PLANNING
for higher education

Pulling Double Duty
Help Student Parents Succeed by Creating a Family-Friendly Campus Culture

by Brianne Dávila, PhD, Giselle Navarro-Cruz, PhD, Ishia Barajas-Orozco, MS, Anna Liu, BA, and Sara Carrillo

What is a family-friendly culture in higher education? Cal Poly Pomona answered the question with cross-division investments to support student parents.

Introduction

Colleges and universities should acknowledge student parent (SP) experiences and implement policies and practices to foster a family-friendly culture. Many efforts in higher education (HE) have centered on approaches that support work-life balance and recruitment and retention of faculty and staff, such as paid leave, on-site and/or subsidized childcare, flexible work schedules, and tenure clock stoppage (Lester & Sallee 2009). Few colleges and universities have done the work to create a welcoming culture for their SPs. Focusing on this group is important: A 2017 technical

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3 TAKEAWAYS . . .

. . . To Build a Family-Friendly Campus Community

1. Implement policies and practices that **increase support for and awareness of student parents on campus**.

2. **Provide student parents encouragement from faculty, welcoming spaces, accessible and affordable childcare, opportunities to participate in a community, and a sense of belonging on campus.**

3. **Collaborate across divisions for a comprehensive approach** that enhances student parent success in higher education.

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report found that 4.8 million undergraduates are raising children while attending school—and the majority are women (Noll, Gault, and Reichlin Cruse 2017). Unfortunately, institutions are ill-equipped to provide enough support to meet the needs of this student group.

Brown and Nichols (2012) identified on-campus childcare, financial aid, class scheduling, housing, and transportation to be the most important resources to SPs. They discovered that even when resources are available, students tend to be uninformed of their existence. Furthermore, Springer, Parker, and Leviten-Reid (2009) found that institutions, departments, and faculty are also unaware of the support available, suggesting that the programs and policies lag behind the shifting student demographic. They proposed that creating institutional strategies offering multiple facets of assistance (e.g., class assignment deadline extensions, childcare support, health insurance for dependents, a family-friendly departmental culture, etc.) is crucial to success and persistence. HE personnel need to know how to encourage SPs as they pursue their degrees. With this growing population of college students who are parents, it is imperative that the scope of family-friendly policies in colleges and universities addresses their unique experiences.

Collecting Data and Assessing Needs

Drawing on our research and advocacy efforts at Cal Poly Pomona (CPP), we identified cross-division investments that increased coordination and collaboration to provide holistic support and facilitate

degree attainment for SPs. Two authors of this article, Brianne Dávila and Giselle Navarro-Cruz, CPP faculty members, conducted 75 semi-structured in-depth interviews with SPs during the 2017–2018 academic year. CPP serves over 27,909 students (93 percent are undergraduates), of which 88 percent are enrolled full time. It is a designated Hispanic-Serving Institution with a diverse student population that is composed of 49 percent Latinx, 21 percent Asian/Pacific Islander, 3 percent Black, 15 percent white, 6 percent other, and 5 percent international students. Fifty-eight percent of students are the first in their family to attend college, and 76 percent receive federal financial aid, of which 44 percent are Pell Grant recipients.

Photography credit: Tom Zasadzinski, Cal Poly Pomona

Eligibility criteria for our study included prospects self-identifying as a student parent, being at least 18 years old, and having attended the university for at least two terms. We recruited participants by sending email announcements and recruitment

> [The policy] urges students to feel comfortable disclosing their status as caregivers so that professors can better support their success.

fliers to the deans' offices and resource centers and leaving fliers in various spaces on campus. Thanks to the Office of Student Affairs Administration, $20 per student in campus cash was offered as an incentive to participate. In addition, information sheets were completed by each participant prior to the start of the structured interview for us to get a better sense of the demographics of the particular population. As part of the process, we conducted a literature review and a critical website analysis of all 23 California State University campuses. The research endeavor informed our collaborative efforts at CPP. In analyzing our interview data, we learned that SPs are persistent and highly motivated, and they wished the faculty members were more understanding of their circumstances. They also desired a space where they felt welcome to bring their children, had accessible and affordable childcare, and were a part of an improved sense of community and belonging. To better meet those needs, it was important that the university sought advocacy and collaboration from divisions across campus.

Policies and practices were implemented based on our research findings, advocates' insights, feasibility, and institutional support. Agents across campus contributed to several transformations. SPs were instrumental in the work, pushing their ideas to the forefront of campus conversations. Changes that were easiest to implement were those that required little oversight, such as developing an inclusive syllabus policy, or those that could rely on existing partnerships. For example, when the Office of Undergraduate Research was informed that a major barrier to SP participation in their annual research conference was childcare, it partnered with the Children's Center to alleviate that concern. The modifications that were most challenging to implement (e.g., family housing, increased childcare access, establishment of a center dedicated to SPs, etc.) were those that required higher level administrative and logistical approvals.

Institutional Change Efforts

Faculty Support

SPs reported several instances when they found themselves without childcare. Consequently, they asked their professors if they could bring their children with them to class so they would not miss the day's material. Through our research process, we also became aware of Oregon State University instructor Melissa Cheyney's policy on "children in class." That policy was shared with and adapted by CPP's Department of Sociology. It welcomes breastfeeding babies in class, declares bringing family members to class as acceptable, encourages all students to contribute to a welcoming environment, and urges students to feel comfortable disclosing their status as caregivers so that professors can better support their success. Since its adoption, the College of Letters, Arts, and Social Sciences Dean's Office has encouraged all of its departments to consider establishing similar policies.

> **[Student parents] are a marginalized population, and advocacy is needed to ensure that they are retained and accomplish their goals.**

Family-Friendly Space

Our interviews indicated that there were few spaces on campus where SPs were comfortable bringing their children. During the 2018–2019 academic year, members of our team applied for an internal grant to establish a family-friendly study area in the university library. We recognized that such a space would let children feel welcome. As part of our research, we learned that California State University, Long Beach (CSULB) had a similar space, and reached out to its children's literature librarian to learn about the process for founding it. She and CSULB's associate vice president of student life met with us in May 2019 to give members of our team a tour of their family-friendly study area and answer any questions we had about planning and implementing it. Our project was financially sponsored by CPP's Office of Student Success, and we collaborated with two CPP librarians to develop a like space in our university library. The area now includes children's furniture, books, iPads, manipulatives, toys, etc., all designed to celebrate children, learning, and literacy.

Photography credit: Tom Zasadzinski, Cal Poly Pomona

Accessible and Affordable On-Campus Childcare

Our research findings also revealed a need for increased childcare on campus. The Children's Center at CPP was established in 1974 by SPs and is funded through a partnership between Associate Students Inc. and the Division of Student Affairs, with additional funding from local, state, and federal grants. It also receives assistance from parent fees and in-kind services from the University. There are 15 teaching staff, four classrooms, and a licensed capacity to care for 71 children each day. As the demand to serve younger children has increased in recent years, the Center changed its license to allow for children at age 18 months old to attend. The change was gladly received by SPs and has been so successful that in the past two years there has been no space available for the children of staff, faculty, or community. In 2019, the Center, informed by responses from our interviews, applied for and received the Child Care Access Means Parents in School Program (CCAMPIS)

grant and is receiving $1.3 million over four years. The funding will be used to upgrade facilities, offer evening care, increase staffing for infant and toddler care, and provide care for more children.

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Identifying Advocates and Creating Community

A Parenting Student Liaison

Identifying advocates on campus has been key to developing full support for student parents. The CCAMPIS funding, in addition to making possible increased affordable childcare, helped to establish a new staff position, a parenting student liaison. The person in this role assists the campus community in assessing, streamlining, and managing collaborations between multiple programs that are currently in place and new initiatives. The staff member provides ongoing training toward mentoring SPs. They take the lead on collecting data, guide and encourage efforts to

make decisions, and develop and carry out functions of the campus-wide, family-friendly initiative.

A Family-Friendly Campus Team

Staff members attended the National Student Parent Support Symposium at Ohio State University, where they learned about the Family Friendly Campus Toolkit. The toolkit, created by Endicott College's Program Evaluation and Research Group (PERG), utilizes assessment-based data to improve support outcomes for students raising dependent children (PERG 2020). Throughout 2018–2020, our parenting student liaison, herself a graduate parenting student, researched ways to remove barriers and increase assistance for CPP students. Through alliance with the vice president for student affairs, the creation of a graduate assistantship, and in collaboration with the student affairs assessment specialist and transfer coordinator, the Family Friendly Campus Team (FFCT) was formed. The team recruited staff and faculty who had previously hosted SP programming, conducted research, or were current SPs themselves. Initially, our team consisted of 17 individuals representing SPs, the Children's Center, the Broncos Care Basic Needs Program, the Poly Pantry, faculty members, the Womxn's Resource Center, the University Library, and Counseling and Psychological Services.

The team has grown to 24 individuals, expanding to include members of the Parenting Broncos Club; the Office of Advising, Outreach, and Orientation; Associated Students Incorporated (ASI); and the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. In spring 2021 three SPs, the president and vice president of the Parenting Broncos Club, and the ASI senator joined

the FFCT. They participate in monthly meetings to share updates, brainstorm potential services, and plan for programming, assessment, and policy change. Members of the FFCT have also begun conversations regarding additional efforts, such as fundraising to provide family housing and targeted scholarships.

The Parenting Broncos Club

The Parenting Broncos Club became the first active student organization *for* SPs (founded at CPP in December 2020) *by* SPs. The club's mission is to support, empower, and ensure the success of SPs on their journey through higher education by providing resources, creating a safe space to connect with others, conducting outreach, building a strong sense of belonging, and raising awareness of their unique needs. The club officers have a shared understanding of the daily struggles and time limitations faced by college students who are raising children. The Parenting Broncos Club held four general meetings in spring 2021. During the meetings, members shared everything from struggles of juggling the demands of being a student *and* parent to the moments with their children that made them smile. They created a social media page and have reached out to campus partners to raise awareness of the club. In one semester, the organization has grown to over 50 members. Its first graduation celebration was held virtually in May 2021.

Conclusion

Toward serving SPs, higher education should work to create accessible and inclusive environments in all areas: classrooms, co-curricular activities, student workshops, events, and services. Cross-division investments contribute to increased coordination and collaboration to facilitate degree attainment. SPs are a marginalized population, and advocacy is needed to ensure that they are retained and accomplish their goals. While academics is a major component to succeeding in college, well-being and personal development also facilitate student success. As demonstrated in Ricardo Stanton-Salazar's (2001) book, institutional agents play a key role in increasing self-advocacy and help-seeking skills among marginalized students. Approaching support techniques through a holistic lens allows faculty and staff to address the intersecting identities and multiple roles of students, promoting validation and belonging. Policy efforts to build a family-friendly culture in higher education should center and prioritize the experiences of student parents.

WHAT WORKED

- **Collaborating across divisions** with many individuals.
- **Conducting research and developing data** to advocate for student parents.
- **Including the voices of students, faculty, and staff** in proposing policies.

WHAT DIDN'T

- Lacking an existing system to identify who's who, **not knowing how many student parents were enrolled**.
- **Not planning for liability concerns** around the presence of children on campus.

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