 (.76)	2.73 (.74)	2.41 (.74)	3.82 (.77)	